De Vries poses a crucial question: can we shape an ethics for the future? He reviews the problems which challenge the ethics of today (if we may say there is an ethics), and wonders whether there is sufficient communality in the definitions of ethics and in the traditions of religion and moral thought to serve as common denominator for the ethics of the future. These themes are frequently heard today. The questions they raise are problematic in the extreme. Without daring to enter the complexities, I would like to make two comments. The first touches the meaning of the expression 'shape a new ethic'. The second reflects on a query of de Vries: "can medical ethics serve as a model in thinking about ethics as a general societal issue?".

We speak almost casually about a 'new' ethic. Yet, on reflection, we are aware of the range of issues opened by this simple phrase. In some contexts, it seems only to be a call to be and act differently than before, for the past is seen to be morally oppressive, restrictive, unreasonable. Liberty is the new ethic. In other contexts, newness bears a pejorative sense: the solid, clear values of the past are being eroded by streams of radical thought. Neither of these somewhat rhetorical senses seems particularly pertinent to de Vries' argument.

When a culture faces problems created by major social, technological or religious exchange, it is often perceived that the expressed moral values do not seem nuanced enough to guide personal and social actions. Among the many fascinating historical examples, we may mention the questions about investment and usury posed to the ethics of European Christianity by the growth of mercantile economy opened up by the age of discovery. The new ethic of commercial exchange was forged during the 15th and 16th centuries. The newness, in that case and probably in all similar cases, is relative. Familiar values and principles are nuanced; radical suggestions are criticized and softened so that they stimulate but do not threaten. Cases are presented in which maxims formerly unconnected are drawn together, contrasted and compared.

These sorts of activities go on at many levels. The deep waters of traditional beliefs emerge into shallower streams where their texture and quality are more easily seen; they run into pools made turbulent by debate of public and by the moral philosophers of the culture. Eventually, they run more deeply again but now carrying the residue of exposure to the environment and to the debate. The ethic is not merely the emotionally charged moral beliefs of the society or the rational critique of its philosophers. It is both, mixed together in an extraordinary complex fashion.
There are occasions when newness is a dramatic break in the flow, like a waterfall or a cascade. A culture is deeply and suddenly disturbed. The appearance of the marxist ethic in our century is of that sort. More frequently, the newness is evolution rather than revolution. Perceptive observers of the life of the society note the cases in which circumstances call for examination of moral values. The rabbinics which first flourished in the diaspora asked, in case by case fashion, how fidelity to the Torah could be reconciled with the demands of life in an alien culture. The casuistry of the Catholic Church in the 16th and 17th centuries (not entirely as despicable as Pascal's famous critique would suggest) pressed the sea-changes of divided christianity, mercantile economy and newly discovered lands and emerging nationalism against the traditional morality of Western civilization. Out of both endeavors comes, in the relevant sense, a 'new' ethic: the earlier and culturally deeper values are exposed to criticism and, as a result, nuanced and qualified.

This historical process is not even: bits of the new appear in the old; the old lies still hidden beneath the new. Contradictions, sometimes almost unnoticed, pervade the whole. The ethic of a culture in any age is not a geometric pattern, but an organic growth. Nor is this process the work of 'moral philosophers' alone; many participate from many fields and at various levels. When the moral philosophers step aside from this natural and organic growth, they may draw a geometric pattern, an intellectually pleasing moral theory. Plato and Aristotle did this as the traditional city state was deteriorating. Kant did this, standing above the moral and political turmoil of his time. These moral theories are vital in a culture's self-understanding, but they are not, I think, organic elements in its growth. They are more like the paintings of great classical artists imitating, yet abstracting from, the nature they view. It is, I think, the 'casuists', who have Socrates as their intellectual ancestor, who shape the new ethic.

This brings me to my second comment. De Vries asks whether the ethic of medicine can be a model for ethics of society in general. I rather think it can. Medicine has a complex history in Western civilization. It has combined the best science of the time with magical beliefs, practical skills with rude manipulations, sacrificial dedication with egoism, sincere beneficence with mercenary interests. Despite this mingling of opposites, the medical profession and the public have come to see medicine as a uniquely moral enterprise. The physician is held, by ethics and by law, to act in the best interests of those who seek help. The physician is expected to go beyond the limits of self-interest when one who has serious need can be helped. The profession is granted unusual personal and social privileges in anticipation of a particular attention to the medical needs of individuals and society. Special moral obligations, such as confidentiality, are heavily incumbent upon the profession.

It might be said that the modern medical profession has inherited two rather diverse traditions and lives today with the ambiguity of these traditions. Ancient