

[1961]

ON THE THEORY OF ETHICAL BEHAVIOR

Clare W. Graves, Ph.D.

"The most significant comment on man's present predicament I have heard in many years."
William Gold, minister The First Unitarian Society

This paper was given as one of a series of lectures sponsored by the Religious Education Committee of:

The First Unitarian Society
of
Schenectady, New York

We might ask what is happening to morality in our times? Are we breaking apart at our moral seams? Are we witnesses to the decline of a fine moral structure to which our way of life owes its strength? Is something cancerous occurring in our moral life?

What is happening to morality and to ethical behavior? Something is happening, of this we can be sure, but is this something bad? Is it cancerous? Possibly . . . but possibly not. Perhaps, one's judgment of today's behavior is a function of one's conception of the human organism. And perhaps those who see a moral decline in man have a conception of the human organism which should be questioned.

Innumerable actions are denoted as signs of immorality in our times. The new Attorney General cites the moral weakness of the American-Korean war prisoners. The public and those in authority are appalled by delinquency and by shady practices in television. Legislative committeemen show indignation at racketeering, featherbedding, and slow down in union activity. Some publics are shocked by price fixing practices in big business. Writers bemoan the slavish adherence to conformity of the "Organization Man" and the crass materialistic values of the "Status Seekers." Our last two national

governments have been caught in scandal and deception at the highest level of government. Magazine writers tell of the scandal in Laotian foreign aid and news disseminators cite the big lies of Castro's Cubans, atheism and lack of civility in Russian leaders and predatory operations of Red China as signs of moral depravity. These and other behaviors are denoted as signs of rampant immorality and unethical behavior in our people, our country, and our world.

One could easily agree that the behaviors are unethical and immoral if his views are determined by the fears and premises of those who so see the behavior. But before one agrees, some serious questions might be asked. Should we accept inferences which may be drawn from a narrow perceptual field of view constricted by limited premises and narrowed by fear? Is it possible that those who conclude the actions are immoral, perhaps are blinded by illusions of the past, fear of the present and terrifying visions of the future? Is it possible that their vision is so constricted by anxiety that they must conclude that man's depravity is showing through in this apparent breakdown of his moral fiber? Are their minds clouded by a conception of man which may be false? Is it possible that the minds of many may be clouded, and is it possible that one should question the

conclusion that such behavior signifies either man's depravity or the breakdown of a solid and sound ethical system which previously existed?

This is strong stuff. It borders not only on heresy, but also on the brink of irresponsibility, and has within it more than a twinge of the crackpot. How, one may ask, can one take evidence such as has been cited, twist it full around, and come out with the bad as good, the immoral as a sign of health, and the unethical as a sign of growth? And, one may ask, isn't this a rather extraordinary manipulation of data, or perhaps even a highly irresponsible and dangerous distortion of fact? How can one do this? The answer is simple. One can work from a different set of premises, because it may not be necessary to subscribe to only one set of premises when attempting to understand the behavior in question. Within the premises of young people what is being said is indeed a distortion, and within their premises what is being said may be a reprehensible and reproachable analysis.

But since there are other premises upon which understanding might be based, we can question whether it is wise to stay only within the customary frame of reference when interpreting the behavior under consideration.

The conclusion that today's behavior is immoral and unethical is, as I see it, based on a premise consisting of three parts:

1. That a sound system of ethics has existed.
2. That this system of ethics was composed of good values.
3. That the values making up this system are the prime tenets by which man should live.

Within this three part premise it follows logically, that the behavior does not demonstrate these values, and that man is acting in a most improper, immoral and unethical fashion. But, it is possible we should hold this premise suspect and it is possible that there may be more than what

most people see in the kind of behavior now called immoral.

If by now our opinions differ, probably it is because of our premises. There is no denying that basic ethical systems have existed, nor that values have stemmed from them. But from another angle of observation, we can question that a sound system of ethics composed of a fine set of values has operated in man's time on earth, and from another angle of observation one would have to doubt the permanent worth of some of the values which have been a part of ethical systems by which man has lived.

For purposes of discussion, let this position be posed: (a) That the data of history do not support the premise that a sound system of ethics has existed. (b) That a different frame of reference allows one to interpret the behavior, distressing so many - as good behavior, as healthy behavior, as a part of the laws of nature, and as a heartening sign of man's growth toward being a truly human organism.

To support this position, one must demonstrate that a sound system of ethics has not existed, and must present a framework for understanding man's behavior which buttresses the assertions made. But first, one must explain what is meant by a sound system of ethics.

Let us assume that a sound system of ethics must be based on the character of the human organism and must, when practiced to its fullest extent, assure that human life will continue to exist. And, let us assume that a sound system of ethics must not require man to behave in a manner contrary to his nature. It must be built on principles contrary to the accumulated knowledge of man the organism; and let us assume that a sound system of ethics allows one, without equivocation, or exception, to denote what is ethical and moral and what is unethical and immoral.

Some will say the position offered falls with this definition of a sound system of ethics; because, they will say, we have a system of ethics within which we can unequivocally know what is right or wrong.