Comments on "Deeds and Rules in Quaker Ethics"

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Comments

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There are three clear strengths in Vail Palmer’s paper which any contextual ethic must work hard to match: the element of absolute obligation and obedience; the transcendence of the norm or command, “the ought” which is independent of anything that “is”; and the effort at a universal ethic free from relativism. Yet Vail Palmer himself admits that he achieves this by a Kantian ethic ruled only by the form of acts. Moreover, today we are watchful about uniform norms as human rationalizing, like Plato’s and Aristotle’s efforts to justify slavery. Also we suspect absolute ethics for their element of self-righteousness or at least our psychological hunger for assurance we are right.

In any case, it seems to me that Vail Palmer breaks away from his own formal ethic when he bases his norms on God’s actions in history: all the more in that the form he adopts is hased, God’s own loyalty and response, with its concreteness, warmth, and depth of love behind it, and that he defines hased in terms of dependability and responsibility. At this point he falls back, to derive concrete norms, on the Decalogue as an inherent part of the covenant. I’d suggest that Paul Lehmann handles all this better, in making God’s acts and even the covenant part of the context for our action, not the norm for it. Vail Palmer himself notes that Emil Brunner uses “Die Ordnungen” in this situational way, even when trying to absolutize “Das Gebot.” Even the Decalogue it seems to me better to use as Reinhold Niebuhr does, as providing the norms of justice by which love is guided, not commanded, rather than setting Decalogue over against love as Vail Palmer does, as the neg-

1. The German title of Brunner’s Das Gebot und die Ordnungen (1932) keeps the distinction lost in the English Divine Imperative (1937).
ative and positive sides of ethics, the forbidden distinguished from the arena of the spontaneous.

In short, I am suggesting that the author’s "mixed ethic" is genuinely mixed, with no clear basis for knowing when the positive and when the negative principles apply (the judge would have to be beyond both). I personally would rather that Vail Palmer had gone the full way with the Pharisees, and produced an ethic outwardly purely legalistic. For the great rabbis, the motive of obedience is love and gratitude for all God has done, in the full richness of Qumran hymns and rabbinic prayers, while the form of obedience is law spelled out in the fullest convenient detail. They made the law much more than "thou shalt not," and thereby broke free from the defensiveness often charged against legalists, where within the circle of the "défendu" is a safe play-pen for innocence. The rabbis trusted God to guide them in any situation anywhere in the world, and put a fence only around the Torah, the holy.

In trying, then, to defend a contextual ethic, I must watch my step. To begin with, I should uncover my own feet as standing on an ethic of response on the lines of Richard Niebuhr’s. There are two issues I’d like to work out here: the first is response to demand, ranging all the way from the transcendent Kantian “thou shalt” and the “demand to be worthy” of the beloved which sets the form for loving, down to the demands set by social expectation and by psychologically compulsive drives. Secondly, we respond to gift and grace, and must make room for an ethic of appreciation. Beyond this, an ethic of response seems to me primarily concerned with needs, one’s own and more often other people’s, arranged in a constantly changing hierarchy according to their immediacy, crucial character for life, and one’s own inability to meet them. It tends to make response to other men and their situations not a duty or a goal but a basic process of human life.

It seems to me that Quakerism raises three special questions for ethics, whether seen from Vail Palmer’s formalist standpoint or my contextual one. The first is that "saving history" is now taking place. Vail Palmer sees that the mighty acts of God did not end at the Red Sea and Sinai, nor even at the crucifixion and resurrection; they go on in our time. He is right to see this, otherwise he would be giving us a good biblical ethic but a lousy Quaker ethic: indeed just insofar as God’s past action governs our present one, I do feel that Vail Palmer, like Lewis Benson, may be giving us an Anabaptist ethic under cover of Quakerism. But the question is: what is God now doing? An ethic focused on present: salvation is inherently ambiguous: it can be an ethic based on experience, on what God has done for me, and thus a self-realization ethic, or at least an ethic keyed to whatever has most vividly shown itself true for me now. Starting from a response-ethic, my own heresy here might be to use relatedness or involvement as the ethical value or norm, somewhat in the spirit of a “T-group” or “encounter group.”

