CHAPTER TWO

A Definition

CHOOSING

In our preceeding chapter it was pointed out what ethics is all about. We saw that in ethics human actions are viewed in terms of good and bad. In this chapter I intend to demarcate our subject more sharply with the help of a definition. It will then also become clearer that we are defending a particular ethics, namely, a *Christian* ethics.

Many definitions of ethics have been given but the results always show that everyone has chosen a particular standpoint. When I say that in ethics human actions are viewed in terms of good and bad, all sorts of questions immediately arise. What is good and what is bad? Where do we obtain the right to impose what we call good upon others as a commandment? Can we point to a norm for actions that applies not only to us but also to others? Or is everything relative, so that what is called bad by one might be called good by another with just as much right?

Everyone who concerns himself with ethics is confronted by such questions. And everyone makes a choice then, no matter how often he may say that he only intends to work rationally and objectively. For what *he* terms "rational" and "objective" might not be so at all to someone else. For example, a glance at the history of natural law — which should be accepted by everyone — will teach us that unity of opinion is often nowhere to be found. Everything has been defended on the grounds of natural law: absolutism and democracy; the right of the government and the right of the revolution; the right to work and the right to free time; individualism and collectivism; war and peace. Reason is the most unbelievably supple instrument when it comes to making the most contradictory things "rational."

Every choice is based on faith. Ethics is not a neutral science. People either find it to be of central importance to speak about God in ethics or they do not, being of the opinion that the discussion can or even must proceed without God.

In this book our actions towards *God* and our neighbour will be discussed. At the same time the following step will be taken: we cannot talk about God without acknowledging that He has revealed Himself to us in the Holy Scriptures. For that matter we can only really come to understand not only God but also man, our neighbour and ourselves by listening to what God's Word says about man.

Thus, the *norm* for my ethics is found in the Bible. That will have to be developed further, later on.

First, a simple definition will be given:

Ethics is the reflection on the responsible activity of man towards God and his neighbour.

We shall now scrutinize this definition more closely.

NOT EVERY ACTION

In the first place I would like to draw attention to the fact that not every human action is an object of study in ethics. We can "act" in many different ways. At school a child is in action when he does arithmetic and grammatical exercises. A person is engaged in activity if he constructs a radio, performs a surgical operation, runs a business, paints a picture or when, as judge, he passes judgment in accordance with the law. Nevertheless we should not bring these various kinds of actions into discussion in ethics. We will limit ourselves to the responsible actions of man in terms of good and bad. However, these actions can also be seen in other ways.

Take a child who does his arithmetic or a grammatical exercise, or a technician who constructs a radio. We judge such an action, in the first place, in terms of *correct and incorrect* instead of in terms of good and bad. When the child, or for that matter the technician, makes all sorts of mistakes, we do not yet say, That is evil, that is sin, but, That is incorrect. A person can falter intellectually or technically without having to be reprimanded ethically. A mistake or even a blunder is still not a lie.

Take a businessman who intends to keep or make his business as productive as possible. Otherwise he would not be a good businessman. He will have to consider what is *useful or harmful* for his business. Once again, that is different from the pair of terms good and bad. Of course a businessman is also concerned with good and bad. He must treat his clients honestly. But everything that is good is not therefore useful for a businessman. He could sell his products far below the wholesale price in compassion for the poor. Such compassion might stand at a high level ethically but it is economically irresponsible.

Take an artist who paints a picture. His work is judged according to the standard of *beautiful and ugly*. He too is bound by ethical norms but as an artist he will be judged by a different standard. A painting which cannot be criticized for ethical reasons can very well be positively ugly. And there is art of high caliber against which we must bring ethical objections.

Take also a judge who must pass sentence. In his actions he has to be aware of what is *legal and illegal.* It can be that he considers certain laws to be in conflict with the ethics he adheres to. But nonetheless, he may not pass judgment on the basis of what *he* would like to see made law but only on the basis of the existing law. "Legal" can be something other than good while "illegal" can be something other than bad.

