

CHRISTIAN
ETHICS
AND MORAL
PHILOSOPHY

An Introduction to Issues and Approaches

Craig A. Boyd and Don Thorsen


Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

To
W. Richard Stephens Sr.
and
Laurence W. Wood

© 2018 by Craig A. Boyd and Don Thorsen

Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Boyd, Craig A., author. | Thorsen, Donald A. D., author.

Title: Christian ethics and moral philosophy : an introduction to issues and approaches / Craig A. Boyd and Don Thorsen.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2018] |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018023225 | ISBN 9780801048234 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Christian ethics—Textbooks.

Classification: LCC BJ1251 .B69 2018 | DDC 241—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018023225>

Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

List of Figures v

1. Varieties of Ethics and Moral Thought 1
Case Study: Violence against Women and Children
2. Ethics in the Hebrew Scriptures 21
Case Study: Care for the Environment
3. Ethics in the Christian Scriptures 39
Case Study: The Nearest and the Neediest
4. Divine Command Theory 55
Case Study: Intervention, Exemptions, and Conscience
5. Natural Law Ethics 71
Case Study: Human Sexuality
6. Individualistic Ethics 85
Case Study: Abortion
7. Kantian Ethics 103
Case Study: Capital Punishment
8. Utilitarianism 121
Case Study: War
9. Continental Ethics 137
Case Study: Euthanasia

10. Virtue Ethics	155
<i>Case Study: Lying</i>	
Epilogue: <i>Love and Christian Ethics</i>	173
Glossary	181
Further Reading	188
Scripture Index	197
Subject Index	199

Figures

1.1	The Intersection of Moral Philosophy and Moral Theology	4
1.2	The Domains of Moral Philosophy	8
1.3	Approaches to Moral Theology	11
1.4	Using the Quadrilateral for Applied Ethics	15
5.1	The Hierarchy of Law in Thomas Aquinas	79
7.1	Autonomy and Heteronomy in Kantian Ethics	113
8.1	The Trolley Problem	129
10.1	Courage as a Mean between Extremes	159
10.2	Sufficiency as a Mean between Extremes	160
10.3	The Priority of Prudence among the Cardinal Virtues	160

ONE

Varieties of Ethics and Moral Thought

Men go abroad to admire the heights of mountains, the mighty waves of the sea, the broad tides of rivers, the compass of the ocean, and the circuits of the stars, yet pass over the mystery of themselves without a thought.

—Augustine, *Confessions*

Words to Watch

agapistic ethics	ethics	moral theology
analytic ethics	general revelation	narrative ethics
applied ethics	<i>imago Dei</i>	natural law ethics
biblical ethics	metaethics	normative ethics
consequentialism	morality	quadrilateral
cultural relativism	moral philosophy	relativism
deontological ethics	moral relativism	special revelation
divine command ethics	morals	virtue ethics

Introduction

“Ethics” is a term that usually refers to the academic study of morals and moral systems. We rarely appeal to the general idea of ethics but most often appeal to some specific account that we have in mind, as indicated by the use

of a modifier. We might, for example, speak of professional ethics or personal ethics. These modifiers help us to be more precise with our discussions. We can also talk about the various approaches that people throughout the world adopt with regard to ethics, given their own religious, cultural, and philosophical commitments. As a result, there are Buddhist ethics, Jewish ethics, Hindu ethics, Muslim ethics, Maorian ethics, and Christian ethics.

There are also specifically philosophical approaches to ethics, including Kantianism, utilitarianism, contractarian ethical approaches, ethical relativism, continental ethical approaches, feminist ethics, natural law ethics, natural rights ethics, and virtue ethics. These lists are not exhaustive, but they show that we need to have some qualifications on the term “ethics.” This book is about the relationship between two kinds of ethics: the theories of ethics found in philosophy and approaches found in Christian ethics. It is a conversation between philosophical ethical theories and the Christian tradition that many of these philosophical theories either emerged from or argued against.

What Is the Difference between Morality and Ethics?

We can begin by making an important distinction between morality and ethics. **Morality** concerns the principles and teachings about right and wrong that organize a group of people. These include, for example, prohibitions against lying, murder, and theft, as well as exhortations to honor one’s parents and give aid to those who are suffering. All human communities practice morality in one way or another. Yet not all people take the time to think about the nature of these principles: why they apply, how they apply, and what motivates us to abide by them. Such reflection is the work of ethics, which requires asking important questions about the morality we practice. A contemporary definition of **ethics**, therefore, is the thoughtful reflection and evaluation of various systems of morality around which people organize their lives. We can see this distinction at work in an experience from the life of Augustine (354–430), who is one of the most important philosophical and theological figures in the Christian tradition.

