**Bonhoeffer on Ethics and Christianity: a Summary**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German theologian, writing about ethics in the era of the Third Reich. He plotted against the Nazi government as was eventually executed for treason. He is seen as one of the great Christian ethicists, for his personal example and the depth of his ideas. Standing within the Protestant tradition, Bonhoeffer saw the evil or ‘fallen’ nature of humanity as a key ethical idea. He sees Christianity as reflecting critically on a crucial factor in ethics: man’s knowledge of good and evil. He appeals to Augustine’s idea of Original Sin: every human being is guilty of rebellion against God. Bonhoeffer argues that Christian religion is crucial for a genuine understanding of morality. This argument contributes to our AS topic of religion and morality. Here are summary notes of the Bonhoeffer’s arguments in *Ethics*.

**Summary**

* Ethics is concerned with knowledge of good and evil; Christianity however wishes to consider the origins and root problem of ethics. It is a critical approach.
* Originally (in the Genesis story) mankind only had knowledge of God. By gaining knowledge of good and evil (remember the serpent), mankind has fallen away from its origin.
* By becoming concerned with good and evil, mankind has lost its direct focus on God. It has become separated from God.
* Having learned of good and evil, mankind then came to see itself as the source of such things. Like God, humans may see themselves as creating moral values.
* Although God had made man in his own image, humanity has stolen a God-like nature. The forbidden fruit of moral knowledge encourages men to see themselves as creators and judges of moral values. If mankind has knowledge of good and evil, it also gains knowledge of choice and election (being chosen by God). Humans wish to set themselves out for greatness. So, although humanity has become like God in knowledge of good and evil, it also sets us against God: “a god against God”.
* This cuts off mankind from eternal life, which proceeds from purely choosing God. Being cut off from God means being cut off from life.
* Human life is now characterised by disunion: with God, things, other humans, oneself.
* Not perceiving God, mankind does see its own disunion and is ashamed of it. We are ashamed by our lack of union with God and each other. It is difficult to find union with others (Bonhoeffer gives the example of making eye-contact with strangers).
* Conscience (personal moral self-awareness) is the sign of humanity’s disunion with itself. Our consciences tell us not to do things which are wrong. Conscience is concerned with our relation to ourselves.
* By putting us back in connection with ourselves, conscience opens up the possibility of right relation to God and others. In conscience, we do not deny our own evil, but strive for good. Good, consisting in unity, is the good of God.
* Aware of disunion with oneself, and knowledge of good and evil, self-knowledge becomes the goal of life. Can we understand ourselves? We are constantly striving to overcome the disunion with ourselves.
* In this quest for self-knowledge, everything seems to be in disunion to the human thinker: life and law, knowledge and action, *etc*. We see many things in terms of conflicts, and we see ourselves as judges, having knowledge of good and evil.
* Reading the New Testament (the message of Jesus), we find this is not characterised by disunion, but throughout a message of reconciliation is to be found. Life can be seen as joyful or certain.
* This contrast can be seen in Jesus’ conflict with the Pharisees in the NT. The Pharisees represent a form of life concerned with knowledge of good and evil. In a way this is admirable, since the Pharisee is trying to honour God with judgements of good and evil. The Pharisee is careful and conscious of his own faults; he is concerned by sin against knowledge of good and evil.
* Face to face with Jesus, the Pharisees try to bring him into their conflicts too. Yet Jesus does not allow himself to be drawn into the debate. Jesus refuses to choose between the conflicting sides of life situations. Jesus’ answers are motivated by union with God. Jesus attacks the disunity with God implied in that concern for knowledge of good and evil.

**Key points from Bonhoeffer’s argument**

This is a radical view of ethics, since it gives special place to Christianity and the Bible in revealing the problems of ethics. Without religion, ethical insight leads only to conflict and self-centred approaches. As an antidote to this, Bonhoeffer suggests that we listen to the voice of conscience, are humble in our exercise of moral judgement, and that we reflect seriously upon the biblical narrative of good and evil.

Bonhoeffer believes that self-motivated ethical judgement should give way to union with God. We need to be humble and self-critical, becoming aware that we are *not* united with the source of our being (God) and that we need to return to him to live good and authentic lives.

In other words, Christianity gives us a special, critical view on morality. Ethics without religion is a hollow exercise, because it is not sufficiently aware of our sinful natures.

**Questions**

* What would be the consequences of holding Bonhoeffer’s view?
* What are the strengths of his position?
* What are the problems of his position?
* Does this approach have an obvious connection to the situation in which Bonhoeffer was writing?