

MORAL CHOICES: Considering the Alternatives

An Introductory Course in Ethics

Why this course? The reason is to equip believers¹ with some basic tools of moral reasoning so that both in our personal lives, disciple making and our evangelism, we can more wisely and confidently navigate the shoals of the cultural landscape.

It seems that today we're bombarded with declarations of how we "should" or "should not live". The voices are loud and often belligerent. Consider the latest headlines and moral pronouncements forcefully come through the page, screen, or I-phone. These assertions come from a variety of sectors² that operate under a particular worldview which guides how people think and live.

Moral demands and judgments are placed on us all, but how do we determine whether or not they are true and thus ought to be obeyed? Populace opinions often lack substance yet the views of those that are loudest and strongest mute the voices of those who are not.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to be salt and light³ in the world, not retreat from it. We have a rich tradition of knowledge in all sectors alluded to above, so cowering need not be our legacy. Instead through a little bit of instruction and effort, we can confidently, courageously, compassionately and courteously engage the issues of our day.

This section in our study will cover:

- The impact of Worldviews on the topic of Ethics
- The major elements of a Worldview
- The reasons for why we should study Ethics
- An overview of the course material in Ethics

¹ Nonbelievers can benefit from the contents to be covered, but this course has the Christian disciple in mind who too often is not taught the forthcoming material.

² From science, philosophy, theology, psychology, the family, the state, politics, law, education, business, sports, music, theatre, entertainment or religion

³ See Appendix A: What Does it Mean to be Salt and Light? Mathew 5:13-16

- Some key terms and distinctions in Ethics
- Major categories in Ethics
- Ethical systems and their categories

A WORD ON WORLDVIEWS AND HOW THEY IMPACT OUR STUDY

There's been a lot of "worldview" talk the past twenty years or so and perhaps it's not clear to you what this is about. Worldviews are inescapable, at times conflated with opposing positions and when this occurs the "say what?" detector should sound off in your mind. A worldview has to do with the way human beings filter all their thinking and living and reveals what is ultimately valuable to them. There are elements to a worldview and psychological attachments that undergird them that are worthy of note.

NON-THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THEORETICAL THOUGHT

There's something called the *Non-theoretical Foundations of Theoretical Thought* which are inescapable.⁴ The areas of science, philosophy, and theology are strongly affected by non-theoretical considerations and these affect the way ethics are done. This is not always bad, but what's important to understand is that the personal dimension is always participating when a worldview is either: evaluated, accepted or rejected. There's no such thing as "neutrality", just like there's no such thing as "dry" water.

People sometimes have psychological barriers that affect their embrace of a view for example because of racial prejudice. People are never neutral, there's always a position held that has a contrary stance. Thus when disagreements adhere, be conscious that there are underlying philosophical, theological, and psychological reasons advanced in ethical discourse.

THE MAJOR ELEMENTS OF A WORLDVIEW

Along with the psychological and sociological reasons for why people hold their views are the actual worldviews that run their motives and actions even if they can't articulate them.

⁴ Taken from chapter 1 "What is a Worldview", by Ronald H. Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict: Choosing Christianity in a World of Ideas*, Zondervan Publishing House, © 1992 by Ronald H. Nash.

According to Philosopher Ron Nash, there are five major elements to a worldview (others place more categories) that consist of the construct of how people make sense of reality. These include our understanding of God, ultimate reality, knowledge, morality, and humankind.

First, there's the *God* question which is the most important aspect of a worldview because it dictates to us what is *ultimate* to us. The famous Reformation Theologian, John Calvin observed that all men are incurably religious, that it's our nature to give ourselves to something or someone. Whatever that object of ultimate concern is for us, will be our God/god.

Second, there's the nature of *Ultimate Reality* which involves metaphysical beliefs (i.e., the nature of a thing). Here is where such questions as; "What's the relationship between God and the universe?" or "Is the universe eternal?" or "Is there purpose in the universe?" or "What does it mean to be human?" are considered.

Third, there's the element of *Knowledge* which deals with epistemology (i.e., the study of how we know anything). Everyone holds beliefs about how we know what we know, whether we can know anything at all, or what counts as knowledge (e.g., scientific vs. philosophical or theological). Questions are raised like "Can God reveal Himself to people with information?" or "Are we only a body and not a soul?" or "What's the difference between reason and religious faith?"

Fourth, there's the aspect of *Ethics* which deals with the *ought-ness* of our conduct (i.e., our morals and thus the focus of our course). Most people live here where the pronouncement of a deed are either seen to be good or bad (e.g., in sports the steroid issue and the integrity of the games). Good worldview analysis will not only *describe* an action, but also consider the *right-ness or wrong-ness* of any action.

