Every day we make moral judgments on all sorts of things—some on crucial issues and others on more inconsequential matters. We evaluate another person’s conduct when we say, “He ought not have done that,” or “She ought to take her studies more seriously,” or “He should be more careful.” We decide about our own conduct when we are in a bind with our studies, when we have to deal with someone we do not like, when we encounter a homeless person asking for money, or when we respond positively or negatively to a charitable agency’s appeal for a contribution. We make a judgment about a current social problem when we say, “He ought to get out and find a job,” or “That poor person doesn’t have a ghost of a chance of getting a job with the economy the way it is.” We make a pronouncement on a political issue when we say, “We need to reform our justice system,” or “We should spend more money on medical research,” or “We ought to drop a bomb on those people.”

Spur-of-the-moment moral judgments usually express the way we feel more than they express what we think. For the most part, they are prompted by situations or events that impinge on our own lives. They reveal our prejudices and/or reflect the prevailing attitude of our peers. Only rarely do these judgments reflect careful thought about the situation to which we are speaking. And rarely do they deal with matters which have not forced themselves upon our attention. Surely there is a better way to make decisions about good and bad, right and wrong. In the study of ethics we undertake a search for this better way.

The study of ethics requires no less a rigorous discipline than study in any other academic field. Good work requires that one be well informed, think carefully, and be open to additional information and insight. Because the work of the ethicist is not subject to the same type of objective verification that is possible in some disciplines, one can appear to be thinking...
logically and critically when in fact such is not the case. A conscientious student will learn that there are no quick and easy solutions to the difficult problems of moral judgment.

Many academic disciplines focus on the future. To attain some desired goal, they analyze the facts as they are now known or believed to be. Researchers study the cause of a disease, for example, in order to find a cure and ultimately to find a means of prevention. Others study soils and seeds and chemistry so that more adequate food and fiber can be produced. Still others study history to understand how we got to where we are so that we can move into a better future. Certainly the useful application of all investigation is not immediately apparent; much research is abstract rather than practical. Ultimately, however, because we human beings care about the future, the question of the practical application of abstract research will surely arise. The study of ethics is entirely at home with this approach. Ethics does not involve itself in the assessment of guilt or innocence for past actions; it is not interested in attaching blame or credit. Rather it is interested in the formation of character and in guidance for decision making. It is concerned with helping people answer the question, “What is the good or right thing for me to do?”

Many different types of questions can and must be asked about any issue. The economic situation in a number of nations, for example, has led people by the thousands to enter the United States, some legally but others illegally, seeking employment. Their presence has forced the United States to face a number of questions: How can the nation best meet the immediate needs of those people for food, clothing, and shelter, and what long-term provisions can be made for them? This is an economic issue. How can the United States prevent people from entering the country illegally, and what should be done with those who are intercepted in the attempt to do so? These are legal questions. How should the nation relate to the government of another country that does not effectively cooperate with its efforts to deal with illegal immigration? This is a political question. What is the moral obligation of Americans to the people who, for economic reasons, leave their own country and come to the United States? This is an ethical issue the answer to which must take into account all the other questions but also will go beyond them.

Another example is the need for research on a wide variety of medical problems, some of them common and some of them rare, and the provision of care for all who need it. Many questions are appropriate: How extensive is the problem? What are the most effective methods of treatment? Who will pay for them? Who will finance the necessary research to discover more effective methods of prevention and treatment? To what extent may those who discover effective methods of treatment profit financially from them? How can we make treatment available to all who need it? Since our resources are limited, should we concentrate our efforts on diseases that affect a larger number of people? And underneath all these questions is the ethical issue: In the interest of the victims, and in the interest of the larger community, what is our moral responsibility?
These two illustrations deal with social issues. All social issues, however, entail individual decisions and actions. It is individuals who are involved in political issues, who vote, and hold public office. It is individuals who buy and sell, who work and who employ other people, who live in communities, who are involved in institutional life. It is individuals who, within the context of a social order, influence that order by their own actions. It is individuals who suffer. In our complex society all of us deal both with the structure and with individuals within it. As individuals living in society, we interact with it, affecting it and being affected by it. At times we find ourselves at home in society; at other times we find ourselves standing in judgment over it. The ultimate question, however, is neither legal nor scientific nor political nor economic, but moral. It is not “What do I think?” but “What action shall I take?”

