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Where Should Wesleyan Ethics Go from Here? A Response to Eric Manchester

Kevin Twain Lowery

I am extremely grateful to Eric Manchester for his most gracious words and encouragement, and we are all truly indebted to him for the careful analysis and most insightful critique he has provided us. It was my hope from the beginning that this project might spur meaningful discussion about fruitful ways to develop Wesleyan models of moral development. Manchester has accurately articulated the concerns which drive the book, especially the criticisms that I leveled against Wesleyan developments that have outlived much of their usefulness and need to be replaced with a new paradigm. Nevertheless, he recognizes and appreciates my attempt to salvage not only Wesley's doctrines and concerns, but also the elements of otherwise obsolete models that I feel are legitimate and ought to be retained. I appreciate Manchester's willingness to read the manuscript carefully enough to identify these subtle moves. Although I never really expected my preliminary attempt at sketching a new paradigm to be regarded as a definitive statement, I did hope that it would lead to discussion that might eventually produce a new, more useful paradigm. Manchester's critique is a significant step in that direction.

Many appropriations of historic figures are simply made by showing through comparison how the new ideas are at least compatible with the thought of the historical figure. In Wesley's case, I believe that a stronger relationship can be built, because Wesley revised his views throughout the course of his life, and this creates several trajectories in his thought that can be extrapolated into the future. If a proposal can be shown to follow one of Wesley's own intellectual trajectories, then this gives validation to the new idea as being truly "Wesleyan".

Nevertheless, this is where Wesley poses an interesting challenge as a subject for study. Wesley was a very eclectic thinker, but he typically did not cite his sources, and this is most unfortunate. This is why the completion of the newer, scholarly *Works of John Wesley* is essential to advancing our understanding and analysis of Wesley's thought. In addition, Wesley often held contrasting views in tension. Some might perceive this as a weakness, but I believe it to be a strength, for it seems to reflect an attitude of open-mindedness. This also makes perfect sense in light of the frequent revisions that Wesley made to his beliefs.

Given these dynamics, the most careful Wesley scholarship requires a certain familiarity with the sources that Wesley used and incorporated into his thought. It is gratifying to know that scholars like Manchester are aware of this and recognize the kind of careful work that must be done. In this book, my goal was to identify the trajectories in the progression of Wesley's thinking that could provide fertile ground for the future development of the Wesleyan doctrines of assurance and perfection. The place to start was to examine the sources that seemed to impact Wesley himself. Manchester notes my glaring omission of Aquinas and Augustine throughout the book, and there are two reasons for this. First, Aquinas and Augustine do not seem to figure much in Wesley's own discussions of assurance, perfection, and related issues. I could not find secondary sources that give significant reason to believe otherwise. In effect, my glaring omission of them essentially reflects Wesley's glaring omission of them. This is not to say that they would not be useful in discussing these issues, nor does it suggest that they do not figure into other areas of Wesley's thought. Indeed, Thomism does offer some promising ways of dealing with particular problems in Wesley's schema, as Manchester astutely points out, but it does not seem to me that either Aquinas or Augustine are essential for understanding Wesley's

views. However, I am willing to stand corrected should someone care to take me to task on this point.

The second reason that Aquinas and Augustine do not figure into my discussion is simply the fact that the trajectories of Wesley's thought do not point backward to either of these men or to the time periods they represent. I also do not see these trajectories suggesting that the way to develop Wesleyan theology is to make it look more like the theology of the eastern church fathers. Moreover, I do not see these options as the best way to develop Wesleyan thought, and the reason for this should become apparent shortly. As I indicated in the book, my first inclination was to create some kind of synthesis between Wesley's and Aquinas's views of perfection, since Aquinas offers some helpful analysis of perfection, especially the types and degrees of perfection that one can hope to attain in this life. Notwithstanding that possibility, my studies of eighteenth century thought soon led me to the conclusion that Wesley was much more engaged with the intellectual currents of his time than is obvious to the casual reader. This is also where I began to see why Outler originally referred to Wesley's thought as "folk theology" but later recanted this appellation. In reality, Wesley produced "theology for folks", not "folk theology". Wesley's approach to theology was significantly more sophisticated than that of the lay person, yet he tended to filter his writing down to the level of the average person, and this can mistakenly give one the impression that his thought is as simple as some of his writing might suggest.

