Two Views of Virtue: Absolute Relativism and Relative Absolutism
F. F. Centore, Westport, CT. Greenwood Press, 2000
ISBN 0-313-31412-8, 195 pp., hardback $65.00

F. F. Centore's erudite critique of moral models exposes the moral morass of absolute relativism (first three chapters). He then develops his own model which he calls relative absolutism (chapter four). He argues for a moral model that avoids the ditch of extremes—moral relativism and moral absolutism. Centore offers evidence to demonstrate that absolute relativism is both philosophically bankrupt and culturally suicidal and hints that moral absolutism is non-compassionate and inflexible. The three varieties of absolute relativism (individual-centered, group-centered, and goal-centered, designated as One, Two, and Three respectively) are weighed in the moral balances and found wanting. Then, invoking Thomistic natural law tradition (as opposed to Grotius), Centore presents relative absolutism as the 'middle ground between theocracy and man-centered state dictatorship' (p.134). Undergirding his relative absolutism is the idea of natural law—that 'which derives from a particular kind of nature (essence)' (p.127), which is human nature or human*ness* (this is what Francis Schaefer referred to as man's manish*ness*). His point is that 'wherever there is a nature (essence) there is a law. Every nature is fixed on its proper end, which is the good of that kind of thing' (p.127). Furthermore, for Centore, this natural law is 'found highlighted in the Ten Commandments' (p.127). Absolute relativism sees man's temporal happiness as the end which confuses *is* and *ought*, while relative absolutism understands man's eternal happiness as the end. Happiness/pleasure (the good of the thing) is important, but it must always be 'ordered to man's final end' which is not 'earthly pleasure (sexual, artistic, mechanical, etc.), but eternal happiness' (p.106).

His argument against all three types of absolute relativism concludes that when carried to a logical conclusion the true nature of man is destroyed. Absolute relativism one exalts personal freedom predicated upon the autonomous will of man, leaving each one free to do his own thing, which dead ends into nihilism. Kant, Emerson, Whitman, Nietzsche, Camus, and Sartre are associated with absolute relativism one. Absolute relativism two, built on the notion that the group is the measure of what is right, is identified with such thinkers as Hobbes, Rousseau, John Stuart Mill, Karl Popper, Richard Rorty, and Jan Narveson. Furthermore, it will eventually gravitate towards some form of tyranny and intolerance of any form of dissent from the individual. This view, according to Centore, attempts to have ethics within a materialistic world view, while trying to avoid the inevitable end of nihilism associated with number one. The third type of absolute relativism Centore identifies as situation ethics or proportionalism. Here the good goal is the guiding moral principle. Centore admits that this approach attempts to be more compassionate and optimistic than one and two but that it ultimately fails man, for in the end, morally 'everything is permissible' and 'good and evil is nothing more than a matter of individual opinion' (p.103).

As an antidote to pure relativism, Centore offers his relative absolutism (God-centered) moral model. Unfortunately, in spite of his commendable attempt to develop a moral model sufficiently strong to support the truly good society, one may be a little disappointed by this chapter. It seems to promise more than it delivers. He rightly claims that each person is special, regardless of his station in life, because he is 'created to be by God' (p.141). The concern, however, develops when he defines personhood by man's 'intellect and will' (p.118) which appear to be purely functionalistic parameters.

Furthermore, in his attempt to make his moral model flexible, he maintains that 'knowing the purpose of the law allows the intelligent person with the power of free choice to apply his or her knowledge to many situations' (p.107). If one knows the purpose of the law, and under certain conditions the purpose of the law could be fulfilled by not obeying the law, then the intelligent person could act contrary to the law (pp.107-109). He fleshes this out by saying, 'Lying is always immoral. This is an absolute rule with no exceptions' (p.111), yet in the very next sentence he introduces exceptions with 'nevertheless, there may be occasions . . .' (p.111). The third sentence negates the first two sentences and seems to bring the final choice back to the individual—the very position he is trying to avoid. Both issues spell trouble for ethics and bioethics in particular.

It is acknowledged that Centore explains that he is only trying to give a general moral model and that others can discuss how it deals with particulars, but when he tries to discuss the particulars, even for only illustrative purposes, he unnecessarily introduces seeds of destruction to his own model. Nonetheless, this book commends itself to all who sense a growing urgency to provide a moral paradigm to guide humanity through the expanding moral questions of our day. As an additional benefit, the book has an impressive bibliography and judicious documentation.

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