DEFINITIONS

**Ethics** is a systematic, critical study concerned with the moral evaluation of human conduct. This evaluation, as we have noted, is oriented toward the future. That is, it is concerned with the making of decisions. Its basic question is not “Did I do right?” or “Was my conduct good or bad”—although to raise the ethical question, of course, is to take the past into account. The evaluation of past conduct, however, is not for the purpose of creating a sense of guilt but of helping make decisions about the future. Its concern is “What am I to do now? How am I to relate to other persons? How am I to relate to the communities of which I am a part?” Such evaluation requires some standard, some canon by which to measure. The beginning point in the study of ethics, therefore, must be the choice of a worldview, a philosophy of life. No ethical system stands on its own feet, but rather is based either tacitly or explicitly on some philosophy. The person who decides that something is good must be prepared to justify that decision. What makes this good and that bad? Why is this value superior to that one? The answer to the question “Why?” is determined by one’s basic view of life.

**Christian ethics** is the critical evaluation of human conduct from a Christian perspective. From that perspective a Christian ethicist makes assumptions about human nature, about the relationship of human beings to one another, and about their relationship to God. A faith community provides the supportive context for such deliberation and action. Christians share many beliefs with adherents of other religions and with nonreligious people. Whether they agree with these people on a specific idea, whether they reach the same conclusions, is not the heart of their ethic. The basic nature of their ethic is determined by their starting point. Their faith defines their character, provides the motives from which they act, underlies the generalizations they make about value and duty, and points to the conclusions they reach about a proposed course of action.

The word **morals** is used freely in the discussion of ethics. Indeed, in popular thought the words **ethics** and **morals** are often used
interchangeably. Strictly speaking, however, there is a distinction: The
word *ethics* refers to a systematic study, and the word *morals* refers to a
behavior pattern. In this sense, one speaks of a moral action or a moral
person, and of an ethical system or ethical code. Because this distinction
is not maintained either in popular usage or in academic discussions, the
student can determine the intent only by considering the context within
which it is used.

**SUBJECT MATTER**

In the study of ethics, one is concerned with making value judgments. *Value*
literally means “worth” or “importance.” We are accustomed to evaluating
almost everything in terms of money. We understand that many factors, in
addition to the cost of materials and labor and distribution, enter into a deci-
sion about the price to be placed on an object. One such factor is its desir-
ability, the willingness of the public to pay a high price. For many items this
factor appears to be the major one. Put in simple economic terms, the ques-
tion is this: Would you rather have this object than the money you have to
pay to get it? If there are two things you want, but you have the money for
only one, which will you choose? If one thing must be sacrificed for another,
which will you hold on to? The issue, therefore, is one of establishing priori-
ties. In ethical terms, it is the question, To what do I give priority? For what
am I willing to give up other courses of action?

Some thinkers insist that the proper approach to the making of ethi-
cal decisions is to begin by determining what is the highest good in life. If
we take this approach, we begin by looking for the one thing for which we
would be willing to sacrifice everything else. Discovering that, we have a
basis for making all other decisions. Everything else will have value in re-
relationship to our movement toward that highest good. In simple terms, the
question is, What do we want out of life? Happiness? Power? The approval
of other people? A sense of accomplishment? A sense of being true to our-
selves? Once we have answered that question we can evaluate options in
terms of whether they would help us attain our objective or would interfere
with attaining it. This approach is *teleological*, concerned with movement
toward an ultimate goal. Duty is derived from value; we ought to do what
helps attain the goal.

