

## What is Ethics?

Ethics is about how we decide what is right and what is wrong. "Ethics is the study of everyday behaviour" and so involves every aspect of our lives.

## What is *Christian Ethics*?

When we speak about Christian ethics, it does *not* mean that:

- a) those who are not Christian do not live by a moral code;
- b) its content is different from other ethical systems;
- c) Christian ethics are superior to other ethical systems;
- d) all Christians agree about what is right and what is wrong.

One definition of Christian Ethics: Ethics which considers the specific situation, gathers the facts and uses the principles (commands and doctrine) and values to be found in Christianity.

## Use of terms

- **Morality** is used to describe our principles or convictions about what is right and wrong and our ultimate values.
- **Ethics or Moral Philosophy** refers to the study of those principles and values, analysing them critically and working out how we make decisions.
- **Applied or practical ethics** is the way we apply ethical theories to practical situations.
- **Meta-ethics** is the study of the status of ethical theories. For example, a discussion of the meaning of 'right' and 'wrong'.
- **Moral theology** "is a discussion of the principles which ... should govern the behaviour of a Christian" (Macquarrie & Childress, p 398). These principles are then applied to particular situations. Moral theology in the past has been more associated with the Roman Catholic Church and studies actions in the light of our true end, our close relationship with God or our vision of God.
- **Christian ethics** often begins with the specific situation and asks what principles should apply in this case.

## How do we decide?

### Feelings or Facts?

Example: Xenotransplantation (eg transplanting a pig's heart in a human). Our initial reaction may be "Yuk!" (the *Yuk factor*). How we *feel* is a result of different factors:

- Our genes.
- How we have been brought up (parents and teachers).
- Our past experiences.
- Our present culture.

In considering transplanting a pig's heart in a human, the *facts* include the following:

- There is a shortage of heart donors and those requiring a heart transplant are dying.
- There is a possibility of retro-viruses crossing the boundary between pig and humans and, if the person then has children, of entering into the genetic pool.

We may also have particular principles which would govern our ethical standpoint:

- Are we using pigs as a means to an end rather than valuing the life of the animal in itself?
- Some believe that all species were made distinct by God and therefore should not be mixed.

### **Principles or Practical outcomes?**

If we believe that there are absolute standards of right and wrong then we could discern the principles behind them and apply those principles in every case. For example, taking life is wrong in every case. So, abortion is wrong in every case – whatever the situation. This approach to morality is called the *deontological* approach. The problem about using principles is that there may be conflicting principles.

Many people today make decisions which consider the likely outcome. Here we are in the realm of “Consequential Ethics” of which Utilitarianism is the most common.

### **Casuistry or Character**

Instead of a morality based on principles or practical outcomes, we may want a morality based on virtue or character. This is sometimes called ‘Virtue Ethics’. Religions, and Christianity in particular, give us a vision and goal of goodness in a way that acts as a constraint over behaviour in the present. For religions, “God enters ethics, not as a source of control alone but as the source of value in the creation of beauty from the beast.” (Bowker, p105).

### **What are the main authorities or resources for Christian ethics?**

- 1) **The Bible.** The Bible is the “witness to the ‘central events’ of the faith, not to every element within the faith and to every problem with which the believer may be concerned” (Jones, p55).
- 2) **The Tradition of the Church.** Since the church decided what was scripture and what was not, we can’t divorce the authority of the Bible from the authority of the Church. In ethics, what past generations thought and said and did is important but is not the overruling authority for same reasons as the Bible.
- 3) **Reason.** To use the authority of reason means that:
  - We must consider all the available evidence;
  - The conclusion must not be predetermined but follow from the evidence;
  - The argument should be coherent and not illogical.

Theologian Richard Hooker regarded Scripture, Reason and Tradition as working in a creative tension with each other. Anglican theology is usually based upon these three planks.

- 4) **The Current Experience of Christians** builds upon tradition but is firmly rooted in the present.

For the Christian, authority lies with God and Christian ethics is a “matter of obedience to the will of God”. (Ward, p1). God wills the fulfilment of human nature, that we may reflect fully the Image of God. Our duty as the will of God involves “reflection, judgement, and insight; sensitivity and a creative exercise of freedom; and a concern for human fulfilment in a just society”. (p106) Christian ethics “takes place in a context of response to the God revealed in Christ and of growth into the ideal of the Christ-life within the sacramental community of the Church.” (Ward, 106)

### **Bibliography**

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