

AN INQUIRY INTO THE CHARACTER OF ETHICAL STATEMENTS AND  
THEIR  
VERIFICATION AND JUSTIFICATION

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ABSTRACT

Meta-ethics aims at considering questions and problems of fundamental importance to ethics as a science. A central aspect of meta-ethics deals with the character of ethical statements. Are they capable of verification? This is the question examined by this paper. Many differing answers have been proposed to the question but where many answers falter is in their neglect to give attention to the truly scientific nature of ethics. It is proposed that the approach of W. Pannenberg is to be followed whereby ethics must be viewed in a scientific way. Christian ethical thinking must take the results in other branches of science and make use of them, applying them to Christianity and theology as the science of God. The views of Karl Popper on the notion of a hypothesis are seen to offer possibilities for attaining the scientific character of ethical statements.

The aim of this article is to consider one central aspect of the field of meta-ethics - that of the character of ethical statements and their verification. Section one gives attention to the context of ethical statements by treating the task of meta-ethics itself as seen within the context of Christian ethics in general. Section two investigates the different approaches which have been adopted towards the character of ethical statements and their verification. The views of individual ethical scholars are presented in order to formulate the different approaches more clearly, and an evaluation is made of their specific attempts. Here I do not limit myself to specifically Christian thinkers, but will consider the views of ethical philosophers in general, which will later form the basis for a Christian approach to the question. As a result of these different views, section three attempts to formulate an approach for a satisfactory theory

of the verification of ethical statements within the context of Christian meta-ethics.

## 1. META-ETHICS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

### 1.1 Christian ethics

The word ethics is used today to refer to a branch of philosophy which concerns thinking philosophically about morality and its problems, it is the science of morality (Reiner, 1964:15). Originally the term ethics came from the Greek word ἠθικός which meant customs, morals or inclination. In latin this was translated by the word mos (pl. mores), also meaning customs, or habits, and from which come our English words morals and morality. In the course of time morality took on the meaning of the totality of the accepted rules of behaviour of a group (Reiner, 1964:15). Ethics is seen as reflection about this life and its norms; it introduces an inquiry into the general principles lying behind this way of life and undertakes reflection into new problems to which traditional moral philosophy can give no answers.

The reflection about morality is as old as man himself. A classical example of this ethical reflection is seen in the dialogues of Plato, especially in the example of Socrates who is faced with death and weighs up the ethical reasons for the way he should act. As an Athenian, Socrates saw that it was his duty to respect his sentence given by the court. If he were to escape, he would have rejected this duty which he saw so clearly: he would have despised the whole Athenian constitution and moral code. His duty was to drink the hemlock (Plato, 1970:87).

The Christian believer is also occupied with the task of ethical reflection. He is a follower of Christ, and as such his life is stamped by the person and presence of Christ (Niebuhr, 1963:43). The Christian life should not be seen as something totally different from other ways of human life. A person is a person, whether he be a Buddhist, Jew, Mohammedan, Atheist: his nature is the same. In so far as all people have the same fundamental human nature they all experience the same exigencies and demands, they all come under the same law. Christian life should be seen as a further dimension of human moral life in general. Christian

ethics is an attempt to understand this human moral life from a Christian standpoint (Niebuhr, 1963:45).

A Christian believer must reflect upon his human life from a Christian standpoint, but this reflection must be undertaken in a disciplined, systematic way (i.e. in a scientific way) if his thought and efforts are to achieve fruitfulness and success. Once more this aspect of ethics, as a science, goes back to the beginnings of western civilisation, to the reflection of the Greeks.

## 1.2 The different branches of Christian ethics

Christian ethics, as a scientific discipline, has in the course of its development been divided chiefly into four branches:

### 1.2.1 Descriptive-explanatory ethics

This title indicates the task with which ethics is concerned, namely that of describing morals and customs in specific groups at concrete historical times. One finds descriptive ethics above all in the works of cultural anthropologists, sociologists and social anthropologists. In this regard there is an interaction between the cultural anthropologist and the ethical scholar: the cultural anthropologist cannot work without an ethical theory, and the ethical scholar cannot work without a knowledge of morals in diverse cultural context and cultures. The Christian ethical scholar tries to describe and explain ethical phenomena from a Christian viewpoint. This branch of ethics rests upon empirical moral facts and attempts to describe and explain them. An example of a typical undertaking in this regard would be: What are the views of Africans today with regard to marriage?

### 1.2.2 Normative ethics

It is not sufficient to describe what people do, but normative ethics goes further and inquires about the principles of standards behind the actions. Its task is to establish ethical norms or guidelines for action. It sets as its goal the formulation of basic principles and even formulates hypotheses which are then to be tested by practice. Normative ethics has

an evaluative function in which it passes judgment on actions and appraises them. It searches for a rational justification for one's actions based upon norms and principles. In the course of history two approaches in this field have predominated: the teleological and the deontological approaches.

