

Framework for Ethical Discernment

Taylor University Center for Ethics

I. Foundations of Ethics

A. What is Ethics?

The concern of ethics is the most basic human question: How ought we to live?

As a formal field of study, ethics is both practical and theoretical. Practically, we aim to know which actions and policies are right and what sorts of people we should be. On the theoretical side, we strive to understand the meaning of moral terms and how moral principles and ideals should guide our conduct. Ethics may also be understood in the context of a profession or organization to be an agreed upon set of standards for proper behavior. Ethics in the broader sense is concerned with what those standards ought to be and why.

B. Objective vs. Relative Moral Values

Common morality assumes there are objective moral standards that apply to everyone. This is known as moral *objectivism*. The alternative to moral objectivism is moral *relativism* which says that there are no universally true or valid moral standards, but that all moral values are valid relative to culture or individual choice.

According to *cultural relativism*, all moral values are only valid relative to cultural norms. While it is true that people in different cultures often make different moral judgments, differing moral judgments across cultures does not imply cultural relativism. Differing moral judgments can occur due to errors in

moral judgment in some cultures or because of differences in application of shared moral principles, due to differing nonmoral beliefs. Cultural relativism is a deeply problematic view. For one thing, it implies that we can never criticize a foreign culture's practices, even such things as genocide and human trafficking. Also, cultural relativism implies that there is no such thing as moral progress or grounds for moral reform.

Moral relativism in the form of *moral subjectivism* says that moral values are merely reflections of personal preference and valid only for the individual person. This view is even more problematic than cultural relativism, since subjectivism implies that no one's actions can be judged right or wrong by anyone but oneself. For the moral subjectivist, each person is a law unto him or herself.

C. Moral Principles and Theories

Moral standards are often expressed in terms of rules. These may be understood generally in terms of ethical *principles*. When ethical principles conflict, however, it becomes apparent that we need a way of prioritizing principles so that moral decisions can be made. This is the purpose of moral theories, which provide rationales for principles and a more basic understanding of moral decision making.

D. Why Be Moral?

It is easy to see why people should be moral. Without a minimal morality society would be impossible. We would exist in an anarchic chaos of egoists all trying to maximize their own interests as described by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*. The more difficult question is why I should be moral rather than simply appearing to

be moral and promoting morality in society so I can benefit from the morality of others while I pursue my own benefit? Attempts to justify morality purely in terms of reason and prudence fall short. That leads us to Christian ethics.

II. How Christian Ethics is Distinct

A Christian moral perspective is distinctive in several ways. Specifically, it is:

A. Grounded in the Nature of God and his Goodness

The ultimate foundation of Christian ethics is God. All moral standards are ultimately grounded in the divine nature, whether these take the form of principles, ideals, or excellent character traits.

B. Based on Scripture

Since the foundation of Christian ethics is God, and He has revealed himself in the Bible, the careful study of scripture is essential to a Christian understanding of ethics. Specifically, scripture gives us moral guidance by providing us with:

1. General moral principles (e.g., the Golden Rule, the Ten Commandments, etc.)
2. Norms for specific situations (both prohibitions and duties).
3. Practical counsel and moral ideals (e.g., Proverbs, Sermon on the Mount, etc.)
4. Endorsements of and narratives illustrating virtuous character traits (e.g., Gal. 5:19-23).
5. Spiritual disciplines for moral growth (e.g., prayer, fasting, etc.)

C. Inclusive of Other Means of Understanding Moral Truth

In addition to scripture, God has given us other means of understanding moral truth. These include deep *conscience* (what God has written on our hearts), *tradition* (the historical consensus of church on moral matters), *experience* (including the natural consequences of actions), and *reason* (which includes theological reflection, applying general principles to specific situations, and what we can understand from the design of the universe and human beings).

D. Informed by a Christian Worldview

Any understanding of ethics is closely tied to a person's fundamental beliefs about the nature of reality. Christians understand who God is, who we are, and what our world is like through a worldview that is manifested by the narrative, rational, and ritual components of Christianity. The scriptural *narrative* of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation, and the biblical *doctrines* of sin, atonement, justification, and sanctification inform our moral reflections and are reinforced by our life together in Christian community.

III. How to Discern What is Right in a Specific Moral Decision

- A. Understand the facts.
- B. Determine who is impacted by the decision, both directly and indirectly.
- C. Determine what moral issues are involved.
- D. Determine what moral principles, virtues, and Scriptural ethical considerations apply to the relevant moral issues.

- E. Pray for wisdom and seek godly counsel as needed.
- F. Make a decision based on all of the above and do what is right with the help of the Holy Spirit.

IV. Common Moral Terminology

Act-utilitarianism: The view that the rightness of actions depends solely on the relative pleasure or welfare produced by individual actions.

Applied Ethics: The use of moral norms and concepts to resolve practical moral issues.

Consequentialist Theory: A moral theory asserting that the rightness of actions depends solely on their consequences or results.

Contractarianism: Moral or political theories based on the idea of a social contract or agreement among individuals for mutual advantage.

Cultural Relativism: The view that right actions are those sanctioned by one's culture.

Deductive Argument: An argument intended to give logically conclusive support to its conclusion.

Deontological (or Non-consequentialist) Theory: A moral theory asserting that the rightness of actions is determined partly or entirely by their intrinsic nature.

Descriptive Ethics: The study of morality using the methodology of science.

Divine Command Theory: The view that right actions are those commanded by God and wrong actions are those forbidden by God.

Doctrine of Double Effect: The principle that performing a bad action to bring about a good effect is never morally acceptable but that performing a good action may sometimes be acceptable even if it produces a bad effect, if and only if: (a) the bad effect is not directly intended, (b) the bad effect is not the means of producing the good effect, and (c) the good effect is at least proportionate to the bad effect.

Ethical Relativism: The view that moral standards are not objective but are relative to what individuals or cultures believe.

Inductive Argument: An argument intended to give probable support to its conclusion.

Metaethics: The study of the meaning and justification of basic moral beliefs.

Moral Absolutism: 1. The view that there are moral norms or principles that are valid or true for everyone (see moral objectivism). 2. The belief that objective moral principles allow no exceptions.

Moral Argument: An argument whose conclusion is a moral statement.

Moral Subjectivism (or Subjective Relativism): The view that rightness is determined by personal preference.

Moral Theory: An account of the nature of goodness and rightness, as these terms apply to human conduct, character, attitudes, and social policies and practices.

Morality: The ethical quality of a person's conduct, character, or attitudes or a social policy or practice.

Moral objectivism: The view that there are moral norms or principles that are valid or true for everyone.

Natural Law: The view that right actions are those that conform to moral standards evident through rational reflection on nature and human beings.

Normative Ethics: The study of the rightness or wrongness of particular actions and policies.

Paternalism: The overriding of a person's actions or decision-making for his or her own good.

Professional Ethics: An agreed upon set of standards of proper behavior for members of a profession, also known as a code of ethics.

Rule-utilitarianism: The view that a right action is one that conforms to a rule that, if followed consistently, would create for everyone involved the most beneficial balance of pleasure over pain.

Utilitarianism: The view that right actions are those that result in the most beneficial balance of pleasure over pain for everyone involved.

Virtue ethics: A system of ethics that focuses on the development of a virtuous character rather than the rightness of specific actions.

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