Fifth, there's the *Humankind* question which deals with anthropological issues (i.e., what is mankind? Are we only material bodies? Do we have a soul? Is that Soul an enduring "I", etc.).

Conclusion: we all have a worldview. Competing worldviews are the basic cause for our disagreements. There are divides within the same worldview for example in the Christian church. A cursory glance at Christendom's history unfolds over two millennia of agreement over God's nature (it's Trinitarian) yet varied views on the church, authority, baptism, end times, divorce, etc. obtain.

Having said that, once we arrive at a clear understanding of what makes for the essentials of any given worldview, then we will be able to discern when the borders of said ideas are crossed and when this occurs, we will know there's a falsehood lurking in the shadows.

The issue is: "Do we have the right conceptual scheme so that we can understand more clearly questions about God, ultimate reality, ethics, knowledge, and anthropology or not?"

1 INTRODUCTION: WHY STUDY ETHICS?⁵

I. WHY BE MORAL?

- a. The Greek Philosopher Plato in his *Republic* held that being moral was inherently valuable, apart from any additional benefits it produced or harm that it enabled a person to avoid.
- b. Why be moral? Most people associate doing well in life with being a good person.
- c. One of the principal reasons for being moral is that it is central to most concepts of human fulfillment
- d. For the *Christian*, being moral is critical to a life that seeks to honor God [p.11]

II. WHY ARE ETHICS IMPORTANT?

- a. Because they give direction to people and societies, who have some sense that they cannot flourish without being moral (e.g., drug

⁵ Although other resources will be considered and cited, the topic headings and core material comes from the book by Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995, 2000, 2009 Scott B. Rae)

addiction, violence in schools, teenage pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, etc.)

- b. Because moral questions are at the heart of life's most important issues, moral deliberation is filled with *metaphysical questions* (e.g., of the nature of what is right/wrong in a given situation, etc.).
 - i. In politics and law people expect their public officials to have a measure of transparency and telling the truth, as revealed in candidate Kennedy's speech last night poking at the Trump administration and the alleged Russian connection in the White House.
 - ii. In business I'm always hearing "*do the right thing*" which implies there's a way to do the "*wrong thing*". If for example the consumer is provided full disclosure of a products upside and downside they tend to feel helped rather than harmed, informed rather than manipulated.
 - iii. At the core, these metaphysical questions govern *how we treat* people or *how we ought to treat* people. All these questions presuppose what it means to be human, and here is where today there's a tremendous amount of confusion.
- c. Because we face moral choices every day. We want to somehow justify why something is right or wrong. This goes not only for teenagers but for their parents as well.
 - i. ***When facing complex issues*** of the culture (e.g., abortion, war, capital punishment, homosexuality, gender identity, etc.), and said issues are debated everyday
 - ii. What many of these issues share is a fundamental disagreement over ***the ultimate source of moral authority***

1. Some hold that the ultimate authority is the **human construction**, while others hold and insist that
 2. Moral authority has its ultimate grounding in the **transcendent/general and special revelation from God**.
- d. Because our society as a whole, is **bewildered** with the aforesaid issues and are absolutely lost as to resolving dilemmas that obtain. Moreover, many of these dilemmas deal with scientific and technological issues.
 - e. Because there's a sense that ethics are necessary for dealing with our increasingly technological society where issues arise and we have not had enough time for ethical reflection (e.g., the I-phone, social media, etc.)
 - f. Because many in our culture are aware of the increasing decline in morality of the society [Pp.12]

III. **OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK:** The book will expose you to the foundations and the applications of ethics. The areas to be covered:

- a. **Christian Ethics**
- b. **Ethical Systems & Ways to Reason Morally**
- c. **Making Ethical Decisions**
- d. **Abortion & Embryonic Stem Cell Research**
- e. **Reproductive Technologies**
- f. **Biotechnology, Genetics, & Human Cloning**
- g. **Physician Assisted Suicide & Euthanasia**
- h. **Capital Punishment**
- i. **Sexual Ethics**
- j. **The Morality of War**
- k. **Ethics & Economics**

