



Can There Be Ethics without Religiousness?

Alfons Auer and Erich Fromm:

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Discussing ethics, values and religion has once again become a current issue. In view of this fact, we publish below for the first time a paper by Alfons Auer, Emeritus Professor of Catholic Theological Moral Philosophy at Tübingen, which he delivered almost 25 years ago at a Symposium in Locarno on the occasion of Fromm's 75th birthday.

Within the field of moral theology, Auer was a proponent of the autonomy of ethics: he limited that which is specifically Christian in theological ethics to the justification of moral actions. As a theologian Auer was keen to exchange ideas with the non-theist humanist Fromm and in this way made an important contribution to the dialogue between Christianity and Humanism. Fromm for his part gladly took the opportunity to make impromptu remarks to the questions and issues raised by Auer, which are also published here for the first time.

Auer's paper was translated from German 1975 by Heather Kirkconnel; Fromm's answer, given at the Congress in German was translated into English by Ann Weiland.

I. Alfons Auer: Can There Be Ethics without Religiousness?

1. The self-evidence of today's ethics

Ethics aims not at socio-technical regulations of human life en groupe, rather at the optimal development of the human capacity to *be*. Perhaps this need for a generally recognized ethics was never so strong as in our time, where humanity as a whole is being challenged in an unheard of manner by the technical consequences of science. Of course, an ethics which demands general recognition must be rationally proved. But today the possibility of a rational grounding of ethics is being disputed from many sides. The reason for this is that the methods of the so-called exact sciences have been used also for the whole area of social sciences. Because morality is not able to be founded in methods of the exact sciences, it is said to be in the area of the

subjective and irrational.

Now ethics is not a science of facts, rather a science of meaning. It must replace the methodological octroi of factual science, and develops suitable tools. Ethical sentences rely on norms and on conceptions of meaning that are grounded in norms -- they are able to be discussed completely rationally. Ethics wants to intelligently lay out norms and meanings in which urgencies and obligations of human existence are articulated -- that is, to critically question behind things, to concretize or further develop and to reflect about the possibilities of their being actualized.

How can ethics fulfill its task? We can ascertain in any event three constitutive elements of ethics as a science of meaning: the tendency in the preconception of morality, the scientific account of this preconceptions and the remaining critical openness.

(1) As in every science of meaning, *ethics precludes a preconception*. Just as each person



understands what 'time' is, without having to recognize the philosophical discussions on it, so each normal person understands the meaning of the phrase: 'you have behaved morally well or badly'. And this is valid long before the person can more precisely give the quality of morality or immorality with scientific distinctions.

(2) *The scientific account of preconceptions* is not shiftable if several recognized moral demands are experienced as incompatible with another or, if in view of the change of relations, they have no meaning. A scientific account of an ethical presumption takes place in the continuous work of ethics with humanities and social sciences and with philosophical anthropology.

The Humanities and Social Sciences show the human constitution, the concrete situation and the legalities of human activity. Chances and limits of a free self-development can thus be made clear. It is not the business of the empirical sciences to also prove the orientation which human self-realization has to accomplish. What makes human beings human, and what constitutes the meaning of their personal existences, belongs to another category than the biological or physiological, psychic and social mechanisms. It is the business of *philosophical-anthropological reflection* to surpass the data produced by the humanities and social sciences and to bring them to an all-encompassing meaning. Again, on the basis of a specific preconception, a better founded and ethically more sound conception of human happiness developed gradually in the play between this preconception of his philosophical explication and of its continuing verification or falsification by humanities and social sciences.

It is first here that the word *ethics* can genuinely start to be used. Unrecognized matters of urgency for a fruitful and meaningful human existence present themselves with an overall view of humanities and social sciences and of philosophical views on the meaning of being human: ethical norms appear as founded or must be decreed where such matters of urgency arise -- they are the result of the attempt to translate the knowledge of existential urgencies into the language of moral obligation and to offer them to people as an orientation. It is

thus that scientific accounts of preconceptions of morality take place through permanent discourse on humanities and social sciences, philosophical and anthropological ethics.

