

Ethics

Unit 313 – Foundations 3

Week 1 Introduction to Ethics



1. What Is Ethics?

Ethics (often called moral philosophy) is the study of human morality and the application of that morality to contemporary life. Its concern is not only with what is right (morality) but also with doing what is right (moral application).

“Today, ethics is the name given to that most general study of the rightness and wrongness of human actions, including not only the determination of whether particular acts are morally permissible but also the derivation of those theories by which such a determination may be made, as well as an analysis of the meaning of the language that is peculiar to such determinations and derivations” (P. M. O’Neil).¹

“The inquiry into man’s moral nature so as to discover what are his responsibilities and the means by which he may fulfil them. Ethics shares with certain other human enterprises the quest for truth, but is distinct in its concern for what man ought to do in the light of the truth uncovered. It is not simply descriptive, but prescriptive in character” (M. A. Inch).²

2. What Is Morality?

“The set of judgements people make regarding what is right or wrong, good or bad, in the relations within or between individual or collective centres of intelligence and will” (H. Stob).³

“Morality refers to the system of values and principles that guide actions, dispositions, attitudes, virtues and ways of life that should characterise the moral person...” (C. C. Curran).⁴

3. Ethical Systems – Broad Definitions

Ethical systems can be broadly defined as either:

(a) Deontological – an ethical system that is “duty-centred.”

(b) Teleological – an ethical system that is “end-centred.”

¹ P. M. O’Neil, “Ethics,” in J. K Roth (ed.), *Ethics* Vol. 1 (Pasadena: Salem Press, 1994), p. 281.

² M. A. Inch, “Ethics,” in W. A. Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), p. 375.

³ H. Stob as cited in C. F. H. Baker (ed.), *Baker’s Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), p. 635.

⁴ C. C. Curran, “Christian Ethics,” in M. Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* Vol. 3 (New York: Macmillan, 1987), p. 340.

DEONTOLOGICAL ETHIC	TELEOLOGICAL ETHIC
<i>Rule determines the result</i>	<i>Result determines the rule</i>
<i>Rule is the basis of the act</i>	<i>Result is the basis of the act</i>
<i>Rule is good regardless of result</i>	<i>Rule is good because of result</i>
<i>Result always calculated within the rules</i>	<i>Result sometimes used to break rules</i>

4. Ethical Options – What Makes A Particular Action Right?⁵

Ethics is primarily about reflecting upon morality and the application of that morality to contemporary life. The concept is that we must not only *be right* but ought also to *do right*. But, how do we decide what is right? There have been various views presented:

(a) *Might is right*

The ancient Greek philosopher Thrasymachus is credited with holding that “justice is the interest of the stronger party.” In other words, the one who is **strongest** and can impose his will is the one who is right.

(b) *Man is right*

Protagoras, an ancient Greek philosopher, claimed that “man is the measure of things” (“man” in a generic sense – inclusive of males and females). In other words, the individual person is the measure of all things – each person is their own standard of what is right or wrong.

(c) *Majority is right*

This is an enlargement of Protagoras’s view above. Here, the majority is the measure of all things. The majority determines what is right for the minority.

(d) *Moderation is right*

Aristotle taught that morality is found in moderation. The right thing to do is the “golden mean” between extremes – the moderate course of action. For example, pride is the moderate course between vanity and humility. Courage is the moderate course between fear and aggression.

(e) *Most good for most people is right – Utilitarianism*

The right thing is what brings the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Some have understood good to be *quantitative* (Jeremy Bentham 1748-1832) while others have understood it be *qualitative* (John Stuart Mill 1806-1873).

(f) *Most pleasure is what is right – Hedonism*

This is derived from the Epicureans of the 4th century BC who claimed that what brings pleasure is morally right and what brings pain is morally wrong.

⁵ N. L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), pp. 17-20.

5. Other Approaches to Ethics⁶

There are six major ethical systems, each designated by its answer to the question, “Are there any objective moral laws?”

- (a) **Antinomianism** – *there are no objective moral laws.*
- (b) **Generalism** – *there are some general laws but no objective moral laws.*
- (c) **Situationism** – *there is one objective moral law (love).*
- (d) **Unqualified Absolutism** – *there are many objective moral laws that never conflict with each other.*
- (e) **Conflicting Absolutism** – *there are many objective moral laws that sometimes conflict with each other.*
- (f) **Graded Absolutism** – *there are many objective moral laws that sometimes conflict with each other and we must obey the higher moral law.*

Example Application: Is there an objective moral law that says lying is wrong?

- (a) **Antinomianism** – *lying is not right or wrong.*
- (b) **Generalism** – *lying is generally wrong, but in some cases can be right (e.g. if there is a good result).*
- (c) **Situationism** – *lying is sometimes right and sometimes wrong. It depends on whether it was a loving thing to do in that situation.*
- (d) **Unqualified Absolutism** – *lying is always wrong.*
- (e) **Conflicting Absolutism** – *lying is always wrong. But, lying is understandable and forgivable because it may have been the lesser evil.*
- (f) **Graded Absolutism** – *lying is sometimes right. If by lying you obeyed a higher law (e.g. saved a life), then God will not hold you responsible for that lying.*

6. The Christian Ethics Approach – What God Wills Is Right⁷

God is seen as the basis of defining what is good and right. If God declares an action right, it is right. If God declares an action wrong, it is wrong. In other words, there is an ultimate right and wrong because they are defined by the ultimate being – God.

