ABSTRACT

Development of a viable action-reflection approach in Christian social ethics turns on the issue of the relationship of “theologizing” to strategy in ethical decision-making. These may be derived and linked together by six other reflective activities that are explicitly or implicitly undertaken in action: situation analysis, identification of cultural issues, interpretation in terms of appropriate middle axioms, utopian (ethical) “modeling,” ethical judgement, and policy determination. Algebraic and geometric models are utilized to describe the characteristics of the reflection and ways that actors may organize and account for them. Emergent, residual issues include the role of preparation, the meaning of objectivity, and the implications of this approach as a method for teaching ethics.
First, it must be said that this paper is best understood as a reflection on reflections on action—a consideration that is twice removed from the proposed focus of the paper. Nevertheless—due to a firm conviction that an approach to action-reflection as a way of doing social ethics is vitally necessary—the effort will be undertaken. The subject itself, "action reflection as a way of doing social ethics," is presented in terms of models describing reflective activities that are, or may be, related to conscious ethical action.

Background and Presuppositions

Chronologically speaking, the first of the models to be presented was developed in response to a question addressed to the writer with regard to a proposed action-training program then being recommended for sponsorship by a cluster of seminaries in the Southwestern Ohio area. A faculty member from the Lutheran seminary involved in the cluster asked: "But what are you doing that is different from what the city planner does?" The writer was immediately struck by the recognition of both a necessary similarity and a necessary difference that were exposed by the question.

On the one hand, the expected necessary difference involves conscious attention to a theologically-based ethic in the actions resulting from implementation of the program. On the other hand, the often overlooked necessary similarity involves the fact that, as action in the social world, the actions developed can appear no different from those of a social planner—despite their justification, motivation, or even specific theological and ethical content. That is, especially considering their intentional relation to public policy, such actions are—in fact—actions in the
social world subject to the conditions and criteria that apply to public acts. Thus, persons engaged in such actions from the vantage point of religious vocation are accountable for the sense in which they are public acts, as well as the sense in which they are grounded in theological and ethical commitments.

The point here is not to argue that the acts in question are only public acts, nor to argue that the theological content of such acts is irrelevant to the social meanings involved (Hauerwas, 1973:73f). The point is that, as intentional public acts, containing statements about how things should be in the world, how things should happen in the world, or what values should be achieved in the world, persons engaged in these acts are accountable for their public character as well as for their theological integrity. Thus, a viable action-reflection approach to Christian social ethics will provide a means of accounting for both of these dimensions of social action.

Since the motivating question for the initial model was asked in the Spring of 1969, and being well acquainted with the biases of the Lutheran questioner, the problem at issue was interpreted by the writer as having to do with identifying the role of “theologizing” in the decision-making process leading to public social action. The point of this undertaking was to describe the linkage, interrelation, and potential interaction of “theologizing” and strategy as components of action.

Linkage refers to the connections that obtain between the two components. As the discussion will show, “theologizing,” identified as theological understanding, is that element of ethical judgement that provides specific religious content to norms for judgment, while “strategy” refers to the complex of reflective acts, including policy determination that must be undertaken to implement judgments in concrete situations. Interrelation identifies the relative position and respective roles of the two in terms of preliminary and intermediary reflective acts
that are necessary for “theologizing” to have situational specificity and to serve as the religious criterion for strategy. Potential interaction has to do with the gains in clarification and effectiveness that are expected from conscious effort to affect the relationships described above.

The models developed were based on the writer’s attempt to apply to practical problems the working definition of strategy proposed by Herbert E. Stotts and Paul Deats Jr., (1962:112): viz., that strategy is “the clarification of ethical norms, the appraisal of social needs, the assessment of costs and resources, and the deployment of energies to establish and accomplish institutional goals.” Recently, it has become apparent to the writer that, in addition to the definition itself, the Stotts and Deats work is also a basic source of the conceptual framework on which the models are based. This is indicated by the model utilized to describe social ethics in that volume. For this reason, the presentation of models, in connection with this paper, will begin with a discussion of the Stotts and Deats model to lay the groundwork for discussion of models developed by the writer, his colleagues, and students over the past several years.

What must first be noted about this Stotts and Deats model (Fig. 1) are the levels of reality and disciplinary reflection involved in seeking to relate normative structures of commitment to social situations. Social ethics arises as the middle term of normative and descriptive reflection. These latter are further broken down into theological and ethical reflection, on the one hand, and descriptive and functional analysis, on the other.