(3) All statements about human reality and its responsible formation have the character of preliminaries. It is therefore advisable for the philosopher of ethics to not hold his conception of tradition and own views as definitive -- he must remain continually radically open. The norms suggested by ethics are either conformed by practice or called into question. Morality is self-sanctioning -- the concrete experience evokes continual contrast to the moral decisions of people.

If morality is a free creation of socio-historical reason in man then the question must be put: what has Christian theology to do with this area? The answer can only be hinted at here: namely that which is specifically Christian does not lie in extra-material norms, rather in a specific horizon of meaning and in the motivations implicated therein. Christian theology does not create a new ethics, it brings in more the critical stimulating and integrative effect of Christ's message to the autonomic process of moral consciousness building.

First Thesis: There is no ethics without an all-encompassing horizon of meaning. Morality concerns the optimal well-being of man. Where one acts morally the concrete decision is always based on a certain conception of the meaning of humanity and the possibility of its realization.

2. Ethics - Experience of Meaning – Religiousness

(a) Experience of Meaning and Religiousness

Are experience of meaning and religiousness identical? From Schleiermacher to Rudolf Otto religiousness has been defined as „feeling of total dependence“. In this frame of reference, the modern day interpretation of Paul Tillich understands religiousness as openness for the deeper dimension of human existence, as being



gripped by „the ultimate concern.“ It is clear here that religiousness's apparently integrative function is being stressed here. In religiousness the deep seated human need for a whole and holy life appears. It is therefore not a much further step when sociologists and psychologists view religiousness as important where this integrative function is actually realized. It does not matter whether this occurs through traditional institutionalized religions, through mysticism or through secular ideologies. In contrast to the historical religion of Christianity, one can speak of the „social basis of religion“, which (somewhat along the lines of Thomas Luckmann) -- includes all those world views which lend meaning to life and in so doing fulfill a religious function.

Even if many should see in this an apologetic or polemical statement, the question still remains why one can speak of religiousness and not just of meaningful human existence, or a human realization from a complete understanding of man and the world. The suspicion remains in any case that in taking over the concept religiousness one is perhaps using the mystically over-charged traditional religious concept as the inspirational impulse for moral education.

Thesis 2: The equating of experience of meaning and religiousness seems to have become popular among those in this field, but is technically and pedagogically complex.

(b) Humanistic explication of the experience of meaning and Religiousness

What is radical humanism? Erich Fromm, who represents this approach well, defines it as a „global philosophy which stresses the unity of the human race, the human capacity to develop his own talents in order to attain an inner harmony and the construction of a peaceful world.“ He sees his own position as „non-theistic mysticism“. Because he tries to reach behind any systematized thought he speaks of „X-experience“ (with reference to Spinoza). His psychological analysis of this „X-experience“ has

four aspects: 1) the restlessness of the dichotomy within existential life; 2) a definite hierarchy of values with optimal development for human potentialities as the highest value; 3) absolute human purposefulness; and finally, 4) the experience of transcendence. With 'transcendence' Fromm does not mean stepping into the here-after, rather the transcendence (or over-coming) of the narcissistic self. Where a godly authority has power over human fate and demands obedience and adoration, man becomes alienated from himself, because „he thereby projects the best which is within him onto God and then all truth and justice rests with God and man is deprived of these characteristics.“ An irrational authority is thereby established and this can only create an irrational belief and authoritarian forms of religion. The basis of a rational belief is productivity, according to Fromm. „To live in faith means to live productively, and to have the only certainty which exists, namely, the certainty which comes from having lead a productive life. The consequences are clear: where belief does not coincide with rational thought it must be eliminated because it is an „anachronistic remnant of an earlier cultural level,“ and should be replaced by a science which has clearly tackled facts and theories which are verifiable.

This radical humanistic explication should be set above the Christian explication of experience of meaning and religiousness. Both apparently are based on a scientifically unilluminated fundamental option -- both must live with aporias. We will not speak of this here however. Here it should be made clear by some decisive aspects of Christian self-understanding that „belief in a transcendental God“ does not necessarily imply authoritarian religiousness. Immanence theories do not escape irrationality or authoritarianism either despite their radical limitations to historical facts.