⁶ N. L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues*, pp. 25-26.

⁷ N. L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues*, p. 21.

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:1-2 NIV).

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honour your father and mother,” which is the first commandment with promise: “that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth”. (Ephesians 6:1-3)

7. Sources Of Christian Belief – The Question Of Authority.

What source/s should Christians turn to for the content of our theology? The differences between branches of the Christian church, as well as differences between individual Christians, often derive from the question of sources – in other words, the question of authority. Over the centuries of the Christian church’s history, a “rough consensus” has developed that there are four main specific sources that have been utilised in relation to Christian belief. These four main specific sources are:

- Scripture
- Tradition
- Reason
- Experience

These four are sometimes called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral or, simply, “the Quadrilateral.”

The following from Roger Olson outlines what is meant by each:

“By Scripture most church fathers and Reformers would mean the written form of divine revelation – the writings of the Hebrew prophets and early Christian apostles. Disagreement may exist about the parameters of the canon of Christian Scriptures (primarily over inclusion or exclusion of the Apocrypha), but that does not undermine the general agreement about the Bible’s special authority for giving rise to and shaping correct Christian belief ...

By tradition most church fathers and Reformers of Christianity would mean what we have here been calling the Great Tradition of ‘mere Christianity’ – the consensus beliefs held in common by the early church fathers and the Reformers of the sixteenth century as expressed in

common by the ecumenical creeds and Reformation confessions of faith ...

By reason most would mean logic – especially the rule of non-contradiction that forbids equal affirmation of opposite propositions. In Christian belief as in every other area of life the search for coherence and intelligibility is essential ...

By experience most Christian thinkers would mean not private, personal experience but human experience and especially the religious experience of God’s people in the community of faith...”⁸

Historically, different communities of the Christian church or different Christians have sometimes emphasised one area of the Quadrilateral above the others or given it a higher proportion of authority in guiding Christian belief and practice.

Protestants have traditionally looked to the Bible as the ultimate source of guidance. John Murray, who is in the Reformed tradition, expressed it in this way,

“In the biblical ethic we are concerned with the norms, or canons, or standards of behaviour which are enunciated in the Bible for the creation, direction, and regulation of thought, life, and behaviour consonant with the will of God” (John Murray).⁹

Christians are often described as “people of the Book.” What does this mean in the context of ethics? The goal Christians share ...

“is to shape our common life in the situations in which we find ourselves according to the characters, convictions and practices related in Scripture” (S. Fowl and L. G. Jones).¹⁰

But, whenever Christians eat pork (Leviticus 11:7-8), refrain from stoning sexual offenders (Deuteronomy 22:13-24) or no longer require women to wear veils when they pray (1 Corinthians 11:5, 13), we are saying something about *how* we are “people of the Book.” So, in what way is the Bible to be used in ethics? What are the options?

(a) The Bible is a “rule” book

Some believe that, in ethics, the Bible should be used as a rule book – that God’s revelation of himself comes to us in the form of commands or laws. Our task is to systematise the rules and then obey them. For example,

⁸ R. E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), p. 57.

⁹ J. Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 14.

¹⁰ S. E. Fowl and L. G. Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 20.

The goal of practical theology is “to deduce, from the doctrines and precepts of the Bible, rules for the organization and administration of the Christian Church in all her functions, and for the guidance of the individual Christian in all the relations of life” (A. A. Hodge).¹¹

(b) The Bible is a “principle” book

Some believe that, in ethics, the bible should be used as a principle book – that God’s revelation comes to us as a set of principles rather than a set of rules or laws. The laws are still important, but they are expressions of principles applied to particular historical contexts and situations.

Some see viewing the Bible as either the source of “timeless rules” or “timeless principles” is missing the point of what the Bible is.

“The ultimate purpose of God’s self-disclosure is to bring us not into a relationship with either a body of timeless laws or moral axioms, but into relationship with the self-revealing God, and as a consequence with one another and with all creation. The moral principles found within the pages of Scripture serve the Bible’s central purpose, namely to facilitate fellowship or community” (S. Grenz).¹²

8. A Case Study: Slavery.

Some theologians see what they call a “trajectory” or “development” in scripture. That is, there is a movement in scripture that took ethical situations at the time and improved them, but also pointed forward to further development and improvement. William J. Webb calls this approach the “redemptive-movement” hermeneutic.

Movement or trajectory 

Original Culture	Bible	Our Culture	Ultimate Ethic
Slavery with many abuses.	Slavery with better conditions and fewer abuses.	Slavery eliminated and working conditions often improved.	Slavery eliminated, improving working conditions, wages harmonized for all, and harmony, respect and unified purpose between all levels in an organizational structure.

¹¹ A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1870), p. 51.

¹² S. J. Grenz, *The Moral Quest*, p. 245.