IV. INTRODUCING KEY TERMS AND DISTINCTIONS IN ETHICS

- a. *Morality* refers to the actual **content of** right and wrong. This considers the custom, manners, or conduct of anyone. Here, human activities are seen as either wrong/right, good/bad, correct/incorrect.⁶
- b. *Ethics* refers to the **process of** determining right and wrong. This is where the concepts of right/wrong are analyzed and the nature of morality is considered.⁷
- c. Ethics is both an art and a science. Morality is the end of ethical deliberation, the substance of right and wrong. [P.15]

| MAJOR CATEGORIES | |
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| <p>DESCRIPTIVE ETHICS: is a sociological discipline that attempts to describe the morals of other societies. It's anthropological in scope which observes people's behavior. This discipline describes behavior</p> | <p>NORMATIVE ETHICS refers to the discipline that produces moral norms or rules as its end product. NE <i>prescribes</i> moral behavior. When most people debate over ethics, it's over <i>normative ethics</i> or what the moral <i>norm</i> should be. This discipline prescribes behavior</p> <p>There are also norms of good taste and social acceptability called <i>etiquette</i> [P.15]</p> |
| <p>METAETHICS is the discipline that investigates the meaning of moral language, or the epistemology of ethics, and also considers the justification of ethical theories and judgments (e.g., <i>right, wrong, just</i>). This discipline explores the what, why and ought</p> | <p>ARETAIC ETHICS is a category that focuses on the virtues produced in the people, not the morality of specific acts. The term <i>aretaic</i> is Greek for <i>virtue</i> and it's also known as virtue theory</p> |

⁶ Peter A. Angeles, *The Harper Collins Dictionary of Philosophy*, pg.194 2nd Edition, © 1992 Peter A. Angeles,

⁷ *Ibid.*, pg.92

**MAKING MORAL JUDGMENTS REQUIRES AT LEAST FOUR THINGS:
A.M.C.C.**

| <i>ACTION</i> Itself | <i>MOTIVE</i> itself | <i>CONSEQUENCES</i> of | <i>CHARACTER</i> of the Moral |
|---|---|---|--|
| <p>Focus of a moral judgment</p> <p>(e.g., Joe pushed the old lady out of the way and fractured her left arm)</p> | <p>Should be evaluated also known as “<i>the moral actor</i>”</p> <p>(e.g., Joe pushed the old lady out of the way to save her life from a car that was about to hit her)</p> | <p><i>Actions and Decisions</i></p> <p>Keep in mind that an action may be inherently right or wrong regardless of the consequences</p> <p>(e.g., Joe pushed the old lady out of the way to save her life but fractured her arm by falling)</p> | <p><i>CHARACTER of the Moral Actor</i></p> <p>This is the tendency of a person to act in predictable ways over time</p> <p>(e.g., Joe is a man who values the life of all people, especially the helpless and elderly, and is bent toward bringing good into their lives)</p> |

ETHICAL SYSTEMS

Ethical Systems may be classified as either *action-oriented* or *virtue* based systems. It's under these two major divisions that three sub-divisions obtain.

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| <p>DEONTOLOGICAL the Greek term “deontos” means that which is binding, needful or right.⁸</p> <p>It is the study of principles in which actions, character or intentions are <i>inherently</i> right/wrong. Thus, the results are not king, <u>the end</u> here does not necessarily justify <u>the means</u>. Thus, principle, not pragmatics rule the day.⁹</p> <p>Three primary systems under deontological ethics:</p> <p>a) Divine command theory where all moral commands derive from God’s commands;¹⁰</p> <p>b) Natural law is where moral principles can be deduced to govern and inform human behavior apart from Scripture;¹¹ this is the knowledge bestowed on all people by God</p> | <p>TELEOLOGICAL are based on the end result produced by an action, which has no inherent right or wrong.</p> <p>This is <i>utilitarian</i> in focus, which holds that the action that produces the greatest good for the greatest number is the moral choice.</p> <p>Also, there’s <i>ethical egoism</i> which holds that the right thing to do is whatever is in the person.</p> | <p>RELATIVISM holds that right and wrong are not absolute and unchanging, but relative to one’s culture or one’s personal preferences (e.g., Whatever is right for you is right for you...)</p> |
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⁸ Liddell & Scott *Greek- English Lexicon*, Pg. 379, (Oxford University Press, 9th edition 1992)

⁹ Peter A. Angeles, *The Harper Collins Dictionary of Philosophy*, pg.93, 2nd Edition, © 1992 Peter A. Angeles,

¹⁰ Philip L. Quinn, “Divine Command Ethics”, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Editor Ted Honderich, pg.203, © Oxford University Press 1995, the Bath Press Ltd.

¹¹ C. Stephan Evans, *Pocket Dictionary: Apologetics & Philosophy of Religion*, Pg.78, ©2002 by C. Stephan Evans, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Il.

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| <p>(Rom.1)</p> <p>c) Ethical rationalism is where reason is the primary source of ethical knowledge and superior to and independent of sense perceptions.¹²</p> | | |
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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why should we be moral?
2. How would you distinguish between ethics and morality?
3. How are moral assessments made and what needs to be considered other than the action?

¹² Peter A. Angeles, *The Harper Collins Dictionary of Philosophy*, pg.252