(c) Christian Explication of Experience of Meaning and Religiousness

Jesus' image of God was anything but authoritarian. Authoritarian elements filtered in with the historical handing down of the texts. Jesus



left the late Jewish concept of a transcendental God behind him -- a God who ruled with total authority and connection with whom was only attainable through the mediating laws. God is also „in heaven“ for him, but transcendence is interpreted as nearness and majesty, as the sovereignty of love. The near God takes care of the grass on the fields, the sparrows on the roof -- this loving God turns to man through Jesus. Jesus holds communion with tax collectors and sinners, he breaks the limits of laws which are between man and God and reduces the plurality of commandments to one basic commandment: namely, love. Through this he shows where God stands with respect to man. Jesus' understanding of God's authority as a rule of love becomes yet more poignant when he speaks of God as his father. God is referred to as father 170 times in the Gospels -- truly an impressive documentation of the fundamental belief that God is near to man through love. In numerous comparisons this is clearly shown. With utmost precision John formulates this: „God is love--ho theos agape estin.“ (1 John 4:8)

It should not be overlooked that the Gospels prove that Jesus does not just approach the lost and the outcast with humanness. The peculiarity of Jesus' love is the motivation for his approach. Jesus preaching of humanness is founded in fatherly love and is measured, directed and has its inner freedom from this. It is therefore not only a matter of humanness, rather also of the realization of God's love among men. The experience of God's love can pierce the web of sin, of love, and of worry which surrounds man and terrifies him. Jesus speaks not only of the liberating power of God's love -- he allows others to experience it themselves. The cramped and anxious hunt for ethical and material self-assuredness gives ground to the trust and creative freedom, which is to be aroused in mankind. If „the God and father of Jesus Christ“ were an authoritarian God and father, this experience would never come to pass. The Christian sees creation and salvation as offers, which demand radical 'engagement' if one is to follow them. These offers do not limit one's freedom for a productive orientation in life -- they form and preserve

it when taken seriously.

Radical and Christian humanists cannot agree on this aspect of the final foundation of humanity. For some, man is the final reality, for others, he is rooted in a transcendental reality. To speak of theonomy, of thankfulness for human existence, of a pre-existent unity of being and meaning and of godly forgiveness is for some the nomenclature of authoritarian irrationalism -- for others the nomenclature of a freed humanity.

For Christians theonomy and autonomy are compatible. Even Paul says that man is his own law maker (Romans 2:14) -- he is autonomous. How does this combine with theonomy? God created man such that he is free to accept his existence as a person -- with all the social influences that go along with this, and at the same time he must make the best of this freedom through responsible actions. God does not need show a moral law to his creatures in a secretive way. He makes his offer by liberating man into the human natural order. Man controls his whole existence in freedom, but he knows he is sheltered and obliged to he who put him into history.

The Christian considers his existence as „grateful beingness“. He sees his humanness and destiny constituted by the creative love of God. He who knows he did not create himself but knows he owes his existence to his father and mother does not feel hindered in his productive orientation in life -- he feels he owes his very life possibilities to this fact. The Christian feels that gratefulness cannot suspend active involvement -- to the contrary, he who, while living, wants to answer to the gratefulness for existence, sets higher standard than he who acts out of a 'must' -- be it the must of law or of conscience. The Christian sees the unity of being and meaning presented in God. This does not lead to blind obedience of an irrational authority. For the Christian recognizes this unity of being and meaning as little as the non-Christian -- he only believes that it exists and that it is manifested in God. He must search just as much as the others and together with them the optimal ways and means towards a meaningful and fruitful existence. There is no godly predetermination or intervention for the purpose of an-



swering these aporias. The world is man's responsibility, but belief confirms the Christian that he is not wrong in trusting that there is a higher meaning for all reality from which all life derives, with its existence, both meaning and value. The historical findings and realization of this meaning belong to active reasoning and to love of mankind.

