

# Ethics apart from the Bible

Ethics is the study of standards of right and wrong, and the basis for making moral judgments. Morality is concerned with the day-to-day actual conduct and human activity as it is guided by (or not guided by) the principles and rules of proper behavior. This survey uses Carl Henry's Christian Personal Ethics as a resource.

## Ethics is concerned with several questions:

- **What is the highest good - the summum bonum of human existence?** For the Christian - the answer is stated in the first question of the Shorter Catechism: "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."
- **What is the source of our knowledge of the highest good?** For the Christian - it is the Bible, the Word of God.
- **What is the final authority for what is right and wrong?** For the Christian it is God, and He will judge every man.
- **What motivates a man to be good?** For the Christian, God has commanded it; but the believer is also motivated by the love of God.
- **Is a man free to act in a moral manner?** The problem of the freedom of the will. The Bible teaches that man was created with moral responsibility, but sin has corrupted his morality. While sinners may act in morally proper ways, sin has to be dealt with first, if one is to please God, and God deals with sin through the redemptive work of Christ.

## But what of the ethics of the unbeliever?

How has he answered these questions? There are three main approaches taken in secular thinking: Naturalism, Idealism and Existentialism.

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### **Naturalism**

Naturalistic Ethics presupposes that 1) nature is the ultimate reality, 2) man is essentially an animal, and 3) truth and right are intrinsically time-bound and changing.

Elementally, naturalism takes many forms...a business man who decides that while honesty is the best policy as a commercial rule, yet now and then considers it is permissible to strike it rich by clever duplicity; the college student who accepts

grading as necessary, but does not hesitate to cheat occasionally, especially on finals; the statesman who deliberately violates a treaty in order to gain strategic advantages - they may not have systematized Naturalism as their world view, but repudiate the ultimacy of values.

Systematically, we find Naturalism at the heart of Hedonism - where pleasure is the universal rule for life. As developed by the Epicureans (c. 300 B.C.) it was not a wanton orgy of eating, drinking and sex, but a matter of finding happiness by

observing nature's limits and avoiding extremes (which usually have painful consequences) - pleasure is good - man should seek the more fruitful, long range pleasures.

Modern Utilitarianism is a modification of Hedonism. Jeremy Bentham (d. 1842) saw it as the seeking the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. His ethics were optimistic, believing man could control nature or outwit it, and that nature was friendly (a romantic view). John Stuart Mills (d. 1873) added rationalism to these, identifying virtue with reason; and Modern Evolutionary Ethics supplied the hope that personal pleasure and the greatest good for all would increase through progress and lives lived for the advancement of the race. These views obviously do not take into account the fall of man and the nature of sin; and death (a part of the natural realm) is the naturalists' ultimate enigma.

Naturalism is also at the root of power ethics - might makes right. This line of thinking questions ethical norms - what prevails is what is right. Machiavelli (d. 1527) was famous for it in the political realm - the state was an end in itself. Nietzsche (d. 1900) took a strong anti-reason, anti-morality, anti-Christ position calling Christian morality "poisonous, decadent, weakening." He was a predecessor to existential ethics. Karl Marx (d. 1883) looked to economic determinism and to Hegel for his dialectical materialism (Communism).

Naturalism for the Greek Stoics meant conforming ourselves to nature, in the process becoming apathetic, finding happiness in setting aside personal desires for the "musts" of life. For the secular humanist, nature is the "real" and the moral life is defined by its uncertainties - no fixed rules for every time and place - resulting in modesty and tolerance as virtues, as others might be right - but overall relativism rules. Of course Skinner's Behaviorism reduced man to no more than the conditioned product of his genetics and environment - where ethics ceases to have any meaning at all.

## Idealism

Idealism "deifies" the moral life - postulating:  
1) An eternal, supernatural realm which is the ultimate reality (which the world "mirrors")  
2) That man is superior to other creatures having a unique relationship to the eternal - he is a distinctive rational animal destined for immortality.  
3) Truth and morality are eternal and changeless - norms that cannot be violated without impunity.

