

CHAPTER THREE

A Few More Differentiations

PERSONAL AND SOCIAL ETHICS

The difference between personal and social ethics can be formulated as follows:

Personal ethics reflects on the personal life of man. Themes such as virtue, conscience, love, honouring the Sabbath, respect for life, truth and lies come up for discussion.

Social ethics reflects on the structures in which man is placed as a social being. In particular, attention is given to economic and political structures.

The distinction between personal and social ethics is anything but sharp. In fact, the issue is more one of different approaches than one of different themes. A so-called personal ethics is concerned with more than just personal matters, such as marriage, family, profession, society and government. The question is *how* it happens. Does one discuss a person without paying critical attention to the structures in which he lives or does one criticize the structures themselves? In the final analysis, is personal ethics concerned with the solitary soul, or is it also concerned with the world?

Due to the influence of a Marxist view of life and the pressure of world-problems like wealth and poverty, freedom and dictatorship, integration and apartheid, war and peace, such questions have become more pressing than ever before. Must the structures not be completely renewed in order to arrive at a livable world? Modern social ethics also ultimately desires the happiness of the individual; but that can only be achieved by a holistic approach. The structures determine the attention paid to the solitary person in social ethics.

Clearly we are dealing with a modern definition of the problem in which a personal ethics is viewed suspiciously. The assemblage brought under the heading of personal ethics is quite varied: existentialists, pietists and even Calvinists. The last group named is also supposed never to have had a notion about a real social ethics; at most an ethics of the individual in a social context. Keywords from the Gospel, such as reconciliation, justification, grace and sanctification are supposedly interpreted asocially. For Calvinists the last word in ethics was supposedly an appeal for a personal choice of conscience.

It must be immediately admitted that a personal ethics which does not concern itself with the renewal or change of structures, is wrong. Whoever intends to combat alcoholism among the poor has also to grapple with the evil of poverty. And whoever thinks that poverty can only be dealt with by charity, will find himself mopping the floor with the tap running. A social worker cannot save a single child without paying attention to the family and the neighbourhood. Helping people to live a more human existence brings with it the necessity of understanding the *whole* situation in which they live.

Nevertheless these simple truths should not be allowed to push us to another extreme so that social ethics becomes the one and only thing. We can-

not separate personal and social ethics since they are aspects of the same ethics. For that reason one may also demand attention for fundamental, personal questions which sometimes *appear* to be of a private nature, but in reality have everything to do with the world. Consider again the definition of ethics as reflection on the responsible activity of man towards God and neighbour. God is named first. Every creature may be expected to love and praise God. Lots of zeal for our neighbour whereby we turn everything upside-down in order to bring about peace, freedom and justice lacks in attention for the honour of God. Building a new world without acknowledging that it is God's world will ultimately result in failure. A Christian ethicist may not remain silent on this point. The praise of God may not be a subsidiary question or a private matter.

In this connection the Christian must also protest against the misuse of key-words of the Gospel. Terms such as reconciliation and justice are misused when man intends to overthrow existing structures in a revolutionary way but refuses to recognize the fact that the same words call people — in a very personal way — to repentance.

In the third place, a Christian must not forget that his activity within political and social structures ought to be marked by love. We can certainly try to keep love outside such social structures, but that is unacceptable. At this point the sharp difference between Marxist and Christian ethics becomes clearly visible. Marxist ethics employs the *conflict*-model; Christian ethics the *harmony*-model. We must be bent on peace, not on violence, when we strive to improve the situation.

In the fourth place, one can certainly seek a new world which is sought *here* in line with our human capacities; but we believe that the Scriptures speak about an eternal salvation on a new earth which will not be built by human hands. It is a gift of God.

Undoubtedly many will find such statements as I make here to be “opium of the people” — pacifiers which change nothing in this world. But we notice again that we have made a choice with our definition. We do not intend to become victims of utopias but rather intend to remember the words of Christ: “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?” (Matthew 16:26). By that statement no good social ethics is being shoved aside.