And finally the Christian experiences freedom through forgiving. Each person has not yet realized his full potential. Each person denies that he owes something to his identity and to his communication with others. Certainly he can and must try to unite reason with love, which he has divided through his own fault. Why does he nonetheless remain deeply affected by guilt in the midst of his personal existence? Why do we not feel freed when others forgive us? According to Christian understanding the answer has its root in the truth of humanity. Human reality in all the facets of its autonomy is more than autonomy -- it necessarily implies the transcendental relation in which it is grounded. The same applies for the absolute demand that humanity poses to the individual -- and for the guilty denial vis à vis this absolute demand. Responsibility and guilt affect certainly that which is primarily human, but it also affects its basic fundamentals. Therefore forgiveness exists not only as a consolation to the individual conscience and not only as human reconciliation. The freedom created by forgiveness -- (Jesus' followers testify convincingly to this) -- occurs when the person returns totally to the center of his being -- to God's creative love. Gratefulness for life is experienced anew through this, and a better humanness is evoked. Resentment and forgiveness free man from the weight of his guilty past and free him to fully affirm the present and future.

Thesis 3: Talk of the Experience of Meaning and Religiousness needs explanation, but this explanation becomes divided depending on the option taken for a final and complete interpretation of reality. To cite two important explications, one could talk of the radical humanistic Experience of Meaning and Religiousness, and that of

Christianity. Although we are dealing with fundamental options it appears to be meaningful and suitable to compare and contrast their positions and their limits. More important is the tolerance with which one accepts the credibility of each and not to hang on to by-gone distortions. What remains should be left to history -- and thereby unite with all representatives of humanism for the sake of mankind.

Let me close now. In Fromm's contribution entitled „Some Post-Marxian and Post-Freudian Thoughts on Religion and Religiousness“ he maintains that radical Christians and non-Christians may not have a common 'theology' - - but they have a common goal: the dignity of man to bring about more respect in the future -- they are united in their religious awareness and in their radical behaviour. They are the same decided opponents of today's consumer society which, with its ignorant egotism, is leading to the total alienation of mankind. They should therefore reflect together on the essentials of „religious awareness“, and work on the criteria for the distinction of truth from illusion, and finally, they should decidedly oppose the reduction of modern man to an object and his alienation.

No Christian would oppose these intentions. The multiplicity of explications of experience of meaning and religiousness applies to the ultimate foundation of meaning and is no barrier for a practical-ethical union of radical humanists and radical Christians. Both are concerned with humanity. It can only be hoped that both unite in dialogue and as allies in the fight for the Humanum, and that both are motivated by the passionate decisiveness of the man for whom we have called together this symposium, on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday.

Questions:

1. Why does not one speak merely of productive and meaningful life rather than of religiousness? Is not a mere mystical overcharge of traditional religious conceptions being used with the adoption of the concept religiousness?



2. The Christian also recognizes the autonomy of morality. (Morality can be convincingly defended without bringing in ultimate foundations of meaning.) There are also pen-ultimate values. The rational argumentation for a concrete realization of morality does not seem sufficient. It apparently needs inspiration -- which can come from someone who motivates the others through his creative love. It could therefore be asked: Is radical humanism a sufficient basis for ethics? Isn't ethics really in a religious tradition, if it lends meaning to life -- a tradition which is explicitly denied, but which actually underlies it?

3. Cultural researchers point to the importance of rituals and symbols for communication to occur at all, especially for the presentation and mediation of values. Are there, in the context of a radical humanism, such forms of expression? Without a minimum of symbolic forms of expression, the humanitarian impulses are leading to no where. Are there such forms of expression in radical humanism, or is it possible to do without them, because they reduced the religious awareness to such a level of objectification?

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II. Erich Fromm's Answers to the Lecture of Alfons Auer (1999b)

am very pleased to be able to say a few words on the lecture of Professor Auer, because he is the ideal opponent in a discussion between Christian religiousness and radical humanism. I have read many of his works, having learnt a lot from them. He has very clearly defined the decisive points, the difference between theistic and non-theistic humanism and the very different argumentation of ethics so that there is no need to discuss the many misunderstandings and contrasts which are unnecessary because they are based on wrong theological traditions or wrong opinions, or are produced by fanati-

cism.

I would first like to comment on the question whether radical humanists when talking of religiousness are not taking the advantage of a mystical additional value of traditional religious assumptions. Well, I fully understand that this appears so from the point of view of Christian religiousness. But I believe that this reproach - if it is one - is not quite justified. The Christian religion has influenced European thinking for 2000 years. Basing on this fact, the representatives of non-theism have no word to express what they want, namely that what I have called X-experience. Furthermore, I am also not pleased either in using the word „religiousness“, as in fact it sounds so as if I would like here to bring in a bordering benefit of the Christian religion or of religion as a whole.

