

CW Ethics & Metaethics

Introduction

- **Ethics** asks, “How ought we to live our lives?” It is the study of what is right and wrong.
- **Metaethics** asks, “What is the basis for ethics? For moral law?” What is “the good”? These are not settled questions among ethicists and philosophers.
- I’m heavily indebted to **John Frame’s** works on ethics for this lesson and for many of the quotes in this lesson.
- Christians and non-Christians **disagree** on many ethical questions
 - **Fox** program on results of new **sex survey**
 - **Paul Kurtz** called Margaret Sanger a hero in American history and said that she led an ethical life even though she rejected biblical morality. Sanger was the founder of Planned Parenthood, an early champion of birth control, a committed Darwinist, and a promoter of eugenics. She also advocated the removal of all moral restraints in favor of what she deemed was healthy sexual expression. Sanger wrote, “Through sex, mankind will attain the great spiritual illumination which will transform the world, and light up the only path to an earthly paradise.” (Total Truth, 143).
- In your experience of listening to unbelievers talk about ethics, what are some of the ways in which unbelievers ground ethics?

I. The Futility of Autonomous Ethics

A. Three Ethical Principles

1. **The Deontological Principle:** From the Greek verb translated “owe, ought, or must.” **A good act is a response to duty, even at the price of self-sacrifice.** Emphasizes *duty* and *obligation*. Tradition includes Plato, Stoicism, Immanuel Kant, & G.E. Moore.
 - “Seek to find ethical norms that are **universal, necessary, and obligatory.**”

- These norms **cannot be discovered through sense experience** or by introspection. They cannot be contingent on the happiness or pleasures of people, for they obligate us for their own sake rather than out of concern for our happiness.
- Obligations seem “godlike”
 - Illust: It’s interesting to see how unbelievers can’t escape ascribing godlike attributes to parts of reality, such as calling the processes of nature, “Mother Nature,” and describing aspects of nature in terms of a Creator.

I’m reading a module on equine health issues. I’ve noticed that the author says, on the one hand, that the horse **evolved** as a grazer; but on the other hand, the horse’s stomach is **designed** for a continual supply of food. Otherwise, a stable horse who doesn’t eat frequently may suffer the consequences of stomach ulcers.

2. **The Teleological Principle:** From the Greek word translated “goal, end.” This tradition has included such thinkers as Epicurus (and most hedonistic philosophies), Aristotle, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and John Dewey. **“A good act maximizes the happiness of living creatures.”** “A good act does good.”
 - An act is morally good or virtuous if it brings about happiness for the individual or for the largest number of people (the achievement of which is a good in a non-moral sense). This tradition justifies behavior based on the principle, “The ends justify the means.”
 - Often the choice of empiricists
3. **The Existential Principle:** “A broad movement, of which the twentieth-century school of writers like Jean-paul Sartre is only a part.” (It is rooted in the ideas of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers. Similar to the ethical thought of the ancient Greek Sophists, of Karl Marx, and of the emotivism of the logical positivists of the early to mid twentieth century.) **Postmodern** ethics is a part of the tradition of existentialism.

- Sartre sought to elucidate an ethic that was **consistent with Atheism**. Since God doesn't exist, I have no predefined essence or nature; rather, I simply exist and am radically free to define my own essence for myself. I must not submit to how others define me (unless indeed I make the choice to submit in my own radical freedom to choose who I am).
- **Movement tends to focus**, not on objective rules for behavior, nor on any calculated goals that should identify my behavior as either good or bad; rather, I am radically free to choose who I am; I choose to define the good and the rules—if any—by which I ought to live out my life. I must self-actualize. This is **radical autonomy!**

B. Problems with the Ethical Principles

1. The Principles Don't Harmonize

- No ethicist exemplifies exclusively any one of these principles because **ethics requires a standard, a goal, and motivation**—and no one principle can satisfy all that's required. Therefore, many philosophers try to harmonize the principles. But without God, it is hard to see how they can harmonize!
- “The **teleological** principle says that ethical action leads to happiness. Yet the **deontological** principle says that in order to do our duty, we must sometimes sacrifice our happiness.”
- “The **teleological** and **deontological** principles say that our ethical responsibility is objective, grounded outside ourselves. But the **existential** suggests that our goodness is inward, and therefore subjective.”
- “The **deontological** principle says that we are subject to a moral law that declares our duty, apart from inclination or the consequences of our acts. But the **teleological** and **existential** principles measure our goodness by the consequences of our actions and our inner life, respectively.”

- “The **existential** principle says that it’s wrong to measure a person’s goodness by anything external to himself. But the teleological and **deontological** principles say that one may measure goodness by the consequences and norms of actions, respectively.”
- Since these principles don’t harmonize well, a given non-Christian thinker will often **tend to polarize to one** of the three principles; but this approach has its own problems.