We must fight poverty, hunger and dictatorship also without expecting people to turn to God in repentance personally. However, we do accentuate the indispensibility of personal ethics — or better said: the decisive personal aspect in ethics. For in its paragraphs about faith and rebirth, thanksgiving and prayer, virtue and conscience, ethics must impress upon the heart the wisdom of the Preacher with regard to what is *truly human*: “Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

The most perfect organization in the world will not bring any real peace unless reform at the *root* of life is accomplished. It is there, in the heart of a man, that the decisive revolution has to take place.

PHILOSOPHICAL AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

The difference between Christian ethics and philosophical ethics is often described as follows: philosophical ethics begins with the fact of morality itself, whereas Christian ethics begins with the divine commandment. Philosophical ethics is supposed to be autonomous, Christian ethics heteronomous.

Immanuel Kant, for example, produced a philosophical ethics in his *The Critique of Practical Reason*. He did end up with the immortality of the soul and the existence of God (as postulates), and that was supposedly via the route of reason. Reason was supposed to begin with the fact of morality and not with that of God's revelation in the Bible.

Other philosophers concerned with ethics, however, certainly do not arrive at the postulate of the immortality of the soul or the existence of God. That Kant came to the conclusion of the immortality of the soul, was primarily due to the echoes of Christian faith to which he could hardly be deaf, even though his purpose was to construct an ethics in a purely rational way. Kant had received a Christian upbringing and that is even apparent in his *Critiques*. Furthermore, every ethics, Christian or non-Christian, begins with presuppositions which have to do with belief or unbelief. Nothing is "purely reasonable."

In Roman Catholic theology, philosophical ethics functions as a sort of substructure which demands agreement from everyone because it is philosophical, while Christian ethics serves as a superstructure. Reason is something that all men have in common; faith is not. The Roman Catholics have not only produced some impressive moral theologies but also quite a few philosophical ethics. But philosophical and Christian ethics are not two layers which can be fitted on top of each other with "nature" as substructure and "grace" as superstructure. The Christian faith is definitive in *all* things, right down to the foundations. When II Corinthians 10:5 says that every thought must be taken captive to make it obedient to Christ, then reason only becomes "pure" when it has surrendered to Christ.

In principle then there exists no dilemma, Christian *or* philosophical. The philosopher too must obey God's revelation. There is certainly a difference between the formulation of the problem and methodological approach of philosophy and, for example, that of theology. The philosopher and the theologian do not live in two worlds in which the former proceeds *without* the Christian faith and the latter proceeds *from* the Christian faith.

Philosophy and ethics are related. That manifests itself, among other things, very clearly in the anthropological basis of a particular ethic. How do I view man? That is a question which not only philosophy but also ethics comes up against. In our definition we are concerned with the responsible actions of *man*.

With a short sketch of two different anthropologies it is possible to illustrate how two diverging ethics must also arise from them. Take, for example, a fairly current anthropologically based ethics and then place my Christian view of man and the thereby resulting ethics over and against it.

Many ascribe the phenomenon of morals to the difference between man and animals. An animal is then called a pre-programmed being. It distinguishes itself by a limited number of patterns of conduct determined to a large degree by well-developed instincts. In terms of its conduct, you could say that an animal has a relatively easy time. With man, though, it is a different matter: he is, as Arnold Gehlen puts it, a *Mängelwesen*, that is to say, a being with shortcomings. He does not have his own pre-programmed world, like an animal, but rather he has to construct his world himself. He is able to choose from a great variety of possibilities because he acts instinctively to a limited degree. This choice from an unlimited number of possibilities is so difficult that *limitation* thereof is necessary. That is what morals are for. Morals give a limited number of rules of conduct that relieve man of the necessity of constantly pondering and deciding what he should and should not do.