Teleology is derived from the Greek word *telos*, which means a goal. This approach searches for an all-encompassing goal which is used to judge man's actions and decisions. One such approach is that of hedonism in which the all-encompassing goal for man's actions is seen to be pleasure, or the elimination of unhappiness and suffering. This is an ancient ethical philosophy whose primitive form is found in the Greeks Aristippus and Epicurus. But it has made its appearance throughout the centuries, and a newly developed hedonistic theory of actions is found in the "Vienna Schule" in the writings of Moritz Schlick (1882-1936). There pleasure is seen both as the highest good or final goal for action, and as the motive for all man's actions: all human actions are induced by pleasure (Reiner, 1964:41).

Deontological ethics comes from the Greek word *deon*, which means duty and refers to what ought to be done. It concerns actions which correspond to a norm. This approach is found clearly expressed in Immanuel Kant (1724-1804): all man's actions are to correspond to an unconditional duty. Ethics then is the formal structure of moral duty. When the question: "What must I do?" is raised, it does not concern the goal to which I must direct my actions, but rather the moral duty or norms on which I must base my actions.

### 1.2.3 Special ethics

This directs attention to a specific area of human life. Here descriptive ethics and normative ethics are brought to bear upon one aspect of human life. Moral problems are mostly very concrete and specific. Thus there is a need for an applied ethics, a material ethics, or as it is called a special ethics. Attention is given to questions and problems dealing with such aspect of man's life as medicine (medical ethics), sex (sexual ethics), society (social ethics) and economics (economic ethics).

#### 1.2.4 Meta-ethics

The term meta-ethics is very recent, appearing only during the last quarter of a century in moral textbooks, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world. From an etymological point of view meta-ethics is used to refer to something coming 'after' ethics, or something being 'about' ethics. It has developed parallel to a branch of science called metascience whose task similarly concerns asking the fundamental questions dealing with science. Radnitzky (1970:6) gives a good definition of metascience:

Metascience as conceived here is a scientific discipline which accumulates knowledge about the scientific enterprise, which checks this knowledge in a systematic way and organises it into knowledge systems.

This, too, is the task of meta-ethics and one can apply these words of Radnitzky to meta-ethics as well. It is also a discipline which has as its goal accumulating knowledge about ethics as a discipline, and it aims at checking this knowledge in a systematic way and organises it into knowledge systems.

The basic task of meta-ethics is to consider questions and problems which are of fundamental importance to ethics as a science. It looks over the shoulders as it were of descriptive, normative and special ethics, and considers questions such as the possibility or impossibility of the verification of ethical-normative statements. Previously such questions were treated together with normative ethics, but today a special branch of ethics has developed in order to give due attention and weight to these fundamental questions. Meta-ethics aims at considering the in depth questions related to ethics. It considers the question regarding the method which should be adopted in treating an ethical question, as well as the scientific nature of ethics. It considers the fundamental meaning of such ethical terms as good, as duty and as obligation. In what language-contexts are they used? What meaning do they have, and do they always have this meaning? A central aspect of meta-ethics deals with the character of ethical statements: Does it add something to knowledge? Is it capable of verification? In treating these topics, or answering these questions, various approaches have been adopted in

meta-ethics: naturalism, intuitionism, non-cognitivism, prescriptionism, relativism. Attention will be devoted to these in Section 2.

A fundamental question related to the whole ability to make ethical statements and the value which can be attributed to them is that of the is-ought question. A very common way of proceeding in ethical statements is to state a fact and from that draw out an obligation, for example in 1 John 4:7 : "Beloved let us love one another: for love is of God ... " Because God is love, John orders his readers that they must love one another.

This line of argument proceeding from a statement of fact to an obligation was questioned first of all by David Hume:

In every system of morality which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is* and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not* (Frankena, 1974:368).

Many scholars, such as Henry Sidgwick and R.M. Hare, following on Hume, have adopted the attitude that an *ought* cannot be derived from an *is*, an obligation cannot be derived from a statement of fact. This has come to be known as 'Hume's Law', and is a question which meta-ethics must consider, for it is fundamental to any ethical statements that are made.

The different approaches within meta-ethics should not be seen as exclusive or contradictory approaches (just as the different branches of ethics itself should not be seen as contradictory, but rather as complementary). What is very often the case is that the supporter of each approach is struck by those features of our ethical concepts which favour his own theory and discredit the others. There is a measure of truth in all of these approaches, and it is this which should be kept in mind (Toulmin, 1968:190).

## 2. THE CHARACTER OF ETHICAL STATEMENTS AND THEIR JUSTIFICATION

Reference has already been made to the different approaches which have been adopted towards the character of an ethical statement and in what way it can be justified or verified. These approaches will now be considered in detail.