Other thinkers, however, put duty first and say that value is derived
from it. The word *duty* refers to an obligation that is based on a relationship
or that results from one’s station in life. It is closely akin to the word *respon-
sibility*, which implies an action prompted by a sense of loyalty to something
outside the self. The person who acts from duty acts not in order to attain a
goal but because of an inner commitment. The focus is on the motive rather
than on the objective. Satisfaction comes from doing one’s duty; the good
life is the life of response to this inner sense of compulsion. In that sense,
value is derived from duty. Such theories are *deontological*, concerned with
movement from a basic obligation.
Whether Christian ethics is teleological or deontological is an open question. In either case, however, it is concerned with norms or standards. It is not interested simply in describing the patterns of people's actions, in analyzing their moral beliefs, customs, and practices. Such objective description is a function of the social sciences, which deliberately avoid making value judgments. Those disciplines are not in the business of saying that one way of acting is good and another way is bad. The most that they will say is that one way of acting achieves certain results and that the other way achieves different results. In sharp contrast, however, the study of ethics requires the making of value judgments. In essence, ethics is prescriptive rather than descriptive. The intent of ethics is to discern a way of acting either for the achievement of certain desirable goals (teleological) or as a response to certain fundamental relationships (deontological). In either case, the ethicist does not try to impose standards upon another person or upon a group, but rather tries to find and to act upon a valid way to make sound decisions about moral issues.

ASSUMPTIONS

In every discipline students are required to make certain assumptions. Whether the discipline is history or biology or mathematics or economics or music or physics, the study does not proceed from a vacuum. The assumptions of one discipline may well be a proper field of investigation in another. Indeed, within the same discipline there may be debate about what assumptions are necessary. Agreed upon or not, however, no work proceeds without them.

We have said that every ethical system is based on some worldview, and that the worldview on which Christian ethics is based is the Christian faith. This, then, is the first assumption that underlies this particular study. In every religion there is a distinctive understanding of value and duty, of right and wrong, of good and bad. At many points Christian ethics and the ethics of other religions overlap, and at many points they differ. Nonreligious philosophies have their own understanding of value and duty, right and wrong, good and bad. In their conclusions they, too, have much in common with Christian ethics, as well as much at variance. Moreover, within Christianity there are differences both in theology and in ethical thought. Recognizing all of this variety, the Christian ethicist stands within the Christian faith and draws conclusions from it.

A second assumption underlying this approach to the study of ethics is that there is an orderliness in the universe that is independent of our knowledge of it. This assumption, in fact, is made in all scientific investigation. Orderly patterns are observed and on that basis predictions are made with a high degree of accuracy. Descriptions of this order are always tentative, recognizing that revision is constantly demanded in light of new information. The better we know these patterns, the more we can use them to our own ends. In this study of Christian ethics the assumption is made that there
is a pattern, an orderliness, that underlies human relationships. In these relationships, therefore, we can talk about cause and effect, about consistency, and thus about norms.

A third assumption is that we can know something about that orderliness. At this point, the word *something* is crucial. We cannot know everything; that is no more possible in the realm of ethical concerns than it is in scientific investigation. An honest scholar in any discipline maintains a spirit of tentativeness about discoveries and conclusions. Information may be incomplete, data may be misinterpreted, and later discoveries may alter thinking about what is now believed to be true. This spirit of tentativeness keeps the scholar going; there is always more to be learned. To learn, we must proceed on the basis of what is now believed to be true. At the same time, we must be ready to revise our thinking in light of new information. This is the spirit that students of Christian ethics are asked to maintain. Our quest is for truth that will provide the basis for moral decisions. We will act on the basis of our present insight, and at the same time we will be open to new understanding that is yet to come.

A fourth assumption is freedom of the will. Human beings do in fact make choices and act on them of their own volition. No one assumes that people are totally free. We live under the restrictions of the natural order and of the social order, some obvious and some not so readily apparent. Within these restrictions, however, we make choices. While we cannot violate the law of gravity, for example, we can use it in a wide variety of ways to accomplish our purposes. Although we cannot choose our parents, we can make decisions about how we deal with them. We cannot choose whether to be sexual beings, but we can decide how to deal with our sexuality. We recognize, therefore, that certain conditions and influences restrict our choices even though they do not determine them. We can talk about why a person is a criminal, for example, and recognize that a poor family setting or bad companions or personality problems may influence that person’s decisions and actions. At the same time we recognize those factors as influences, not determinants, and we know that the individual makes independent decisions.