Take marriage, in which we choose *one* partner. You do not constantly have to search for a new partner. Such a permanent relationship can contribute to peace and security. You save creativity and energy which can then be applied to other matters. However, once an accepted set of morals starts hindering instead of liberating, we have to get rid of it. Morals are always directed towards the development of man. *He* stands in the center.

Against this philosophical view of man and his morals, I place the Christian faith that recognizes man not as an evolved *Mängelwesen*, but rather as a creation of God, created in the image of God. Man is not the central figure but God, from Whom, through Whom and to Whom are all things (Romans 11:36). Man has God, and not himself, as a law-giver. The commandments (especially the Ten Commandments) under which God has placed man is undoubtedly intended to serve the development of human life. They are given "that it may go well with you," as Moses says to the people of Israel (Deuteronomy 6:3). The law to which we are bound is, at the same time, the law of liberty (James 2:12), even though we may not always experience it in our life as such.

This is the point where you can see the distinction between the already described humanistic ethics and Christian ethics: *I* do not determine what may or may not serve my freedom but rather *God's* commandment has determined it for me. Suppose someone considers his marriage to be a failure and looks for an outlet in a relationship with another woman. He might experience that as liberation; but that is certainly not the case for someone who accepts the Seventh Commandment as a commandment from God: "You shall not commit adultery."

The difference between the two ethics can also be well-illustrated when we consider the *utility* of the morals. Also nowadays morals are often weighed according to their usefulness. If they serve the interests of man, then they are useful. If they do not meet that end, then they have to be thrown overboard. Moral rules either bring humanity to development or impede it. Formerly, for example, pre- and extra-marital sexual relations were forbidden. However, now there must be room for free forms of sexual expression. The

old sexual morals have become harmful because they can no longer meet the needs of modern man.

Christian ethics avoids the word *utility* just as little as the word freedom. But what is really useful? If our horizon did not extend beyond this short, earthly life, we might also choose a humanistic ethics which intends to make of this life what it can. But the Scriptures say that godliness is useful "in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (I Timothy 4:8). We must not wear blinkers! Even though we might conclude that obedience to God's law *apparently* does not have any use for the time being, we must not doubt that it will in the long run.

The self-denial which God asks of us is not self-destruction but actually leads to full self-development, as we have already seen. Self-denial can often be called anything but useful within the limited horizon of this life. But it is indeed useful for those who faithfully make their decisions within a broader horizon. There is a life after this life, in which it shall be manifested (if it does not already manifest itself in this life) that the good commandment of God was also a useful commandment.

In anthropology the ways that part are not a neutral, objective philosophy/ethics and a Christian, subjective philosophy/ethics, but a non-Christian and a Christian philosophy/ethics. Is man *autonomous* in the sense that he makes his own laws, or is he *heteronomous* in the sense that he stands under the law of God?

For many people the word heteronomous sounds horrible. That is understandable, because they see their freedom being endangered when it is said that we stand under the commandment of another. However, the Other is God Himself, Who gives us the law not to paralyze our life but rather to bring it to full development. Bondage means freedom. *True* freedom listens to God's law.

That was an example of two anthropologies which stand over and against each other. There are also more which could be given. But what is always valid is: tell me what your philosophical view of man is and I will tell you what kind of ethics you hold to. Man can be seen as a free being, able to choose from a great number of possibilities. He can also be seen as a determined being, not free at all but acting as he must act. There are those who think that man is determined by his body. It is not reason that rules over feelings and desires but rather feelings and desires which rule over reason (materialistic ethics).

Many others think that man is totally conditioned by economic relationships. Those relationships determine ethics and not the other way around (Marxist ethics).

Whoever speaks highly about man's free choice will quickly have to whistle another tune when he notices that there are also other theories, *above all* when he looks around. For most of the world's population is not free at all but lets itself be told what to do in all sorts of ways by someone or something, forced or freely.

In itself, being heteronomous is not shameful for man. The real issue is under whom or what he places himself. Whoever bows before God and His law may say that he is free and that his existence is worthy of a human being. Humane in the full sense of the word.

