

CHRISTIAN ETHICS

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES & OPTIONS

SECOND EDITION

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10 11 12 13 14 15 16 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

List of Tables and Chart 9

Preface 11

Part 1 Ethical Options

1. All the Options 15
2. Antinomianism 22
3. Situationism 35
4. Generalism 52
5. Unqualified Absolutism 66
6. Conflicting Absolutism 83
7. Graded Absolutism 97
8. The Basis for Ethical Decisions 116

Part 2 Ethical Issues

9. Abortion 131
10. Infanticide and Euthanasia 160
11. Biomedical Issues 180
12. Capital Punishment 199
13. War 220

14. Civil Disobedience	244
15. Sexual Issues	260
16. Homosexuality	280
17. Marriage and Divorce	299
18. Ecology	314
19. Animal Rights	335
Appendix 1: Drugs	359
Appendix 2: Is Gambling Unethical?	374
Appendix 3: Pornography	381
Appendix 4: Birth Control	396
Glossary	407
Bibliography	412
Index of Scripture	421
Index of Authors	431
Index of Subjects	435

P R E F A C E

This book is a thorough revision of its precursor of two decades ago. All chapters have been updated, and new chapters and appendixes have been added. With moral decay inside and outside the church, never has there been a greater need for an understanding and application of sound ethical principles. I wish to thank my able assistant Bill Roach, who greatly assisted in research and in writing of the extensively revised sections and new chapters in this book. Also, I want thank my faithful wife, Barbara, for help in preparation of the manuscript, especially for her meticulous proofreading. While deeply grateful for their contributions, I take responsibility for the contents.

Part 1

ETHICAL OPTIONS

1

ALL THE OPTIONS

Ethics deals with what is morally right and wrong. Christian ethics deals with what is morally right and wrong for a Christian. This is a book on Christian ethics. Since Christians base their beliefs on God's revelation in Scripture, the Bible will be cited as an authority for conclusions drawn here (see chap. 8).

God has not limited himself to revelation in Scripture; he also has a general revelation in nature (Rom. 1:19–20; 2:12–14). Since God's moral character does not change, it should be expected that there will be similarities and overlaps between God's natural and supernatural revelations. However, the focus of this book is not God's natural law for all people, but his divine law for believers.

Definitions of Ethics

Ethics deals with what is right and wrong morally. Numerous theories have been proposed concerning what is meant by a morally good action (see chap. 8). But it is sufficient here to note the distinguishing characteristics of Christian ethics, each of which will be briefly discussed here.

Christian Ethics Is Based on God's Will

Christian ethics is a form of the divine-command position. An ethical duty is something we ought to do. It is a divine prescription. Of course, the ethical imperatives that God gives are in accord with his unchangeable moral character. That is, God wills what is right in accordance with his own moral attributes. "Be

holy, because I am holy,” the Lord commanded Israel (Lev. 11:45). “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” Jesus said to his disciples (Matt. 5:48). “It is impossible for God to lie” (Heb. 6:18). So we should not lie either. “God is love” (1 John 4:16), and so Jesus said, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39). In brief, Christian ethics is based on God’s will, but God never wills anything contrary to his unchanging moral character.

Christian Ethics Is Absolute

Since God’s moral character does not change (Mal. 3:6; James 1:17), it follows that moral obligations flowing from his nature are absolute. That is, they are always binding everywhere on everyone. Of course, not everything God wills flows necessarily from his unchanging nature. Some things are merely in accord with his nature but flow freely from his will. For example, God chose to test Adam and Eve’s moral obedience by forbidding them to eat a specific fruit on a tree (Gen. 2:16–17). Although it was morally wrong for Adam and Eve to disobey that command, we are no longer bound by that command today. That command was based on God’s will and did not flow necessarily from his nature.

On the other hand, God’s command not to murder (Gen. 9:6) applied before the law was given to Moses, under the law of Moses (Exod. 20:13), and also since the time of Moses (Rom. 13:9). In brief, murder is wrong at all times and all places and for all people. This is true because humans are created in the “image of God” (Gen. 1:27; 9:6). This includes a moral likeness to God (Col. 3:10; James 3:9). And whatever is traceable to God’s unchanging moral character is a moral absolute. This includes such moral obligations as holiness, justice, love, truthfulness, and mercy. Other commands flowing from God’s will, but not necessarily from his nature, are equally binding on a believer, but they are not absolute. That is, they must be obeyed because God prescribed them, but he did not prescribe them for all people, times, and places. Absolute moral duties, on the contrary, are binding on all people at all times and in all places.

Christian Ethics Is Based on God’s Revelation

Christian ethics is based on God’s commands, the revelation of which is both general (Rom. 1:19–20; 2:12–15) and special (2:18; 3:2). God has revealed himself both in nature (Ps. 19:1–6) and in Scripture (19:7–14). General revelation contains God’s commands for all people. Special revelation declares his will for believers. But in either case, the basis of human ethical responsibility is divine revelation.

