

[1964. Review of *Ethics and Science*, by Henry Margenau. *Christianity Today* 18 Dec.]

There Ought To Be A Law

Ethics and Science, by Henry Margenau (Van Nostrand, 1964, 302 pp., \$7.50), is reviewed by Gordon H. Clark, professor of philosophy, Butler University, Indianapolis, Indiana

Dr. Margenau, competent author of *The Nature of Physical Reality* and with Lindsay *Foundations of Physics*, attempts here to provide a scientific basis for ethics. The first chapter presupposes a fair knowledge of the earlier books and is not designed for beginners.

After this account of the nature of postulation in physics Margenau argues that the same general procedure can be used to solve the problems of ethics. This, in his opinion, is not to say that norms or the concept of “ought” can be derived from what “is.” Ethics cannot be *reduced* to physics, but it has the same structure.

Postulates in physics are tentative: the scientist must always be ready to revise them. So too the norms of ethics: there are no norms applicable to all men at all times. Each is to be used so long as it works.

This means of course that ethics is not based on religion. There may be connections between them, or there may be none. Either way, “ethics can stand on its own feet” (p. 149).

Margenau’s observations on religion lead one to doubt that his competence in physics has been transferred to this different field. For one thing, he dates Hammurabi a thousand years after Moses, and Zoroaster a thousand years after Hammurabi (p. 153). Similarly questionable are both his history and his argument that hedonism is refuted by the fact that Moses and Martin Luther were ascetics. He also seizes upon First Corinthians 13 as the sum of Christian morality, ignores the rest of the New Testament, and then complains that love is insufficient for the elaboration of an ethical system (pp. 242-247).

What seems to be a serious flaw in his ethics is his assertion that ethical conflicts are infrequent and unimportant (pp. 266 ff.); that Western democracy and Russian Communism share the same values; that the different values postulated by Hitler did not work since he was defeated, whereas the defeat of ethical nations by brutal conquerors does invalidate *their* ideals.

In any case, even if there are fundamental conflicts in ethics, it means no more than the existence of conflicting geometries. “It makes little difference whether you choose as the source of your imperatives the Sermon on the Mount, the Koran, the Analects of Confucius, the eightfold path of the Buddha, or the Toa” (p. 293). And “behavior can differ intrinsically among people because of different choices of imperatives and primary values. There is no obvious reason to suppose that several of these, which differ to the point of contradiction, may not be validated in human living. If this is true, there are several sets of “oughts” between which there can be no reconciliation” (p. 284).

Such is his scientific solution to the problems of ethics.

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