DOGMATICS AND ETHICS

Ethics was defined above as *reflection* on the responsible activity of man. People of all kinds can be occupied with this reflection in many different ways. It is certainly not just a concern of scholars. But when *they* concern themselves with ethics, they do so systematically. Reflection, then, becomes *scholarly* reflection on the responsible actions of man.

Earlier, this scholarly reflection was almost exclusively limited to philosophers and theologians. Within theology it usually had its place in the division with such names as positive, thetical or systematic theology. Later, the term dogmatics made its entrance as a subdivision next to ethics. The view that the term dogmatics is older and that it included a treatment of ethics within it is not correct.⁵ However, it was often the case in Protestant theology that the dogmatician also had to deal with ethics. That is obvious as dogmatics and ethics are intricately bound to one another.

Dogmatics treats the dogmas which deal with the *doctrine* of the church, whereas ethics concerns itself with the dogmas which deal with *life*. The word dogmas formerly included not just the *articuli fidei* (the articles of faith) but also the *praecepta decalogi* (the precepts of the Decalogue). Next to the norm of the things which must be "believed" (*norma credendorum*) there is the norm of the things which must be "lived" (*norma agendorum*). That dogmatics and ethics are no longer taught by one man is above all due to the increasing range of ethical questions. It is therefore not a matter of principle but a question of division of tasks.

There is also no objection in principle to dogmatic and ethical viewpoints being interwoven with one another. Calvin's *Institutes* can neither be called a dogmatics nor an ethics in the modern, academic sense of the word. We can, however, say with certainty that doctrine and life are viewed together from the first to the last page of the *Institutes*. The section *De vita hominis christiani* (III, 4ff., concerning the life of the Christian) cannot be removed from the rest of the *Institutes* without mutilating it. What is very clear in Calvin, namely, that every dogma (in dogmatics) has its ethical side, while every ethical question sinks its roots deep into the soil of dogma, is something that ought to be clear in the works of all dogmatic or ethical theologians. The Scriptures teach that faith without works and also works without faith are dead (James 2:14ff.; Romans 4:1ff.).

To illustrate the unity of dogmatics and ethics, H. van Oyen uses the example of a coin with heads and tails. Heads are dogmatics and tails are ethics.

⁵ H.J. Birkner in: A. Hertz, W. Korff a.o. (red.), *Handbuch der christlichen Ethik*, Freiburg im Breisgau 1978, I, 287.

The head's side (dogmatics) indicates the legal nature of the coin. The tail's side (ethics) indicates the value that the coin has in practical life. They are each other's reverse side.⁶

The unity of both aspects must also be kept in mind today. There are theologies in which everything actually boils down to ethics. The only part of the Christian faith left over is that which still "does" something. Dogmas such as the Trinity, the deity of Christ and His birth of the Virgin Mary, do not "do" anything for us anymore and do not change the present world. For this reason they can easily be missed in a theology of revolution or liberation. Or, they can be so twisted around that nothing remains of their original meaning. Only that is called "true" which proves itself true. What really counts is the useful effect.

Such a faith orients itself to those things which can be *seen*. But whoever limits himself to that is attempting to get the branches to flower (to renew the world) while the roots of the tree are already sawn off. Respect for God's broad and deep revelation, which we cannot really fathom at all, can preserve us from a pragmatic viewpoint which wants to come to the truth by means of the effect.

Ethics is an important subject, but God's revelation extends further than simply what there is to say about our actions. Whoever lets dogmatics be completely absorbed by ethics is attempting to measure God in human proportions.