When one takes into consideration the varied strands of thought that Wesley incorporated into his own thinking, coupled with the points of tension that he tried to maintain between polar opposites, it becomes fairly obvious how Wesley has historically been construed in many different ways. There are thus a number of options that might be suggested for the development

of Wesleyan thought, and Manchester's suggestions are certainly feasible. I chose the particular route that I believed is most consistent with the *inner workings* of Wesley's thought (as evidenced within the trajectories created by his own intellectual progress), and I believe that this route actually offers the best way to develop Wesley's doctrines of assurance and perfection so that they can be fully integrated with social and cognitive science and be intellectually defensible in general. Such a development might help these doctrines regain the relevance that they once had in the daily lives of believers. At the very least, a fresh approach to these doctrines would help to promote Wesleyan conceptions of spirituality and moral progress.

There are three elemental areas of Wesley's thought that I believe set distinct parameters for Wesleyan theology and ethics. These three commitments fit together and reinforce another quite well. Of course, Wesley held each of these principles in tension with other considerations, but I am convinced that they form the backbone of Wesleyan thought. The first of these is Wesley's firm commitment to empiricism. He even tried to conceptualize a "spiritual sense" to perceive spiritual realities. However, Wesley recognized the subjectivity and unreliability of notions that are not empirically grounded, and he thus modified his doctrine of assurance. He concluded that the direct witness of the Spirit is not a reliable basis for assurance, and he suggested that assurance must ultimately be judged by the indirect witness of conscience, which itself is more empirically grounded. Wesley's commitment to empiricism seems firm, and he appears to have regarded science positively and optimistically. This goes a long way in setting boundaries for the development of his thought. After all, epistemology is foundational to any system of thought, for it determines what is considered to be reliable.

The other two commitments exist in tandem. Wesley believed that grace is synergistic to the extent of emphasizing human initiative and responsibility, and in that sense I am in complete

agreement with Cobb and Maddox. Wesley likewise held a naturalistic conception of Divine providence. He asserted that it is fanatical to expect God to bring about ends apart from their natural means. In essence, Wesley's faith was not a "God of the gaps" sort like we so often see. Instead, Wesley believed that God acts through natural causes and through human beings who thus become vehicles of his grace and providence. This is an extremely critical point in Wesley's thought, in my estimation, because it espouses a type of spirituality that welcomes knowledge and progress. It is not the type of faith that wants to remain ignorant and dependent. On the contrary, it envisions human progress as a part of God's general providence, and we thus continue to grow and develop, becoming more like our Creator. Moreover, we accept responsibility and take initiative rather than wait passively for God to act in our behalf. We must still acknowledge our dependence on God and trust him to make our efforts fruitful and to indeed act in our behalf beyond the limitations of our capabilities. Nevertheless, we accept responsibility and take initiative, essentially extending our capabilities and our realm of responsibility. This resonates with Mildred Bangs Wynkoop's assertion that we should embrace a moral interpretation of religion over a magical one. This applies not only to the moral development of individuals, it is relevant to human progress in general.

I have laid all of this out so that it might be more apparent how I would qualify my agreement with Manchester's suggestions. He advocates a greater role than I recognize for the sacraments, corporate worship, and other ecclesial practices. These are all legitimate in their own right, and they do foster the growth and perfection of the individual. Moreover, groups are capable of being less subjective than individuals, so Manchester's proposal is a definite improvement over the models that need to be replaced. However, I do not advocate replacing personal mysticism with corporate or institutional mysticism, if that is what he has in mind.