In fact there is neither in German nor in English a suitable word. „Spiritual“, „intellectual“, „psychic“ - these are all words having their own combinations. I would prefer to talk of „X-experience“, as I have done. Anyway we, the radical humanists, are in a dilemma here, which just arises from the fact that religion in the theistic sense has made such an impression for a long time on our words and language so that the words we have used - as you might say - have become tarnished.

The more important and most decisive question is the second question, which hits the core of the whole discussion between radical, non-theistic humanism and theistic humanism. I quote the decisive words: „For the concrete accomplishment of morality, however, rational argumentation does not seem to suffice. Inspiration is apparently necessary, this can come from someone who motivates the others through his creative love. It could therefore be asked: Is radical humanism a sufficient basis for ethics?“

First of all it must be said that radical humanism is not simply a case of rational argumentation, on the contrary this rational argumentation is based on what the individual experiences. In the opinion of radical humanism the individual experiences in his relations with others maybe the experience of sacrifice and of a love for other human beings and by which a person devotes his life to others, without believing that he is giving up his own life. This



phenomenon is not only a phenomenon of the Christian history of salvation. It is the phenomenon of the human history of salvation, the political history of salvation. Throughout the whole history of mankind up to the present day, there have always been individuals who have practised love in an absolute form, having impressed their contemporaries with it. This phenomenon has existed as long as mankind and will continue to do so. In the West Jesus was impressive to the inhabitants of those countries in which Christianity was preached. The same applies - just to name one very extraordinary person - to Buddha for the countries of the East. Buddha was a person, in whom total love and devotion for mankind and at the same time rational criticism on the human existence was so developed that he became the founder of something, for which we have no proper word. Buddha was not the founder of a religion, only later did his foundation develop into a religion with all its negative turns. There is no term for that what Buddha founded. One would only say that Buddha has created a philosophical system, which is indeed correct, but then on the other hand is not correct, as Buddha has created a philosophical system which touched a deep life experience, and at the same time it was a system of norms which taught man what to do to give him a sense in life.

It is just the example of Buddhism which shows how the motivation of ethical norms can be understood on a rational level, without just being a level of argumentation. Buddha has analysed the existence of man. He came to the result that this existence creates suffering, and he has recognised why it creates suffering: Greed leaves mankind constantly unfulfilled and robs his sense in life. The healing of this suffering lies in giving up greed, in giving up having (belongings/possessions), opening oneself completely, in love of man and in the deepest understanding of truth. Several elements of critical insight meet together here. Buddhism was in fact a product of enlightenment and was therefore fought tremendously as atheistic by the religions of that time. Buddha analysed, set up norms, but had at the same time because of his personality appealed to the practical knowledge and experience of man.

From my point of view, that means from the point of view of a radical humanist, I would partly say against the argumentation of Professor Auer that one can perhaps use more rational arguments than he has mentioned. From the analysis of human existence, which methodologically pursues the Buddhist thought, as well as from the biological conditions of human existence, the determinative dichotomies can be derived, the potentiality of decay, the need for a vision; it can be ascertained what its optimal growth allows; the fact can be undermined that if this growth does not take place, a human being then suffers and becomes evil; norms and principles can be determined which lead to the full integration and development of man, namely mainly love and critical reason. So really there is only a small difference (between his and my point of view).

As we are here concerned with a dispute about principles, I would like to say a few words as to what the main difference really is. For me, Christianity, just like traditional Judaism, is a historical conditioned expression of insight and of experience, which has gained a certain place in the history of mankind, when namely the individuation of human species made the vision of the ONE possible. I mean the vision of the ONE contrary to the multiplicity of facts and phenomena without, but also contrary to the multiplicity of strivings and tendencies within man.