In his spiritual autobiography, *Confessions*, Augustine recounts the story of how he stole some pears from a neighbor’s orchard.¹ He says that one evening some of his friends encouraged him to go out and raid the neighbor’s orchard for pears. The pears were not particularly delicious, but Augustine wanted to go along because there was no fun in stealing them alone. He wanted

1. Augustine, *Confessions* 2.27–35; see *The Confessions: With an Introduction and Contemporary Criticism*, trans. David Meconi, SJ (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012).

“companions in crime.” Augustine reflects that, had it not been for his morally suspect friends, he never would have stolen the pears, but there was a certain social dynamic that influenced his behavior. Years later Augustine still found occasion to reflect on this seemingly unimportant event to ask why he did what he did. What did he find pleasurable in the experience? To what extent was he personally responsible for his actions? To what extent can we place the blame for our sinful actions on other people?

In this brief narrative from the life of Augustine, we can see the difference between morals and ethics. **Morals** are the collective values we live by—the values we ascribe to certain activities and goods. Companionship is a value, but so too are self-restraint and respect for property that belongs to others. Augustine’s morals as a young man had more to do with his desire for acceptance and pleasure than with a concern for integrity and respect. Some people value money above all else, while others see a life of self-sacrifice as most valuable. Some people pursue pleasure at all costs, while still others believe that honesty in all circumstances is to be valued. The point here is that all people have morals since we all value some behaviors over others. Yet we not only judge some moral behaviors as better than others; we also judge some moral systems as better than others. We can ask whether we were justified in some action, whether our intentions were the appropriate ones in a given situation, and whether we followed the guidance of our conscience. These and other questions begin the process of systematic reflection on morals—or what we call “ethics.”

Among those professionals who engage in the practice of ethics, we’ll focus on two kinds: philosophers and theologians. In general, philosophers consider life’s ultimate questions without regard to holding specific theological assumptions. Historically, philosophy is the “love of wisdom” as developed by such figures as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Philosophers often consider questions concerning the ultimate basis of reality, such as whether humans have free will, how knowledge is possible, and how the basic principles of logic work. They also consider questions concerning the ultimate meaning of human existence, such as the nature of the soul and what constitutes the “good life.” On all the aforementioned questions, their work oftentimes overlaps with that of theologians. When philosophers look at questions raised by ethics, this is known as **moral philosophy**—that is, the reflection on and the evaluation of moral principles and norms from the perspective of philosophy.

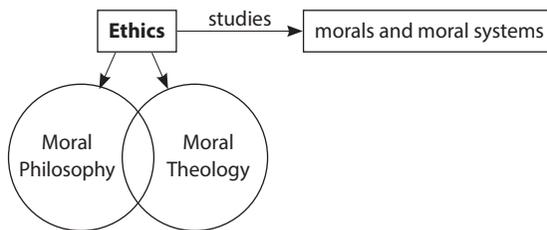
Theologians, however, take beliefs about God to form the core of their ideas about life. They are not as concerned with proving God’s existence as they are with understanding God’s relationship to humanity and how

reconciliation, salvation, and sanctification are possible. In light of these concerns, theologians are often interested in how God’s relationship with humanity shapes and informs our behaviors toward one another and toward God. When theologians consider ethical questions, this is usually known as **moral theology**—that is, the reflection on the moral principles and narratives as found in the Scriptures and church tradition from the perspective of faith.

There is not always a clear distinction between philosophers and theologians (and between moral philosophy and moral theology), since some philosophers have religious commitments, while others do not. For example, Plato and Aristotle—two of the greatest Greek philosophers—both wrote extensively on ethical issues, including themes many Christians hold to be central to the life of faith such as justice, friendship, courage, and self-control. Other philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre were openly hostile to Christian beliefs. Still others like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas blur the lines considerably, since they not only engaged both philosophy and theology but also held to the idea that philosophy without the correcting influence of theology was fundamentally incomplete. As a result, we see that there is often a great deal of overlap between what counts as moral philosophy and what counts as moral theology (see figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1.

The Intersection of Moral Philosophy and Moral Theology



One of the tasks we have in this text is to treat both philosophical and theological approaches to ethics from a Christian perspective. Too often, texts in theological ethics ignore the importance of such thinkers as Plato, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Nietzsche, while texts in philosophical ethics ignore the work of theologians such as Augustine, Aquinas, John Calvin, John Wesley, and Søren Kierkegaard (many of whom are also considered “philosophers”). In reality, theological issues have influenced many so-called secular thinkers, and philosophers have influenced much of Christian thought on ethical issues. As a result, we intend to bring these two disciplines into

conversation with each other. We begin by laying out some of the different approaches to these areas of ethics.

