An Introduction to CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Fourth Edition

ROGER H. CROOK

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Dedicated
to
Mary Ruth Crook

Preface

This book is a college-level introductory textbook in Christian ethics. This statement indicates three important facts. First, the book is based on the Christian faith and is written for people who stand within that faith. The text recognizes as viable options a number of other systems and indeed, because of their significance, describes some of them briefly without attempting to assess their strengths and weaknesses. Yet this book is an effort to state a Christian ethic—a Christian method of making moral decisions. It makes certain assumptions, which are proper subjects of debate in Christian theological discussion, that reflect the theology of Protestant Christianity. Although in the field of ethics there is a significant mutual influence between Protestant and Catholic thinkers, there are also significant differences. At many points, therefore, my own Protestantism is clearly revealed.

Second, this is an introductory textbook. It is intended to acquaint beginning students with both the field of ethics in general and varieties of Christian ethical systems in particular and to assist them in formulating an approach that they will find valid for themselves. It is further intended to help them consider from a Christian perspective a wide variety of ethical issues, both personal and social, with which modern men and women must deal.

Third, this text is written for college students and is designed to help them develop a method of dealing with the thorny moral issues that they face not only as students but also as people involved in the life of the broader community. It does not, therefore, assume either the experience or the preparation of students at the graduate level.

The plan of the book is clearly indicated in the part and chapter titles. Part I (Chapters 1 through 3) introduces the field of ethics and a variety of approaches to its study. Part II (Chapters 4 through 6) describes my own

method for making ethical decisions. Part III (Chapters 7 through 15) deals with some of the issues that demand attention today. No attempt is made to draw a line between "personal" and "social" issues because most issues have both personal and social implications, and the two aspects are therefore considered together.

To assist the students, I have prepared a glossary of unusual terms and common terms that are given a distinct meaning in the study of Christian ethics. The first time those words are used in the text they appear in boldface. All quotations of scripture are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

I am grateful to Meredith College for the sabbatical that enabled me to complete the major portion of the actual writing of the first edition of this book. I am deeply indebted to three long-time colleagues at Meredith College, B. H. Cochran, Allen Page, and Bob Vance, for continuing discussion and debate, the fruits of which are reflected in much of what I have written. I am further indebted to the students who have taken my course in Christian ethics and have criticized this work in both oral and written form. Hugh T. McElwain at Rosary College, Dean M. Martin at Campbell University, and Emmanuel K. Twesigye at Ohio Wesleyan University made valuable suggestions that were incorporated in the second edition. In making revisions for the third edition I benefited greatly from suggestions made by Rev. Mark A. Duntley, Jr., at Lewis and Clark College; Charles L. Kammer at the College of Wooster; Ronald A. Smith at Hardin-Simmons University; and Edward R. Sunshine at Barry University. In this fourth edition I have taken into account the suggestions of these additional reviewers: Akin Akinade at High Point University, NC; Pamela K. Brubaker at California Lutheran University, CA; and James B. Martin-Schramm at Luther College, IA. While I have updated material throughout the book, the most significant revisions are found in Chapters 2, 7, 8, and 9.

Introduction: To the Student

Every day we make decisions on ethical issues. Even routine, everyday choices often involve judgments about good and bad, right and wrong. Sometimes the issues are clear, and one simply has to decide whether or not to do the right thing. More often, however, it is not quite so apparent what "the right thing" is, and one has to weigh the options, examine the implications, and choose the better way. The more one's choices affect other people, the more urgent the moral problem becomes.

Students, for example, live and work in a setting in which their conduct is regulated by many rules. Certain expectations about preparing for class, participating in class, writing papers, and taking tests and examinations demand self-discipline and involve students in relationships with the subject matter, their fellow students, and their instructors. Most students, sometimes for reasons beyond their control and sometimes because of their own neglect, occasionally find themselves in situations in which a violation of the rules seems a viable alternative. In such situations they have a simple decision to make: Will they follow the rule? If a rule is unclear, however, what are they to do? How are they to write their research papers, for example, when the members of the faculty do not agree with one another on what constitutes plagiarism?

