Chapter 2: *Ethics*

Purpose

The purpose of chapter 2 is to explore the humanist system of ethics.

Humanist Manifesto II: "We affirm that moral values derive their source from human experience. Ethics is autonomous and situational, needing no theological or ideological sanction. Ethics stems from human need and interest...We strive for the good life, here and now." [1]

A. What is the basis for humanist ethics?

"Ethics is autonomous..." The word "autonomous" comes from the Greek **autos**, self, and **nomos**, law. Disciples of this thinking are literally a law unto themselves. It follows that there are no laws or rights given by God. Ethics are based on what seems necessary or expedient at the time. Man is his own and **only** authority.

"Ethics is...situational." The true humanist believes in a system of personal morality and ethics often termed situation ethics. Situation ethics is morality and personal ethics based on the premise that there are no absolutes. Right and wrong cannot be determined by a set of rules and certainly not by commandments given by God. It follows that moral values are a product of human choice. Each individual must choose what is right for himself without regard to any set of pre-existing standards. Ethics and morals are based on the current situation and how one feels about the situation. No standard exists to judge any act as right or wrong.

Jacques Monod, the popular French biologist, who subscribed to the humanist world view, said in his book, *Chance and Necessity*, that there is no way to determine the "ought" from the "is."[2] So what is approved or disapproved is determined by "human need and interest." Therefore there can be no fixed point of reference to judge the rightness or wrongness of any activity. Secular humanists reject the Biblical imperatives which declare certain absolutes such as, "You shall not murder...You shall not commit adultery...You shall not steal...You shall not give false witness against your neighbor..." (Genesis 20:13-16)

QUESTION: Where do you see examples of situation ethics illustrated in our society?

B. Where can we see humanist ethics at work in society?

There are varying degrees of commitment to the stated creed found in *Humanist Manifestoes I and II*, just as there are varying degrees of commitment to the value system of Christianity. For instance, one can be deeply ingrained in the humanist affirmation of situation ethics without denying the existence of God. For example, some humanists might say, "It's okay to believe in God as long as it doesn't affect the way you act or live." This milder form of humanism is growing rapidly in our society.

The rapid spread of humanist ethics owes much to positive, sympathetic treatment by the entertainment media in recent years. Television has shaped and molded many of our ideas. And since television appeals mainly to the emotional rather than the rational, it can be a tremendous instrument of change. Humanists have found that television makes a wonderful pulpit for the preaching of humanist ethics.

A case in point was a CBS made-for-TV movie called NOT IN FRONT OF THE CHILDREN. The movie centered on a mother who chose to live with a man without benefit of marriage. Her ex-husband is represented as a Christian.

The drama opens with tender, heart-warming music surrounding scenes of affection between mother, children and mother's live-in boyfriend. Music stops. It is Sunday morning. Enter one obviously narrow-minded father who is upset at the thought of his children living under the same roof with mother and boyfriend.

Husband: "Nancy, you are the person they [daughters] respect most in the whole world, and you're teaching them that intimacy outside marriage is not a sin."

Wife: "**I don't think it is**...I am being honest with them...**I am doing what's right for me**, and later on **they can do what's right for them**."

Husband: "If you deliberately choose to have a relationship with some man, that's your right and your choice, even if I don't approve. But what about their rights? They didn't choose to live with this man."

Wife: "I asked them. They wanted to."

Husband: "They're babies! They don't know what it means. I forbid you to flaunt this relationship in front of my children." (Husband leaves.)

Daughter (Who has overheard conversation): "Mom, are you gonna go to hell?"

Mother: "No, sweetheart, I'm not. This is kind of hard to explain...Everyone has their own beliefs. And **your Daddy thinks the way we're living together is wrong. He has a right to think that. But I don't**. I believe God is love, and that what we have together, Paul [her live-in companion] and I [beautiful, moving inspirational music starts again] and you two girls, that's love. And I think God understands that. That's what I believe. And **when you two girls are all grown up, then you have a right to decide what's right for you**. OK?"

