Book Report: Essays on Ethics and Politics by Gordon Clark

Dr. Clark’s book on Ethics and Politics is a collection of 43 essays, encyclopedia entries, and articles for academic journals and popular magazines. Throughout this book, Clark shows that whenever ethics, law, and politics and governments are based on human creations and conventions as opposed to the Word of God, they ultimately fall short. Without the Bible, there is no possibility of ethical knowledge or action. It is God’s Word alone that establishes right from wrong. Clark presents clear and convincing arguments and a defense of Christian ethics and politics. I will not review every article in this book, because many of them are very short, maybe one or two paragraphs. However, I will review several of them in order to provide a good overview of this collection of essays.

The essays are in alphabetical order. Clark covers subjects such as “Activism,” “Altruism,” “Anarchism,” and “Calvinistic Ethics” for Baker’s Dictionary of Christian Ethics. One particularly interesting article, “Can Moral Education be Grounded on Naturalism?” consists of a discussion of in which Clark states that Humanism, naturalism, or atheism does not have a ground for morality, nor does it uniformly accept these laws such as the Ten Commandments. The empirical method of ethics cannot identify values, for a number of reasons. How does one measure those values if there is no standard by which to refer? Additionally, many values such as art and friendship are descriptive, rather than prescriptive. What is observed cannot give us what ought to be done. Essentially, there is no empirical knowledge sufficient to brand murder as wrong and private property as right.
In a series of articles on capital punishment, Clark shows that the contemporary efforts to abolish capital punishment proceed on a non-Christian view of man, a secular theory of criminal law, and a low estimate of human life. The low evaluation of human life occurs in the liberal penology that holds criminal law to be solely for the purpose of rehabilitation of the criminal. The murder of a human being, they say, is too minor of a crime to warrant execution, and their theory consistently implies that no crime should ever be punished. This is the difference between secular and Christian ethics.

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament support and confirm capital punishment for certain crimes. Clark states that the ritual and civil laws of Israel and the Old Testament are no longer in effect (Bahnsen may disagree to some extent) but Clark clearly states that the moral laws are still valid and are validated by Christ. The basis of moral law in all ages is the perceptive will of God. The laws against murder and adultery are not merely Mosaic laws, but go back to creation. Capital punishment is commanded by God to Noah, and by implication even farther back.

Clark also provides a short article on the Christian and the Law of God. He laments the false dichotomy that exists between the law and grace. However, Clark is very clear and frank in his discussion stating that the Scriptures speaks very definitely. Unless one knows the law of God, he cannot know what is wrong, evil, or sinful. It is evident that good and evil are defined by the law of God. He shows how the Bible commands obedience, and how love is defined as keeping the commandments of God.

Clark covers a few other subjects such as Christian Liberty and the role of the Civil Magistrate in very short entries. However, he spends some time on an article called
“Concerning Free Will” where he refutes the popular notion of man having a will that is completely free to choose or not to choose. He quotes extensively Luther, Calvin, and other Reformers and concludes that natural liberty is not the liberty of indifference, nor is it inconsistent with necessity. Man wills, and man acts voluntarily, but what he wills and when he wills it is predetermined by the eternal decree of God.

There is a major section of this book of essays on a history of ethics. Clark summarizes the history of ethics from the ancient period of Plato to the 20th century. He defines ethics as the study of right and wrong, of the most desirable manner of life, and of the most worthy motivation. Ethics answers the question, why? Why is stealing wrong? Why is honesty right? He divides this article into two parts, one is a study of largely secular ethics and ethical theory and philosophers, and the other part is a discussion of Christian principles.