Right, Wrong, and the Good

Traditionally, moral theories have been divided between those that ascribe priority to the notion of what is right (and the corresponding idea of one's duty) and those that see the good (in terms of utility or interests) as the most important factor. Those ethical theories that advocate for the priority of the right are forms of **deontological ethics**,² while ethical theories that see the good as primary are forms of **consequentialism**.³

Deontologists emphasize the idea that an action is right or wrong regardless of the consequences. Moreover, one has a binding moral obligation to perform one's duty once it becomes known. For example, a deontologist would say that one is morally bound to keep one's promises regardless of any good that might come from breaking them, since one has a duty to fulfill as a result of the obligation freely entered into when making the promise.

Consequentialists see morality primarily in terms of the results of any given rule or action. They tend to avoid talk of duty and prefer to think in terms such as "the greatest good," "net utility," or "maximizing interests." A consequentialist would only see keeping a promise as valuable if it promoted good outcomes. Promise keeping, if adopted as a general rule, might promote overall good in some contexts. It all depends on what the consequences are. Lying might actually save someone's life or preserve a person's dignity in some situations.

The distinction between deontology and consequentialism often fails to account for theories such as virtue ethics, feminist ethics, and various forms of existentialism that resist being primarily concerned with either duty or consequences. These other theories emphasize such ideas as the development of specific virtues, authentic and responsible choices, or the practice of compassion.

Moral issues often take place at the intersection of all of these concerns. In both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, which together Christians view as their Bible, we see approaches that sometimes emphasize duty. In some instances, moral actions are associated with punishment and reward. At other times, development of personal character is encouraged. Children are told, "Honor your father and your mother . . . so that your days may be long and

2. Deontological theories include Kantianism, natural rights, and divine command theory.

3. Consequentialist theories include utilitarianism and egoism.

that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you” (Deut. 5:16). But at other times, God issues commands without qualification, lending to the idea that some actions are simply right in themselves—such as “You shall not murder” (Exod. 20:13). At still other times, people are told “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [their] God” (Mic. 6:8).

We can see this conflict played out in contemporary situations when people try to judge among competing alternatives. Consider the case of war. Some Christians appeal to the idea that it may be important to kill in a “just war” so that there may be peace or to protect innocent lives from unjust aggressors. The appeal here is to a consequentialist intuition that God wants peace and that killing, while unfortunate, must be done to achieve peace. In contrast, there are some Christians who appeal to a deontological approach that sees the command against killing to be binding in all circumstances, regardless of the consequences. Others see the command to protect innocent life at all costs as another kind of moral obligation that does not permit exceptions. Still others look to the life of Jesus, when he tells Peter, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matt. 26:52). The idea here is that a life of peacemaking and compassion cannot be understood entirely in terms of either doing one’s duty or maximizing overall utility. In order to understand why Christians might take differing views on the question of killing, we must first consider how to understand the ways in which Christian ethics have been developed and applied.

Christian Ethics

Generally speaking, what makes Christian ethics “Christian” is the centrality of the person and teachings of Jesus Christ. The first place to look for guidance on questions of morals and how to develop an ethic, therefore, is in the Christian Scriptures. One of the most important passages in the Gospels concerns Jesus’s teaching about the first or greatest commandment:

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he [Jesus] answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:28–31)

Of course, here we need to ask about what it means to love, how to love, and who are the various “neighbors” we are commanded to love.

Christians have not always been in agreement about the scope of love and what it requires. Questions about how love determines what is right or wrong and about what a good life is have puzzled all kinds of people, not just Christians. Yet these questions about love in particular—and how love informs our relationships with others—have animated important discussions among various Christian groups about how we should organize our lives around these important ideas.

Christians have tried to understand how this principle of love—as well as those principles that can be derived from it—has application to our lives in diverse ways. Is it ever permissible to lie? Are wars ever just? What should one think about human sexuality? Does one have obligations to care for the environment? Christians have often considered these and other questions in light of the teachings of Jesus and the various traditions of interpretation of his teachings. In turn, these traditions have been variously appropriated, altered, and challenged by many so-called secular theories as well. So we must consider the interaction between Christian ethics and those that offer alternatives to and modifications of the various traditions of Christian moral theology.

Methods in Ethics

Methodological approaches to ethics, at least in philosophy, generally examine assumptions, look for validity and cogency in arguments, consider counterexamples, and attempt to build theories that will appeal to people regardless of their religious convictions. Some philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill, appeal to qualities such as universality and rationality, while others, such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, attempt to undercut every theory as somehow illicitly motivated by a hidden desire for power.

