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How Christian Ethics Became Medical Ethics: The Case of Paul Ramsey

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Abstract

Over the last century Christian ethics has moved from an attempt to Christianize the social order to a quandary over whether being Christian unduly biases how medical ethics is done. This movement can be viewed as the internal development of protestant liberalism to its logical conclusion, and Paul Ramsey can be taken as one of the last great representatives of that tradition. By reducing the Christian message to the 'ethical upshot' of neighbour love, Ramsey did not have the resources to show how Christian practice might make a difference for understanding or forming the practice of medicine. Instead, medicine became the practice that exemplified the moral commitments of Christian civilization, and the goal of the ethicist was to identify the values that were constitutive of medicine. Ramsey thus prepared the way for the Christian ethicist to become a medical ethicist with a difference, and the difference simply involved vague theological presumptions that do no serious intellectual work other than explaining, perhaps, the motivations of the ethicist.

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