An ethic responding to present history, then, must see what God is doing apart from us, and sometimes, as in the black community, the visible rebirth does reshape our ethic and response. But normally we have to bring in a standpoint of faith here, in what we choose to see as God’s action.

Some would go farther and say that we cannot respond to what God is now doing without assuming also what God will do. In any case we are clearly moving into an eschatology, an ethic of the kingdom. Vail Palmer is right to see Matthew’s perfectionism in these terms: the absolute demand is set by the kingdom itself, since we must either “get with it” or be left behind. In the key passages of Matt. 5 and 6, however, and the parables of the kingdom in 13, 18:23-35, etc., while Matthew has introduced a dualism of present act and future reward or judgment, there seems to be an underlying tradition at least as old as “Q” (see especially Matt. 12:22-42 and its Luke 11 parallels) in which the kingdom is already fully here, though hidden, in the power which forgives and brings to repentance. This power is inherent in what God does, namely his indiscriminate non-punishment of prodigals and sinners, if men would only see this as God’s love and respond to it by faith. “He that has eyes to see, let him see.” Hence for early Friends
God’s consistency was not a logical principle but an awareness of the consistency of their own inner truth-experience, by which the Light purified them for the “Lamb’s war” and the kingdom.

A second Quaker challenge for ethics lies in the centrality of inner leading by the Spirit for early Friends. This is easily absolutized by a doctrine of the uniqueness of revelation, and represents the temptation of the Moral Re-armament and many Pietist groups. It is hard, however, to tie to a formal ethic, except on a basis going back through Kant to Plato in intuitionism. The Inner Voice, unless it is itself an act of God, is hard to tie up to God’s historic acts. From a contextual view, the problem is easier, since intuition can be seen as a synthesis of the whole situation, including the whole personalities of the self and the other people interacting at a non-rational level.

Such an approach, nevertheless, tends to an ethic simply of openness, where at times one merely lets the conscious self become aware of “what the situation is,” or “what you yourself really want.” The transcendent element which early Friends assumed in the Light’s leadings, and the absolute obedience which they — and Vail Palmer — have demanded, tend to evaporate in proportion as one takes intuition as simply a valid truth-method. Both the strengths and the weaknesses of “openness” are evident in liberal Quakerism.

The third Quaker challenge to ethics is how within our own tradition we are to describe the antithesis of Light and the Self at many points, the conflict of Light and Sin. There are obvious barriers within the self against true response or obedience. To overcome these, Paul, Luther and Gandhi use rules as methods of self-discipline and self-purification, mainly to keep their awareness of truth clean, and their ability to respond alert. At first sight this suggests the ascetic ethic of mysticism, but these men wanted to respond to brothers and their needs, not only to the vision of God.

But there is a real problem in merging such a truth-ethic with a real guilt-ethic, based on our sin against other men and God. Another form of this problem is the high worth, given in an ethic of truthfulness and response, to total obedience and total selflessness. We have somehow to combine this valuation of selflessness with our sense that responsible action consists of identifying our acts as ours, saying “I did this,” not “I was led,” or “the situation was...”. An ethic of response may not only have to show the relationships of selflessness to self-awareness and self-forgetfulness: it may cease to be an ethic altogether. Perhaps in Paul’s teaching of living by grace and faith, without ever being sure whether in deed we have done right, he comes close to this. It is only in turning back to what God is like and what God has done (Romans 6) that Paul sees he can avoid lawlessness and still live without a law.

If we take the Spirit seriously, as early Friends did, or even the doctrine of grace, then I think we must live without an ethic, even the love-ethic of agape. There has always seemed an element of miracle in the occasions when, in looking back, one finds one was really selfless in loving, really met a need or met a person.