The final assumption is the responsibility of the individual. In one sense this responsibility means that having made a decision, a person must live with it. The consequences of an action are often the logical result of the decision we have made. We are not free to choose an action and to refuse its consequences. Nor can we attribute the results of our choice to some other person or some other set of circumstances. This responsibility means that a person who chooses is held accountable. Our choices and actions often come under judgment by some external authority. That authority may be as informal as group pressure or as formal as the law of the state. From a Christian perspective, the final authority to which we are accountable is God. At this point the concept of duty becomes involved in Christian ethics. We have a duty to ourselves and to the communities of which we are a part. This duty,
however, is contingent. The Christian’s ultimate duty is to God, and moral choices are made in response to God.

CAUTIONS

To maintain a careful objectivity and to maintain the integrity of their study as an academic discipline, some ethicists stress the fact that they aim at knowledge and not at behavior. Austin Fagothey, for example, says “Ethics is not interested in what a person does, except to compare it with what he or she ought to do” (*Right and Reason*). John Hospers makes the same point, saying “Ethics is concerned to find the truth about these moral questions, not to try to make us act upon them” (*Human Conduct*, p. 9). Hospers is not indifferent to behavior, and he hopes that people who find the truth will act on it. He insists, however, that ethics “is concerned not directly with practice but with finding true statements about what our practices ought to be.” Such affirmations, however, are overstatements of the need for objectivity. It is probably true of all disciplines, and it is certainly true of ethics that knowledge is not sought for its own sake; it is sought so that it can be used. No knowledge of goodness, of course, can make one good. To know the good is not necessarily to do the good. Armed with the best information available, one may nevertheless make bad decisions. Knowledge, however, provides a necessary tool for action. One learns an approach to decision making in order to make good decisions.

In the pursuit of this objective the student faces a number of serious problems. First, there is no consensus on the nature of good and bad, of right and wrong, of value and duty. At the starting point is the question of whether there are indeed any absolutes. Is it possible to say “always” or “never” about anything? This is, of course, a question about the nature of truth. Is truth simply within the human mind, or does it exist independently of human thought and knowledge? Neither philosophers nor theologians agree among themselves on whether there is objective truth in the moral realm. Those who believe that there is such truth do not agree on its content. They do not agree, therefore, as to whether there are any reliable universal criteria of judgment, and they do not agree on what makes something good or right.

A second problem is the fact that many views that once were generally accepted are now being challenged. No longer is there a consensus on sexual morality, including premarital and extramarital relationships, abortion, and homosexuality. Although there was never a time when the rules were universally followed, those who ignored them knew that they were violating the standard. Now the question is not so much whether to violate the standards as whether the standards themselves are valid. The same thing is true concerning the use of violence in the achievement of good ends. Until quite recently it was generally agreed that only the state had the right to use violence in that way and that it was wrong for individuals to do so. Individuals were expected to work within the system to correct what they considered
to be unjust. An increasing number of people, however, insist that violence may be a correct way to bring about change. Thus some people suggest that mob violence, while always regrettable, may be an understandable reaction to racial injustice in the United States. Some believe that terrorism may be a necessary, and therefore valid, tool in the struggle of a minority people against an oppressive government. Some think that a battered wife may be justified in killing her abusive husband. Some insist that private citizens are morally right in carrying weapons for self-protection and in firing them when threatened.

