

THE ODOUR OF ETHICS minimal ethics versus maximal ethics



lecture

I define 'minimal' ethics as a kind of ethics that tries to combine self-interest with the notion of interdependency of men from men, and men from nature. The complexity of such an ethics is so great that freedom has to be in the heart of such an enterprise, because of our lack of insight. 'Maximal' ethics strives for the maximal benefit of everybody, a group or an individual, and designs a specific truth to realize its lofty aim. In the tension between the aims and the means, needed to realize those aims, there is a strong tendency to force the realization of the aims, and to neglect the inner value of the means.

My thesis is simple: one can recognize the real quality of the aims by realizing that only the means show the real intention of the aims. Aims are abstract; means are concrete. Aims can deny the human reality; the means are not able to do so. There is, in my opinion, no exception to the rule that aims may never over-rule the ethic content of the means to realize themselves, be it the nation-state, race, class, god or an ego-paradise.

There is a striking parallel between the notions of aim and mean in the field of ethics, and the notion of content and form in the field of aesthetics. Not only aim and content are similar, so are mean and form. In aesthetics it is the form that determines the content. In ethics it is the mean that determines the aim.

I will use two examples to specify these abstract lines of thought, viz. the Clinton versus Starr dispute, and the Indian and Pakistan nuclear tests

A minimal ethical view on these questions appears to me to be more ethical and wise than a maximal approach. For there is no absolute truth involved in both cases.

