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Geisler, Norman L. *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1989.

Pp. 335

While Geisler's work on the variety of options in ethical thought and the resolution of moral dilemmas is now thirty years old, its continued publication speaks to its ongoing relevance. By outlining alternative moral frameworks, advocating for one in particular then analyzing various issues, Geisler provides a useful introductory text to the broad range of ethical thought. However, the book leaves out some important perspectives and Geisler's advocacy for graded absolutism is not without difficulties.

The late Norman Geisler served as professor of apologetics at Dallas Theological Seminary and dean of the Liberty Center for Christian Scholarship at Liberty University. He was co-founder of two seminaries and author, co-author or editor of over 90 books including *Baker's Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, his four-volume *Systematic Theology* and in 1971, *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues*. He insists that his 1989 book on ethics is not merely a revision of its 1971 predecessor, but rather a completely new work necessitated by changes in his approach, the need to update his material, and the decision to include new issues that were not present in the earlier volume.

Geisler unequivocally explains that his book is not intended to focus on ethics generally, but rather Christian ethics specifically. His concern is not what is right and wrong broadly

speaking, but rather what is right and wrong for Christians. As such, he states that his conclusions will be based upon Scripture, not the natural law available to all humanity.

The overall work is divided into two sections. In the first, Geisler provides a summary of various categories of ethical systems under the headings antinomianism, situationism, generalism, unqualified absolutism, conflicting absolutism and graded absolutism. In each chapter Geisler gives a description of the view, assesses its advantages and disadvantages, and evaluates whether it is an adequate system for Christian ethics. He concludes the first section of his book by advocating for “graded absolutism,” the view that moral duties are absolute but graded such that some are higher than others, and that humans are not morally responsible for violating a lower moral duty in favor of a higher one.

The second half of Geisler’s book focuses on specific moral issues and how they are to be viewed through the lens of graded absolutism. It includes the topics of abortion, euthanasia, biomedical issues, capital punishment, war, civil disobedience, homosexuality, marriage and divorce, and ecology. In each chapter Geisler presents the issue (along with the various possible positions in regard to it) then gives an evaluation. He concludes with what he believes is the correct ethical outcome.

While the book could be seen as two distinct works, one on ethical theory and the other on application, there is a running theme throughout. Specifically, Geisler is advocating for the necessity of “graded absolutism” in Christian ethics and demonstrating how that methodology can successfully resolve many of the most popularly discussed moral issues. For example, in the first half of the book he successfully shows how graded absolutism is not plagued by many of the problems inherent in other systems. Antinomianism, situationism and generalism all ultimately result in no true moral law at all. Unqualified absolutism fails to take genuine moral dilemmas

seriously whereas conflicting absolutism holds us morally responsible in situations where we have no alternative.

Geisler bases his positive argument for graded absolutism on three premises: “There are higher and lower moral laws” (p. 116), “There are unavoidable moral conflicts” (p. 117) and “No guilt is imputed for the unavoidable” (p. 119). Based on these premises, for which he provides scriptural support, Geisler concludes that “God does not hold a person guilty for not keeping a lower moral law so long as he keeps the higher,” (p. 120) and therefore graded absolutism must be true.

When Geisler addresses the specific moral issues in the latter half of his book his analysis is clearly guided by his commitment to graded absolutism, even when he does not explicitly acknowledge such. For instance, in discussing how graded absolutism resolves real moral conflicts, he analogizes it to the principle of double effect. He observes that sometimes both a good and evil effect can result from the same act. In the example of a person who lies in order to save another’s life, the lie itself is still a morally wrong act, but the act of telling the lie also produces a morally good result. Under graded absolutism this person is not morally responsible for the wrongfulness of the lie in light of the higher law to save a life. In his later chapter on euthanasia, Geisler utilizes this same reasoning. In answering the question, “What if pain relievers hasten death?” he notes that this dilemma too implicates the principle of double effect (p. 170). If the will of the person giving the medication is to relieve pain and not to accelerate death, then he is committed to the higher law and is not morally accountable for the concomitant negative effects.

There is much to commend Geisler’s work, especially in his description and evaluation of ethical systems. However, if one is hoping for a comprehensive overview, Geisler leaves out

important insights. Most apparent is his failure to acknowledge virtue ethics. His approach is thoroughly deontological and fails to offer any rebuttal to those who would claim that the ethical pursuit of Christians should lean more toward developing certain virtues than following particular rules. He gives virtually no consideration to the objection that a system based solely on outward obedience fails to account for those who “do the right thing for the wrong reasons.” In the limited space where he does touch on this subject (such as in the euthanasia example discussed above) he still equates motives to obedience to a set of absolute rules.

It is also difficult to see how, once “graded,” Geisler’s “absolutism” truly remains “absolute” in any meaningful sense. He suggests that only absolute moral laws are suited to an infinite being, but it is not clear why this should be the case. Virtues possessed by God certainly must be “absolute” in the sense that they are the perfect standard by which all virtue is measured. But the application of those virtues to specific dilemmas may present conflicts. It is not at all clear that the resolution to those dilemmas must require “absolute” rules.

Aside from this linguistic oddity, in practical effect Geisler’s system at its core is very similar to one in which moral laws are considered *prima facie*. A *prima facie* law is one which is generally applicable, but which may be legitimately subverted when it comes into conflict with a higher moral duty. This view has all the benefits of Geisler’s graded absolutism without the mental exercises necessary to label generally applicable rules as “absolute.”

Geisler’s analysis is highly beneficial to those seeking an introduction to Christian ethical philosophy, from illustrating difficulties with competing worldviews to establishing the basic foundation for an adequate Christian morality. His failure to include virtue ethics and his insistence on describing what is in practical effect a *prima facie* morality as being absolute are negatives to be sure, but they do not irredeemably detract from the overall value of the work.