In the ancient period Clark groups Plato and Aristotle. Plato in his earlier years seemed to ascribe to hedonism, but later repudiated it and even perhaps went so far as to adopt some form of asceticism. Plato developed a psychology that was key to his virtues. Man’s soul was divided into three parts: the lowest was the appetitive function, or desire; the second was spirited principle; and the highest was reason, or the intellect. Justice was all three parts working in harmony. Vice occurs when desire, either alone or with the help of the spirited element, usurps the role of reason. He thought that no one ever does wrong voluntarily, but does wrong because he is mistaken in believing an evil act is good, or is ignorant of the fact. Ignorance is the cause of vice, and knowledge guarantees good.
Aristotle had no interest in religion, unlike Plato, and morality for him had no connection with a future life. Morality was a social custom, refined by reason and based on a view of human nature. Aristotle formulated ethics as the search for the good, that for which man does everything else. Rationality is the function particular to man, so therefore, Aristotle reasoned, the good for man is the active exercise of his soul’s faculties in conformity with reason. This was acted out in two forms: moral and intellectual virtue. Moral virtue was not a natural habit, but was acquired by habit. Action produces character, he stated. Higher on the scale than moral virtue is intellectual virtue, for the highest level of human nature is reason, and its proper functioning is the highest purpose of man. Aristotle also worked out a theory of choice, deliberation, and how goals determine choices.

In the medieval period Clark discusses Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Augustine repudiated Plato and Aristotle by stating that knowledge itself is a means to an end, and that end is blessedness. Knowledge is not wisdom, and wisdom turns man from things to God. Science is necessary to arrange temporal affairs, but when people subordinate themselves to God, they put their various activities in their proper place. In order to address why everyone was not wise, Augustine discussed voluntary action. Augustine argues that love was a key part, but the question was not whether to love or not, but what one ought to love. Love is a volition, not an emotion. Augustine then develops his theories based on original sin, a depraved nature, and a redefined concept of free will. He developed these ideas more fully later in life after his debates with Pelagius. Man
may exercise volitional choice without free will in view of an omnipotent and omniscient God. Faith is a gift of God.

Thomas Aquinas succeeded in overthrowing Augustinianism and replacing it again with Aristotle. He stated that not even God could compel the will of man, and based his theories upon extrabiblical sources as much or more than Biblical sources. Thomas built his ethics on natural law, those laws written on the human heart.

Clark moves to the modern period with English ethics and Thomas Hobbes. Hobbs aimed to make ethics scientific, and he held that all forms of life were but complicated relationships among particles of matter in motion. His materialism served as the basis for his psychological hedonism. Hobbes’ ethics were descriptive rather than normative; he did not say what men ought to do, but he described their actual conduct and then made some recommendations. Other people Clark mentions include Ralph Cudworth, who returned to a Platonic view by stating that an action was not wrong because God forbids it, but God forbids it because it is wrong.

Bishop Joseph Butler was another important writer in this period who believed that moral obligation, the basic theses of Christianity, can be established by observation. He was not attached to the materialistic mechanism of Hobbes, but still depended on scientific methods. However, Clark argues that observation leads to incompatible results, and that one cannot base ethics and morality merely on observation.

In 19th century England Jeremy Bentham proposed a theory of utilitarianism, which basically states that everyone seeks nothing but pleasure, and one ought to seek not only his own pleasure, but the greatest pleasure of the greatest number. He proposed that
one could measure the amount of pleasure that each act provides, and using math
basically determine which act was good and which was not. However, Clark argues that
descriptive science can discover no reason for aiming at the good of all society. No
mathematical theory can quantify all of the choices of one person, let alone the entire
human race, to determine what will provide the greatest good for the most people.

Immanuel Kant came up with a system of categorical imperatives, which was a
theory of *a priori* duty; a moral precept was such because it was a categorical imperative,
universal maxims. However, a serious problem arose when determining what constituted
a categorical imperative and what did not. How does a maxim become such?