Plato is the most prominent teacher of Idealism. He proposed a world of Ideas that is perfect, and assessable through reason, casting shadows into the real corrupt imperfect world. Man finds these universals and then applies them to his particulars. Man's moral problems were ones of forgetfulness, ignorance - for knowing the "good" should result in virtuous actions. Plato believed the soul of man was essentially divine. His virtues however were those of the Greeks, and of popular opinions. Platonic thinking has had much influence on Christian thinking through history.

Immanuel Kant was also an idealist. He taught that reason supplies the form, but sensation (experience) supplies the content of knowledge. The Ideal world is a faith postulation - arising out of man's sense of "I Ought", and the divine spark of intelligible reason within man. Thus an ethical system is formulated by man as he resolves the tensions between the way things are and the way they ought to be. This of course makes God over in the image of Man's ethical system; assumes no radical fall or sinful human nature and "deifies" the autonomous self. Idealism too ends up in relativism.

## Naturalism and Idealism in light of the Fall

Both Naturalism and Idealism are self-justifying efforts to be morally right while rebelling against God. Naturalism avoids man's moral predicament by assimilating man to the world of nature. Idealism tries to deify him, concealing his



desperate ethical plight by assimilating him to the supernatural. The ethics of special revelation unmask them both as man-made, speculative distortions of the real ethical situation. They are attempts to align sin with fallen conscience, and each becomes a "morality of compromises." (p. 161)

The ethics of Divine revelation stand against speculative ethics by exhibiting the good as the will of God alone, and by insisting upon a holy-neighbor-love as an essential expression of love for God. Ethics and religion are inseparable. The will of God has particular moral content - commandments. Man's true freedom comes only with freedom from sin, and is a regulated freedom, exercised in responsibility to God. In God's love the supreme interests of all men coincide; and the path to happiness is also the path of duty - true happiness is in serving God and fellow man. (ibid., Section II, Chapter 5)

## Existentialism

Existentialism in contrast to Naturalism and Idealism is a non-ethical system. It assumes: 1) there are no absolutes, no right and wrong, no norms, no guidelines, no infinite, no answers in human reason. 2) So man is free to act - his finite life is intense and subjective - man has to act, and by acting (regardless of what he does), man says "I am!" 3) There is no past or future, no hope of immortality, just a certainty of death. So "Don't think, Just do it!" - there are no wrong choices. Just irrational experiences for their own sake.

Existentialism has characterized Eastern thinking for thousands of years, and has now become a dominant force in modern Western thinking as well. Both secular and religious existentialism had their roots in Soren

Kierkegaard. In the secular world Heidegger, Sartre and Camus, and Karl Jaspers have articulated it; in the religious world of liberal Christianity it has been articulated by Buber, Barth, Bultmann and Tillich.

"As Heidegger sees it, the individual is thrown, rudderless, into a world which he cannot comprehend rationally, but in which he must decide and act. Not rational grounds, or objective criteria of goodness and rightness, can guide him in these choices. The individual's nature is forged by his choices and deeds; previous to them he has no nature. He becomes what he decides and does. . . his freedom is untoward. Death is the only certainty in man's experience . . . he is the god who shapes his own destiny. . . " (ibid. p.125, 126)

Religious existentialism would call this "a leap of faith" where we "encounter God", a finding of hope in the midst of despair. But it is not a meeting of the God of the Bible in a providentially-ordered universe.



Of course, one of the problems with existentialism is that there are others. Existentialism offers no reason why we shouldn't act any way we "will" towards anyone else, or why we could criticize the "free willed" actions of others, or how to cope with two individuals whose actions clash with the others. Religious existentialism attempts to solve this by talking about an "I-Thou", and treating people like "Thou's" rather than "its"!

Actually Existentialism is a revolt against human responsibility and against those imperatives which God imposes on moral creatures. Insistence on the universe as woolly free and upon existence as rationally incomprehensible is the course of human pride in its refusal to bow before the claim of God.

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**"The Hebrew-Christian perspective sounds stern warnings to the ethical explorations of our turbulent times: the revolt against the Logos is also a revolt against Agape, and the only genuine prototype of Agape is the Logos become flesh."**

Dr. Carl F. H. Henry, [Christina Personal Ethics](#)

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