Such distinctions are actually quite old. Aristotle distinguished between "ethical" and "dianoethical" virtues. The ethical virtues include, for example, courage and temperance, while the dianoethical virtues (*dianoia* = understanding) involve the skills with which we apply our understanding in scientific inquiry, craftsmanship and art. There is more than simply the good. There are yet other values, the truthful, the beautiful, the lawful, just as we have seen above.

We cannot make a watertight distinction between the one and the other.

Everyone could give examples of connections between ethics and other sciences, such as jurisprudence, medicine, natural science, philology, technical sciences and agriculture. All of these sciences have to be practised responsibly and are concerned, among *other things,* with aspects of good and bad.

It is no accident that at this time when the problems of science are also getting out of control ethically (think, for example, of the development of nuclear energy, the possibilities of medical science, the pollution problem) that the ethical aspect is receiving more attention than was formerly the case. The subject of ethics, which was until recently the exclusive domain of theologians and philosophers, now appeals strongly to scholars of other sciences. But nevertheless the ethical aspect remains just *one* among others which deserve our attention in the multiformity of reality.

ASPECTS OF WHAT IS ETHICAL

When I talk in my definition about the actions of mankind viewed in terms of good and bad, the issue is not only the *deed* as a part of an ethical action. Attention to the act itself is indispensable. Earlier, much more attention was devoted to it than today. Whoever reads the laws of the Old Testament will notice that we are dealing with a *criminal code pertaining to deeds.* Lawbreakers were condemned on account of the forbidden deed. A distinction was made between sins committed in a premeditated (with the "raised hand") and in an unintentional way (Numbers 22ff.; 35:11ff.). Anyone who had unintentionally killed his neighbour could flee to one of the six free cities in Israel in order to escape the vengeance of the dead man's next of kin. Nevertheless a fatal blow was apparently of such a serious nature that the man who fled sometimes had to remain in the free city for a very long time. If he were to step across the boundaries of the free city even for a moment, he could become the victim of a vendetta. The deed of killing cannot be blotted out without further ado. Blood demands atonement, just as theft demands compensation.

Thereby we can also learn a lesson for today. Even when we are not guilty, we cannot, without further ado, pass off our actions which caused so much sorrow. Nevertheless, for a correct analysis of the action, we cannot limit ourselves to just the deed. We also have to ask what there is behind the deed, the *intention.* When someone gives a large sum to a charitable institution, we can praise the giver as generous. But it is possible that he is not charitable at all and donates the money with ulterior motives. He may indeed donate the money hoping thereby to win many people for himself who will praise him for his generosity. He is not really serving the interests of his needy neighbour but himself. In order to assess an ethical action accurately, we should therefore pay attention not only to the deed but also to the intention. "Whatever your task," writes Paul, "work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men" (Colossians 3:23).

But we can put too much stress on the intention and neglect the fact that there is still a third component: the *consequence* of the deed. An ethics which

pays attention to deeds is one-sided because the deed is not the whole story. We can ask about background, accountability and mitigating circumstances. But we had also better not rest everything on the intentions and adhere to a "Gesinnungsethik" (attitudinal ethics). A German poet (Theodor Storm) expressed this ethic in four lines:

> One asks what is right, principially;
> Another asks what the effect might be.
> And so one man is free;
> But the other, a slave is he.

The philosopher Kant would hear only of a Gesinnungsethik, an attitudinal ethics. Whoever acted with an eye to the consequences, did so wrongly. Foremost for Kant were good will and fulfilment of our duty. A grocer should not treat his customers honestly because he would otherwise lose them; but he should be honest because it is his duty to be honest, even though he might thereby lose customers. Here Kant says some good things, but he too ended up being one-sided. If we take another glance at Theodor Storm's poem, we see that it contains the full truth only when the slave thinks about himself egoistically, when he asks what the effect might be. But he can also be *so* concerned about the welfare of his neighbour that he has to reject a deed on account of the consequences, no matter how good the motive for the deed might be in and of itself. If the "free-man" does not pay any attention to this, then he is employing a definition of freedom which is merely an abstraction. "Free-will" is detached from the world in which we can be held accountable for action and for reaction.