2. Each Principle Fails as Stand Alone

- **Deontological Problems:**
 - a) **How do we gain knowledge** of the universal moral principle? (Kant’s “Categorical Imperative,” “Moore’s Intuitionism”—there are few deontological ethicists today)
 - b) How do **abstract** universal moral **obligations apply to the real world**? (Plato’s “Good” as an empty principle)
 - c) How can an **impersonal law** or principle morally obligate us to obedience? Moral obligations arise from **interpersonal** relationships. These transcendent principles seem “godlike”—do transcendent moral principles make sense in a universe without God?
- **Teleological Problems:**
 - a) **Whose happiness** should determine what is good?
 - b) How do you measure or quantify “units” of happiness in order to determine what is good?
 - c) How do you determine the consequences of our actions into the future?—**both b) and c) requires superhuman knowledge!**
 - d) The **naturalistic fallacy** argument, as asserted by David Hume and by G.E. Moore, asserts that “one cannot derive moral obligations from natural facts.” That is, one cannot infer a moral obligation from a description of a fact: We cannot infer that since the chair is resting

on the floor, therefore the chair ought to sit on the floor. “The fact that we seek happiness does not imply that we ought to seek it.”

- e) If the teleological principle is true, then there are **no moral principles that are universal in their application and unchangeable in their duration.**
- f) The teleological principle itself **needs a transcendent norm** to be obligatory.

- **Existential Problems:**

- a) Cannot avoid making reference to norms and situations since ethics must “deal with principles that are universal, necessary, and obligatory”.
- b) Tends to criticize those who don’t live “self-actualized lives!”
- c) Sartre signed a protest statement against a war.

- **Conclusion: “The non-Christian approach leads to the abandonment of ethics itself.** The story of twentieth-century ethics is that philosophers have abandoned their traditional role (since Plato) of teaching us how to live. The main ethical thinkers of the twentieth century (with the exception of existentialism, which is inconsistent in this regard) don’t try to tell us how to live, but rather they examine the language and reasoning of the discipline of ethics. In other words, they have given up ethics for metaethics. Their concern is not to defend ethical principles, but rather to show us what an ethical principle is. Their message to us is, ‘if you happen to hold any such things as ethical principles, here’s what they are.’

The reason for this development is not hard to see. If there is no norm or duty available to human beings by the revelation of a personal God, then there is no way that any ethical philosopher, or anyone else, can tell us what to do.”

II. The Harmony of Christian Ethics

- “In general, **ethical judgment always involves** the application of a **norm** to a **situation** by a **person**”

A. **The Normative Perspective: The Ground of Moral Obligation**

1. **The Deontological Principle Revised**

The Bible affirms that moral law is **universal, necessary, and obligatory**. Although we are morally obligated to obey God regardless of the consequences either to us or to our fellow man, the Bible teaches that our happiness is certainly a legitimate goal for ethical behavior: Matthew 6:28-32, “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

2. **The Euthyphro Dilemma?**

- In **Plato’s dialogue**, *Euthyphro*, Socrates and Euthyphro discuss with one another how to define “holiness”. Euthyphro says that holiness is whatever the gods say it is; that is, holiness is whatever the gods decide for it to be. Socrates, on the other hand, argues that holiness is what the god’s love; that is, holiness exists apart from the gods since it is admired as such by the gods.
- **The problem:** If holiness is whatever the gods declare it to be, then it is **arbitrary**. If holiness is whatever the gods love, then holiness is not dependent on the gods and doesn’t require the gods for its real existence. This same **dilemma** is often used to critique Christians who assert that morality requires the existence of God.
- **How** would **you** respond this dilemma?

3. **The Character of God**

- Moral obligations **arise** in the context of **interpersonal relationships**. We feel guilt when we violate moral law, but we **never feel guilt with regard to impersonal objects** such as rocks or helium gas or chairs. (We only feel guilty about these things when we “personalize them”.)

- **We learn morality from our parents**; but as we learn that our parents are fallible, we look higher and higher up for infallible moral law—the law that obligates even our parents and our grandparents. **We eventually come to God** and stop with Him since He is the **absolute Person**. Therefore, He alone is the ground of universal and necessary moral obligations.
- **God is good**. He doesn't merely love the good as if it were some free floating universal substance external to Himself. He loves Himself because He Himself is good. His character is "the good". Absolute moral obligation or law is grounded in a Person who is also "the good".

4. The Commands of God

- **God's commands** are the criterion or **standard** for ethical behavior. But God's commands are **not arbitrary** like those of the Greek gods. God commands out of the goodness of His nature; therefore, His commands are normative and good.
- God's Word, the **Bible**, defines the good for us and is the ultimate standard against which all claims about goodness must be evaluated.
- The **Ten Commandments** are moral principles pregnant with moral meaning and application. **Jesus summarized** the Law as to our duties towards God and man:

Mark 12:28 "One of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, "What commandment is the foremost of all?" 29 Jesus answered, "The foremost is, 'HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; 30 AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH.' 31 "The second is this, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

- The **virtuous life** is the life lived in **imitation** of God:

1 Peter 1:14 "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts *which were yours* in your ignorance, 15 but like the Holy One who called

you, be holy yourselves also in all *your* behavior; 16 because it is written, "YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY."