The dynamics of the model are focused in three tensions: (1) Normative tension involving conflicts between and among goals (and values); (2) primary ethical tension growing out of conscious effort to relate normative commitments to social situations; and (3) social tensions intrinsically involved in the situation and arising out of implementation of strategies.
chosen. A further dynamic roots in time as a critical, underlying, dimension of the action that takes place.

![Diagram of the model]

Fig. 1

Time provides the one sure dimension of movement in the model. It is the context within which ongoing tensions and conflicts are adjudicated and the fundamental differentiation leading to a strategic response occurs. Social ethics is the emergent outcome of goal-oriented and commitment-based behavior, negotiating the three basic tensions (identified above) as systems move through time.

A final dimension of importance is the differentiation between the challenge contained in the situation and modes of responses, on the other. This differentiation necessitates, and is achieved by undertaking the enterprise in the middle term, which, in terms of its characteristics
as an ethical method, structures the four contributing disciplinary reflections in a manner yielding integrative, interdisciplinary results (see the definition of Christian social ethics in Muelder, 1966:20f)).

All of these elements are presupposed in the models that follow.

The Elements and Processes of the Models

The first model is designated a “Composite Diagram of Reflective Activity in Developing Strategic Responses” (Fig. 2). It is the initial, though not necessarily the clearest presentation of the approach being proposed. Nevertheless, the two key terms, “reflective activity” and “strategic responses” are, in the judgement of the writer, more visibly presented than in succeeding diagrams.

It should be noted that the major factor differentiating this approach from that of Stotts and Deats is the emphasis on reflective activities, as such, with implementation and evaluation of strategic responses as the goal and primary criterion of the completeness and coherence of those activities. The elliptical character of the diagram focuses the unity of the reflections in terms of their cogency for action in the situation being addressed. The reflections are engendered by and project toward involvement in the situation.

Thus, the reflective activity described in the models is not rooted in withdrawal from the situation, nor should it be characterized as “disinterestedness.” While it presses towards a kind of objectivity, the objectivity results from self-critical analysis rather than “detachment” (Gustafson, 1974). The reflective activity described in the models, then, is the kind referred to by

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Thomas Luckmann (1967:45) when he says, “the meaning of experience depends, strictly speaking, upon one’s ‘stopping and thinking’: that is, acts by which subjective processes are
located in an interpretive scheme.” It is the kind of activity practiced by the central character in the musical, “Stop the World, I want to Get Off.”

Those who have seen that production will remember that at those points in the action when motives, goals, and consequences were most confused, and most problematic, the actor would shout: “Stop the World!” He would then ascend to the pinnacle of the tiered platform in the center of the stage, where he would proceed to ponder the meaning of the situation in which he found himself – to philosophize, if you will. From this vantage point, he would return to the plane of action and re-enter the situation at the point of departure with his subsequent behavior being judged by and, to some extent, modified by the insights gained in the moment of reflection.

In this sense, one can be misled by the poetic license exercised in the second part of the title. Contrary to the advertised motive of escape, which probably related significantly to the sentiments of a substantial number of audience patrons, the focal activity of the character at these moments is the kind of “stopping and thinking” to which Luckmann refers. It is reflection which provides a more adequate schema for interpretation of the situation and some, related, moral guidance for behavior (Although the production would not have attracted many patrons, including the writer, if it had been entitled: “Moments of Reflection in One Man’s Life”). The entertainment interest of the production prevents us from pushing the analysis of the reflection acted out further, except to say that it is, in a significant way, descriptive of the kind of reflection on action-in-process that the models presented in this paper are intended to describe.

A word also needs to be said about the meaning of “situation” in describing the empirical conditions of action. It is not used in the technical sense employed by Joseph Fletcher (1966) in his “situation ethics” or by Paul Lehmann (1963) in his definition of the “Christian context.” It
is, rather, rooted in the “existential” character of action as referred to by Thomas Wren (1974) and described in the following statement by Jean-Paul Sartre:

For us, man is defined first of all as a being ‘in a situation.’ That means that he forms a synthetic whole with his situation – biological, economic, political, cultural, etc. He cannot be distinguished from his situation, for it forms him and decides his possibilities; but, inversely, it is he who gives it meaning by making his choices within it; to be is to choose oneself in a situation, and persons... differ from one another in their situations and also in the choices they themselves make of themselves. (Quoted in Wren, 1974:145.)

Wren (1974) adds that for a person to be an agent “in situation” means not only that he must “insert his action in a network of determinism” (as suggested by Sartre), but also that each act is preceded and conditioned by other free actions of his, even if these earlier actions have been forgotten or repudiated.