Failure to recognize God as the source of moral duty does not exonerate anyone, even an atheist, from their moral duty. For “when Gentiles, who do not have the law [of Moses], do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts” (Rom. 2:14–15). That is, even if unbelievers do not

have the moral law in their minds, they still have it written on their hearts. Even if they do not know it by way of cognition, they show it by way of inclination.

Christian Ethics Is Prescriptive

Since moral rightness is prescribed by a moral God, it is prescriptive. For there is no moral law without a moral Lawgiver; there is no moral legislation without a moral Legislator. So Christian ethics by its very nature is prescriptive, not descriptive. Ethics deals with what ought to be, not with what is. Christians do not find their ethical duties in the standard of Christians but in the standard for Christians—the Bible.

From a Christian point of view, a purely descriptive ethic is no ethic at all. Describing human behavior is the task of sociology. But prescribing human behavior is the province of morality. The attempt to derive morals from mores is, as we have already noted, the “is-ought” fallacy. What people actually do is not the basis for what they ought to do. If it were, then people ought to lie, cheat, steal, and murder, since these things are done all the time.

Christian Ethics Is Deontological

Ethical systems can be broadly divided into two categories, deontological (duty-centered) and teleological (end-centered). This is sometimes called consequentialism since the value of an act is determined by its consequence. Christian ethics is deontological. Utilitarianism is an example of a teleological ethic. The nature of a deontological ethic can be seen more clearly by contrast with a teleological view (see table 1.1 on the next page).

A couple of illustrations will clarify this point. Someone tries to rescue a drowning person but fails. According to one form of teleological ethic, this was not a good act because it did not have good results. Since the results determine the goodness of the act, and the results were not good, then it follows that the attempted rescue was not a good act.

Yet a more sophisticated form of teleological (utilitarian) ethic might argue that the attempt was good, even though it failed, because it had a good effect on society. People heard about it and were encouraged to help rescue others in the future. But even here the attempted act of rescue that failed was not good in itself. Rather, it would have been good if and only if it had brought some good results, either for the drowning person or for someone else.

By contrast, the Christian ethic is deontological and insists that even some acts that fail are good. Christians believe, for example, that it is better to have loved and to have lost than not to have loved at all. Christians believe that the cross was not a failure simply because only some will be saved. It was sufficient for all even if it is efficient only for those who believe. The Christian ethic insists that it is good to work against bigotry and racism, even if one fails. This is so because moral actions that reflect God’s nature are good whether they are successful or

not. Good for the Christian is not determined in a lottery. In life the winner is not always right.

TABLE 1.1
Two Views of Ethics

Deontological Ethic	Teleological Ethic
Rule determines the result.	Result determines the rule.
Rule is the basis of the act.	Result is the basis of the act.
Rule is good regardless of result.	Rule is good because of result.
Result is always calculated within the rules.	Result is sometimes used to break rules.

However, Christian ethics does not neglect results. Simply because results do not determine what is right does not mean that it is not right to consider results. Indeed, results of actions are important in Christian ethics. For example, a Christian should calculate in which direction a gun is pointing before he pulls the trigger. Drivers need to estimate the possible consequence of their speed in relation to other objects. Speakers are responsible for calculating the possible effects of their words on others. Christians have a duty to anticipate the results of not being immunized to serious diseases, and so on.

In all the foregoing illustrations, however, there is an important difference between the deontological use of results and a teleological use of them. In Christian ethics these results are all calculated within rules or norms. That is, no anticipated result as such can be used as a justification for breaking any God-given moral law. Utilitarians, on the other hand, use anticipated results to break moral rules. In fact, they use results to make the rules. Existing rules can be broken if the expected results call for it. For example, while Christian ethics allows for inoculation for disease, it does not allow for infanticide to purify the genetic stock of the human race; in this case the end result is used to justify the use of an evil means. In brief, the end may justify the use of good means, but it does not justify the use of any means, certainly not evil ones.

Various Views on Ethics

There are only six major ethical systems, each designated by its answer to the question Are there any objective ethical laws? That is, are any moral laws not purely subjective but actually binding on humans in general?

In answer, *antinomianism* says there are no moral laws. *Situationism* affirms there is one absolute law. *Generalism* claims there are some general laws but no absolute ones. *Unqualified absolutism* believes in many absolute laws that never conflict. *Conflicting absolutism* contends there are many absolute norms that sometimes conflict, and we are obligated to do the lesser evil. *Graded absolutism* holds that

many absolute laws sometimes conflict, and we are responsible for obeying the higher law.

Differences between Various Views

Of the six basic ethical views, two deny all objectively absolute moral laws. Of them, antinomianism denies all universal and general moral laws. Generalism, on the other hand, denies only universal moral laws but holds to general ones. That is, there are some objective moral laws that are binding most of the time but not necessarily all the time.