### 2.1 Naturalism and definism

#### 2.1.1 The Position

A knowledge of the meaning of ethical terms such as good, right, honest, etc., will help one in ascertaining whether such judgments as 'This is good' etc., are justified. The justification of ethical judgments rests upon the definition of ethical terms. This was the basis behind the dialogues of Socrates, in which, through his discussions, he was searching for the answer to the question: 'What is good, beauty, truth, etc.?' The definist and the naturalist hold that ethical terms such as good, right, etc., can be explained or translated into different terms. Where they differ is solely in so far as the definist maintains they can be translated into metaphysical terms, while the naturalist maintains that they must be in non-metaphysical terms (Frankena, 1974:370). If this approach were justified it would have a great advantage for one would have a firm basis, empiricism, on which to rely in ethical discussions. Naturalism attempts to give an explanation for the connection between the value of something and its empirical characteristics. Thus whether something is good, bad, wrong, just, can be derived from the empirical characteristics of the thing. Most supporters of the ethical, naturalistic theory begin with the concept 'good' and offer a definition of it. From it they hold all other ethical terms can be derived, e.g. Aristotle defines the good as 'that as which all things aim' (Frankena, 1974:313).

R.B. Perry is a typical example of a naturalist. He defines the concept of value first of all:

A thing - anything - has value, or is valuable, in the original and generic sense when it is the object of an interest - any interest.

Or whatever is the object of interest is inso facto valuable  
(Frankena, 1974:372).

From this definition he attempts to define other ethical concepts such as morality and the moral good. For him the moral good is defined in the special sense as a character which is given to objects as a result of interests which are harmoniously organised. This is the standard which is used for actions and judgments: that which is good is that which is conducive towards harmonious happiness. This is what is termed the 'moral first principle'. He advances reasons in support of this definition of the moral good by showing that this definition avoids egocentrism which has plagued ethics before, in which all interests have been subordinated either to their own interests or those of their neighbour. Since it maintains that the good is a harmonious happiness, it remains impartial because the interest of the one who makes the judgment is merely one among many other interests.

From this definition of the moral good, Perry proceeds to deduce all the other virtues held in high regard throughout the centuries. It upholds as well the Golden Rule, because the harmonious happiness of all demands that each person should put himself in the place of the other and recognise the other's interests as well. This fundamental definition of the good should become the basis on which people judge and criticise everything - their conscience, society, law, economy (Frankena, 1974:380).

#### 2.1.2 Evaluation of this approach

A strong criticism of the naturalist approach arose especially from the supporters of intuitionism. One of the basic objections is due to the definition which is given to terms such as good. There is no universal agreement as regards the exact definition of good. Some will define good as meaning pleasant, while others will describe it as meaning happiness. What they are really saying is that most people use the term to refer to pleasant, etc. But then they say that one ought to act in this way, because most people use a certain word to refer to such and such (Frankena, 1974:386).



G.E. Moore developed a test called the open-question test and he applied it to definism. He found that the latter did not stand up to the test. If I define good as pleasure, then I ask whether all good things are pleasurable? As long as this question can be posed, then good and pleasurable acts are not identical. This can be presented in general terms: if I state that two terms, A and B mean the same thing, then the test is whether all As are Bs. As long as this question can be posed, A and B are not identical. Moore shows how closed this type of approach is: it rests solely upon this false definition of what the good is, and rejects any other opinion in this regard (Frankena, 1974:391).

A further criticism came from the side of R.M. Hare, neither a defintist nor an intuitionist, in his book *The Language of Morals*. There he argues (Frankena, 1974:398) that value judgments cannot be derived from empirical-factual judgments. He has pointed out that value terms have an important function in language, namely that of commending. When value terms are translated into empirical terms they thereby lose an essential aspect, the function of commending. For this reason a naturalist cannot define, for example, the term good with reference to some empirical characteristics. V. Brümmer (n.d.:100) elaborates upon this fallacy by applying it to value judgments and shows that in the process of an argument, it is not possible to proceed from a factual judgment immediately to an evaluative conclusion. It is necessary to include a value judgment as well. For example, from the empirical fact that a tape-recorder allows batteries to last for 50 hours' playing time, one cannot immediately pass the evaluative judgement that the tape-recorder is good. One must also include in this argument the evaluative judgment that tape-recorders which allow batteries to play for fifty hours are good. From this one is justified in concluding that my tape-recorder is good. Evaluative conclusions can only be drawn from empirical facts plus a value judgment, and not simply from a statement which includes only an empirical-factual judgement.