“situation,” in the models presented in this paper, is intended to refer to this dual character of human agency: on the one hand, the structural social conditions and historical process with reference to which the agent acts, and, on the other hand, the past, present, and future determinations and possibilities of agency.

Looking at the “Composite Diagram of Reflective Activity in Developing Strategic Responses” in these terms, we note the following reflective activities: (1) perception, (2) cultural reflection, (3) theological reflection, (4) ethical reflection, (5) political reflection, (6) strategy, or specific action reflection, and (7) action as a reflective product of the process. These reflections give rise to analytical and decisional outcomes that interpret and direct the action taken. The outcomes themselves are understood as “middle terms,” involving interaction between normative valuations and descriptive elements of the situation. Some of these (empirical analysis, ethical models, ethical judgment, and policy determination) are implemented in subsequent stages of the
process, while others (cultural understanding, theological understanding, and middle axioms) mediate and serve as criteria of subsequent outcomes.

Value analysis is more extensive and more differentiated than other kinds of reflective activities described in the model. It occurs in four of the eight determinations identified: cultural understanding, theological understanding, middle axioms, and ethical models. Including ethical judgment, three kinds of ethical reflection are described. These reflections “pay off” concretely in their utilization, which is the necessary mediating element in relating ethical judgement to strategy. The descriptive accuracy of the model is maintained by recognizing the integral connections between perception, judgment, and action. It is similar to that proposed by Gordon Lippitt in his book, *Visualizing Change* (1973:2), where he describes behavior as an organism’s response to an environmental stimulus mediated through perception, or Stimulus – Organism – Perception – Reaction. This description involves a modification and elaboration of the classical stimulus-response description of behaviorist psychology. Likewise, the elements of value and strategic analysis proposed in the model constitute further elaboration of variations presupposed in simpler formulations.

We are helped in understanding the elliptical shape of the model, and attendant symmetrical properties, by remembering that in the theory of analytic geometry an ellipse is a figure having two foci and described by a point “moving so that the sum of the distances from...the foci is constant and always greater than the distance between the foci.” (*The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, Micropedia, Volume III: 859. Italics added.) The situation, as the concrete frame of reference for action, and the valuational claims implicit in the cultural, religious, and ethical commitments of the actor provide the grounds for the foci of the model, with the former being located in the perceptual plane and the latter in the religio-ethical plane.
Lippitt's insertion of perception in the stimulus organism-response reformulation of the description of human behavior requires further comment. In a sense, perception is the crucial element in the process. It is, at once, the mode of entry and the unitary expression of the process in miniature. This characteristic of perception is best understood in the following description of the perceptual process by Solley and Murphy (1960:24ff):

The perceptual act begins before stimulation; it begins with the individual's expectations about future perceptions. Expectations mark the initial preparatory aspect of the perceptual act. Perceptual expectation is the first molar unit of the perceptual act, a unity which continues at least until the percept is achieved. As a unit it merges with and partially directs still another molar unit of the preparatory phase, that of attending... In point of time, attending begins the moment before stimulation and continues during stimulation. Stimulation itself critically affects the final content of perception; sensory reactions are therefore the third stage (based on "old" understanding of reflection) and should be taken as another molar unit. Between reception and the final percept there 'exists' still another component which, after Woodsworth, we call trial-and-check. In this molar unit, 'hypotheses' are tested, unconscious assumptions are checked, and materials supplied by the sensory process are articulated with previously stored memory traces. During this phase, new information sources are triggered which feedback both into trial-and-check and into the final stage of percepts. This new information often comes by and large from proprioceptive and autonomic sources, although it may come from further visual (and other) searching. The arousal of these sources and their subsequent flow back into the perceptual at is usually termed simply feedback. This molar unit merges with the final molar event, that of conscious perception itself.

Solley and Murphy (1960:25) diagram the perceptual act as follows:
Thus, perception has the quality not only of immediate intuition, but also of reflective interpretation of reality. Further, the fact that empirical tests and value judgment are intrinsic elements of perception means that empirical and value analyses serve the purpose of clarification of perception. In this sense, the process described in the action-reflection model is a means of keeping the perceptual process open so that the 'percept' obtained will include a more adequate judgment and a sounder basis for effective action.