John Dewey taught instrumentalism, which depended upon an empirical and
scientific ethic. Much of his ethic had to do with capital punishment. He alleged that
society had just as much to blame for the criminal as the criminal was, and he
advocated that a criminal should not be punished, but rehabilitated and paroled. In
addition, he also advocated very strict controls of government over business. He held
that nothing was intrinsically good or bad, nothing is valuable in and of itself, but that all
beliefs, values, and actions are instrumental. They are judged by their consequences. If
they solve human problems, they are good consequences. Clark notes, however, that if
nothing is inherently good, then how can man choose anything? Suicide would be just as
much an option as perseverance.

Several other people that Clark mentions seem to hold that ethics and morals are
really just personal preferences, and not absolute normative principles that apply to all
people. P.H. Howell-Smith thought that ethical choices are personal preferences and that
no one could question another’s personal preferences (morals). C.L. Stevenson also held that morals were personal preferences, but that people who held those preferences were just trying to persuade others to adopt the same preferences as they had.

Clark ends this section of the book with a discussion of Christian principles, beginning with the Decalogue. He quotes a number of the questions and answers in the Westminster Larger Catechism to support the Christian position of the importance of the moral law. The Ten Commandments, he notes, rests on certain presuppositions, such as the authority of God and His Written Word. Ethics requires definite information on what is right and wrong, and such information can only be revealed by a living and communicating God. The secular notion of changing morality presupposes a belief in a changing god, which raises theological issues. The Christian God is immutable, as is His Word. Sovereignty is one of the most important aspects of God as it relates to ethics. God does not will the good because it is independently good, but on the contrary the good is good because God wills it. The idea of sovereignty solves all of the major problems of secular ethics.

Clark has an especially pertinent but short article on the ethics of abortion. Clark follows the logic of the arguments of the abortionists, and concludes that if the Supreme Court can legalize the murder of infants, it can easily legalize the murder of adults. This is already happening today in the euthanasia movement.

Clark has two other particularly interesting articles in this collection of essays. One is called “Human Nature and Political Theory,” in which he takes the ethical models of several philosophers and Christianity and applies their systems to the area of politics
and government. What is interesting to note, the secular ethical systems all favor a totalitarian governmental system. Marx, Rousseau, Hobbes, Aristotle, and others all propound some sort of benevolent dictatorship, or a government where the citizens give up their rights to a monarch or dictator and trust them with their well-being. However, Christianity is different, because of its view of the nature of God and the nature of man. Government was instituted by God because, though it is evil, men at liberty are evil also, and need oversight. Civil government is one of God’s methods of restraining sin. The Law (God’s Word) is of course another. However, Christian governmental theory states that there are some things that the State is not allowed to do, and God’s Word governs what the civil magistrate can and cannot do.

Another interesting article from Clark is called “The Puritans and Situational Ethics.” The Puritans have gotten a bad name in contemporary history, and Clark attempts to shed some positive light on this group of saints by contrasting them with the blatant antinomians that are influential and permeating today’s culture. He contrasts these moral giants with the likes of Joseph Fletcher, a professor of social ethics at the Episcopal Theological School at Cambridge, MA. Fletcher denies the divine law, advocates breaking all of the commandments, including those of murder, theft, and adultery. Fletcher is a consummate advocate of situational ethics, and cites several instances where murder and adultery would be moral under the right circumstances. He states that love may require the breaking of the commandments.

However, Clark asserts that the Puritans would insist that no specious assertion of love can possibly justify disobedience to God. Christ said, “If you love me, keep my
commandments.” The Ten Commandments are not civil laws poorly written or stupidly conceived, but are divine commands. Theology is the crux of the matter, for ethics depends on theology. Instead of a God who gives moral laws, Fletcher acknowledges a god who commands nothing but love. However, love by itself does not justify any action. Morality cannot be based on love alone because love alone gives no guidance whatsoever. Without the specific and detailed instruction of the commandments we could never know how to express our love for God. Clark concludes this article by stating bluntly that the Scriptures stress doctrine, information, and knowledge. This information and knowledge includes rational statements about the nature of God, and the Bible teaches morality.