What these various methodologies have in common is that they focus their attention on a consideration of values and principles without an explicit appeal to divine revelation. Some philosophers reject all forms of religious belief, while others see religious beliefs as confirming truths that can be known philosophically. Still other philosophers try to argue to religious truth from philosophical truths. When we consider the views of Kant or Nietzsche, for instance, we need to remember that they are not assuming that God speaks directly to human beings, that they harbor deep suspicions about the binding

nature of religious obligations, and that they often think strictly religious approaches are misguided.

Areas of Ethics

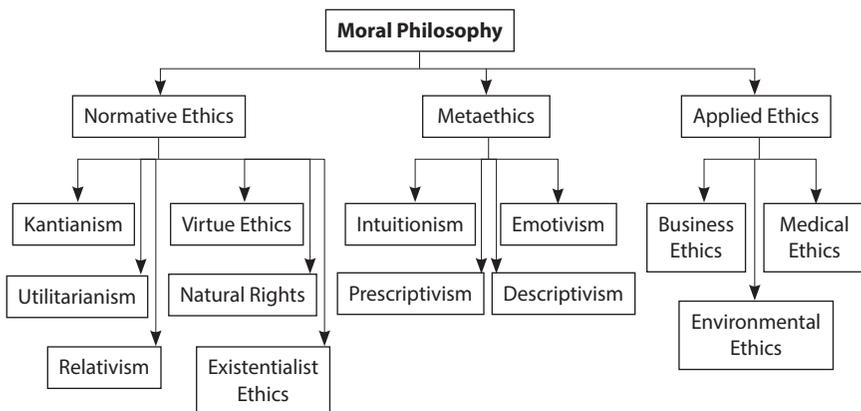
Philosophers traditionally distinguish among three kinds of ethics: normative ethics, metaethics, and applied ethics. **Normative ethics** is an attempt to develop a theory about those central moral principles that should guide our lives. This is what people typically think of when they think of ethical theories. It considers questions concerning the content, motivation, and justification for morality: What should I do? Why should I do what I do? What is the nature of the good or the right?

Metaethics concerns questions regarding the meaning of moral language and the nature of moral properties. Does moral language describe things as they really are? Is there, for example, some real quality called “goodness” that we can point to in a moral act? Or is “goodness” merely a fiction we want to believe? Is moral language about prescribing moral behavior or about encouraging others to “go and do likewise”? Does moral language merely express the emotions of the speaker—such as praise and approval or disgust and condemnation? The focus in metaethics is typically on how we use and analyze moral terms.

Applied ethics is that discipline that engages specific moral issues from a particular moral perspective. Issues regarding capital punishment, care of the environment, treatment of animals, fair trade practices, genetic engineering,

Figure 1.2.

The Domains of Moral Philosophy



and patients' right to medical information are all part of the field of applied ethics. In short, any professional field has issues that can be regarded as applied ethics, and any legal area or domain that considers what people should or should not be permitted to do is part of applied ethics. In figure 1.2, various main categories are listed with common subcategories found within each of those major areas of ethics. In this book, we look primarily at the categories of normative ethics and how they are applied to various moral issues.

Philosophical Approaches

There is no one way to adjudicate among different approaches to philosophical ethics, since there are numerous approaches to the discipline of philosophy itself. The various approaches to philosophy include historical, analytic, continental, process, and Thomistic philosophy, among others. Each approach has various advocates, strengths, weaknesses, and insight into philosophical questions. For the purposes of this book, we focus primarily on the most relevant theories and how they intersect with Christian ethics.

Historical approaches to ethics focus primarily on two things: tracing the historical development of theories or concepts and asking how contemporary thinkers can benefit from the insights of past philosophers. Philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Kant, and Kierkegaard can be valuable resources for addressing the various goods we should pursue, the kinds of virtues we should acquire, the importance of fulfilling our duties, and the centrality of relationship in the moral life.⁴

Analytic ethics derives primarily from Kant in the eighteenth century, and it represents a dominant trend in contemporary philosophy. Important analytic ethicists of the past one hundred years include G. E. Moore, A. J. Ayer, R. M. Hare, and John Rawls. Analytic moral philosophers focus on the meaning of moral language and the validity of the logic employed in ethical argumentation. As a result, much of analytic ethics is in the domain of metaethics.

Continental, especially existentialist, philosophy traces its origins to the work of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche up through twentieth-century philosophers such as Sartre, Martin Buber, Foucault, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida. Continental approaches to ethics focus on a variety of ideas including authentic choices, the existential encounter with "the other," and deconstructing the attempts of those in power to control the masses.