Another difficulty one encounters in the effort to develop a pattern of right conduct is the fact that few problems are simple, clear-cut choices between right and wrong. Most problems that people face are highly complex, and one is aware that any decision will bring certain undesirable consequences. The pressure to establish racial balance in the public schools in the South, for example, was an effort to prevent certain injustices of the past from being perpetuated and to prepare young people for life in an integrated society. At the same time it placed many people in emotionally stressful situations; it intensiﬁed problems of discipline in the schools; and it undermined the neighborhood concept, which many people found meaningful. Busing was an effective way to achieve the goal of desegregation in the schools, but it required many children to take an unduly long ride to reach their school. The quota system in the employment of teachers guaranteed a racial balance but worked a hardship on many individuals and brought emotional stress to children and teachers of all races.

The same difficulty troubles people in making certain intensely personal decisions. Suppose that by doing honest work on a test you earned a C, while your friend cheated and got an A. Your knowledge of the cheating inevitably will affect your relationship with your friend, even if you say nothing. The relationship will also be affected if you confront your friend with the cheating. Furthermore, your friend’s action has a bearing on the teacher’s curve. If it were true that your friend’s cheating hurt no one else in the immediate situation, what about the long run? Decisions about conduct, whether on a social issue or on a personal matter, are rarely simple choices between right and wrong.

Convinced about what is an appropriate thing to do in a given situation, we may ﬁnd ourselves frustrated when we try to do it. Consider, for example, the efforts of a middle-class family to help some poverty-stricken neighbors. An elderly widow lives in a two-room shack with four grandchil- dren, the sons and daughters of her own unmarried daughter. The daughter lives in another city. The widow’s only source of income is public welfare. She is too old to work, and if she did work, there would be no one to care for the children. The shack in which she lives is heated with a wood stove and is a ﬁretrap. The children are ill fed, ill clothed, ill educated, and have inadequate medical care. The woman frequently asks for help from her middle-class neighbors, playing on their sympathy as much as she can. In the face of such obvious need, they cannot refuse assistance. Yet by helping
her, they contribute to the perpetuation of the pattern in which she is living. The problem is personal and individual: This woman and her grandchildren have immediate and urgent needs, which they cannot meet. But the problem is also social: The nation has not learned how to deal with poverty. People often respond spontaneously to cries for help, particularly when they feel that the victim is worthy, but they know that such a spontaneous response leaves tremendous unmet needs. They deal with the symptoms of a social problem without knowing how to cure the disease. Although the welfare system is an important effort to meet the needs of the people, it is subject to abuse. Most Americans believe that they must provide for the poor in their land—and in their own neighborhood—but they are not satisfied with any method that has been devised.

One further difficulty complicates our efforts to make moral decisions. We are subject to a variety of influences, and we act from mixed motives. No one has one loyalty only. All of us are members of families; we have friends; we are citizens; we belong to social clubs and churches and political parties. We learn the news from the mass media, and we are entertained by the same media. We are pressured by advertisers who want to sell us something and by exhorters who want us to do something. Bombarded on all sides by merchandisers and charities, we find it difficult to look objectively at value and duty.

In spite of all the difficulties, however, in this study we shall try to establish a pattern for making sound moral decisions. A part of our work will be theoretical: We shall try to formulate a system for dealing with the moral issues. We have already made it clear that our system will be developed within the framework of the Christian faith. We shall look briefly at certain non-Christian alternatives, without trying to evaluate them, because we need to understand the basis on which many of our contemporaries operate. But we shall move from them to a Christian approach.

Another part of our work will be practical: We shall attempt to cultivate an uneasy conscience. We shall raise questions about commonly accepted practices. Although we cannot deal with all ethical issues, we shall raise questions about a wide variety of personal and social activities, and we shall cultivate the practice of raising questions that will invade every realm of life.

Questions and Topics For Discussion

1. Is there a valid place for feeling in making moral judgments? Why or why not?
2. If our feelings and our thinking lead us to different conclusions, how can we reconcile them?
3. What is the relationship between personal morality and social problems?
4. What is the relationship between value and duty?
5. If people of differing faiths agree on an ethical issue, what difference is made by their religion?
6. How can we speak of right and wrong in a world where there are so many different religious and philosophical perspectives?
Recommendations For Further Reading