The idea of the ONE has a story. In the Upanishads already, in the Indian way of thought, definitions are found in the Vedas in which the ONE is purely thought of as the ONE, often identified with the no-thing, as this ONE is a principle, but it is also not something. The ONE as a principle is found in philosophical thinking, also with Plotin in Neo-Platonism it is found in various forms. In one special form the principle of the ONE is expressed in theistic religions, which originated in the Near East, that means mainly in Palestine, first in Judaism, then followed by the Christian religion. Indeed the idea of the ONE could only be expressed distortedly in these religions and had to be expressed in the social categories of that period. The idea of king or of king of kings was the only thinkable way in the life East of the Medi-



terranean at that time, in which the idea of the ONE could be clothed. Nevertheless, already included as a decisive factor in the Old Testament's concept of God, and later of course in the New Testament also, was that this ONE is not something. This differentiates the ONE considerably from idols. The ONE is a principle which has no name which cannot be copied, whereas idols are things which are built up by man himself, which are made by man himself; idols are the work of the hands of man, to which he surrenders himself.

When then at the beginning, the definition of the ONE God could only be understood in a time dependent form, this definition has in fact gained its decisive meaning by its strict limitation against idols. In my opinion one can regard the history of western religions as an attempt to cleanse the concept of ONE more and more from its incidental historically dependent remnants, namely the conception of the king of kings. Especially in mysticism, in the Christian, Islamic and Jewish mysticism it can be shown how all such concepts of thought in which the concept of the ONE is veiled, are repressed in favour of a concept of the ONE than that of the No-thing. So, for example Master Eckhart dropped the concept of God just in his most daring explanations in which he was likely or apparently inspired to say things, which even for him were normally unthinkable. But sometimes he says the unthinkable and then he comes out with clearly formulated theses that that what is important is the Godhead. But, the godhead is just not the God who created, who rewards and punishes. The godhead is the ONE and it is also the No-thing: It becomes and it becomes not.

Therefore, for me the question of the concept of God does not amount to the same thing as the question of the atheism controversy. For me it is rather a historical question. The definition „God“, such as it has been developed by the Christian or Jewish religion, is for me a historically dependent form of the idea of the ONE which people - not from nature, but from a certain point in their development - can grasp as an inherent category in them, namely as a necessity to see the ONE, to concentrate on the ONE and thus to give their own life unity, of

the relationship to themselves and also of the relationship to others.

With this view I think I do not borrow thoughts from religion. On the contrary, I believe that Christianity stands in the tradition of the idea of the ONE, that now radical humanists can certainly still understand such theistic distinction in the poetic sense of the idea of the ONE, which can be partly explained historically, but do not regard this as their own language any more.

I would now like to look into the question of authority. I agree completely with Professor Auer, that the message of Jesus was not authoritarian, but quite the opposite. It was, I would say, revolutionary, a message of freedom, and was everything else than a message of authority. The same applies for the message of the prophets, which also was not authoritarian, but a message of freedom. Meister Eckhart is one example of anti-authoritarian radicalism, which can be found in political works, even if only seldom. If you read Eckhart and Marx together, you will find many things in common, which only surprise those, who do not see the depth of the subtle history of ideas of the European development

The concept of God is not necessarily an authoritarian. If you maintain it or not, that is a different question. In the name of religion, the concept of God was used to support secular authority and was infected with elements of idolatry so that the concept of God was in fact used as a pillar of power, as a pillar of sovereignty, as a pillar of authority. As long as this happens, the radical humanist will not only have a kindly regard of the concept of God, but with much mistrust. He will even understand that there are many people who fight this concept, because they recognise that this concept is used in an authoritarian sense.

Certainly this is not the difference between Professor Auer and me. However, this point must be considered to understand why just the most progressive forces, who are penetrated the deepest by the ethics of the New Testament or the Old Testament and by the concept of the One and of the salvation of mankind, as Karl Marx for example is in his system, why they



mistrusted the concept of God. Of course their mistrust was influenced by enlightenment, by the situation of thought, which had just rejected the authority of the state and of the Church. This point must be taken into consideration.

There is something in common (between theistic and non-theistic humanism): the common desire to fight against idolatry. When we think of idols today, we think of Baal and As-tarte, and of the biblical idols which we read of in the Bible. But those who say they are idols, they pray to their own idols. These idols are the

state, honour, nationalism, and also an idol has been made out of God, wherein there is certainly no difference between Professor Auer and me. This serving of idolatry must be fought by both the Christian and the non-theistic radical humanism. I believe, the main question which mankind is faced with today, is not so much the question of God, but the question of enlightening as to what idols represent today, as well as the fight against those idols which today threaten mankind.

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