Introducing ethics

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Defining ethics [1]

Ethics (or 'moral philosophy') is "the branch of knowledge that deals with moral principles".[2]

Morality refers to "principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behaviour." [3]

The standards or principles that guide an individual's beliefs about what is and is not acceptable behaviour can be called 'morals' or 'ethics'.

It is possible to identify three levels of ethics: **metaethics**, which concerns the basis of ethical principles; **normative ethics**, which identifies moral principles to guide behaviour; and **applied ethics**, which examines specific issues in light of these moral principles.

Metaethics

Metaethics asks whether morality arises from human beings themselves (e.g., individual feelings, human reason or social consensus) or from some set of principles external to human beings (e.g., the will of God or universal truths). It also provides definitions for terms that are needed to formulate moral standards. There are three key issues in metaethics (although secular moral philosophers often recognise only the first two):

1. **Standards – Where does morality come from?**

   Moral standards are either:

   a) **Objective** – existing external to humankind and therefore absolute and eternal, applying to all people in all places and times. The basis for objective ethical standards can be either:

      i. *Universal truths* – a belief that there are certain impersonal truths about right and wrong that regulate the moral universe in a similar fashion to the laws of physics that regulate the physical universe. Greek philosopher Plato compared moral values to numbers which exist external to human beings and thought of morals as abstract spiritual objects.

      ii. *God* – a belief that standards of morality arise from a sovereign creator. Some Christian theologians, in the tradition of William of Ockham, argue that moral standards arise from divine command (this view is called voluntarism). God wills certain things to be right or wrong and He imprints these truths on the human conscience and reveals them in Scripture. Other Christians argue that these moral standards arise directly from the character of God. It is not so much that He wills something to be right or wrong (as if He could have willed it some other way) but that it is right or wrong because it is in keeping with His character. God acts as He does because of who He is – He is light (truth) and He therefore acts justly; He is love and He therefore acts graciously.

   b) **Relative** – dependent on and invented by humankind and therefore vary between societies and across space and time. There are two variants of moral relativism:

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[1] I refer the reader to the following online article for a lengthier discussion of the nature of ethics and the various issues within it: Fieser, James. 2009. 'Ethics', in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available: http://www.iep.utm.edu/ethics/ [accessed 7 Oct 2012]

[2] 'Ethics' in *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, 1998, ed. Judy Pearsall (Oxford: Clarendon Press)

[3] 'Morality' in *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, 1998, ed. Judy Pearsall (Oxford: Clarendon Press)

i. *Individual relativism* –individuals decide their own morality. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), for example, believed that the 'overman' (*übermensch*) can rise above the mediocrity of the herd mentality to determine his own moral standards. There are two possible bases on which to make this judgement:

   a. Reason **–** Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) argued that reason can guide us to act in a moral way and that emotion should be eliminate from the process of deciding how to act as it can mislead us. A decision to act one way or the other should be made on the basis of weighing the reasons for one against the other.

   b. Emotion **–** David Hume (1711-1776) believed that morality was not primarily about reason but about emotion. Although reason can help us towards moral principles, we will not see a particular action as having moral value unless we feel either revulsion or approval towards it.

ii. *Cultural relativism* (e.g., skeptic philosopher Sextus Empiricus) – morality is determined by the approval of the society of which an individual is part.

2. Motivation – Why should we be moral?

Simply being aware of moral standards does not mean that we feel motivated or compelled to obey them. Various possible motivations for acting morally have been proposed:

- **Egoism –** philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) believed that most, perhaps all, of our actions, even those that might seem selfless on first consideration, are motivated by the selfish desire for gain, whether of reward, praise, satisfaction or pleasure. If the driver is a desire for pleasure then we can speak of it as hedonism.
- **Altruism –** bishop, philosopher and theologian, Joseph Butler (1692-1752), whilst agreeing that egoism is often the driver of our behaviour, insisted that we are also able to act selflessly from pure interest in what is good for the other person (benevolence).
- **Logic –** we may seek to decide what course of action to take on the basis of
- **Fear –** the fear of punishment or retribution may motivate people who believe that there is an external lawgiver to avoid doing what is wrong.
- **Respect –** we might obey a rule or avoid harming someone out of respect for the law or for the individual.
- **Duty –** if we hold to an objective, absolutist ethical framework, especially if the source of the standard is believed to be God, then a sense of duty to obey may motivate us to want to be moral.
- **Love –** from a Christian perspective, love for God and His love for us becomes the supreme motivating factor in our desire to do what pleases Him. As we experience His grace we extend His grace to others.

3. Power – How can we be moral?

Secular moral ethicists often assume that human beings are capable of acting morally if they recognise moral truth and are motivated to act in line with it. There is a third problem, however, from a biblical perspective, which is that sin has rendered us incapable of the strength we need to act consistently with what we know to be true and want to do. This struggle is described in Romans 7, where Paul talks about His delight in God's law and yet His powerlessness to obey it. Sin holds us in slavery until we are set free and enabled by God's Spirit to do what truly pleases Him. There is a range of opinion among Christians over the degree to which sin has corrupted our ability to recognise and to do good (is all that the person without Christ does sinful or can they sometimes act without sin?) but all Christians will agree that God's saving power is necessary if we are to become good.

Normative ethics

Normative ethics refers to attempts to identify general moral standards that can guide us as to right and wrong or good and bad behaviour. There are three broad schools of normative ethics:

1. Virtue ethics

Standards are determined on the basis of their consistency with and promotion of virtues (e.g., justice, charity, and generosity), which are dispositions to act in ways that benefit both the person who is acting and the society of

which they are part. The primary concern of virtue ethics is with character and emphasis is placed on the responsibility to educate young people in virtue. If a person develops good character and avoids bad traits (vices) they will act in a virtuous way. Virtue ethics is the oldest form of moral theory in European thought. Plato (427-347 BC) emphasised four virtues which came to be known as cardinal virtues: wisdom, courage, temperance and justice. Aristotle (384-322 BC) wrote about eleven virtues and suggested that extremes in each (either too much or too little) are bad. Christian theologians would later adapt virtue ethics by replacing Platonic and Aristotelian virtues with biblical standards, notably faith, hope and love. Augustine of Hippo (354-430), for example believed that love fulfils and transforms the cardinal virtues. He famously said, "Love, and do what you will".

2. Duty (deontological) ethics

Standards are outlined on the basis of fundamental obligations to do what is right or good and to avoid doing what is wrong or bad. The term deontological is derived from the Greek *deon*, meaning duty. Christian ethicists have historically seen evidence for a deontological dimension to ethics on the basis of Scripture, including the Old Testament Law (notably the Ten Commandments), the teaching of Christ and various commands in the New Testament epistles. There is significant theological debate over the degree to which the Old Testament Law is binding for Christians and exactly how we relate to it. Four major theories of duty ethics have been proposed by Western philosophers in the modern era:

a) Samuel von Pufendorf (1632-1694)

Von Pufendorf believed that we have duties in three directions: towards God, ourselves and others. Towards God we have both a theoretical duty to recognise His existence and nature and a practical duty to worship Him. Regarding oneself, we have duty to our soul, to develop all of its talents, and a duty to our body, to avoid harming it. Concerning others, we have absolute duties to avoid wronging them, to treat them as equals and to promote their good, as well as conditional duties which are based on promises we make them.

b) Rights theory

A person's rights are justified claims about how others ought to behave towards the person. My rights create duties for others. Rights are generally said to be universal across all cultures and equal for all people. John Locke (1632-1704) was an early advocate of rights theory, arguing that God-given natural law dictates that we should not compromise the life, health, liberty or possessions of another. Locke's theory influenced the United States Declaration of Independence with its emphasis on rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

c) Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

Kant sought to identify a fundamental principle of duty, which he called a 'categorical imperative', which would serve as a foundation for all other duties and that would be independent of personal desires or needs. Kant formulated several different categorical imperatives at different times, such as "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law" or "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end."