In this way a person could, for example, strive for unilateral disarmament with understandable motives. Nuclear weapons are horrifying weapons with which the world could be obliterated. But we should also take into account that unilateral disarmament would give the Soviet Union the opportunity to take advantage of our defenselessness. We know what this can imply: dictatorship, the ideological indoctrination of our children and concentration camps for those who protest. Good intentions are no good at all if they lack the *wisdom* which counts the costs. With noble intentions and a deed which is good in and of itself, we can still make blunders for which we are responsible. To use another biblical example: a king who intends to make war on another king has to first ask himself whether or not he is capable of defeating his enemy who has 20,000 soldiers, when he himself has 10,000 soldiers. If not, he must attempt to negotiate terms of peace (Luke 14:31f.). Such a king might have every right to march against his enemy. However, not only good intentions but also the consideration of the *consequences* is a part of every ethical action.

There is a Latin proverb: fiat iustitia, pereat mundus — "let justice be done though the world perish." That may sound bold, but it is by no means an acceptable proverb. When I am capable of either predicting or suspecting the consequences of my well-intended deed, then I am responsible for the consequences. My actions must not only stem from good intentions but must

also choose the right direction. Intentions, deeds, and consequences are the three components of ethical actions. We can certainly differentiate them, but we must not separate them. We must not construct an ethics in which either the attitudes or the deeds receive all of the attention; nor a goal-ethics (a teleological ethics which considers the consequences). But we must pay attention to all three in the *responsible* activity of man. What is he thinking, what is he doing and what does he bring about?

GOD, NEIGHBOUR AND NATURE?

The definition consists of two parts: man acting responsibly with respect to God and with respect to his neighbour. Is it not better to mention three elements, whereby next to God and neighbour there is also a place for *nature*? Such a division into three parts seems to be obvious in view of all the attention being given to environmental problems.

It would be strange if we did not pay any attention to the use and misuse of the environment in our ethics. Nature, however, encompasses more than just the environment. The whole question of the stewardship and use of nature in technology and art would also have to come under consideration. We have already seen that ethics should not concern itself with everything. For that reason it is better not to give nature an independent place in our definition.

That we do speak about the responsible action of man towards God and his neighbour is connected with the double commandment that the Scriptures prescribe to us: to love God and our neighbour as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40). By way of this double personal relationship, the spheres within which human actions take place will then also come up for consideration: the church, marriage, family, societal structures, political relationships, stewardship of nature, etc. We do not need to make nature a third, independent quantity. In our reflection on responsible actions towards God we naturally come upon our mandate to rule the earth in a good way (Genesis 1:28). And whoever thinks about his responsibility towards his neighbour shall also not forget the necessity of a livable environment in which we have to associate with each other.

GOD, NEIGHBOUR AND ONESELF?

It is also not correct to decide on the following division into three elements: Man acting responsibly towards God, towards his neighbour and towards *himself.* Matthew 22:37-40 does not speak about three, but about two commandments. The first and great commandment is love towards God; the second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." On these *two* commandments depend all the law and the prophets. It reads: "You shall love your neighbour *as* yourself," not "*and* yourself"! There is no complication of a commandment for self-love in the words "as yourself," but instead a fact is being determined. We love ourselves and the intensity of that

love can serve as a barometer of our love for others. A man should love his neighbour with the intense love with which he (very often illegitimately) loves himself.

The Scriptures know nothing of a commandment of self-love but instead points out that whoever loves his life, will thereby lose it (John 12:25). Love is not self-seeking (I Corinthians 13:5).

Loving our neighbour as ourselves is also implied in the so-called *Golden Rule*: "So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7:12). Here too the commandment is "Love your neighbour," and not "Love yourself." Only what we would gladly receive ourselves can clearly indicate what we ought to give to others. We are very sensitive about what we have a right to and where we are being short-changed. Let us but take that as a standard in order to know how we really should love our neighbour.

In a concrete case Paul uses a similar argument. "He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it" (Ephesians 5:28f.). That strikingly describes our self-love, not as a commandment but as a fact. The *commandment* can be that we must hate our life in this world in order to keep it for eternal life (John 12:25)!

Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas and others have indeed spoken of a commandment to love oneself. In order to do them justice, we should not think they thereby wanted to defend an egoistical love of self. For example, Bernard of Clairvaux recognized a ladder of self-love with the following rungs:

1. love for the sake of oneself (the pure love of self);
2. love of God for the sake of oneself (this is also self-love; man needs God for his own profit);
3. love of God for the sake of God (this is not self-love anymore);
4. love for oneself for the sake of God (a love of self which can only be partially realized in this life; we must therefore totally become one with God).[3]

The fourth, last step, has nothing to do with crass egoism. But the question arises whether it cuts off a more refined egoism. It is unthinkable without the mysticism in which man is totally taken up into God. Love of self *and* love of God in fact coincide. This self-love erases the boundary between the Creator and the creature — a boundary which became a chasm after man's fall into sin. In a harmonious, sinless world it is conceivable that the love of God and the love of self might completely correspond even though the boundary between God and man might remain. But we are not living in that world today. Man is inclined to love himself and to be hostile towards God and his neighbour. We must therefore engage in battle against ourselves and make room for God and our neighbour. That is the

[3] Bernard of Clairvaux, *De diligendo Deo,* Migne Patrologiae Latinae tom. CLXX, 987ff.

reason why we must apply the commandment of love not to ourselves but to God and our neighbour.

When we do not decide on the above-mentioned division into three categories and stress self-denial instead of self-love, we do not thereby deny that man stands in a threefold relationship, i.e., with regard to God, to his neighbour and to himself. The notion of the *conscience* certainly makes it very clear that man also has a relationship to himself. But we must not distill a third commandment of love from that relationship.

Also when we warn someone against suicide or recklessness, we do not do so by appealing to self-love. On the contrary: we call him away from self-love to the love of God and neighbour. Where this twofold love is found, our own life comes to its proper development. The double perspective does not estrange man from himself but rather allows him to reach full maturity.

Naturally, self-denial is also not the same as self-destruction. For whoever has lost his life for the sake of Christ, will find it. Self-denial ultimately leads to full development.

THERE ARE TWO TABLES

So we do not want a division into three parts where our responsible actions are concerned. But are not two one too many? Are not ethics just concerned with our relationship to our neighbour? Must the responsible actions of man towards God be discussed in ethics?

Not every Christian-ethicist answers this question positively. Some want to differentiate religion (seen as relationship to God) and morality (seen as relationship to the neighbour). Emil Brunner, for instance, does not regard relationship to God as ethical by nature but views it as the *foundation* of what is ethical.[4]

If Brunner had said that relationship to God is not *only* ethical by nature, then he would have been right. But why may what is ethical in the sense of responsible activity not also be related to God? Response-able here means responding to what God has done for us and asks of us. After all does that response not take the form of various actions which can be directly intended for God? I am thinking of such actions as prayer, the contemplation of God's Word and church attendance.

We have to keep the *two* tables of the Ten Commandments in mind and not reserve just the second table for our ethical reflection. That too would be an artificial division. Who can write about Christian ethics without, for example, discussing reverence for God's name (the third commandment) and the Sabbath/Sunday (the fourth commandment)? Of course we can certainly differentiate within ethics between our personal and ecclesiastical association with God on the one hand and our association with our neighbour on the other. There are *two* tables, but *one* ethics. There, not only the more direct

[4] E. Brunner, *Das Gebot und die Ordnungen*[4], Zürich 1939, 583.

expressions of love towards God but also the indirect ones through our relationship to our neighbour come up for discussion. Not every action in our relationship to our neighbour is an object for ethics and neither is this the case with every action arising from our "direct service" towards God. For example, any sort of liturgical forms falls outside the discussion.

When we consider both tables of the Ten Commandments in our ethical reflection, another subject which once used to be thoroughly dealt with in Christian ethics can also be dusted off: *ascetics.* While studying the history of ethics, it has become clear to me that in former times ascetics was known next to casuistry. Casuistry dealt with the *commandment* while ascetics concentrated on *prayer.* I shall come back to both these branches later, but I can say in the meantime that in ascetics not only prayer was discussed, but also the whole field having to do with the exercise of piety.

This subject has sunk into oblivion but deserves to receive its rightful place again. Whoever makes acquaintance with it will understand that in the definition of ethics room was made not only for responsible actions towards our neighbour, but also for our responsible activity towards God.