

■ Many years ago, when the language of moral debate was less inhibited than it has since become, an English woman doctor caused some stir by remarking that she was always astonished by the confidence with which moral theologians plunged into medical obscurities, especially of a gynaecological sort. 'What they say may be morally unexceptionable,' she remarked, 'but it is usually biologically preposterous.'

It certainly is truer than ever that the moralist should recognize his proper limitations. It can happen that he passes judgment on factors that he only imperfectly understands: it is hardly his function to be the interpreter of a constantly changing area of scientific knowledge. He most of all needs to remember the radical distinction between the truth which, of its very nature, is not susceptible of change, and the field in which that truth is verified, which not only can, but must change – for such is the very condition of human existence. We may smile indulgently at some medieval speculation or other, based on a theory of humours or the influence of the stars. But it is not a laughing matter at all when moralists base their ethical judgments on an interpretation, shall we say, of the central nervous system which hardly begins to take account of an actual and proved advance in our knowledge of its operations.

The need, first of all, is a recognition of the limits of the moralist's right to intervene. He has to make a judgment on the material that others provide: he must not only tolerate, he must actively support, the right of the research worker to arrive at a new, and perhaps revolutionary, insight into human behaviour itself. This is indeed only a special application of the whole debate on the Church and the modern world, which, as Pope Paul has remarked, means that 'the Church looks at the world with profound understanding, with sincere admiration and with the intention not of dominating it but of serving it, not of despising it but of appreciating it, not of condemning it but of strengthening and saving it.'

New factors in medicine, then, are not essentially different from any other new factors in the modern world which call, in the first place, for an ethical understanding. It is only understanding that can provide the basis for judgment. And here we have to recognize with candour the legacy of a casuistic tradition which is concerned with measuring limits, vindicating laws, assessing how far you can go without actually sinning – in fact a legalism in the ethical order, which, however necessary it might some-

times appear to be at a pragmatic level, can none the less seriously distort the true function of ethical judgment – which must always be concerned with the totality of the human person. A judgment that falls on this or that aspect of human behaviour cannot be isolated from an understanding of the whole. For the context is always that of the whole man: his destiny embraces all that he is, all that he can become – and a moral approach that is content with the isolated assessment, the particular dilemma to be resolved, can be false to the full dimensions of man's nature.

And it is here precisely that the question of conscience – its rights and duties – emerges. Many people are only too happy to be told in exact detail where their duty lies: they prefer to be absolved, as they think, from the necessity of choice, the agony of decision. But my conscience – that which, here and now, determines my decision to do this or to refrain from that – is inalienable: it is mine, and I must follow it. Certainly it needs to be instructed. I must become increasingly aware of the right application in particular circumstances of the principles I should hold. But every act of mine, every decision I take, should be an exercise of my conscience. And the need above all now – and the furious debate about contraception has only underlined it – is the development of consciences that are truly adult and free. For human freedom is exercised at its fullest when it accepts, because it acknowledges the force of, a moral principle that is meant to be incarnate in a human act that is responsible, chosen and mature.

There is a polarity, then, between the moral order that is seen to be established and true, and the order of advancing knowledge that at every turn affects the setting in which human acts are in fact realized. And it is not enough simply to evoke the concept of a 'natural law' to resolve the dilemma. For, whatever validity a natural law theory may be held to possess, it can in no sense be used as a way of escape from recognizing the increasing complexity of moral judgments in rapidly changing circumstances. The circumstances do not indeed change the moral law, but they profoundly affect its application.

Recent controversy on the moral permissibility of contraception has perhaps isolated a particular, and obviously an agonizing, aspect of a question that must be seen in its fullness. Those who have argued most loudly for a 'change' in the Church's discipline in the matter have sometimes fallen into a new kind of casuistry – which always means the limiting of moral insights, seeing them too exclusively in separate channels of choice. Sexuality, of all realities, cannot be divorced from a total understanding of man's nature and his needs. And it is not only in sexual ethics that there has been an evolution in awareness of what is natural to men and women.

There is great need to reaffirm the roots of a true humanism, which for the Christian can only mean a sense of a destiny that is to be fulfilled here-

after. It would be a sad distortion of the redemptive meaning of the work of Christ if Christians themselves were to seem to suggest that there is no room left for suffering, no place for pain. Certainly the Christian moralist must be alert to all that can alleviate the agony that makes so much of human living. He must be open to the advances in knowledge which in their turn can affect the application of moral law. And above all he must avoid the temptation to feel proprietary about moral matters, as though they were a speciality committed to his exclusive care.

But there remains the final mystery of a human nature that can never know a complete resolution of conflict and the agony of being a creature. In his concern to ease the burden, the moralist can never assume that human nature can wholly be healed, in the sense that it will never know the wounds that sin has brought in its train. A true humanism finds its meaning in the sort of recognition Sir Francis Walshe spoke of in a lecture given some years ago to the Faculty of Medicine at Toronto. 'What we conceive to be the highest good,' said Sir Francis – and he spoke as a neurologist, concerned with stating an accurate and consistent account of human nature as the physician should see it – 'depends upon our view of the human person, of his dignity, of what is owing to him, and of what we believe his destiny to be. If we think of man as the beasts that perish, but merely a beast with more complex neural circuits in his cerebral hemispheres, then I cannot see how we are to escape a deadening materialism of outlook.'

It is a strange, but true, irony that the attrition of the moral law in the alleged service of man's humanity can end with the denial of man's greatest dignity, which is to *choose* – and to choose to serve a greater good than that of his own immediate joy. In the meantime we must work patiently – and confidently, too – for the development of a moral understanding that will indeed match the changing circumstances of the times in which God has called us to live. And the moral sense of the Christian is not some disembodied ethic, a prudential rule that knows no sanction of love. Here, most of all, the Christian life is to find its identity in a person, who in himself, once and for all, has embodied the sacrifice that love alone can offer. St Paul's assurance that 'the spiritual man judges all things: he himself is judged by no man' is the guarantee of the ultimate serenity of conscience of all who seek the truth, and, finding it, begin to see that its service is the only freedom.