d) W.D. Ross (1877-1971)

Ross believed in duties that are fundamental to the nature of the universe. His list of duties was shorter than most earlier duty theories:
- *Fidelity*: the duty to keep promises
- *Reparation*: the duty to compensate others when we harm them
- *Gratitude*: the duty to thank those who help us
- *Justice*: the duty to recognize merit
- *Beneficence*: the duty to improve the conditions of others
- *Self-improvement*: the duty to improve our virtue and intelligence
- *Nonmaleficence*: the duty to not injure others

When two or more of these duties conflict with one another, Ross believed that we can depend on intuition to tell us which is our actual duty and which is only an apparent or *prima facie* duty.

3. Consequentialist (teleological) ethics

Moral responsibility is based solely on the consequences behaviour will have. An action is morally right if its consequences are more favourable than unfavourable. The term teleological is derived from the Greek *telos*, meaning 'end'. Consequentialism is based on experience but it raises the question of the relative value of different consequences. Three types of consequentialism can be distinguished on the basis of whose favour is being considered in the decision about an action:

- *Ethical Egoism* – only the consequences for the person performing the action need to be considered.
- *Ethical Altruism* – the consequences for other people must be considered, but the consequences for the person performing the action are unimportant in the decision.
- *Utilitarianism* – the consequences of the action for everyone need to be considered.

The most prominent type of consequentialism is utilitarianism. There are two broad types of utilitarian theory:

a) Act Utilitarianism (e.g., Jeremy Bentham, 1748-1832)

The overall consequences of every action should be weighed to determine whether that action is morally right or wrong. This approach creates some difficulties. If applied strictly it would prohibit activities that are purely leisurely since we could instead be doing something that has greater overall benefit to society. It can also justify individual actions that might appear to be immoral (e.g., torture or slavery) on the basis that they have an overall benefit to society that outweighs any unfavourable consequences.

b) Rule utilitarianism (e.g., John Stuart Mill, 1806-1873)

It is not individual acts that should be judge on the basis of their consequences but moral principles or rules. A rule is morally right if the consequences of adopting it are more favourable than unfavourable to everyone (e.g., rules against theft or murder would appear to meet this test). Individual acts can then be judged against the rules that are formulated.

Another key question for utilitarianism is what consequences are included in our calculation. Possibilities include:

- *Hedonistic utilitarianism* – weighs only pleasure (or happiness) and pain. Both Bentham and Mill argued for hedonistic utilitarianism, even though the former thought in terms of acts and the latter in terms of rules.
- *Pluralist (ideal) utilitarianism* (e.g., G.E. Moore, 1873-1958) – weighs any consequence that we intuitively recognise as good or bad, rather than simply pleasurable or painful (e.g., faithfulness to a friend or spouse might be valued even though it may not always bring pleasure).
- *Preference utilitarianism* (e.g., R.M Hare, 1919-2002) – recognising that we cannot always achieve the ideal, this approach weighs consequences in terms of strength of individual and group preferences.

One major challenge for utilitarian ethics is how to deal with extreme views. Some utilitarians argue that the overall balance of all preferences and desires will lead to a moderate position where extreme views are listened to but cannot skew the final position. Others claim that unacceptable desires or preferences can and should be identified, but this raises the question of what 'unacceptable' means. A pure utilitarian will not accept any duty or virtue definitions but may appeal to past experience to show that some preferences (for example the desire to abuse the elderly) ultimately undermine utilitarian social aims by creating conditions that are adverse to human value. Another objection that is sometimes raised against consequentialist ethics in general is the unpredictability of the outcome of our actions. Proponents of consequentialism counter this by insisting that this is unavoidable but that their approach does, nevertheless, represent a sincere attempt to achieve the best possible outcome.