An important element of perception in the process described by the model is the fact that the process begins with the (perceptual) awareness that the situation in which the actor is involved presents a problem. It is not an ordinary situation for which standard solutions are available or adequate. It is an extraordinary situation, requiring definition and a set of responses with regard to which values important to the actor are at stake. As the previous discussion shows, ordinary situations are accounted for in the behavioral aspects of perception. However, implementation of any portion, up to and including the full range of the activities described, is based on the actor's sense of the situation as problematic, i.e., requiring action.

The Fact—Value Problem

In the common parlance of action training, situation analysis involves a combination of value determination and fact-finding. Value determination is primary in the sense that situations are analyzed in terms of the interests of "victims," which are opposed to those of "powers" and "experts." "Change agents" the fourth designated group of actors, are viewed as implementers, or potential allies, in the action process anticipated (see the 'Situation Analysis" form circulated among Action Training Network members.)
Along with other members of the "establishment," ethicists are generally bothered by the use of such value-laden terminology in referring to persons and institutional processes. However, there is a sense in which the emphasis on objectivity, most often interpreted as "disinterestedness," has short-circuited one of the major duties of ethicists—that of taking responsibility for the practical implications of ethical analysis. This duty should serve as a primary criterion of the validity of the analysis. Gunnar Myrdal (1944:1044) makes a similar observation with regard to the vocational responsibilities of social scientists:

There are only two means by which social scientists today avoid practical and political conclusions: (1) neglecting to state the value premises which, nevertheless, are implied in the conclusions reached; (2) avoiding any rational and penetrating analysis of the practical problems in terms of social engineering (which would too visibly distract from the announced principles of being only factual). By the first restraint the doors are left wide open for hidden biases. The second inhibition prevents the social scientist from rendering to practical and political life the services of which he is capable.

If such observations are appropriate for social scientists, they are much more appropriate for ethicists. On the crucial matter of objectivity, Myrdal (1944:1041, 1043) reminds us:

Science becomes no better protected against biases by the entirely negative device of refusing to arrange its result for practical and political utilization. As we shall point out, there are, rather, reasons why the opposite is true.

Biases in research [or, in the parlance of this paper, ethical analysis] are much deeper seated than in the formulation of avowedly practical conclusions. They are not valuations attached to research but rather they permeate research. They are the unfortunate results of concealed valuations that insinuate themselves into research at all stages, from its planning to its final presentation.

The valuations will, when driven underground, hinder observation from becoming truly objective. This can be avoided only by making the valuations explicit. There is no other device for excluding biases in social sciences than to face the valuation and to introduce them as explicitly stated, specific, and sufficiently concretized value premises. If this is done, it will be possible to determine in a rational way, and to openly account for, the direction of theoretical research... Practical conclusions may thus be reached by rational inferences from the data and the value premises.
The proposed action-reflection model responds to Myrdal's observation in two ways. First, it identifies the role of value judgment in clarifying and interpreting the facts of the situation, and second, it provides actors with a means of articulating and criticizing the values being applied by distinguishing among the varying levels and kinds of value interpretation involved. Further, it defines and arrives at ethical judgment in terms that can be translated into concrete action.

It is important to note that the writer realizes that action does not occur in the manner described in the model. Both action and the ethical judgment accompanying it are "living wholes" that do not follow the suggested sequential pattern of the model. Nevertheless, the model does provide a means of accounting for the empirical and value components involved. Moreover, it can be used to instruct choice, and related actions, in those cases where there is sufficient time and social space. In so doing, it moves us further along the path toward accomplishing the task that Myrdal has set for us.

Moreover, as indicated in the introductory statement, this model and the others to be presented in the paper are not presented as a means of describing the action-reflection process. They are intended, rather, to specify the universe of reflective activities that should be appealed to in that process, in order to account for the judgments and actions at issue. The reflective activities are defined and structurally related, but not, here, located in a behavioral description of the action-reflection process.

Such a description is obviously required to demonstrate the validity and applicability of the models, but cannot be undertaken within the scope of this paper. The writer has chosen instead to focus on models of the reflective activities involved in ethical judgment and action, in order to lay the groundwork for other analyses—including behavioral (case-study) descriptions.
of the action-reflection process. This choice is predicated on the view that a sound methodological basis is needed to promote more adequate discussion of action-reflection approaches in ethics.