Naturalism and definism have not really succeeded in answering the question of the justification of ethical statements. Values are not simply factual or empirical characteristics or definitions of such. It is true that there is some connection between value judgements and factual state-

ments, but arguments, as has been shown, cannot simply be drawn from a factual statement because the aspect of commendation is missing,

## 2.2 Intuitionism and non-naturalism

### 2.2.1 The position

The term intuitionism arose as a result of the critique of G.E. Moore on naturalism, referred to above. As a view it was first worked out in the eighteenth century by Richard Price and Thomas Reid, though elements of this view can possibly be traced back to Plato. The intuitionists insist that in order to come to an evaluative conclusion it is necessary that one must have at least one ethical premise in the argument. The question then arises concerning the ethical premise: How does one arrive at this premise? Is it arbitrary? The intuitionists maintain that the basic, ethical words which one uses are untranslatable and indefinable. (This is in direct opposition to naturalism.) These ethical words, however, are not arbitrary, but are seen to be self-evident. One obtains an immediate knowledge, which is simple and unique.

Sometimes intuitionism is referred to as non-naturalism. This emphasises that these simple, indefinable concepts are non-empirical, that is they cannot be translated into empirical concepts. One does not observe, for example, good as one does a shape or a colour, like yellow. One arrives at moral values through 'intuition', but with this concept they wish to oppose every form of subjectivism. By means of intuition they maintain that in all judgments of value one gives objective information, and they are not an expression of one's own subjective feeling. According to them intuition itself is a special kind of judgment, which is made by means of an extra sense which man possesses. This renders ethical concepts self-evident, simple and objective. G.E. Moore is without doubt the most important representative of intuitionism during this century and the views of intuitionism can be clearly seen from his work *Principia Ethica*. He maintains that statements about the good, etc., are synthetic and never analytical. This rules out the view of the naturalists of trying to define ethical concepts by means of only one definition. It is impossible to maintain that 'pleasure is the only good'. The concept of good is seen as being one of those finale or ultimate terms by means of which anything

that is able to be defined must be defined. Good itself cannot be defined for it is a simple term, not complex, without any parts. For Moore the fundamental principles must all be self-evident. By this he understands that the term or proposition is evident by itself alone: no reasons can be given to prove that it is such. If one were to give a reason for it being evident, then it is obviously not self-evident (Frankena, 1974:392).

### 2.2.2 Evaluation of this approach

In order to defend their own position the naturalists have pointed out certain weaknesses with regard to this approach concerning the justification of ethical statements. For example, R.B. Perry shows that by saying that 'valuable' means simply 'valuable' the intuitionists are not adding to knowledge of ethical concepts in any way (Frankena, 1974:394). They are involved in a form of verbalism. He also points out that one cannot attribute a simple meaning to any word in the sense that it has a unique meaning which never undergoes any change. The meanings which words have always undergo constant change due to the development of man himself (Frankena, 1974:396).

A further difficulty arises from the wish of intuitionism to uphold the objectivity of values. But they have not been able to propose reasons which will uphold this objectivity. When two people disagree about the value of something, how is one to decide which person's intuition is the right one? How is one to distinguish between true intuition and what might be termed 'pseudo-intuition'? As with naturalism, intuitionism has maintained the knowledge character of ethical statements which is an important aspect. However, it has not been able to uphold against all criticism its basic contention that values are intuitions.

## 2.3 Non-cognitivism or non-descriptive views

### 2.3.1 The position

The two previous approaches agreed on one point, namely, the knowledge character of ethical statements, although they differed in their explanation of this knowledge-content. As a result of criticism of this epistemological character in the 1930's the pendulum swung to another

approach in ethics, namely that of the 'emotive theory'. This position laid stress upon the emotions or feelings in an ethical statement. Although it received popularity in this century, aspects of this approach can be traced back to the writings of Hume and Adam Smith in the eighteenth century. In the course of its presentation, the emphasis on the emotions has undergone many changes. Since 1936 the most radical exponent has been A.J. Ayer. C.L. Stevenson attempted to improve upon this theory in 1944. Because of differences in these approaches, it is best to refer to this trend by what is at least common to them and to call them 'non-cognitive or non-descriptive theories' (Frankena, 1974:406).

### 2.3.2 The emotivism of A.J. Ayer

Ayer admits that the fundamental ethical concepts are incapable of being analysed because there is no criterion by which one can test the validity of the judgments in which they occur. Ayer maintains that if one were to say to someone: 'It was wrong of you to steal that money', then one says nothing more than if one had simply said: 'You stole that money'. By adding the words 'it was wrong of you' one has not added anything new about the action. What one has done is to express one's feelings. The same thing could have been achieved by using a special tone of voice when one said 'you stole that money'. If it was written one could have expressed one's feelings by means of exclamation marks (Frankena, 1974:408). Ayer therefore draws the conclusion that in every case where one is usually understood to be making an ethical judgment, the function which the ethical term has is merely an emotive function - it expresses the feelings of the speaker but makes no factual-content statement concerning the object. Because ethical terms and judgments intend to express the feeling of the speaker, and to arouse feelings in others, they do not possess any objective validity. Since they refer only to feelings, they cannot fall under the category of truth or falsehood.