Applied ethics

Applied ethics is the study of specific controversial issues (e.g., abortion, infanticide, animal rights, ecology, sexuality, capital punishment, or war) using the conceptual framework of metaethics and the moral standards derived from normative ethics. For example, study of an issue like abortion would draw on normative ethics in applying principles such as the right to choice or the right to life and on metaethics in determining whether these principles are universal in

their application and to what beings they apply (i.e., to the mother only, to the fetus only or to both). The challenge of applied ethics arises whenever different normative principles conflict with one another. In practice, if there is no agreed metaethical framework for a discussion it is common to apply a number of different normative principles to the issue and make a decision on the balance of all aspects. In the 'secular' world this means that appeals to God's will are inadmissible since they won't be agreed by nonbelievers.

A typical list of principles derived from different normative schools that might be considered is as follows:

Principles from consequentialism:
- *Personal benefit* – the extent to which an action produces beneficial consequences for the individual in question.
- *Social benefit* – the extent to which an action produces beneficial consequences for society.

Principles from duty ethics:
- *Principle of benevolence* – the duty to help those in need.
- *Principle of paternalism* – the duty to assist others in pursuing their best interests when they cannot do so.
- *Principle of harm* – the duty not to harm others.
- *Principle of* honesty – the duty not to deceive others.
- *Principle of lawfulness* – the duty not to violate the law.
- *Principle of autonomy* – the duty to acknowledge a person's freedom over his / her actions or body.
- *Principle of justice* – the duty to act fairly towards others.
- *Rights* – acknowledges a person's rights to life, information, privacy, free expression, safety, due process etc.

Some of the main areas where applied ethics is often brought to bear include:

- *Bioethics* – moral issues surrounding life and health, e.g., early life issues such as use of embryos, abortion and genetic engineering; end of life issues such as assisted suicide and euthanasia; confidentiality; responsibilities to tell the truth to patients; the interplay between the rights of patients and the responsibilities of professionals (who decides what treatment an individual receives); consent; medical experimentation on human beings; mental capacity.

- *Business ethics* – moral controversies relating to the corporate world, e.g., the social impact of capitalism; deceptive advertising; insider trading; employee rights; job discrimination; drug testing; whistle blowing.

- *Environmental ethics* – the morality of how we use and impact the environment, e.g., rights of animals; animal experimentation; preserving endangered species; pollution control; management of resources; obligation to future generations.

- *Sexual ethics* – moral considerations about sexual behaviour, e.g., include monogamy versus polygamy; sexual relations without love; homosexual relations; extramarital affairs.

- *Social morality* – issues affecting society and law, e.g., capital punishment; nuclear weapons; war; gun control; recreational use of drugs; welfare rights; racism.

A proposed biblical ethical framework

In this final section of this paper I will give a very brief outline sketch of what I believe to be a biblically faithful framework for Christian ethics that draws on the various schools of ethics I have outlined above. This offered very much as a proposal for discussion and I have not engaged in significant reading around the theories of other Christians. I would appreciate any feedback that the interested reader may have! I recognise three levels to biblical ethics:

- The foundation, which correlates to what we have called **metaethics**, rests in the character of the God who created and is sovereign over the universe. At this level moral behaviour is whatever reflects the character of

God. As creatures in God's image we are meant to represent Him to all creation. The Old Testament speaks several times of the need to be holy as God is holy (e.g., Leviticus 11:44-45). God's covenant people, Israel, were meant to show His character to the world. Jesus also taught His followers to be perfect as their Father in Heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48). He taught that the whole Old Testament Law was based on two foundational principles – loving God with all that we are and have and loving our neighbour as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40). The whole duty of mankind is to keep these two basic commands. Paul reflects this same truth in several places (e.g., Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:13-14). If it were possible for us to always know what it means to love God and others and we always acted in keeping with that knowledge then we would be sinless. In reality, however, sin has clouded our understanding and judgement. We can read Scripture and understand what God is like, but if we are to become like God we need the Spirit to transform us into the likeness of Christ, from glory to glory (2Corinthians 3:18). We can imitate God (Ephesians 5:1-2) as we put off the sinful nature and put on Christ. It is love that binds all other Christian virtues together in perfect unity (Colossians 3:14). At this level, then, Christian ethics are **virtue ethics**. Our fundamental aim is to be transformed into the likeness of Christ – to have God's law written on our hearts (Hebrews 8:10) so that we instinctively act in a way that reflects God's likeness and lives in love.

