Morality as a Way of Life
A first introduction to ethical theory

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The development of this series of study guides is an initiative of the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape. Its main purpose is to help produce affordable, readily available and contextually relevant textbooks that can be used for teaching purposes in the Southern African context. In addition, the series develops research tools that may be employed for postgraduate research projects in the region. The following volumes have appeared in this series thus far:


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Since the advent of democracy in 1994 there has been a widespread concern over the disintegration of the moral fabric of the South African society – amongst politicians, business leaders, community leaders and religious leaders alike. Many have recognised the need to build the moral and religious foundations of society and have encouraged contributions towards the moral regeneration movement.

The standard textbooks on ethical theory are seldom in a position to address such concerns because they tend to focus on divergent theories on moral decision making in highly specialised situations – which few South African citizens would probably ever encounter. Instead, this first introduction to ethical theory focuses on three important moral questions:

- What is an appropriate vision of the good (a just, participatory and sustainable) society?
- How does the formation of virtuous people, persons of good moral character take place?
- And, on this basis, how do we take responsible decisions?

The underlying question which is addressed here is one of moral formation and education. We do not only need a democratic constitution with a bill of human rights; we also need a human rights culture. We need communities and institutions where there are people who embody and practice the vision articulated in the constitution, people who respect the human dignity and rights of others and who can exercise responsibility in this regard. What is required for the formation of good South African citizens, people who can make a contribution in family life, in civil society, in community-based organisations, in faith-based organisations, in the economic sector and in various structures of governance? This is a question which parents, educators and the leadership in all these sectors simply have to grapple with.

This book explores the significance of four important moral categories, namely visions, virtues, values and obligations. It outlines the necessary, if sometimes conflicting role that each of these categories plays in the shaping of morality. It argues that morality is best understood in terms of judgements about an appropriate way of life. It offers examples, case studies and exercises based on teaching experience and derived from within the Southern African context in order to assist prospective leaders to reflect on the challenge of building the moral foundations of society.

The discussion of the four ethical categories mentioned above draws especially on the illuminating “map” of moral concepts developed by Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen. In various chapters of this textbook we have also made use of some of their examples and case studies to illustrate and describe the distinctions between these categories. These are taken from *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* by B.C. Birch and L.L. Rasmussen, copyright © 1988 Fortress Press. Used by permission of Augsburg Fortress. Throughout the text these concepts and illustrations are appropriated through examples drawn from within the Southern African context.
Chapter 1

Introduction: Three moral questions

In this chapter …

○ You will be introduced to a number of basic ethical concepts and distinctions;
○ You will see that there are three important kinds of moral questions, namely questions around a vision for the good society, people of good character and responsible decision making;
○ You will discover through some exercises how these questions may complement one another but also how they may be in conflict with one another.

“Ethics … is about the art of living – seeing our lives as the material out of which, through the choices we make, we are gradually constructing a work of art.”

“Our lives are continually shaped by the choices we make, and by the convictions and values that underlie them. In this way, our lives are like works of art.”

1.1 The distinction between morality, ethos and ethics

Words such as morality and ethics are used in many different ways. In Through the looking glass the Queen tells Humpty Dumpty that she has the right to decide what words mean. The words will mean just what she chooses them to mean! The variety of meanings does require from us to use words such as morality and ethics carefully though.

The word “morality” comes from the Latin word mos (plural: mores) which used to refer to customs. One of the oldest meanings of “morality” is indeed “behaviour according to customs”. Such behaviour provides a sense of stability and security and helps to sustain society. It keeps society sufficiently intact to allow people to go on with their everyday lives. Likewise, rules for social etiquette determine what is considered to be polite behaviour: how to eat and dress, greet one another, express gratitude and appreciation, show respect to seniors and, in general, to carry out social transactions.

In pluralist societies, with different sets of customs and different rules for etiquette, the meaning of “morality” had to be adapted. If there is more than one custom, for example for courting before marriage or for dealing with theft, it is no longer clear what it means to behave according to the appropriate customs. There are different customs for greeting one another: nodding the head, waving the hand, handshakes, bowing, hugging, kissing on the cheek or the lips, etc. It may be a matter of morality that we should show respect when we greet others, but how we greet others is not necessarily a moral concern.

The meaning of the word “morality” subsequently became broader and referred to behaviour according to certain rules, principles or codes of conduct. These rules spelled out what one may or may not do in a particular context. Soon the word “morality” developed the connotations of distinguishing between “right” and “wrong” or between “good” and “evil”. One may, for example, distinguish between a moral and an immoral action, way of conduct or decision (for
example: “It is immoral to rape someone”). One may also use the word morality to comment on a person’s character (for example: “That rapist and murderer is really a wicked and cruel thug.” One may also talk about the need for a moral society (for example: “There is something deeply immoral about a society where so many babies are raped”). We will soon come back to these ways of using the word morality. What is important here is to see that the concept “morality” implies a judgement about decisions, persons or societies.

The word “ethics” is derived from the Greek word “to ethos”. The word ethos was originally used to refer to a shelter or dwelling place for domestic animals. It suggested the need for a place of protection and nutrition. The word ethos also had the connotations of a daily routine, a sense of familiarity, a place that may be called home. The stable, for example, offered a sense of stability (the words share a common root, meaning a firm place to stand). The origins of the Greek ethos and the Latin mos are therefore closely related to one another. Nowadays, the word ethos usually refers to the characteristic way in which a particular group of people (a family, a community, an organisation, an institution) lives, embodies and practises its convictions about what is right and what is wrong. Ethos therefore describes a way of life. In many religious traditions, a particular Way is identified, characterised and embodied by local religious communities.

A group develops its ethos over an extensive period of time. Children and new members of the group are socialised to accept the ethos of the group. They gradually learn how to behave themselves according to this ethos. They learn to think, to speak and to act as members of the group. They learn whom they should respect and follow and whom they should ridicule or avoid. They identify people who are regarded as examples, as figures with authority within the group. They identify others as heretics, opponents or enemies. In numerous ways this ethos is reinforced to maintain the group’s identity and also its boundaries. This does not imply that a group’s ethos cannot change. In fact, the ethos of a group constantly changes as generations of leadership come and go, as new challenges appear and as internal tensions manifest themselves.

To summarise: The connotations of the words “morality” and “ethos” are closely related to one another. The word morality may be used with reference to 1) decisions, 2) persons and 3) societies to express convictions about what is right and what is wrong. The emphasis in the word ethos is on a way of life: the ways in which morality is actually practised, especially in a communal context. The ethos of a group may, in some cases, be judged as immoral. This would, for example, apply to the ethos of a group of gangsters whose way of life is to steal what they want when they want.

The word ethics developed as a result of the emergence of philosophy, especially in ancient Greece. In the discussion above we saw that morality originally referred to behaviour according to custom. With the emphasis on critical inquiry in philosophy this could no longer be accepted. Ethics now came to imply behaviour according to reason and had to be based on thorough reflection. In philosophical reflections one had to provide reasons for acting in a particular way. Ethics called morality into question and reflected on the very basis (rules, principles, criteria) which may be used to distinguish between what is “right” and what is “wrong”? The task of ethics is thus to investigate morality, to assess morality and to make moral recommendations.

Perhaps the easiest way to distinguish between ethics and ethos is to suggest that ethics involves a reflection on ethos (or morality). Ethics therefore refers to a critical, intellectual (or academic) discipline in the same way that linguistics involves a reflection on language and