

Postmodern Ethics: Is It All Relative?

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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

Two Worldviews

- Modernism
 - Based on the naturalistic humanistic principles of the Enlightenment
 - The belief that absolute universal truths about God, self and the world can be achieved by means of the reasoning abilities of the autonomous individual without other norms or traditions
- Christianity (Calvinistic Reformed)
 - Applied to the whole range of human thought and activity
 - Renewed (*semper reformata*) by making use of the positive achievements of human cultural development

The Christian Church & Modernity

- Individuality
- Dichotomies
 - Body/Soul
 - Reason/Heart
 - Secular/Sacred
 - “Christian” as an adjective
 - Theology vs Morality
- Practical Deism (Atheism)
- Sources of Authority
- Sources of Power and Politics

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.Thomasma (2000)

The 20th Century Demise of "Ethics"

- A.J. Ayer *Language Truth & Logic* (1946)
 - Ethical statements are not verifiable, therefore cannot be statements of "fact"; so what are they?
 - "Boo-Yeas" (Emotivism)
 - Statements of preference ("taste")
 - Prescriptions (R. Carnap)

Not so fast...

- Willard Van Orman Quine, "*Two Dogmas of Empiricism*" APA 1950
- Hilary Putnam, "*The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*" 2002
 - While we can *distinguish* between fact and value statements, we cannot separate them (no dichotomy)
 - All fact statements are value-laden, there is no clear separation
- It is not logically impossible to go from an "is" to an "ought" (*contra* Hume)

"In theory there is no difference between practice and theory. In practice there is."

–Yogi Berra

Alasdair MacIntyre

After Virtue (1981)

"All moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling."

The "*borrowed capital*" of the Christian tradition in Western Society is all that holds together the cultural/moral consensus necessary for civilization

Our Post-Christian Culture

- 12% of adults believe that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife!
- Only 42% of adults know that the *Sermon on the Mount* was preached by Jesus
- More born-again Christians believe in channeling , astrology and reincarnation than non born-again Christians
- The fastest growing religion in NA is Wicca
- Non-Christians will outnumber Christians in the US by 2042

Our Post-Christian Culture

- The poll by The Barna Group, a Christian research organization, shows that only 35 percent of Americans believe in absolute standards of morality -- that is, believe that right and wrong do not change with time or circumstances.
- Only 5 percent of Americans still maintain a Biblical worldview
- The same poll shows 74 percent of Americans identifying themselves as Christian
- ????????

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)

What's left? Culture Wars

- Populous expression
 - Media/marketing
 - Shouting
 - Power
 - Violence
 - "Post-Modernity"

Demise of the Modern Worldview

- Rejects the Enlightenment vision
- Self-deceptive
 - There is no neutral and objective stance from which, through the use of reason, one can gain indubitable knowledge
 - All knowledge is perspectival
- "Truth" is oppressive
 - Legitimated the rejection of the truth claims of others
 - Justified the hegemony of the dominant Enlightenment civilization over those of others
 - Marginalization and oppression (implicit or explicit) are the fruits of modernism
 - Contemporary discussions of social morality disguise the "will to power"
- Postmodernism

Friedrich Nietzsche

- Only two authentic ways of living:
 - Christianity
 - Nihilism (nothingnessism)
- Modern liberal religion, secular philosophy is only a "halfway" house between one or the other (inauthentic)
 - Christianity a life of "weakness"
 - Nihilism a life of "strength and bravery"
 - A fate that haunts Western culture

Relativism vs Nihilism

- Relativism
 - Absolute (“truths” but not “Truth”)
 - Empirical (if there is a “Truth” we can’t know it)
- Nihilism
 - Error Theorists (ethical claims are false)
 - Noncognitivists (ethical claims are neither true nor false: “non statements”)

Postmodernity:

(Two-Cheers!)

- Rejects the Enlightenment vision that absolute universal truths about God, the self, and the world can be achieved by means of the reasoning abilities of the autonomous individual
 - Self-deceptive (not neutral or objective)
 - Oppressive nature of “the truth”
- There is no neutral stance from which to attain truth
 - Kuyper, Dooyeweerd, Van Till, Schaeffer
 - *“You can only find truth with logic if you have already found truth without it.”* -G.K. Chesterton

Postmodernity:

(Two-Cheers!)

- There is no “outside” view by which to choose an ethical system
 - “Choosing” an ethical system is an “ethical” choice
 - No one is neutral, there is no neutral ground
- This does not mean all views are equal or cannot be compared
 - Consistency (internal, cannot be self-contradictory)
 - Coherence (external, must conform to our experience of the world)
- *“When you finish talking with a relativist, don’t let him take the stairs!”*
- We have a word for changing your worldview: Conversion

Postmodernity:

(Two-Cheers!)

- The truth claims of modernism have been oppressive of Christianity
 - Appeals to revelation and tradition irrelevant
 - All claims to truth had to make their case at the bar of neutral autonomous reason
 - Religious and moral claims exiled to the domain of the non-rational realm of faith
 - Fact-value distinction (no significance for the public realms of life)
- Christianity may have a place back at the table (but with a price!)

Postmodernity:

(No Third Cheer)

- Rejects the very notion of a comprehensive worldview
 - *"Incredulity toward metanarratives"*
 - Jan-Francois Lyotard
 - Metanarrative as a "power play"
- Extreme relativization of all perspectives, including Christianity
 - Truth claims reveal more about your assumptions and social location than about any so-called objective reality
 - Society must allow room for a multiplicity of voices, with the understanding that none makes any claims to universal truth

Metanarrative as "Myth"

- "Myths" are necessary for societies
- "Myths" provide foundations for common cultural assumptions that maintain society
- Christianity is a "myth"
- Christianity is the only "myth" which is "True"

Three Critical Comments

- Postmodernism is its own “metanarrative”
- Postmodernists continue to appeal to norms and principles
 - Condemnation of certain evils
 - Inconsistency
 - *bricolage*
- Practical problem of a common morality
 - Metanarrative not necessary
 - Modest pragmatism of liberal democracy
 - Provisional goals

Options for a Pluralistic Society

- Mid-Level Principlism
 - Beauchamp & Childress *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*
 - Respect for Autonomy
 - Beneficence
 - Nonmaleficence
 - Justice

Options for a Pluralistic Society

- Casualty
 - Jonsen & Toulmin *The Abuse of Casualty* (1988)
 - Case Analysis Approach

Options for a Pluralistic Society

- Neo-pragmatism
- What is useful? (not “true” or “right”)
- “For the pragmatist, sentences are true not because they correspond to reality, but because they work—because they perform some useful service.” - Richard Rorty

Modern Existentialism

- Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980)
 - Self-realization ethic without a view of the self
 - Denied the existence of any objective human nature
 - Ethical behavior is at best an expression of human *freedom*
 - The absence of all values itself becomes the “value
 - “Existence” is the last thing one must free oneself from

So, what now?

- It’s all just words...
 - “In the beginning was THE WORD...”
- There is no truth...
 - “I am the truth...”
- And if there was, we can’t know it...
 - “You shall know the truth...”
- Freedom is the ultimate virtue
 - “...and the truth will make you free.”