T. CANBY JONES

“I’m a legalist and proud to be one. Naked and unashamed, I’m a legalist.” These words exploded from my mouth at the Powell House summer 1971 QTDG conference following Hugh Barbour’s response to Vail Palmer’s paper on “Deeds and Rules in Quaker Ethics.” This explosion represented a real ethical breakthrough for me.

Hearing Vail Palmer’s paper had been a very moving experience. He had carefully explained the position of the situation ethics of Joseph Fletcher and the more sophisticated but similar contextual ethics of Paul Lehmann and also had brought in the clearly situational ethical viewpoint of the pamphlet, Towards a Quaker View of Sex. After pointing up the strengths and weaknesses of these views he went on to
demonstrate that the early Quaker ethic was clearly a “mixed ethic” consisting of both situational and absolute elements.

I resonate with Vail Palmer’s viewpoint because this “balanced,” “mixed” or “both-and” approach is precisely my understanding of the nature of the biblical ethic and especially the ethics of Jesus. In the Bible we find a healthy balance between following wherever and in whatever way the Spirit may lead (situational ethics) and keeping the commandments, doing the truth, obeying the covenant (normative ethics). I was also very happy that Vail Palmer had detected this same biblical balance in the ethical thought and practice of the early Friends. This corresponds exactly to my reading of George Fox.

Vail Palmer goes boldly on to claim that for Quakers today the ethical stance of early Friends is normative. His paper is an important contribution to the recovery of the power and ethical vision of the early Quaker movement.

In responding to Vail Palmer’s paper, Hugh Barbour defined himself as a “contextualist” in ethics. For him, if I understand him correctly, all ethical decisions are shaped and informed by personal encounters and personal values in the context of the given situation, tradition and history. I found myself fuming, saying to myself, “Contextual ethics, fine; if you make the context big enough, long enough and wide enough — big and wide enough to include the whole of mankind and his environment and long enough to include the history of mankind, especially the ‘saving history’ focused on Sinai, in Jesus’ Cross-resurrection and in the life and power of the early Friends.”

I’m very grateful for Vail Palmer’s critique of situationists like Joseph Fletcher who condemn all ethics that have any norms or ordinances (save that of an amorphous kind of love) as frozen legalism. I am happy to learn from Fletcher the dangers of legalism. I covet his call for flexibility, responsiveness and sensitivity to persons in the emergency situations in which all ethical decisions are made. But with Vail Palmer I agree that there are many ethical choices and ethical systems which lie in between the two extremes of absolute legalism and total situationism. Fletcher admits no such middle ground. Because of his own “contextualism” Hugh Barbour also chided Vail Palmer for holding a “mixed ethic.” Quite the contrary, I feel that a “mixed,” “balanced,” “both-and” ethic is not something to be accused of or criticized for — it is a strength to be rejoiced in!

If I am a legalist in ethics, I would like to be known as a “soft legalist,” or preferably as a “flexible legalist” or a “contextual or situational legalist.” I rejoice in the ten commandments of the Mosaic tradition and use Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and the Advices and Queries of the Quaker tradition as canons of conduct. But as I do so I wait for the guidance or voice of the Holy Spirit teaching me how to apply them in each new emergency ethical decision. Thus used the Decalogue and the Sermon on the Mount are not ossified absolutes but become living norms. Besides, by experience we learn something from each ethical decision. When a new ethical crisis arises we recognize the similarity to a past emergency of the same sort and to that degree we are better informed on how to act this time. Further, the combined ethical experience of the community of faith builds into a sort of living thesaurus of ethical tradition which does not dissipate with my death or with the end of my private experience. This living tradition illuminated to succeeding generations is found par excellence in the Scriptures and also for us in the early Quaker tradition. Our spiritual forbears laid down their lives rather than commit idolatry, adultery or murder. People just don’t lay down their lives for frozen, heteronomous legal precepts, nor for static, abstract absolutes. You can only put your life on the line for personalized norms of conduct made vibrant and alive for you by the power of the Holy Spirit in your own ethical experience.