As a variation on a well-known statement by Kant one could say: Dogmatics without ethical quality is empty; ethics without dogmatic quality is blind. Dogmatics becomes dry scholasticism when its meaning for life can no longer be made clear. But ethics is reduced to moralism when it separates our actions from the work that Christ and His Spirit accomplish in our lives. Lord's Day 32 of the Heidelberg Catechism says that quite strikingly. The question is asked why *we* must do good works. The answer reads: "*Christ*, having redeemed us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit after His own image, that with our whole life we may show ourselves thankful to God for His benefits." This thankfulness is therefore fruitfulness, with fruit which only ripens when the branch remains in the vine, Christ (John 15:1ff.).

Whoever writes an ethics in which he describes the sanctification of life also has to make clear that this sanctification lies imbedded in our justification through Christ. Time and again *we* stand before the ruins of our life. Paul can say that he presses on toward perfection but he knows that he has not gotten hold of it. He does know, however, that he *is* taken hold of by Christ (Philippians 3:12ff.).

By no means has that always come to light in ethical reflection. Above all in the classical doctrine of virtue, concurring with Aristotle, the Christian life can easily lead an independent existence. During the Middle Ages much was written about the Seven Cardinal Virtues: faith, hope, love (the three theo-

⁶ H. van Oyen, *Evangelische Ethik*, Grundlagen, Basel 1952, 18f.

logical virtues), prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance (the four classical virtues). These virtues were viewed just as Aristotle already saw them: as a bearing, a condition, a "habit" (hexis). Naturally, moral theologians admitted that virtues such as faith, hope and justice were gifts from God but gifts which were infused into man, thus becoming his property. You first *receive*, but then also constantly *possess*. Armed with these virtues man could walk in his own strength. You might say, the virtuous man is not auto-nomous but rather auto-mobile. Once started up he can proceed further himself.

Too easily forgotten is the fact that the Christian life is very imperfect and that the Christian must live by grace every day. There is no "having" but always receiving again by grace. For this reason, the heart of our Christian faith has to remain beating in our ethical reflection. You cannot speak about the Christian without speaking about the Christ.

BIBLICAL OR CHRISTIAN ETHICS?

Even though someone is not a theologian he can still be intensively concerned with ethics. After all, what is decisive is not how much he knows about dogmatics and ethics as practised as a speciality by theologians, but whether or not he wishes to employ the same compass as they do, namely, the Holy Scriptures as norm for dogmatic and ethical reflection.

Ethics is not by definition *theological* ethics. There is something to be said for not using the term theological ethics since it causes misunderstandings. Compare medical ethics with theological ethics and the confusion becomes clear. Theological ethics is ethics by theologians while medical ethics is ethics *for* physicians. The latter is a professional ethics, the former not, at any rate, not for the profession of theologian and only partially for the office of pastor. The ethics with which the theologian deals, is now actually no broader or narrower than that which every Christian deals with in all sorts of ways. We are no longer conducting our ethical reflection in theological isolation; co-operation with non-theologians (who can read the Bible too) has become so common that it would therefore be better to label the results of our ethical reflection generally as ethics rather than particularly as theological ethics.

Does it make any difference at all whether we talk about Christian or biblical ethics? It does. The Bible gives the building blocks for our ethics but itself offers no ethics that we can accept without more ado. That becomes clearer whenever we consider biblical *morals* for a moment. Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets and the apostles all lived in their own times with particular, sometimes very diverse morals. These morals include antiquated elements such as cultic behaviour, blood vengeance, polygamy and slavery. If we were to give an introduction to Christian ethics as a guide for the conduct that can be expected of a Christian today, it would be something different from an introduction to biblical morals. On the other hand, it can be important to pay special attention to biblical morals and then to determine what is outdated and what is still relevant for today.

Ethics is also to be found in the Bible. A book such as Proverbs is totally

concerned with reflection on the responsible actions of man. But it will also not suffice to simply adopt this ethics. We live in another time with very old, but also very new problems. Armed with knowledge of our times and its questions, we have to listen attentively to what the whole Scriptures have to say to us in a message with *one* decisive name: Christ. Our salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to us by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12). For that reason we would do well to call our reflection on the responsible activity of man *Christian ethics*.