

CHAPTER ONE

Morals and Ethics

THEY CONCERN EVERYONE

Whenever we read the newspaper we are daily informed about what is happening nationally and internationally. We read about governments which have fallen, about the nuclear arms race of which no end seems to be in sight, about prices which steadily increase, about plane and train accidents. Besides the main news there is also the minor news, such as announcements of marriages, births and deaths. Books are reviewed, various articles are put up for sale and enticing vacations are advertised.

We are thus showered with a great deal of information. But it does not remain at just that. We also form an *opinion* about all these matters. The newspaper promotes this not only by reporting the facts but also by giving background information. Why did a government fall? Did it oppress its citizens and violate human rights? Nuclear weapons can destroy the whole world, so is it therefore responsible to continue the production of even more warheads? If a railway accident happened, was the engineer possibly negligent?

We form an opinion, even about the smallest news items. We do not want to buy everything we are offered. We reject a vacation which is beyond our means as irresponsible. Even the obituaries could elicit a judgment. The deceased person we knew might be remembered as a good or a bad man. Let us take a few expressions which we used in the sentences above and line them up: oppression, violation of rights, responsible, negligent, good and bad. They make it clear that everyone deals with morals and ethics every day, consciously or not. For in morals and ethics we are concerned with what people do and do not do in order to make a judgment about it. We analyze their activities in terms of "good" and "bad."

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Morals and ethics — two words. Is there a difference between the two? To answer that, we shall first discuss the origin of each word. Ethics is derived from the Greek word *ethos* or *èthos*. Both forms occur in the Greek New Testament. We read that Jesus went to the Mount of Olives *kata ethos*, that is to say, as was his custom (Luke 22:39). Concerning the Romans it was reported that it was not their custom (*ethos*) to give up a man as a favour to others (Acts 25:16). In some books about ethics a distinction is made between *ethos* as morality in the sense of customs, morals and *èthos* as morality in the sense of disposition or inclination. Such a distinction is not always easy to find. It would be better to say that both meanings are intertwined. Disposition is reflected in custom while custom presupposes a certain disposition.

It is indeed interesting that both *ethos* and *èthos* can also mean abode, home (for men or animals). That throws a certain light on the deep meaning of customs and manners in human life. Customs are not an external matter. We live in them, customs form the milieu in which we move. We can determine from the manner in which someone conducts himself where his *home* is.

Next, then, is the word morals. It is derived from the Latin word *mos*, which is interrelated with *metiri*, to measure. We can be brief concerning this word. The Latin *mos* has the same meaning as the Greek *ethos* and *èthos*.

Although our search for the meaning of the Greek and Latin roots yields no difference in meaning, a distinction is often made between morals and ethics. In this article I will differentiate in the following sense: Morals is the totality of the traditional and prevalent customs whereas ethics is reflection on these customs.

This distinction has often been made. I can describe *morals* as they were among the Greeks, Romans, Medieval Christians and as they are today in all sorts of variation. In this description, however, I do not necessarily have to make a judgment yet. In *ethics* I make a judgment. Ethics is, therefore, reflection on morals. One might do this or that (morals), but is it right to do it (ethics)? It is clear that ethics cannot function without morals, while morals do not yet comprise ethics. No one can judge whether a particular action is good or bad when he has no knowledge of the action itself. Someone could, however, give a description of an action or of a whole morality without thereby passing a judgment on the material itself.

The difference between morals and ethics can also be expressed like this: You can indeed draw up a solo-ethics, but you cannot speak about solo-morals. One man or woman can write a book about ethics. But morals are always *group* morals. Morals are a social concern while ethics can be very personal.

Customs is a broader term than morals. That becomes evident when we consider various national customs: traditional times for eating, customary dishes, expressions of politeness, festivities, etc. We pay little attention to this as far as morals is concerned. Etiquette, too, which has been termed "a mini-ethics" (although the word has nothing to do with *ethos* and *èthos*),¹ will not be considered in this book.

Tabulating these matters will clarify for now what we shall and what we shall not discuss in this treatment of ethics:

There are personal *habits* (carrying our keys in the right or left pocket, taking a nap in the afternoon or not, etc.).

There are national *customs* (times and ways of eating, celebrating, manners in public, etc.).