A further consequence of this theory is that it is impossible to dispute about questions of value because one is dealing with feelings or emotions. One wishes one's opponent in a discussion to adopt the same moral attitude as oneself, but there is no way in which one can bring forward arguments to show that one system is better than another (Frankena,

1974:412). It leads to the ultimate in subjectivism in that it is impossible to argue or discuss about questions of value. The problem is evident when two completely different attitudes or feelings are expressed - there is no way of deciding which one should follow (Toulmin, 1968:32). If someone says: 'it is right to kill one's enemy', he is expressing his feelings with regard to a particular mode of action. How is one to bring this person to accept the same moral feelings as we do? Does one admit that his moral system of values is as good as ours just because it is expressing his own feelings. I find it impossible to accept that one must totally banish reason as Ayer does and maintain that 'we cannot bring forward any arguments to show that our system is superior' (Frankena, 1974:412).

### 2.3.3 The emphasis on attitude and language according to C.L. Stevenson

One attempt to improve upon the emotive theory was undertaken by C.L. Stevenson (1972). He examined the nature of ethical agreement and disagreement, and showed that there are first of all disagreements with regard to beliefs. Here one person believes that X is the answer to a mode of acting, while another person believes that Y is the answer. In addition there are also disagreements with regard to purposes, preferences or wants. To distinguish these two types of disagreement (in belief and in attitude) Stevenson (1972:7-8) gives a very telling example of a chessplayer playing with a beginner. The expert makes a very weak opening move, which leads on onlooker to ask himself: 'Does he make the move because he believes that it is a strong one or because, out of charity to his opponent, he does not want to make a strong one?' (Stevenson, 1972:7). Here one distinguishes between a belief and a want (or an attitude).

Stevenson maintains that in the past, ethical writers have concentrated upon agreement and disagreement in belief and have totally disregarded the other vital aspect of agreement and disagreement in attitude. For this reason, it is Stevenson's intention to draw attention to this aspect of agreement and disagreement in attitudes, and to indicate the influence which both attitudes and beliefs exercise on each other. In line with the emotive theory Stevenson maintains that moral judgments go beyond

cognition or knowledge, but address themselves to the conative-affective nature of man. He shows (1972:21) that an ethical sentence is very similar to an imperative, for example 'You ought to defend your country' is the same as 'Defend your country'. Stevenson sees that ethical sentences are different from sentences in science: Ethical sentences have as their intention to encourage and direct the conduct of people, rather than to describe them. The ethical statement 'this is wrong' means in actuality that 'I disapprove of this' and then one calls upon one's hearer to 'Do the same'. In this one can see two important aspects of an ethical statement. 'I disapprove of this' shows that there is a disagreement which stems from one's attitudes. 'Do the same' shows the intention of an ethical statement - to get the other person to redirect his attitudes in accordance with one's own (Stevenson, 1972:36).

Stevenson has attempted to improve upon the emotive theory by showing that value judgments are not just an expression of feeling, but of attitudes and beliefs. One failing however is that he has neglected to give a detailed examination to the concept of attitudes (Brümmer, n.d.:104). It remains rather unclear what he means exactly by this term. Stevenson's observations show that value judgments are not just statements of fact, neither are they just statements of emotions, but they are expressive statements in which the speaker shows a favourable or unfavourable attitude towards something.

Brümmer (n.d.:109-111) indicates a rather dangerous tendency both in Ayer and Stevenson. They have indicated that value judgments have, besides an expressive function, a function with regard to the influencing of another's actions. This is undoubtedly a valid and true function of value judgments. However, the difficulty arises that they do not give a means to distinguish value-judgments from propaganda, by which another is manipulated casually to achieve what one desires. Man's freedom is not sufficiently taken into consideration, for the weight has been placed on bringing someone to do what I tell him to do and thus trying to manipulate him. In this way his freedom is taken away.

#### 2.4 Prescriptivism

A recent approach, which rejects descriptivism, intuitionism and emotivism, is that called prescriptivism, which examines the very nature of ethics and tries to restore objectivity to it. R.M. Hare, a good proponent of prescriptivism has given some pungent observations with regard to the nature of morality and moral reasoning which are worthwhile examining (Frankena, 1974:413). Moral reasoning involves the faculty of the will - it is prescriptive. It attempts to move someone to perform a deed, but at the same time, it clearly presupposes that the hearer has the freedom to do or not to do what is asked of him. In all moral reasoning there is the desire to universalise and faced with the requirement of universalisation one is led to abandon some desires.