B. The Situational Perspective: The Goal of Ethics

1. The Teleological Principle Revised

"As we shall see, the Bible affirms the importance of considering the goals or purposes of our action. The utmost goal, the *summum bonum*, is the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). Scripture also teaches us to consider the consequences of our choices (Luke 13:3, 5, [unless you repent, you shall perish] for example). And it affirms the importance of maximizing the happiness of others (as Luke 10:27 [love God...love your neighbor]). But unlike secular teleological ethics, Scripture also affirms the authority of God's moral norms and the importance of the character of the heart."

2. The Glory of God and the Happiness of Men

- Under the situational perspective, we **apply God's Law** to all of the **facts of our situations** with the **ultimate goal** of glorifying God and enjoying Him forever.
- **God is most glorified when we are most satisfied in Him.** But remember that our duty to glorify God by delighting in Him is **not merely a private** enterprise. We are called upon to help our brothers and sisters love and delight in God. We are also called upon to save sinners so that they will delight in God and thereby glorify him.

Psalm 117:1 "**Praise the LORD, all nations;** Laud Him, all peoples! 2 For His lovingkindness is great toward us, And the truth of the LORD is everlasting. Praise the LORD!"

3. The Naturalistic Fallacy?

- As we learned in our critique of autonomous teleological ethics, you cannot derive a moral obligation from a description of a fact. Frame gives the following example:

Premise: X is pleasurable

Conclusion: We ought to do X.

This is a naturalistic fallacy. It deduces a “value from a fact” But these are not examples of naturalistic fallacies:

Premise: X is morally right.

Conclusion: We ought to do X.

Premise: God says stealing is wrong.

Conclusion: Stealing is wrong.

- These two arguments are **not examples of the naturalistic** fallacy, “because the premise is a moral fact, not a nonmoral fact. There is an *ought* implicit in the premise.” We are then **arguing from moral fact to moral conclusion** and not from a purely descriptive fact to moral conclusion.

God’s Word, as we have seen, is normative. His Word is both a **fact and a moral norm** simultaneously.

C. The Existential Perspective: The Motivation for Ethics

1. The Existential Principle Revised

“Of the three principles mentioned in Chapter 4, existential ethics values most the principle that “a good act comes from a good inner character.” This principle is a biblical one. A good ethical character implies that we should affirm our ethical principles from within. Hypocritical obedience is not the obedience God honors. He wants his word to be written on our heart. If it is written there, then our behavior will be a kind of self-realization. Our behavior will display what we are, deep inside. As we saw in Chapter 3, God motivates our behavior by asking us to become what we are: regenerate sons and daughters of God, dead to sin and alive in Christ. So he wants our behavior to display what we are at the most fundamental level.”

2. The Heart of the Matter

- The Scriptures everywhere teach that true piety is fundamentally a matter of the heart:

“He opened His mouth and *began* to teach them, saying, “Blessed are the **poor in spirit**, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are **those who mourn**, for they shall be comforted. “Blessed are **the gentle**, for they shall inherit the earth. “Blessed are those **who hunger and thirst for righteousness**, for they shall be satisfied. “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. “Blessed are the **pure in heart**, for they shall see God.” (Matt. 5:2-8).

“So all these curses shall come on you and pursue you and overtake you until you are destroyed, because you would not obey the LORD your God by keeping His commandments and His statutes which He commanded you. “They shall become a sign and a wonder on you and your descendants forever. “**Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joy** and a glad heart, for the abundance of all things” (Deut. 28:45-47).

- **Jonathan Edwards** reminds us of our ethical obligations to avoid a merely formalistic obedience to God—and he modeled it for us:

“That religion which God requires, and will accept, does not consist in weak, dull, and lifeless wishes, raising us but a little above a state of indifference: God, in His word, greatly insists upon it, that we be in good earnest, “fervent in spirit,” and our hearts vigorously engaged in religion.”

[“Resolved, To endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness in the other world as I possibly can, with all the power, might, vigor, and vehemence, yea violence, I am capable of, or can bring myself to exert, in any way that can be thought of.”](#)

D. Summary of the Perspectives

- “**Christians can gladly accept all three of the principles**, insights or intuitions listed above. The God of Scripture is the author of the situation, the Word, and the moral self, so that the three are fully consistent with one another. He ordains history so that people will find their ultimate blessing in doing their duty. He has made us in his image, so that our greatest personal fulfillment occurs in seeking his glory in history, as his word declares.”

- In view of all that we've discussed so far, we may, with John Frame, **define ethics as** "theology, viewed as a means of determining which human persons, acts, and attitudes receive God's blessing and which do not."