- On the foundation rest solid walls that represent general principles for life. The foundation principle of loving God and loving others is not sufficient to guide our actions. Until Christ returns in glory, when we shall be transformed to be perfectly like Him (1 John 3:2), we are still prone to deception, to selfish desires and to sin. We need greater clarity from God as to how we ought to live. We need **normative ethics** that guide us as to God's will for us. For this reason God gave His Law to Israel. The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) flesh out in general, easily memorisable principles what it looks like to love God (commandments 1-4) and to love our neighbour (commandments 5-10). The specific case laws that follow the Ten Commandments bring greater precision to what this looks like in concrete situations. In totality, however, the Law was given to express Israel's identity as God's people and their faithfulness to Him. Although Christ gave only one command to His followers – to love one another (John 13:34) – He also gave very clear moral direction to how His followers should live. The epistles also contain detailed lists of vices and virtues, guiding us as to how to live in general terms to please God. Indeed, all but one of the Ten Commandments are reaffirmed in the New Testament. Thus, built on the foundation of virtues that reflect God's character, Christian ethics has a **duty** dimension to it on the basis of God's will for us as His people that Scripture reveals. We need God's Spirit to motivate us to want to obey God, to want to live in order to please Him, and we need Scripture to show us the general contours of God's will for us.

- Within the walls of God's principles for life we must decide how to interact with one another. The final level of Christian ethics operates at the level of the everyday decisions that we must make as to how we act in given situations. This is the level of **applied ethics**. The Israelite in Old Testament times was expected to live within the Law, but there were many specific situations that the Law simply didn't speak about (it would be impossible to prescribe the correct actions in every situation). In these situations the Israelite was dependent on wisdom, which is the art of living skilfully, making good decisions. Wisdom, as described in the Wisdom Books (especially Proverbs) guides the steps the wise person takes and depends on understanding what consequences might arise from the decision that will be made. Generalisable rules simply won't work in the complexity of everyday life. Wisdom works within the boundaries of God's law to enable good choices to be made. Christ also expected His followers to be able to develop the skill to figure out what action they should take in a given situation. His famous 'golden rule' (Matthew 7:12) embodies this principle – it depends on our ability to reason out what we would like to happen to us, which includes understanding the likely consequences of our actions. The consistent scriptural emphasis on our part within a larger community of God's people means that we must consider the consequences not only for ourselves but for the community as a whole. This way of thinking is clear in passages like Romans 14-15 where Paul tells the believers how to think through 'disputable matters' on the basis of the impact our actions will have on others. Thus, Christian ethics builds on the foundation of virtue and general duties a final **utilitarian** dimension to moral living. We are not, however, abandoned to our own reason in deciding what to do or not to do. The Spirit of God will lead us step by step as we prayerfully seek His guidance. We must learn to recognise His leading and to follow it rather than our own desires (Galatians 5:16-25).

The following table summarises these three levels of biblical ethics:

	Concern	Guiding principles	Old Testament ethics	Moral behaviour is …	New Testament ethics	Scripture and Spirit
Applied ethics	Specific will of God – what He wants me to do in this particular circumstance	Virtue + Duty + Consequences	Wisdom is needed to walk on straight paths through all of the situations not prescribed in the Law (Proverbs 3:5-6)	Walking in the Spirit – we keep in step with Him, following His leading	So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 7:12) live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. […] if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. […] Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:16, 18, 25) Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, [16] making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. [17] Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. (Ephesians 5:15-17)	Scripture shows us who we are and what we need; the Spirit empowers us to act selflessly for the good of others
Normative ethics	General will of God – what kind of life He wants me to live	Virtue + Duty	Ten Commandments – general principles fleshing out what loving God and others means Specific case laws – detail what loving God and others means in concrete situations	Obedient to the revealed will of God – we obey His commands as found in Scripture	Jesus reworks commandments, restoring their full force and true meaning (Matthew 5:17-47) "The acts of the sinful nature are ... But the fruit of the Spirit is ..." (Galatians 5:19-23) "But among you there must not be even a hint of …. Nor should there be ..." (Ephesians 5:3-4)	Scripture reveals God's desires to us; the Spirit motivates us to want to obey
Metaethical foundation	Character of God – the kind of person He wants me consistently to be	Virtue	"Be holy because I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44-45) Love God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and your neighbour (Leviticus 19:18)	A reflection of the likeness and image of God – it represents His character	"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48) "serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" (Galatians 5:13-14) "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us" (Ephesians 5:1-2)	Scripture reveals God's character to us; the Spirit transforms us inwardly into His likeness

The key principle to recognise in this brief discussion of Christian ethics is that for any action to be moral it must be:

a) *Godly* – consistent with God's character and motivated by love for God first and then for others

b) *Scriptural* – in line with God's revealed will as outlined in the New Testament (we can also learn from the Old Testament Law but must consider how Christ's coming changes our relationship to it).

c) *Wise* – in step with the Spirit as we apply wisdom to each specific situation.

These are not three separate dimensions to any issue – any action that is wise must also be scriptural and any action that is scriptural will, by definition, be godly. These three principles can act as tests to help us assess our behaviour and reach decisions about how we should act.

An invitation to live

The standards I have outlined for Christian ethics creates a very high standard for ethical living, which might even cause us to despair, especially as we realise that any action that is not moral (i.e., that is ungodly, unbiblical or unwise) is sin. This means that we are more sinful than we ever imagined. Our sin does not simply consist in disobedience to what we knew God's will to be but failure to do the good we knew we should do and even immoral actions committed in ignorance of God's will. For this reason it is incredibly important to state as I conclude this paper that God is willing and able to forgive our sins. He is willing to do so because of His great grace and He is able to do so because Christ died in our place and lives to intercede for us. Christian ethics serves as a guide for life, but it also serves as a sign to point us to our need for forgiveness, cleansing and power to live as we ought. You cannot live the Christian life without the power of God's Spirit to transform you. Christian ethics is not simply a moral system, it is an invitation into relationship with the living God who reveals His will, transforms our lives and enables us to obey Him. My challenge to you is to be sure that you have entered into that relationship. To do so you need simply to repent, turning away from living by whatever other standard you were following and depending on whatever other power you depended on (yourself or some other power external to yourself), and to trust in Christ, committing yourself to live in obedience to Him and depending on His power to rescue you and to change you. That is the beginning of the journey, a journey of daily repenting and believing as you turn from self to trust in Christ. I pray that you will begin that journey or that if, like me, you have been on it for some time, you will continue on it today and through your whole life.

Further reading

To explore specific aspects of ethics further you may want to access some of this author's other papers through his website: www.paulcoulter.net (look for the 'Ethics' page under 'Writing'). Other titles currently available there include:

- **What does it mean to be human?** A consideration of this question drawing on science, philosophy and Christian theology. What do Christians believe about mankind? Is this in contradiction to the discoveries of modern science?

- *Misconceptions?* - A Christian perspective on issues in early life ethics and family planning

- **Life as God Intended** - Christian explorations into health, sickness and healing

- **Christian Sexual Ethics** - a study on major sexual health issues facing our society and what the Bible says about sex and sexuality (including homosexuality).

- **End of Life Ethics** - biblical foundations and ethical reflections on end of life issues including advance decisions, withdrawing treatment, euthanasia and assisted suicide.

You can also find out more about the author and contact him through the website.