Hare shows great sympathy for the amoralist (someone who refuses to make moral judgments) because he can understand what has brought him to this position. For Hare the amoralist is aware of the great changes which are taking place in the world, but he is also aware of the fact that the moral rules of tradition have not kept apace with these changes. They often call upon a person to do something of which, upon reflection, he cannot approve. This leads the amoralist to the question 'Why should we have moral rules at all?' This problem is experienced above all in the moral education of children. Parents have acquired these morals to which they at least pay lip-service, but they are incapable of justifying their moral rules. When children reach the age at which they begin to think morally, they obviously start to question moral rules. If they can obtain no satisfactory justification for these rules, they will inevitably reject them, and with them morality as well. Very often children have been taught that something is wrong, they know it is wrong, but they have never been presented with the reasons for why it is wrong (Frankena, 1974:419). What is lacking is that they have never come to see the prescriptive sense of moral words, namely that when one comes to the idea that an act is wrong, one will by that very fact refrain from doing it. The best way to achieve this is to pay attention to the consequences of one's actions for other people. They must give as much attention to the interests of others as they do to their own interests. This can be termed 'the consequences of universalism'. In this sense morality is no longer conformity to the way in which every one acts, but it is the attempt for free agents to discover for themselves principles which they view as binding on all people. In this regard, philosophy has a vital task

with regard to education in morality: it is to help one to come to a deeper appreciation of morality in general and to help one to see more clearly the consequences of one's actions for others (Frankena, 1974:422).

Hare has made a great contribution to the whole question of what morality is all about. He has shown in this view the place which reason must play in ethics, and has restored the possibility for one to discuss freely about moral questions and moral judgments. This view has re-established the importance of moral rules and the way in which one arrives at them and makes them one's own. The aspect of universalism in ethical judgments is vital for restoring objectivity in ethical statements.

## 2.5 Relativism

Perhaps one of the most distinguishing features of our present age is the view that everything is relative. This attitude has had its repercussions in ethics, and it is one of the main opponents to the view that ethical judgments can be considered objectively valid. One can distinguish three main types of relativism in ethics:

### 2.5.1 Situational ethics

Norms are never seen as absolute, valid and unchangeable for all times. The situation determines whether a norm is to be upheld or not. A clear example of this occurs in the situation where duties or rights conflict. For example, in the case of telling the truth an escaped convict asks someone at gunpoint where the judge who sentenced him to imprisonment was. One replies that one does not know even though one knows perfectly well where the judge is. In this situation a more important norm has come into play: the norm of protecting the life of another which in the situation is far more important than the norm of telling the truth.

H. Fletcher (1974:24) is the typical exponent of this situational relativistic ethic. This approach upholds the rational nature of man in making ethical judgments and insists that all ethical judgments must be made according to the situation in which one is. The great danger with the approach is its tendency towards excess and over-emphasis when all



norms are rejected and everything becomes relative, unpredictable, and amoral. Fletcher emphasises this point strongly. He upholds the view that there must be an absolute or a norm of some kind if there is to be relativity:

It is not anarchic (i.e. without an arche, an ordering principle). In Christian situations the ultimate criterion is, as we shall be seeing, 'agapeic love'. It relativises the absolute, it does not absolutise the relative! (Fletcher, 1974:45).

#### 2.5.2 Descriptive Relativism

This view is based on the notion that cultures differ in their basic moral value judgments. It results from the studies of cultural anthropologists into the customs of different societies as well as their modes of conduct and the values which they hold. In the past there has been the tendency to stress the enormous differences between different cultures and societies. They concluded that the customs and value judgments of cultures and nations are all relative to their particular culture and as such are all equally valid.

During the past few years a new appraisal of the differences in cultures has been made. Far more agreement is observed in the fundamental values of different societies. The differences emerge from the application of the same values to situations in different ways.

#### 2.5.3 Meta-ethical Relativism

When two (or more) opposing moral judgments are made about the same subject, both are judged to be true or false at the same time. Meta-ethical relativism maintains that there is no method to decide which is true or false. It is really based upon the descriptive relativism in which the differences in the value-judgments of different cultures are used to support the contention. As has been indicated, this position is far from being demonstrated: there is no clear example of universal, basic differences in fundamental basic value-judgments.

### 3. TOWARDS A SATISFACTORY THEORY OF THE CHARACTER AND VERIFICATION OF ETHICAL STATEMENTS

In the previous section a number of important insights into the character and verification of ethical statements have been presented. The knowledge content of an ethical statement has been rightly pointed out in both intuitionism and naturalism. Non-cognitivism has emphasised emotions and attitudes as another important insight into the ethical statement. Relativism has validly emphasised the situation and the context in which a judgment is made. The universalism prescript of Hare is also something which is of vital importance to an ethical norm. These are all valid points. Unfortunately, these meta-ethical approaches have also erred in numerous ways, as has been indicated in the course of discussion. Their major failing lies in focusing their attention on one aspect of the ethical statement to the entire exclusion of all other aspects. At the same time most of these approaches have neglected to give attention to the true scientific nature of ethics and the correct function which reason should play in ethical judgments. In this way the objectivity of meta-ethics was called into question and weakened. It is this failure to pay attention to the scientific nature of ethics which has hindered the above approaches from providing a satisfactory theory for the verification of ethical judgments. This will be indicated in what follows.