¹ This word is derived from French and not from Greek. It is related to an old verb *estiquer* (to fasten, to bind) and only occurs after 1600 in the sense of *etiquette*. See the dictionary *Le Petit Robert*, 1977, sub voce.

There are *morals* (customs in which the opposition of good and bad attracts our attention).

There are *ethics* (reflection on morals).

The first two — however weighty they might be in everyday life — fall outside the scope of this book. We will devote our attention to morals and ethics.

RELEVANCE

There has always been ethics in the sense of contemplation of morals, even without that name. In the Old Testament there is no special word for “manners” but the issue is nevertheless very present. When Jacob’s daughter, Dinah, was violated by Shechem, Dinah’s brothers said “such a thing ought not to be done!” because it is “a folly in Israel” (Genesis 34:7). Tamar says precisely the same thing to her half-brother Amnon who intends to rape her (II Samuel 13:12). Over and against folly stands wisdom, *chokma*, which must be taught to the young in order that they might choose good and reject evil. In particular, we have in mind the book of Proverbs which purposes to give prudence to the simple and knowledge and discretion to the young (Proverbs 1:4). The word *moesar*, which means “discipline” in Proverbs, and translated in Greek as *paideia*, has sometimes been called the Hebrew word for ethics. Ethics is a large part of every good upbringing.

Nevertheless, there is a great difference in the attention paid to ethics when we compare one period to another. Why is there such a great interest in ethics these days, much more than fifty years ago for example? It is simple to give the answer. Morals contain an element of continuity and stability. They bear an impersonal, social and strongly self-evident character. In a fairly static society ethical instruction will not face big problems. But today we see that handed-down morals are being cast into doubt or rejected in almost every respect. This is very clear with regard to sexual morals. It is not incorrect to speak of a sexual revolution. Modern man wants to be emancipated and will not let himself be held back by remarks like “Such things ought not to be done in Israel.” Tradition has no strength anymore, all self-evidentness has disappeared, and not the social but rather the individual motive must settle the matter.

We are witnessing the appearance of a landslide in morals. Catchwords like abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, alternative forms of living together, say enough here. The word “morals” is threatening to become old fashioned. Are new morals developing again? Or will no morals develop anymore because everyone does as he or she pleases? Must (social) morals make way for personal habits?

Unity of opinion concerning morals is nowhere to be found. But interest in ethics can nevertheless still be great. In this time of spiritual crisis many are once more seeking a foundation for their actions. The question of good and evil does not allow itself to be pushed aside.

There is still another factor we must bring into consideration. In earlier

times men lived for the most part in closed worlds: the world of their family, their village, their city and their country. Without a doubt there always has been interest in what happened further away. But we heard of things without actually being affected by them. Now we are growing towards *one* world in which *all* men are increasingly becoming our neighbours. But thereby ethical problems also begin to weigh more heavily upon us. Think of the Report of the Club of Rome with its five critical factors in the context of the world: population growth, food production, industrialization, the exhaustion of natural resources, and pollution. The contrast between North and South (rich and poor) seems to be as irreconcilable as that between East and West (the arms race). In all of these problems not one of us is an outsider. It is no wonder then that they give an even greater relevance to ethical reflection.

NORMATIVE ETHICS

A current division of ethics differentiates the following parts:

1. descriptive ethics
2. normative ethics
3. special ethics
4. meta-ethics.

We will devote our attention briefly to each of these divisions:

1. *Descriptive ethics* describes the customs and morals of various cultures of earlier times and today. In particular, cultural anthropologists and sociologists are concerned with this. Whenever ethics is *reflection* on morals, as I stated above, this reflection is always critical. That does not apply to the *description* of morals which only intends to present and not to judge. For that reason it is strictly speaking not justifiable to talk about descriptive *ethics*. After all, it concerns a description of morals and not of ethics. Nonetheless, the term is current and everyone would admit that every ethics encompasses some description of morals. Anyone who wants to reflect (ethics) has to know what he is talking about (morals). In this regard studies of a descriptive nature can be very welcome to him.

2. In *normative ethics* we start from a norm, a guide-line, or a standard which indicates how we ought to live. We are thus no longer noncommittally involved in saying how morals *are* (descriptive ethics), but how they *ought* to be. Anyone can describe the moral aspects of slavery, polygamy, homosexuality, abortion and atomic weapons ("this is what people think about it"), but he can also judge them according to a particular norm ("this is how people ought to think about it"). In this work we shall concern ourselves almost exclusively with normative ethics, whereby our norm is God's Word as found in Holy Scripture.