4. A helpful historical approach here is Arthur Holmes, *Fact, Value, and God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

Virtue ethics—and its theological versions, including narrative ethics—has tended to focus less on questions of what kinds of actions are praiseworthy and blameworthy and more on what it means to be a certain kind of person or to live a certain kind of life. According to virtue ethics, moral actions can only be understood within the context of the narrative of one’s life and the character or virtues developed over one’s lifetime. The cultivation of virtues or qualities of character such as justice, self-control, charity, and humility plays a central role in ethical discourse for virtue ethics.⁵

These various—and at times, competing—approaches to ethics are often treated in isolation from one another. It is our intention to be more integrative in this book, dialoguing among these approaches as well as between philosophy and theology, reason and faith.

Theological Approaches

There are a variety of ways in which to proceed in moral theology. Some begin with the biblical narrative and advocate biblical ethics, while others begin with theological commitments such as human depravity, divine transcendence, or the encounter with God. Some develop approaches systematically from a doctrine of God to an understanding of creation or to a theological anthropology, while still others emphasize the role of Christian churches in mediating the moral principles of the Bible to contemporary society.

Many Protestant Christians, especially those in the evangelical tradition, look first to the Bible for moral guidance. Texts such as the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1–17; Deut. 5:6–21), and the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) have a special place since they set out basic rules or principles that believers need to follow if they are to consider themselves true disciples. Protestants generally look to the Bible first and foremost and then to important theological figures who have interpreted the Bible in important ways. Such thinkers as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley play important roles, but they are never on the same level of authority as Scripture.

In contrast, the Roman Catholic tradition holds that the Bible needs the authority of the church to address questions that Jesus and his disciples never faced. Catholics turn first to how their church has traditionally understood

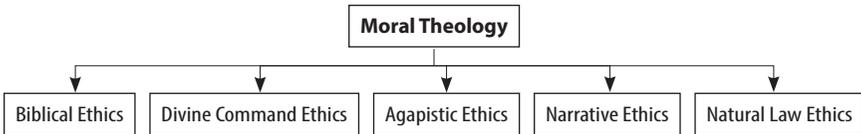
5. See, e.g., Kevin Timpe and Craig A. Boyd, eds., *Virtues and Their Vices* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

various passages and look especially to such figures as Augustine and Aquinas and how they interpreted and applied the tradition in their own historical and cultural contexts. For Catholics, one needs the necessary guidance of the church as found in such documents as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, papal encyclicals, and various ecumenical councils. From this perspective, Scripture cannot be read in isolation from the authoritative role of the Christian community.

Both Protestants and Catholics understand that the moral message of the Christian Scriptures has to be grasped, interpreted, and applied. How Christians do this requires thinking about the meaning of the text, the context of the text, and whether or not that text has a direct bearing on our contemporary discussions. Within the context of moral theology, there are five main alternatives: biblical ethics, divine command ethics, agapistic ethics, narrative ethics, and natural law ethics.

Figure 1.3.

Approaches to Moral Theology



Biblical ethics is an approach to Christian ethics that emphasizes the biblical text above all other authorities by attempting to apply the biblical text to contemporary situations. For example, one might ask whether sexual promiscuity is permissible and then look at the prohibitions from the Decalogue and the epistles of Paul to determine that there is a consistent message that it should be avoided. However, biblical ethics can run into difficulties with other ethical questions such as whether slavery is permissible. On the one hand, slavery was permitted in both ancient Israel and early Christian churches. On the other hand, Galatians 3:28 teaches, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” This verse suggests that in churches there should be no moral distinctions based on ethnicity, gender, or status. Here one has to take into account the meaning and interpretation of the texts and how they can or should be applied in contemporary contexts. (Cf. Paul’s Letter to Philemon encouraging Philemon to receive Onesimus—a runaway slave—as a brother in Christ.)

Divine command ethics is an approach to Christian ethics that holds that whatever God commands is right, and whatever God forbids is wrong.⁶ On this view, obedience to the commands of God (as found in the Bible) is the primary criterion of what makes for good and evil acts. But how do we know that it is God who commands these actions, and which commands to obey? When we ask which commands we should obey, we encounter some problems. For example, should we obey the dietary laws about not eating shellfish in the Hebrew Bible? How do we (or should we) apply these commands in the twenty-first century?

A third theological alternative is agapistic ethics.⁷ **Agapistic ethics** is an approach to Christian ethics that takes the command to love as the central theme. This approach is based on Jesus's commands to his followers: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:37–40). Thinkers as diverse as Augustine, Aquinas, and Kierkegaard have all emphasized the primacy of this command. The issue here is not just the importance of the command but also its primacy. Another issue is how a person can acquire the ability to love not only one's friends and relatives but also one's enemies (Luke 6:27–28). Other questions concern whether there are some people who should be loved more than others and whether the intention to love is the only thing that matters.