#### 3.1 Theology as a science

A way of coming to objectivity in the realm of meta ethical judgments has to my mind been opened up by the recent attempts which have been made to approach theology (and hence Christian theological ethics as a branch of theology) as a science. The chief exponent of this approach is Wolfhart Pannenberg (1973). He has undertaken a detailed consideration of the relationship of theology to science, by examining the major trends of thought in all scientific disciplines. Especially from an examination of their methods an application has been made to theology. Science is a way to knowledge, and in this regard one can speak of a science of theology which is a way to knowledge about God. Pannenberg is opposed to any form of rigid dogmatism and absolutism and makes use of the methods of the scientific disciplines in order to come to a deeper understanding of theology itself. Theology's task is not to adopt a dogmatic

attitude towards pre-given facts, but to investigate the truth of the Christian faith (Pannenberg, 1973:419-420).

Theological ethics, according to Pannenberg (as with all the other theological disciplines) must be considered in a scientific way through its interconnections with other disciplines such as anthropology. It must test its judgments according to sense experience (Pannenberg, 1973:425). Basic to every science is the role which reason plays in ensuring that the methods used, the conclusions drawn, are rational. With this contribution and conviction that theological ethics is a science, and that reason must exercise her rightful place in this theological discussion, one can consider a basic problem raised earlier, the 'is-ought' question. As a result of the discussion of this problem from a scientific-rational basis one will open up directions towards a satisfactory theory of justification.

### 3.2 The is-ought question and a new approach to the verification of ethical statements

#### 3.2.1 The problem

This question has already been raised in 1.2.4 where it was shown that Hume raised a fundamental question which had serious repercussions in the field of ethics. This question must be seen against the background of Hume's criticism of the method of induction. Induction briefly stated means that one constructs laws or general statements based upon individual instances. An example of such a general law or belief based upon individual instances is the view that one believes that the sun will rise tomorrow. This is based upon the observations which have been made in the past. Induction from repeated events which one has experienced in the past leads to the projection of a law that this will or must take place in the future. An invalid jump has been made from the is of many repeated facts to the expectation or the must that the future will be like the past.

Hume dealt with this process of acquiring knowledge and raised two problems, which Karl Popper (1974:4) refers to as the 'logical problem'

and the 'psychological problem'. Popper formulated Hume's logical problem in the following way:

H : Are we justified in reasoning from repeated instances of which we have experience to other instances (conclusions) of which we have no experience?

Hume's answer to H is:

No, however great the number of repetitions (Popper, 1974:4).

Hume rejects the process of passing from statements of fact to predictions of what must be in the future. He rejects the construction of general laws based upon individual events. This leads to a further problem, termed Hume's 'psychological problem':

H : Why nevertheless do all reasonable people expect, and believe, that instances of which they have no experience will conform to those of which they have experience? That is, why do we have expectations in which we have great confidence? (Popper, 1974:4).

Hume's answer is that people make this connection between past events and an expectation that the future must be like the past on the basis of habit or custom. Because of a reflected event in the past a mechanism is built up in a person by which that person associated the ideas of the past together. Starting with this custom of experiencing the same events at similar circumstances, the person makes a projection into the future and expects the same events to occur in the future as happened in the past.

Although 'this problem of Hume', as Popper (1974:4) was the first to call it, referred to knowledge in general, it applied to the realm of ethics with equal force. For in ethics one is accustomed to pass from statements of fact to statements involving a value judgment. For example:

Statement of fact: 'You broke that window'.

Value Judgment: 'You must admit that you broke

it when your father asks about it'.

Here is a typical mode of reasoning by which one passes immediately from a statement of fact to an obligation derived from this fact. For Hume this method would be illegitimate. One cannot base an *ought* upon an *is*. Is there any way in which this custom or habit of arguing in ethics can be justified?

### 3.2.2 Attempts to answer this problem

#### 3.2.2.1 The naturalists and the intuitionists

The naturalists felt that there was no real problem. They considered that it was possible to translate an *ought* into an *is*. For them it was merely a question of how one defined one's terms. The intuitionist also experienced no difficulty: an *ought* remains an *is*, but in this case it ascribes a non-natural, simple property to something and views it as an evaluative term producing an obligation. Both these views have not really solved the problem of Hume. Because there are values, because I have knowledge of what is right and wrong, why must I do what is right or avoid what is wrong? The question of passing from an *is* to an *ought* still remains (Frankena, 1974:403-404).