Not all teachers use a grade curve. Yet in every class the students who do the best work are likely to be given an A, most students will receive a C, and students whose work is significantly inferior to that of others in the class will get a D or an F. Whether they like it or not, students are competing with one another. What should a student do if he or she becomes aware that a classmate is getting good grades by plagiarizing, turning in work done by another student, or cheating on tests?

Every student makes decisions about sexual activity. Those who believe that intercourse is to be reserved for marriage face challenges to that conviction over and over again. Those who do not share that conviction nevertheless have to make choices about partners and circumstances. Many people, married and single, have to decide what to do about unplanned pregnancies. Many people have to deal with the unfaithfulness of marital partners. Those who discover that they are homosexual have to decide how they will deal with that fact.

The marketplace demands decisions that are surprising not in their frequency but in their variety. What should an employer do, for example, when a worker who earns a minimum wage requests payment in cash rather than by check? The salary is not enough to meet the needs of the employee's family, but payment in cash facilitates cheating on income taxes and perhaps welfare. What is the responsibility of the employer for seeing that the needy employee abides by the letter of the law?

Consider another marketplace situation. A department store advertises a low-priced lawn mower. The clerks, however, are instructed to pressure customers to buy a more expensive one. Can a clerk appropriately urge all prospective customers to buy a more expensive mower, no matter what their needs and whether they can actually afford to pay more?

Students often ask their professors to write recommendations for them as they seek employment or entry into a graduate or professional school. Should the professor be completely honest in the recommendations? If a student did not take seriously the responsibilities of academic life, should the teacher say so? If a student had been guilty of academic dishonesty, should the teacher report that fact? If the teacher thinks that the student is really not qualified, should the teacher say so?

As knowledge of the natural order increases and as our ability to manipulate it grows, new moral issues are raised. How can we balance our increasing need for energy with our need for a clean and safe atmosphere? What are the moral implications of genetic screening, in vitro conception, and surrogate motherhood? What are the moral implications of organ transplants and artificial organs? What are the bases on which we can decide about the best use of our scanty resources?

These matters are not moral issues only. They are scientific, political, religious, and economic as well. They are sociological, psychological, and philosophical. They are theoretical and practical. They are emotional, rational, and volitional. They are, in short, matters that involve the whole person. They require value judgments in personal life, in vocations, in social relationships, in politics. Precisely because they involve the whole person, the fundamental issue is morality. Morality is not concerned with a limited number of specific matters; it is concerned with every course of action that involves human beings. In this book you are invited to examine this wide range of issues from the perspective of Christian ethics, to ask, "In light of my Christian faith and commitment, what is the right thing for me to do in the circumstances in which I live?"

Contents

1

An Overview of Ethics

Most of us think of the natural order as characterized by a high degree of certainty. The very term *order* implies regularity, dependability, and predictability. We assume that there are certain laws of nature that are immutable and to which there are no exceptions. We talk of cause and effect, of predictability, of doing certain things so that we can obtain certain results. We believe that once we have discovered the cause of a disease we can treat it, perhaps cure it, possibly even prevent it. The more we know about genetics, the more we can improve plants and animals and human beings. The more we discover about energy, the greater the possibility of harnessing energy to suit our own purposes.

When we think about the social order, however, we are much less likely to think in terms of certainties. Although the disciplines of psychology and sociology, for example, require the use of scientific methods, these methods are necessarily different from those of the physical sciences. Social scientists cannot experiment in the same way that physical scientists do. The accuracy of their predictions is much more open to question. There are more variables than they know what to do with. Social scientists are acutely aware that dealing with persons is radically different from dealing with things.

Both the natural sciences and the social sciences, however, are concerned with giving an accurate description of what exists. Both deal with objective reality. Scientists in both areas observe how specific entities act and react. They describe those entities, compare notes with one another, evaluate the work of their colleagues, and debate conclusions. They create images and discuss the reality so represented. They describe processes and speculate on why things operate as they do.

We move out of the realm of science when we speak of *good* and *right*, of *value* and *duty*. Science does not know what to do with such qualities because it can neither describe them nor experiment with them. As a person, the scientist has values and feels obligations. Those values and obligations, however, cannot be subjected to the kind of empirical examination used in the study of physics or chemistry or psychology or sociology. Much less can the scientist examine the values and the sense of obligation of a fellow scientist.