Narrative ethics is an approach to Christian ethics that sees that virtues must be developed within the ongoing narrative of Christian churches and the practices they inculcate in their disciples. It shares a good deal with its philosophical counterpart, virtue ethics, but places virtue ethics within a larger narrative context. Theologian Stanley Hauerwas argues that for Christian ethics narrative is primary and that rules and principles are secondary. Discipleship, for Hauerwas, is more about being a certain kind of person than it is discovering the right rule that we should apply in any given context.⁸ If one considers the rules of the Ten Commandments, for example, one finds that they begin with this verse: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exod. 20:2). According to narrative ethicists, the commandments make no sense apart from the ongoing story of God's faithfulness.

6. A comprehensive approach to divine command ethics is Janine Marie Idziak, *Divine Command Morality: Historical and Contemporary Readings* (New York: Mellen, 1978).

7. See Gene Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).

8. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

A final alternative is **natural law ethics**, which is an option in both moral theology and moral philosophy. The tradition of natural law ethics holds that some moral principles are in all humans because of the ways in which God created humans. Reflection on human nature and human communities provides the content for much of human morality, and these principles are so “natural” that all people, regardless of culture or religion, can discover them. In moral philosophy, it serves as the basis for a kind of universal morality, wherein all people can agree on some basic moral norms. C. S. Lewis appeals to this kind of thinking when he argues that all societies share some universal moral principles, such as prohibitions on murder and lying.⁹ In moral theology, natural law is often employed by Catholic theologians concerning issues of social justice, sanctity of life, and human sexuality. Here natural law is seen as a continuation and application of moral principles found in the Bible and applied to current issues in morality. Questions concerning the nature of marriage and divorce, although addressed in the Bible, have different contexts and implications some two thousand years later.

General and Special Revelation

When considering the moral message of the Christian Scriptures, we discover that there are at least two ways in which God communicates to humanity: general revelation and special revelation. **General revelation** has to do with what people can know through their natural abilities and by observation of the world in which they live. Such knowledge is available to everyone and is thought by some to reveal at least basic religious knowledge about God. Thomas Aquinas says the ability to know God through nature is due to the “light of natural reason” that God has implanted in every human being.¹⁰ Psalm 19:1 says that “the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork,” which suggests that the glory of God and God’s existence can be known by observation of the created order of the world.

God’s existence is thought to be communicated to all people, mysteriously by their observance of the world that God created. Such knowledge not only tells people about God, but the Bible says it also confirms their sinfulness and God’s judgment on them. In Romans 1:18–19, the apostle Paul says: “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has

9. See, e.g., C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1947); C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1952).

10. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.1.2, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger, 1947).

made. So, they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened” (Rom. 1:20–21). An important concept here is that of sin, the separation or alienation from God and from one’s neighbor. As a result, people fail to honor God and to live the kinds of lives to which they are called. What is needed is the restorative work of grace that can only be understood through the idea of special revelation.

In the Christian tradition, **special revelation** has to do with God’s disclosure of particular knowledge required for salvation, especially as revealed through the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹¹ By grace, God makes it possible for people to be healed from sin and from those habits and behaviors that prevent them from living lives that reflect the *imago Dei*, or the image of God. The concept of the *imago Dei* has also been given to humans through special revelation (e.g., Gen. 1:26–27). God reveals in the early chapters of Genesis that humans have been created in God’s own image, which gives them a unique value and responsibility in all creation. Hence murder is considered especially sinful since it is a kind of direct attack on the image of God and consequently an attack on the Creator.

Special revelation occurs in many ways but primarily through the Scriptures and most fully in the person of Jesus Christ. Oral traditions were written down and sometimes compiled by editors until a body of sacred writings emerged as the Hebrew Scriptures. During the first century, Jesus and first-generation Christians revered the sacred writings they received and exhorted others to live by them. The Beatitudes (Matt. 5:1–12), for example, were a particularly important set of ethical teachings for the early church. Yet how these teachings were transmitted and interpreted remained an open question.

Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience

A helpful paradigm for understanding issues of religious authority for Christian ethics can be summarized by the so-called **quadrilateral**, which is an approach to Christian reasoning that includes reference to the authorities of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.¹² This paradigm does not resolve potential tensions among the four authorities, but it does provide useful categories and contexts for the study of Christian ethics and moral philosophy.