**Variations on a Theme**

1. **Triangle: Alternative Geometric Model**

   A second model of the action-reflection approach proposed in this paper, was suggested by my colleague Newell Wert at the time, was Dean and Professor of Christian Ethics at United Theological Seminary. He found the process easier to understand when described by a triangle, utilizing the points and lines to represent the various elements of the process (Fig. 3). Thus, the base of the triangle represents the situation and serves as the involvement axis of an imaginary action-reflection "field." Its initial point is perception, and strategic action, within the limited consideration of the diagram, constitutes the terminal point. Judgment is the apex of the triangle, being reached by the kind of analysis employed, or the interpretation of the situation by the actor. Strategy serves as the means for making the judgment effective in terms of action undertaken in the situation.

   One of the gains made possible by this diagram is a means of presenting the time dimension, which is implicit in all the other models. Perception, reflection, and action occur across a time interval \((t_1 - t_2)\), which indicated that the situation itself is dynamic. Moreover, the actor's understanding and use of time is crucial to all of the aspects of participation in the situation. Time is not only a dimension, it is also a basic value in action. As timing, it has strategic significance, and as *Kairos*, it has profound theological and ethical significance.
In his argument for "the world view" as a universal social form of religion in human society, Thomas Luckmann observes:

Individual existence derives its meaning from a transcendent world view. The stability of the latter makes it possible for the individual to grasp a sequence of originally disjointed situation as a significant biographical whole. The world view as a historical matrix of meaning spans the life of the individual and the life of generations. We may say, in sum, that the historical priority of a worldview provides the empirical basis for the "successful" transcendence of biological nature by human organisms detaching the latter from their immediate life context of a tradition of meaning. We may conclude therefore, that the world view as an "objective" and historical social reality, performs an essentially religious function and define it as an elementary social form of religion (1967, 52f).

Since this understanding of the world view is rooted in the anthropological condition of human beings independent of their participation in particular religious sentiments, it has direct bearing on the situational, ethical, and theological reflections described in the preceding models.
Moreover, it clarifies the content of the perspectives and commitments that actors bring to the reflection process.

This clarification is enhanced by Luckmann’s specification of a “hierarchy of significance” being characteristic of a world view:

The typifications, interpretive schemes, and models of conduct contained in a world view are not discrete and isolated units of meaning. They are arranged in a hierarchy of significance. Formally speaking, this hierarchical arrangement of meaning is an essential “structural” trait of the world view (1967, 56). The structure trait referred to in the previous quote is articulated through

The structural trait referred to in the previous quote is articulated through, what Luckmann calls “levels of reality” graduating from specific “concrete objectives and events in the world of everyday life,” to specific “pragmatic and ‘moral’ evaluation (such as, maize does not grow where aloe grows; pork is inferior meat; there should be no marriage between first-degree cousins; if invited for dinner take flowers to the lady of the house),” to, in the end, “a superordinated level of interpretation referring to social and historical wholes, (such as a just social order; the beaver clan), that claim jurisdiction over individual conduct.” The latter level would include normative ethical and theological understandings in addition to the examples cited by Luckmann.

Thus Luckmann further states:

... As one moves from the lower to the higher levels of meaning in a world view, one finds a decrease of familiar and variable concreteness that is met with unthinking routine and an increase of generally obligatory models whose concrete application involves some “choice.”

This means that the process of reflection proposed here is a normal, or “natural,” human activity formalized to foster intentional ethical and theological reflection in making moral decisions and developing strategic responses to meet ethical challenges. The implications of
Vertically, reflective activities pivot around ethical judgement as, on one hand, the goal of reflection and, on the other, the ground of action. It should be noted that, in this model, the range of activities is expanded to explicitly include problem identification and evaluation. The colors assigned to the levels in both world view and reflective analysis show how they correlate with the universe of reflective activities involved in the strategic action-reflection process. Significantly, ethical judgement and evaluation encompass all of the levels of analysis, as well as the levels in the actor’s world view.

While the nature of the relationship between a matrix and an ellipse in mathematical theory points to a level of coherence in the argument presented here, the most important test of the validity of the argument is its utility in offering a series of steps that can be reliably taken by participant-actors to deal effectively with ethical challenges in their social contexts. The author has worked with this model over a significant span of years in teaching social ethics courses and it has proved useful in this regard, though the methodology is still a work in progress.

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A matrix is an algebraic system of quantities which, on one hand describes a second-order directional value..., and on the other hand, is “intimately connected with the geometrical properties of the second order surfaces” ellipsoids and hyperboloids (Lanczos, 1957: 50ff. 81). The directional component is significant because it underscores both the dynamic and the normative aspects of the strategic process. As presented here, the matrix is a classic representation of the basic graph of algebraic functions in analytic geometry.
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Fig. 5.