3. *Special ethics* is a specialization of normative ethics. It has also been called applied ethics. The specialization can take on different forms. We could for example consider medical, sexual, economic and political ethics, as well as the division of personal and social ethics. We could concern ourselves with the professional ethics of social workers, physicians, lawyers, and journalists

and then consider the different codes of conduct which apply to these and similar professions. Examples of questions which arise are: How does one treat patients and clients? What are the boundaries of professional secrecy?

4. *Meta-ethics* is a new name for something which used to be called philosophical, critical or formal ethics. It has often been classified under normative ethics. That is no wonder for it is concerned with the fundamental questions raised by ethics. What do such words as good, evil, duty and norm mean? Are our actions free or pre-determined? Are moral actions by nature relativistic, so that what is called good at one place and in one time, might be called evil at another place in another time? An often-quoted example is that of a missionary in the 18th century who was speaking to an Eskimo girl about love toward God and neighbour. The girl believed that she had demonstrated love to her neighbour when she complied with the request of an old sick woman, who could not die, by taking her to a steep cliff in order to push her off. What one man labels murder or reprehensible help with suicide, another calls a kind of love towards a neighbour.

Through analytical philosophy meta-ethics has received a special place of its own. The central question has become: What is the character of an ethical statement? For that, the ethical statement is placed next to other statements.

I use the word "is" three times when I say: 1. The moon is a heavenly body; 2. The moon is lovely; 3. The moon is a useful object for man. The three statements, which look grammatically the same, lie nonetheless on clearly different levels. In number one I establish a fact that can be verified. In number two I give a personal judgment that has to do with my feelings. I find the moon to be lovely. It would be strange if I had said: "I find the moon to be a heavenly body"! In number three I give a value judgment: I think that it is *good* that the moon is put to use by man, for example, by establishing laboratories there.

The question arises now as to *why* I call something good. Is this an opinion of mine or of some other people, a sort of feeling (emotiveness), just as when I find the moon to be lovely? Or can it be everyone's opinion because I am able to verify empirically such an ethical statement, just like the statement that the moon is a heavenly body? Is the good, therefore, measurable, so that I can translate it into terms everyone can check, for example, "that which brings about the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people," or "that which is progressive"?

In this book, though, we will not directly concern ourselves with this subsection of ethics. However, it does always play a role in the background of normative ethics. Whoever considers God's law to be normative, as we find it in the Ten Commandments, can wonder if these commandments are arbitrary (could God not just as well have commanded something different or even its total opposite?). But he can also maintain (as we do) that God's law is the only garment that really fits the world, that it causes life to develop, and that as such it can be made understandable.

Meta-ethics is no more a neutral matter than is normative ethics. It is *more* than an exercise in tidy ethical thinking or a clarification of our own ethical standpoint. J. de Graaf describes meta-ethics as that branch of ethical scholarship, "which, as it were, looks over the shoulder of the practitioner of normative and special ethics and constructs a theory about the possibility or impossibility of verifying ethical-normative statements."² But to look over someone's shoulder and then to construct a theory can happen in many very different ways. Theories can be drawn up which, in a strongly subjective way, reduce ethical judgments to expressions of feelings. But theories are also conceivable in which we, out of respect for the commandment as *God's* commandment, point to meaningful relationships between ethical judgments and the development of life for which the commandment is given.

It is impossible to devise an ethics with statements that are rationally transparent for everyone. Ethics always involves making a choice. It makes no statements of the sort "The moon is a heavenly body." Does rejecting an ethics which can be verified by everyone mean that I end up in a subjectivistic ethics? Does that imply an ethics with statements of the sort "The moon is lovely"? No, for another path is possible: the path on which we start and finish with *faith* in God and in His commandments. With this faith it can still very often become quite clear to us that God's law is beneficial for us and for our world. He who believes learns to see the wisdom hidden in God's commandments. He understands that it is *wise* to listen to God's commandments (Proverbs 2:1ff.; 3:13ff., etc.).

² J. de Graaf, *Elementair begrip van de ethiek*, Haarlem 1972, 4.