11. The Greek term for “gospel” is *euangelion*—“evangel” or “good news.”

12. This concept is attributed to John Wesley’s fourfold understanding of religious authority and theological method, which his followers describe as the “Wesleyan quadrilateral.” See Don Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral* (1990; repr., Lexington: Emeth, 2005).

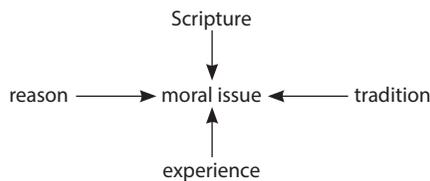
A great deal of knowledge is generally available to all people, regardless of their religious commitments. Such knowledge comes through reason and experience. Although historically some Christians have been suspicious of the extent of knowledge attainable through reason (e.g., critical thinking, philosophy, metaphysics) and experience (e.g., personal experience, social experiences, and the sciences), most Christians presuppose their general reliability. The success of the sciences since the time of the Renaissance is testimony to this. Whether we want to admit it or not, we all assume some degree of reliance on our reasoning and experiential capabilities (e.g., our ability to perceive words on the page of a book and to understand the words with our minds). Reason corresponds fairly well both to those truths we can gain through the discipline of philosophy and to what Christians call general revelation.

Even so-called special revelation requires the use of human abilities of reason and experience. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God revealed special knowledge to people through, for example, visions and dreams. The reception of such knowledge relies on our experiences and thoughtful reflection as much as it relies on divine agency in communicating special revelation. The reception of special revelation through the Bible also requires people’s capabilities to read, interpret, and apply the subject matter theologically and ethically. Since the time when the Bible was canonized, some Christians have wanted to treat it as something untainted by human contact. Yet every interpreter of the Bible needs to understand the historical, literary, and cultural context of biblical revelation in order to interpret and apply it. Otherwise the result of one’s reading of Scripture is merely an uninformed opinion on whatever the topic happens to be.

At the same time, Christians also affirm that church traditions have special relevance to understanding and applying biblically oriented beliefs, values, and practices. As we have seen, while Protestants generally relegate tradition to a subordinate role to the authority of Scripture, Roman Catholics view tradition—in terms of the authority of their church—as a necessary correlative of the Bible. Regardless of the specific religious tradition one inhabits

Figure 1.4.

Using the Quadrilateral for Applied Ethics



and the relative significance given to the role of tradition, the Bible together with tradition, reason, and experience provide useful categories for the study of moral theology. There is disagreement among Christians with regard to a right understanding and application of tradition, reason, and experience, just as there is disagreement with regard to a right understanding and application of the Bible. But at some point all religious authorities need to be considered and discerned in order to deal with the complex, real-life issues people face, especially when considering the various Christian approaches to ethics. For one way to understand how to use the quadrilateral for applied ethics, see figure 1.4.

Case Study: Violence against Women and Children

Around the world, many cultures maintain practices that can be viewed as promoting violence, especially against women and children. Among those socially approved practices are child marriages, human trafficking, and female genital mutilation. The International Center for Research on Women estimates that a third of all women worldwide are married before the age of eighteen. In many countries, they are married off before the age of fifteen and have little to no participation in the marriage contract. In some places a child bride can be married at age twelve or younger.

One version of **relativism**, the ethical theory that there are no universal moral truths, is **cultural relativism**, which holds to the idea that people in one culture cannot judge the actions of people living in another culture. On this view, no culture, religion, or temporal perspective is uniquely privileged. As a result, people living in Canada should not judge the behaviors of people living in Mozambique, and people living in Mozambique should refrain from judging people in Canada. It is only from *within* a culture that one can make moral judgments. To judge from the outside that the practice of child brides is wrong would be to misapply the judgments from another culture to this practice. Even a person who already lived within that culture could not criticize the practice, since this is what the culture already approves. In other words, whatever a culture does is right for that culture because it is what the culture does.

Another version of relativism is **moral relativism**, which is the idea that there are no universal moral principles that all people, regardless of their culture, recognize as obligatory. In this version, a person might say to another, “Well, that might be morally true for you, but it’s not for me.” A moral relativist thinks that all morality is relative to the individual and therefore subjective.

Questions of morality are not like questions of fact, since there is no truth that can be known about moral principles. For this view, universal moral principles simply do not exist. As a result, all moral convictions are merely matters of taste or preference. One person may like chocolate while another likes vanilla, but there is no truth to the question of whether chocolate or vanilla is better. In reducing all moral questions in a like manner, anything is permissible since there is no authority to which we can appeal. In this way, moral relativism is weaker than cultural relativism since the cultural relativist can at least appeal to social norms to provide a kind of authority higher than the individual's opinion.