Four ethical views claim to be forms of absolutism. Of these, situationism believes in only one absolute, while the others believe in two or more absolutes. Of them, unqualified absolutism contends that these absolute moral principles never conflict, while the other two believe that they sometimes do conflict. Of the two that believe these moral principles sometimes conflict, conflicting absolutism contends that we are responsible to do the lesser evil but guilty for whichever one we break. On the other hand, graded absolutism holds that our responsibility is to obey the greater commandment. Consequently, we are not guilty for not following the lesser commandment in conflict with it.

Examples of the Six Major Ethical Views

Corrie ten Boom tells how she lied to save Jews from the Nazi death camps. During U.S. Senate hearings on the Iran-Contra issue, Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North testified that, in the process of performing his duties, he had lied to save innocent lives. North said, "I had to weigh lying and lives."

In a number of biblical stories, people lied to save lives. The Hebrew midwives lied to save the baby boys Pharaoh had commanded them to kill (Exod. 1:15–19). Rahab lied to save the lives of the Jewish spies in Jericho (Josh. 2).

Is it ever right to lie to save a life? This issue will serve to focus the differences among the six basic ethical positions.

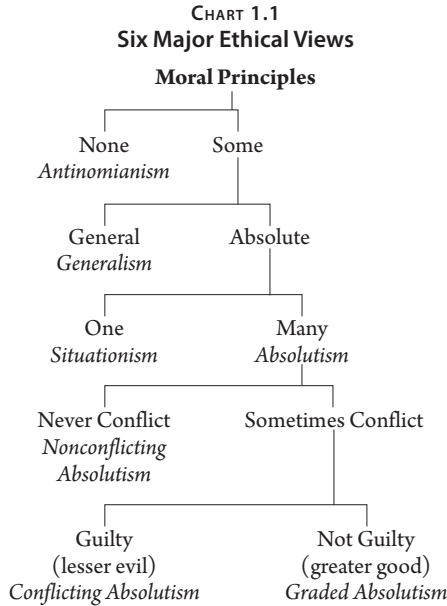
1. *Lying is neither right nor wrong: there are no laws.* Antinomianism asserts that lying to save lives is neither right nor wrong. It affirms that there are no objective moral principles by which the issue can be judged right or wrong. The issue must be decided on subjective, personal, or pragmatic grounds, but not on any objective moral grounds. We are literally without a moral law to decide the issue.
2. *Lying is generally wrong: there are no universal laws.* Generalism claims that lying is generally wrong. As a rule, lying is wrong, but in specific cases this general rule can be broken. Since there are no universal moral laws, whether a given lie is right will depend on the results. If the results are good, then the lie is right. Most generalists believe that lying to save a life is right because

in this case the end justifies the means necessary to attain it. However, lying in general is wrong.

3. *Lying is sometimes right: there is only one universal law.* Situationism claims that there is only one absolute moral law, and telling the truth is not it. Love is the only absolute, and lying may be the loving thing to do. In fact, lying to save a life is the loving thing to do. Hence, lying is sometimes right. Indeed, any moral rule except love can and should be broken for love's sake. Everything else is relative; only one thing is absolute. Thus the situationist believes that lying to save lives is morally justified.
4. *Lying is always wrong: there are many nonconflicting laws.* Unqualified absolutism believes that there are many absolute moral laws, and none of them should ever be broken. Truth is such a law. Therefore, one must always tell the truth, even if someone dies as a result of it. Truth is absolute, and absolutes cannot be broken. Therefore, there are no exceptions to telling the truth. Results are never used as a rationale to break rules, even if the results are desirable.
5. *Lying is forgivable: there are many conflicting laws.* Conflicting absolutism recognizes that we live in an evil world, where absolute moral laws sometimes run into inevitable conflict. In such cases it is our moral duty to do the lesser evil. We must break the lesser law and plead mercy. For instance, we should lie to save the life and then ask for forgiveness for breaking God's absolute moral law. Our moral dilemmas are sometimes unavoidable, but we are culpable anyway. God cannot change his absolute moral prescriptions because of our moral predicaments.
6. *Lying is sometimes right: there are higher laws.* Graded absolutism holds that there are many moral absolutes, and they sometimes conflict. However, some laws are higher than others, so when there is an unavoidable conflict, it is our duty to follow the higher moral law. God does not blame us for what we could not avoid. Thus he exempts us from responsibility to follow the lower law in view of the overriding obligation to obey the higher law. Many graded absolutists believe that mercy to the innocent is a greater moral duty than telling truth to the guilty. Hence, they are convinced that it is right in such cases to lie in order to save a life.

The diagram on the next page is a logical summary of the six major views.

In summary, antinomianism sets forth its view to the exclusion of all objective moral laws. Generalism claims that there are exceptions to moral laws. Situationism holds one moral absolute to the exclusion of all others. Unqualified absolutism insists that there is always an escape from the apparent conflict in absolute moral laws. Conflicting absolutism contends that when moral laws conflict, doing the lesser evil is excusable. And graded absolutism holds that when moral laws conflict, God grants an exemption to the lower law in view of our duty to obey the higher law. Each of these views will be examined in the next several chapters.



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