The incorporation of such vital ethical tradition is essential to any ethics in my view. From this standpoint situation ethics is only half there, because it lacks such a tradition. Contextual ethics fares better than situational only if it brings such living ethical norms into its context.

I want to enter a plea for a return to “the living Torah.” If you read the 19th Psalm verses 7-10 or the whole of the 119th Psalm you will find songs of praise and exultation in Torah.
Paul E. Pfuetze

Vail Palmer’s fine paper raises as many questions for me as it answers. His ending is ambivalent and inconclusive, as perhaps it should be. He seems to end up (as most of us do, I suspect) with a “mixed ethic,” or “act-agapism” and “rule-agapism” in tension. He wants freedom and order, spontaneity within a disciplined structure. He wants timely as well as timeless elements of Christian-Quaker thought, continuity of basic biblical norms with changes to meet specific situations, constancy but constantly varied, for he recognizes that “new occasions teach new duties.” I won’t quarrel with that.

Vail Palmer says that the great ethical insight of the early Friends was their interpretation of certain ethical practices as direct testimonies to their faith in Christ. He does not say direct testimonies from Christ! Do these prepositions not point to an important difference? Must we today honor Christ in precisely the same particular ways? Cannot life in the Spirit be constant, yet constantly open in response to new conditions? If not, then Quakerly manners like hat-honor, plain talk, and plain clothes become in our day merely eccentric, like those other Plain People who wear beards but don’t wear buttons.

The author insists that the early Quakers acted from absolute moral rules. He admits, however, that Fox and Penn and Naylor made exceptions. But it takes only one exception to break a rule. There are mitigating circumstances in many complex situations. In crucial moral situations there is rarely a clear good agains: a clear evil. Indeed, do we ever possess full, sensitive knowledge of the complex situations in which the moral decision is made? And in his last paragraph, Vail Palmer gently chides the Quakers for a too rigid and unloving adherence to their excessively legalistic discipline. Too often the new life in the Spirit becomes ossified into a new set of rules. Is this not why an early Advice from a General Meeting of Friends at Balby, in 1656, declared: “Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all, with the measure of light which is pure and holy, may be guided; and so in the light walking and abiding, these
may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not from the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.”

To balance the picture, Vail Palmer also warns against a too lax situational approach. I agree. But with reference to what he calls the mandates of early Quaker tradition, what of our present day conservative legalistic Friends who betray the peace testimony, the testimony against respect of persons (I know many racists in the Society of Friends), and who are uncritical beneficiaries of an exploitative economic system and a system of built-in institutional covert violence? Is this not contrary to the spirit and the letter of the Declaration of 1660? Obviously there are legalists and traditionalists who bend the law to suit their purposes or their situation, just as there are contextualists who bend the law in ways which appear shocking to the legalist. (What, by the way, is it about Fletcher’s situationalism and utilitarianism which makes it seem so radical?) And remember that there were many devout Quakers operating on the Underground Railway who would lie or bend the truth without a qualm rather than turn an escaped slave over to his pursuing master.

Vail Palmer begins from the position that the thought and practice of early Quakers is “somehow normative.” Somehow! He declares that we cannot go back to a literal repetition of 17th century Quakerism. Then what? Did the early Friends give us a set of absolute moral propositions and eternally correct forms of behavior, or primarily a method of seeking God’s Light and Will in a company of seekers? I am inclined to think the latter.

Aren’t we really dealing with a method of making ethical decisions, rather than a specific content? “Situation ethics” also refers to a method; but the method itself does not dictate the final decision. Other factors, values, experiences, principles, dispositions, and attitudes will also be at work. Conscience, we know, is not a clear “Voice of God” but a coming into focus of a whole accumulation of learnings, insights, value judgments, and principles which become normative at the point of decision.