One can see that relativism is a deeply flawed theory since it sanctions some truly horrific behaviors. For example, if a culture (or an individual) determined that public torture was morally permissible, then no one could say otherwise. Those from within the culture would not have the critical faculties necessary to criticize the practice, since they would naturally assent to it as part of the culture. Those outside the culture would not be able to criticize it, as it is not their culture. Further, one would not be able to make any kind of moral progress from within the culture. The work of abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass in America or William Wilberforce in England would have been impossible since, as members of a culture that practiced slavery, they could only assent to the practice without criticizing it. But clearly they were able to criticize the practice even from within the practicing culture.

If we agree that relativism is inadequate as an ethical theory, then we are still left with the question of how to employ the approaches of moral philosophy and moral theology to practices such as forcing children into marriages with adults. We might appeal to the idea of natural rights—that all people possess the right to self-determination and that this idea is inconsistent with the practice of selling a human being. Or we could ask the question of consequences. Utilitarians, for example, might ask who benefits and who is harmed from such a practice. The data show that many girls sold into marriages suffer abuse and can even be murdered. As a result, for both natural rights theorists and utilitarians, such a practice would be wrong.

Moral theology could offer a number of different approaches as well, all of which would likely agree that the practice is wrong. Consider the quadrilateral for guidance. The Bible, when understood in its historical and cultural context, might not initially be too helpful here, as the practice of marriage has changed considerably over the past two to three millennia. Yet we could look at more general biblical principles—such as Jesus's exhortation to “do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31)—or look at Jesus's

frequent exhortations to compassion. Such biblical passages would all need interpretation and application. We could even say that compassion is a basic principle throughout the Bible and that to fail to practice it would be wrong, regardless of the cultural context.

Reason might help us not only to interpret moral passages of the Bible but also to suggest how to think consistently about child marriages and how they parallel the issue of slavery. If we do not sanction slavery, then how could we possibly sanction child marriages? We could also employ logic here to the broader topic of relativism in order to undermine it as a theory. Consider the following valid argument:

If relativism is true, then it is impossible to put an end to immoral practices.
But it is possible to put an end to immoral practices (such as slavery).
Therefore, relativism cannot be true.

Reason, therefore, asks questions of consistency, implication, and logical relations.

Tradition becomes a tricky source. The Christian tradition includes various strands of Protestantism as well as Catholic and Orthodox Churches. These faith traditions emphasize various aspects of the Christian message. Yet some cultures see their own traditions as fixed and unchanging. One could argue that tradition is the keeper of truth in the sense that a tradition might have a clear prohibition on, for example, killing innocent persons. However, sometimes traditions can serve to maintain deeply embedded prejudice, which is wrong regardless of how long it has been in existence.

Finally, one can consult experience. Hearing the stories of young women who have survived the experience of being sold off in a marriage contract can provide moral data for thoughtful people to consider. Scientific research on physical and physiological harm should also be weighed and evaluated.

In short, using the quadrilateral makes clear that the practice of child marriages is wrong, regardless of one's particular theological perspective. As we work through other theories and approaches throughout this book, we will see in greater depth how these approaches converge and diverge and how they could be used to answer similar questions.

How to Use This Book

This text is intended as an introduction. As such it does not cover every conceivable topic, nor does it intend to. Rather, the book attempts to lay out some basic options in both moral philosophy and Christian ethics.

Each chapter addresses at least one major foundational topic or normative theory. There is also the opportunity to consider a current applied issue in order to facilitate the reader's understanding of how the theory works.

Each chapter can be read on its own without reading the prior chapters. At the beginning of each chapter there are important terms that the reader should know ("words to watch"), which are also provided in bold throughout the text. The glossary at the end of the book will aid readers in quickly locating key terms and their definitions. At the end of each chapter there are discussion questions that are designed to aid readers—especially in classroom settings—to consider how the theory in question might address specific moral issues.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between ethics and morals? How is this distinction helpful? How would you define each of these terms in your own words?
2. What is the difference between right and wrong? How do determinations of right and wrong differ from determinations of the good? How is this distinction helpful?
3. What are the three basic areas of moral philosophy? How are they helpful in sorting out different moral problems?
4. What distinguishes Christian ethics from other approaches to ethics? What points of intersection do they share?
5. To what religious authorities do Christians specifically appeal in ethical decision-making? To what extent are these authorities helpful or potentially problematic?
6. Are the categories of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience relevant in ethical decision-making? How might one apply these authorities to various issues like euthanasia, lying, and world hunger?
7. In what ways can both moral philosophy and moral theology respond to the challenge of cultural relativism?