Although the methods are different, the study of value and of duty is no less rigorous a discipline than is the study of the natural or the social sciences. Good work in the study of ethics requires that one be well informed, think carefully, and be open to additional information and insight. Because the ethicist does not have the same tools as the scientist, and because the work of the ethicist is not subject to the same type of objective verification, one can appear to be thinking logically and critically when in fact such is not the case. A conscientious student learns that there are no quick and easy solutions to the difficult problems of moral judgment.

Most, if not all, studies are oriented to the future. To attain some desired goal, we analyze what has been and what is. We study the cause of a disease in order to find a cure and ultimately to find a means of prevention. We study soils and seeds and chemistry to provide more adequate food and fiber. We study history to understand how we got to where we are so that we can move into a better future. Certainly some study is not immediately practical; much research is abstract rather than utilitarian. Because human beings care about the future, however, the utilitarian issue is ever-present.

The study of ethics is entirely at home with this utilitarian approach. Ethics is not fundamentally concerned with evaluating past actions and therefore with assessing guilt or innocence or with attaching blame or credit. Instead, 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 problem. The economic situation in Mexico during the 1990s, for example, led people by the thousands to enter the United States, some legally but others illegally, seeking employment. Their presence in the United States has forced our nation to face a number of questions: How can we best meet the immediate needs of those people for food, clothing, and shelter, and what long-term provision can we make for them? This is an economic issue. How can we prevent people from entering illegally, and what are we to do with those who are intercepted in the attempt? These are legal questions. How are we to relate to the government of another country that has failed to cooperate effectively with our efforts to deal with the traffic of illegal drugs? This is a political question. What is our moral obligation to the people who leave their own country for economic reasons? This is an ethical issue the answer to which must take into account all the other questions but also will go beyond them.

Another issue that continues to demand a great deal of attention in the United States is the rapid spread of AIDS. 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 some other disease that affects a larger number of people? And underneath all these questions is the ethical issue: In the interest of the AIDS 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 we all 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 final question 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 evaluation of human conduct. This evaluation, as has been 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?" 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 some worldview, some philosophy of life. Ethics does not stand on its own feet but rather is based on a philosophy. The person who decides that something is good must be prepared to justify the 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. The Christian ethicist stands within the Christian faith and makes Christian assumptions about human nature, about the relationship of

human beings to one another and about their relationship to God. The Christian community provides the supportive context for such deliberation and action. Christians share some beliefs with adherents of other religions and some with nonreligious ethicists. Whether they agree with these ethicists on a particular idea, whether they reach the same conclusions, is not the definitive matter. The definitive factor is the starting point. The Christian faith defines the motives from which the Christian ethicists act, the generalizations they may make about value and duty, and the conclusions they reach about a proposed course of action.

The word ***morals*** is used freely in discussions of ethics. Indeed, in popular discussion *ethics* and *morals* are often used interchangeably. There is a distinction, however, that should be maintained. Properly understood, *ethics* refers to theory, whereas *morals* refers to conduct. This distinction, however, is not always maintained either in popular usage or in academic discussion.

SUBJECT MATTER

In the study of ethics, one is concerned with making value judgments. ***Value*** literally means "worth, 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 decision about the price to be placed on an object. One such factor is its desirability, the willingness of the public to pay a high price. For many items this factor appears to be the major one. Put in simple terms, the question is this: Would you rather have this object than the money needed to pay for it? The issue is therefore one of establishing priorities. If one thing must be sacrificed (or paid) for another, what will you hold on to? In the study of ethics we do not think primarily in terms of money. Yet we are dealing with the question, What is the value of this proposed course of action? The way of answering this question is the subject of the study of ethics.

Some thinkers insist that the proper approach to the making of ethical decisions is to begin by determining what is the highest good in life. If this is true, we must look for the one thing for which we would sacrifice everything else. Discovering it, we can understand what will determine our lesser decisions. Everything else will have value in 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 someone else? A sense of accomplishment? A sense of being true to ourselves? Once we have answered this question we can evaluate things 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 objective. Duty is derived from value; we ought to do what helps attain the goal.