#### 3.2.2.2 Karl Popper

Just as the *is-ought* moral question must be seen against the background of the general question of knowledge, so too its solution, or attempted solution, must be seen against this background. In this regard Karl Popper offers a key to its solution. He himself is convinced that he has achieved a solution as he states in his opening chapter on *Objective Knowledge* (Popper, 1974:1). In his solution he supports Hume in maintaining that no number of empirical facts can support or justify a universal law as true. He does not reject the use of the importance of constructing general, universal laws. But these universal laws must be viewed in a specific way: they must be regarded as theories which always remain open to change, open to *falsification*. In science one draws up theories, or hypotheses, which are based upon empirical facts. The

hypotheses are tested to see if and how they can be falsified. Laws of science then remain hypotheses which one is to accept only in so far as one leaves them open to refutation, or falsification. Popper came to this position from a realisation that in science laws which were universally accepted as valid, were later, through different insights and research, rejected. A good example of this is the case in which the universally accepted views of Newton as regards gravity were supplanted by those of Einstein (Popper, 1974:9).

A general scientific hypothesis can be seen somewhat in the way in which a flashlight casts its beam and illuminates a part of reality, then another flashlight is used to illuminate another or wider aspect of reality. In this way too another scientific hypothesis supplants the previous hypothesis by using different methods, different approaches, and consequently explains reality in a better way. The basis for Popper's view is empiricism: sense data remain the background against which every scientific theory or hypothesis must be tested, must be falsified. In this way, Popper has preserved the ability and the right for one to make general predictions on general laws, provided that they are not seen as absolute, unchangeable, but as always being open to future further change or falsification.

#### 3.2.2.3 W.W. Bartley III

These views of Popper with regard to the theory of the natural sciences were taken up by W.W. Bartley (1971) and applied to ethics with particular reference to the is-ought question within ethics. He considered the particular relationship between evaluative statements and factual statements in ethics. He began with Popper's view that observational statements have a relationship to theoretical scientific statements. A theoretical scientific view is built up upon observational statements, and these observational statements are used to test, to falsify a theoretical scientific statement. Bartley maintained that a moral statement can sometimes be logically falsified by means of a factual statement. He showed this by means of a factual statement. He showed this by means of the fact that ought statements imply can with regard to persons. When one says that a person ought to do something, one implies that the person can do that thing. The example he gives concerns the statement that

'Jones ought to be a genius'. From this statement one concludes that 'Jones can be a genius'. But this conclusion might prove to be false if one has evidence to the contrary, namely that he has a very low I.Q., or has suffered some form of brain damage. Here one has used facts to justify or to falsify a moral statement.

### 3.3 Conclusion

An evaluative statement should be seen, in the light of Popper, as a hypothesis which is subject to empirical testing. This means that one accepts the views, the opinions, the evaluative statements and judgments which have been made by others in the past. But these must not be accepted as unchangeable, absolute dogmas: one has the task not just of repeating them verbatim, or of just paying lip-service to them. One must take them as maps indicating the direction, but then one must subject them to criticism, to testing in the desire to see whether they correspond to empirical facts, whether one can improve upon them. One has the obligation to test evaluative statements with reference to empirical data. As with the example of the flashlight which illuminates reality, so too a moral evaluative judgment illuminates the way in which one is to act. But this flashlight can be replaced by a different one which may illuminate reality in a different or clearer way. So too another moral evaluative judgment can illuminate the way in which one should act in a different or clearer way. The way one decides between these different evaluative judgments is by means of testing, by empirical facts. Here the ought is being supported, or falsified by the is, and it is the is which gives the justification or the falsification of the ought, of why I ought to act in such and such a way.

There remains one further vital point to which attention must be drawn. What relevance does the Christian faith have with regard to all that has been said? In 1.1 reference was made to Christian ethics, but all that has so far been said deals rather with meta-ethics in general, more from a philosophical or rational approach. In 1.1 it was shown that the Christian life should not be divorced from human life. The Christian life was presented as a further dimension of human ethical life. Christian ethical thinking must take the results achieved in other branches of science, as was shown by Pannenberg, and make use of them, applying

them to Christianity and particularly to theology as a science of God. In this respect there is no contradiction between reason and faith.

Christianity should be seen as an all-embracing life-view which has an integrating function of humanising - in the case of ethics - value judgments as a means of following the example of Jesus of Nazareth. This life-view is based upon a basic conviction, a fundamental option, which one has chosen to accept and which influences one's life. The Christian life-view is not something irrational: it must always remain open to discussion and inquiry. As Popper has shown, every hypothesis remains open to criticism and this is true for the Christian life-view as well. In no way is it to be presented in an absolutised and dogmatised way. Instead the Christian life-view must remain open to criticism and inquiry. The Christian theologian (and more particularly the Christian meta-ethical scholar) must exercise this spirit of rationality by showing that Christian moral norms are free from contradiction, that they can be formulated coherently, that they are existentially relevant to today, and finally that they are universally applicable. In this way the Christian life-view is constantly subjected to the processes of reason and one will constantly be approaching a deeper understanding of the truth, of reality, and of man's moral actions.

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