

Being Good Without God: Secular Approaches to Ethics

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Outline of Course

- Introduction to Christian Ethics: Ethics as Theology
- Secular Ethics: Man's attempt to do ethics without God
- Post-Modern Ethics: The end of ethics...is it all relative?
- Virtue Ethics & Natural Law
- Building A Christian Approach to Ethics
- Excursion: Jonathan Edwards' Distinct Approach to Christian Ethics
- Issues at the Beginning of Life
 - Defining Human Life
 - Stem Cell Research and Modern Biotechnology
 - Abortion and the Sanctity of Human Life
- Issues at the End of Life
 - Defining Death
 - Euthanasia and End of Life Care
 - Death Penalty, Just War, etc.

Levels of Thinking

Worldview: Anthropocentric or Theocentric

What is the nature of God, the world, and man?

What is "good"?

Sources of Authority

Nature, Reason (Philosophy/Science), Revelation, Community/Tradition

Methods of Moral Reasoning

Deontology (rules), Teleological (outcomes), Existential (attitudes, virtue)

Principles

Beneficence, Justice, Veracity, Autonomy

Rules

Policies, Laws, Codes

Decisions

Specific Issues

Christian Ethics

- Ethics is Theological
 - Sanctification
 - Applying theology to life
 - Knowledge of God and Man
 - *Imago Dei*: Roles and Relationships
 - God – Creation – Community
 - Worship and Serve
- Scripture as Authority
 - Interpretation of Word and World
 - Tradition and Reason

What Happened?

- Reformation (1517-1648)
- Thirty-Years War (1618-1648)
- World Colonization
- New Sources of Authority
- Enlightenment
- Humanism
- Deism - Naturalism

Outline of “the Story”

- Secular Ethical Theories
 - Focus on “Rules”
 - Focus on “Situations”
 - Focus on “Self”
- Inadequacy
- Postmodernism
- “Egyptian Spoils”
- A Christian Integration

Universal Sources of "Right and Wrong"

Secular (Modern) Ethics

- Universal *not* Particular
 - No appeal to Special Revelation (i.e., Scripture)
- Anthropocentric *not* Theocentric
 - Not necessarily atheistic
 - Not necessarily naturalistic
 - ...but not Biblical Trinitarian
 - Deism as a "half-way point"
 - Leads inevitably to Atheistic Naturalism or Paganism

Nature of Man (Without Reference to God)

- A Rational Animal
 - Reason (Rationalism)
 - Senses (Empiricisms)
 - Emotions (Subjectivism)
- Man's Role
 - Man as "citizen"
 - Man as "maker"
 - Man as "responder"

Deontology-Normative

- Man the "citizen"; Political model
- There exists universal norms or rules (transcendent "oughts") that are binding on ethical decisions
- Asks, "Is it right?"
- Focuses on rights and duties
 - (Gr. *deontoj* "deontos")
- Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)
 - Categorical imperative
 - Autonomy of ethics

Categorical Imperative

- Absolute and universal knowledge is founded on reason *alone*
- Categorical vs. hypothetical imperative
- Summary:
 - Act so that you can want everybody to follow the principle of your action
 - Act so as to treat each rational creature as an end in itself, not merely as a means
 - Act so that your principles could be used to govern the whole universe of rational persons
- Autonomy of ethics: the self acts as an autonomous legislator, the moral law is essentially self-imposed

Other Sources for Normative Ethics

- "Idea of the Good" (Plato)
- Passions (David Hume)
 - Pre-rational
 - "You cannot reason from 'is' to 'ought'"
- Intuition (G.E. Moore, G.W. Ross)
 - Immediate perception
- Special Revelation
 - 10 Commandments

Divine Command Ethics

- Euthyphro
 - Is something "good" because God wills it to be good, or does God will it because it is "good"
- Voluntaristic (God's "will")
 - Completely Free
 - Gen 22:1-2; Exod 11:2; Hosea 3:1
 - Capricious
- Doxastic (God as "ideal observer")
 - Impartial, Rational, Omniscient
 - Not Causal
- Modified Divine Command Theories
 - Eternal moral truths connected to God's eternal nature
 - Divine "desires" not "commands"

Pitfalls of Deontological Theories

- How do we identify the absolute, self-attesting moral principles?
- Can logic (reason) alone distinguish between ethical good and evil in the absence of any empirical or subjective premises? (lacks immanence)

- What do you do when norms collide?
 - “Tragic moral choices” or “conflict of duties”?
 - Do we merely make a “hierarchy” of norms?
 - Are norms *prima facie* binding?
 - Does 1 Cor 10:13 implies that there are no “tragic moral choices”?

Teleological-Situational

- Man the “maker”; Management model
- Looks at outcomes and consequences
- Utilitarianism
 - “Greatest pleasure for the greatest number”
 - Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)
 - Quantitative (Cyrenaicists)
 - John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)
 - Qualitative (Epicureans)

Modern Utilitarians

Utilitarianism

- Act Utilitarianism
 - No way to be *sure* we have made the right choice of action
 - What about actions such as promising & pledging?
 - Is it really universal?
- Rule Utilitarianism
 - Conflicting rules
 - Inconsistent rules

Problems with Utilitarianism

- Does everyone seek pleasure?
- Is pleasure “whatever someone seeks?”
- Even if we do seek pleasure, does this imply we *ought* to?
- The difficulty of calculating the pleasures and pains produced by an act is so enormous as to require virtual omniscience
 - Utilitarianism is unable *in principle* to render finality to any human action, acts can never in principle have finality, can never be given over to divine providence

Situation Ethics

- Situationalism
 - Concerned with the particular situation and the specific consequences as they apply to the individuals in that situation (small scale consequentialism)
- Joseph Fletcher (1905-1991)
 - *"The one final thing to which we are answerable is not a command that we have received from God to do good unto all men, to save life rather than end it, or to be faithful to our wives and husbands, but rather the thing we are to be ultimately responsible to is 'love.'"*

What is (are) "good(s)"?

- There are a multitude of "goods" for which we are competing
 - *The notion of the perfect whole, the ultimate solution, in which all good things coexist, seems to me to be not merely unattainable—that is a truism—but conceptually incoherent; I do not know what is meant by a harmony of this kind. Some of the Great Goods cannot live together. That is a conceptual truth. We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss.*
 - Isaiah Berlin *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (1991)
- *"There is no 'one good' in which all other goods are reconciled unless we turn to theology and belief"*
 - David C. Thomas (2000)

Being "good" without God

- **Judges 21:25** In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

Being "good" without God

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles...They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

Romans 1:21-25 (NIV)

- To be continued...