Daughter: "OK. I knew God wouldn't send you to hell." (Music intensifies.)

The remainder of the program is a study in contrasts. At one end of the spectrum is the harsh, bigoted, dogmatic, intolerant, domineering, ill-tempered, biased, overbearing Christian ex-husband. At the other end are the sympathetic, caring, kind, affectionate, gentle, understanding, tender, benevolent, secular living-together lovers. Throughout the program, the injured party is the teary-eyed ex-wife who is consistently a victim of Christian intolerance.

This and countless other entertainment media productions in recent years have been quite effective in encouraging the "what's right for me" value system as opposed to the Christian value system.

The program above illustrates well the humanist view of ethics. Sex outside marriage is right because it is decided by the parties involved that it serves their needs and interests. Later on in life the girls would decide what is "right for them" on the basis of their needs and interests. In the humanist ethics system, personal values are relative, needing no other sanction than that expressed by the mother above, "I'm doing what's right for me."

QUESTION: What other examples can you give of decisions based on situation ethics, or the "what's right for me" philosophy?

C. How are the moral values of humanist ethics formed?

Since "moral values derive their source from human experience" and personal ethics need no "theological or ideological sanction," it follows that the past has no precedents for the future, parental values are not necessarily important for children, and values based on religion are not acceptable. Personal values must come from within.

One arena in which humanists have been able to advance their system of ethics is the field of public education. "Values Clarification" courses being taught in many schools today advocate the development of personal values which are purely "situational and autonomous." The values clarification approach was formulated by Louis Raths who borrowed heavily from the thinking of John Dewey. Raths was concerned not with the **content** of people's values, but the **process** of valuing.[3]

In the values clarification system, to arrive at a child's values, he is to:

1. **Choose the value freely**. He is to choose the value free from parental guidance and religious teachings. In the book, *Values Clarification, A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students*, edited by Sidney Simon and others, the statement is made that "young people brought up by moralizing adults are not prepared to make their own responsible choices." And the problem with depending on religious teachings, according to the same authors, is that "we have religious people who love their neighbors on the Sabbath and spend the rest of the week competing with them."[4]
2. **Choose from alternatives**. The child is to choose from alternatives including those different from those of his parents—alternatives such as to have premarital sex or not to have premarital sex.
3. **Choose after considering the consequences**. This assumes that children are able to see far enough ahead to be the best judge of those consequences.
4. **Prize and cherish the value, publicly affirming when appropriate**. If one cannot point to a value with pride then it must be called into question. This includes religious values.
5. **Act on the value regularly and consistently**. This is supposed to help students see when their stated values and their actions are out of harmony. The process is supposed to help students discover what they really value. If a student says he or she values church but seldom attends, the values clarification approach may cause the student to decide that church is not as important as was supposed.

One popular values clarification technique is called "values voting." In this system, the teacher begins with the question, "How many of you here...," and students are asked to respond before all other students in the affirmative, the negative, or with no vote at all. Questions suggested in the values clarification handbook previously mentioned include: "How many of you here...approve of premarital sex for boys?...approve of premarital sex for girls?...would approve of a marriage between homosexuals being sanctioned by priest, minister or rabbi?...would encourage legal abortion for an unwed daughter?...have spoken with homosexuals about their lifestyles?...would take your children to religious services even if they didn't want to go?...would be upset if organized religion disappeared?

In short, the values clarification approach is a model for developing situation ethics in children and youth. The student must question his present value system and somehow develop a new one which has not been "imposed" by his parents or the church.

QUESTION: If the values clarification system is followed, do you think children are more likely to adopt secular values or Christian values? Why?

D. What is the Christian response to humanist ethics?

Humanist ethics reduced to simplest form means situations, not rules, determine ethics. What is the Christian response? Certainly we need to examine the system of humanist ethics. But more importantly, we need to get a firm grip on the principles of Christian ethics.

Humanist ethics says values are relative and subjective, and individuals may follow their autonomous opinions