These practices (and the means of grace in general) are effective because they impact us cognitively, and this is what brings about change in the individual. What I am ultimately suggesting is that we allow our understanding of cognitive and social science to infiltrate and inform our understanding of the means of grace. We no longer need to view them as magical practices. Just as we allow our medical knowledge to inform our understanding of divine healing, we must allow other areas of empirical knowledge (i.e. science) to inform our understanding of divine providence in general. Even tradition itself should be viewed within an empirical framework and not be given some sort of mystical status. I believe that this approach is fundamentally Wesleyan, for this is the best way to reconcile Wesley's relationship with the Anglican Church, his appropriation of historical figures, and his views on ecumenicity. He did not accept sources uncritically, but he seems to have at least attempted to give each of the varying strands of Christian tradition due consideration.

Along these same lines, Manchester raises the question as to whether I am ultimately giving reason and empirical knowledge (i.e. empirically grounded belief) more importance than the theological content they affirm. In my opinion, this question hinges on two issues. The first is whether we allow theological content to change over time. Theological interpretations are always more important than the data on which they are based, because they reflect the ultimate meaning that we ascribe to the data. The real question here is the extent to which our theological interpretations must conform to those of the past. The more willing we are to change our doctrine, the more willing we will be to incorporate new data and new ways of thinking. Considering the ways that Wesley revised his own positions, one would be hard pressed to argue that Wesleyan theology should be rigidly based on tradition. Indeed, Wesley was criticized specifically for allowing practical experience to be a factor in shaping doctrine. However, as a

critical mass of experience and thought, tradition still carries a certain weight and should not simply be overlooked.

The second issue related to this question is an epistemological one. The rationalist or the mystic will complain that the empiricist gives ultimate allegiance to empirical data and reason, but that is due to the fact that the empiricist considers them to be the foundations of all belief in the first place. Even theological concepts are understood analogically in relation to empirical concepts. Moreover, since the empiricist views all knowledge as merely probable (not as absolutely certain), belief is strengthened as more empirical data is taken into consideration and as reason is used more efficiently. In response to this criticism, the empiricist would say that the rationalist and mystic ultimately give more authority to whims (either their own or those of the past) to the extent that their beliefs are not empirically grounded. I also believe this position to be in accord with Wesley's.

I should probably include a brief comment about my use of Kant in this project. Kant's usefulness lies primarily in his analysis of the basic theological components of religion. He seems to grasp rather well the way that religion attempts to answer the existential questions that seem to be of universal concern (i.e. existence of God, afterlife, morality, etc.), so his analysis of assurance and moral progress (i.e. sanctification) are most helpful. With respect to his ethics, Kant offers what is arguably the foremost criticism of the empiricist, motive-centered ethics that dominated much of the eighteenth century. Wesley was certainly a part of this movement, and Kant's critique appeared near the time of Wesley's death, so it seemed to me that a good way to nuance Wesley's ethical categories and concepts was to expose it to Kantian ethics. This in no way makes Wesleyan ethics more Kantian, but it does offer a more robust account of Wesleyan

ethics that addresses some of the weaknesses that exist in Wesley's own construal of ethics and moral development.

Finally, I appreciate Manchester's suggestions for developing the concept of conscience further than the brief treatment that I gave it in the book. Since Wesley's definition of sin as "a willful transgression of the known law of God" essentially puts the primary emphasis on the discernment of motive, I was content to simply assert that conscience ought to be viewed more empirically, thus downplaying the role of intuition, including mystical accounts of conscience. This still does not address the discernment of ethical actions, but since this requires a host of other issues to be addressed, it seemed to extend beyond the scope of this book. In addition to Manchester's recommendations, I would propound the possibility of developing Wesley's Aristotelian predilections along the lines of virtue ethics and/or utilitarianism. There is obviously much dialog that could and perhaps should take place concerning these issues, and I am indebted to Manchester for bringing them to the forefront.