Therefore, I think the author is correct in saying that a radical critique and prophetic judgment of personal morality and of unjust social orders must come from outside the existing situation. But isn’t it precisely something within the situation which provides the occasion, motive, and spur for radical revision or innovation? The prophets never operated in a social vacuum. Again, a “mixed” picture: one without the other will hardly do. An open canon with a continuing revelation of the “mighty acts of God” comes to men only in the dramas of history, in the concrete existential meeting of men with God in the particular events of history.

Vail Palmer merely mentions Emil Brunner in passing. It might have been fruitful to examine further the views of Brunner, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Martin Buber with their ethic of responsibility, of response to what God is doing in the concrete events of history. In these thinkers we may have a resolution of the polarity between deeds and rules. It seems to me that Niebuhr and Buber are able to include, embrace, and at the same time reconcile what is valid in both de-ontological and teleological methods. They go beyond both to a genuine synthesis, to a truly biblical ethic of universal norms, sensitive responsibility, and grace. Here there may not be an unambiguous universal absolute but there is an existential absolute for the actor. Here one walks the “narrow ridge” with fear and trembling.

I don’t follow the distinction between God as primarily Redeemer and God as Creator. I am uncomfortable about this as an interpretation of either Christian or Quaker thought. It seems to me rather that in Christian theology creation and redemption must always be held together in tension. To me one without the other has little meaning and the whole drama of salvation makes little sense.

Vail Palmer is correct in faulting Fletcher for over-simplification in his typology and in his ethical reasoning. But the legalist also over-simplifies in his effort to formulate a summary rule which will cover all possible cases. Thus it was that the rabbis and Talmudists piled up 613 mitzvoth. Even within the Ten Commandments one is often compelled to break one of the commandments if he obeys another. This is surely one reason why Jesus reduced the Law and the Prophets to two
commandments — the love of God and love of the neighbor — and finally these are further reduced to one: the Law of Love. For all of the thinkers considered, Love is the Law of Life; but how love is interpreted makes a lot of moral difference. Yet nowhere do our authors give us clear definitions of the key terms, such as "love" and "freedom" and "human." What does it mean to be free in the Spirit in terms of conduct? What does it mean to love the neighbor in the many complex situations within the common life? What is the loving way to deal with the Viet Cong, the Black Panthers, hard-core criminals, student rioters, striking workers, the homosexual? (My own practical working definition is: I love my neighbor when his welfare, security, satisfaction, and freedom are equally important with my own.) Life is lived in particulars, not in broad generalities. So it saves wear and tear to have habits, precepts, guidelines, and rules to provide specific guidance. And in perhaps 99% of the cases, the habits and rules serve us well. But there is that 100th instance when the rule breaks down or the habit serves us badly. If the situation is so crucial in determining what love and responsibility require, it is most important how one understands the situation. The situation will never be the same for any two actors.

Life in the Spirit does indeed rule out certain things. One who loves God does not please to do just anything! To be in the Spirit should not lead to a simple antinomianism or hedonism, as the early church fathers recognized in declaring antinomianism a heresy. (But Fletcher is no more an antinomian or radical relativist than he is a legalist.) The love of the neighbor is but the other and positive side of the same coin of self-denial. The "human" life does need freedom but always within an order of discipline and structured relationships, just as a baby needs both freedom and security.

And forgiveness does not cancel out moral criticism or even just punishment. If human beings or human society need elements of restraint, then love will accept that necessity, but it will keep alive the compassionate and reconciling spirit in the midst of these necessities. It will remember that there is nothing evil in my neighbor that is not also potentially, if not actually, present in myself. No one is without sin and guilt and bad judgment, not even Quakers who think they live daily in the Spirit. Any forgiveness we extend to another is always the forgiveness of a forgiven sinner. Any restraint which we exercise over others is that of one who himself is under restraint.