

Christian Ethics: Ethics as Theology

Dr. Paul J. Hoehner
Christ the Redeemer Church,
Portland, Maine

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.

Morality and Ethics

- Morality
 - L. *mores*, habit, custom
 - “moral” (*moralität*), the rightness of actions and decision, “oughtness” and obligation
 - Moral and amoral decisions
- Ethics
 - G. eqoj “*ethos*”, habit, custom (cf. Luke 2:42)
 - “ethics” (*ziflichkeit*), the goodness of behavior, teleological, the pursuit of the “good”
 - *Summa bonum*
- Morality is a subset of Ethics
- Descriptive and Normative Ethics

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

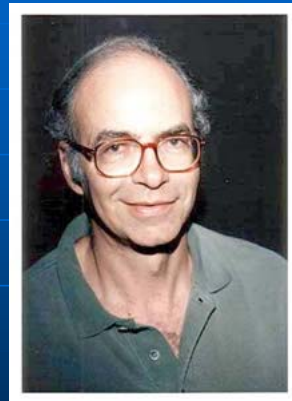
Worldviews & Ethics

- What is the nature of "God"?
 - Theology
 - Theistic, Deistic, Atheistic
- What is the nature of the Universe?
 - Metaphysics/ontology
 - Created by a Sovereign God, product of chance, naturalistic
- What is the nature of Man?
 - Anthropology
 - Image of God, rational animal, product of evolutionary chance
- How do we know what we know?
 - Epistemology
 - Revelation, authority, reason, empiricism, feeling
- What is our destiny?
 - Teleology, Eschatology
 - Eternal significance, entropic doom and nihilism

Worldview and Ethics Logical Conclusions

Naturalistic Worldview

- No ultimate basis for meaning and value
- Man not unique; no basis for treating man differently from animals
- No normative moral sanctions; ethics reduced to individual or collective sentiment; choices have no ultimate significance
- Illness and death are part of natural, meaningless order of things; death simply a point in amoral continuum, inimical only for unfounded emotional reasons

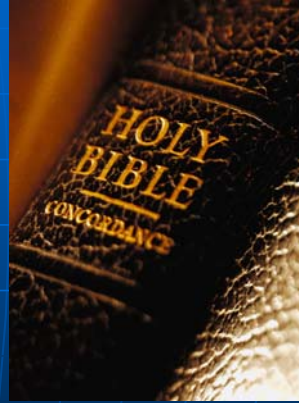


Worldview and Ethics

Logical Conclusions

■ Christian Worldview

- Meaning & value rooted in the character of God
- Man unique, radically different from animals, to be treated with respect
- Ethics has a normative base; ethical principles are binding; choices have eternal consequences
- Illness and death are abnormal but not the final enemy; they are used by God to accomplish His purposes



Theology and Ethics

- Ethics is not a separate discipline from theology; ethics is *applied* theology

The one thing I am here to say to you is this: that it is worse than useless for Christians to talk about the importance of Christian morality, unless they are prepared to take their stand upon the fundamentals of Christian theology. It is a lie to say that dogma does not matter; it matters enormously. It is fatal to let people suppose that Christianity is only a mode of feeling; it is virtually necessary to insist that it is first and foremost a rational explanation of the universe. It is hopeless to offer Christianity as a vaguely idealistic aspiration of a simple and consoling kind; it is, on the contrary, a hard tough, exacting and complex doctrine, steeped in a drastic and uncompromising realism.

-Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos* (1947)



Theology and Ethics

Any world-view which carries with it important implications for our understanding of man and his place in the universe would yield its own distinctive insights into the scope, character and content of morality. To answer the further question, "What is the distinctive Christian ethic?", is inevitable to be involved to some extent in controversial questions of Christian doctrine."

–Basil Mitchell, *How to Play Theological Ping-Pong* (1990)

Theology and Ethics

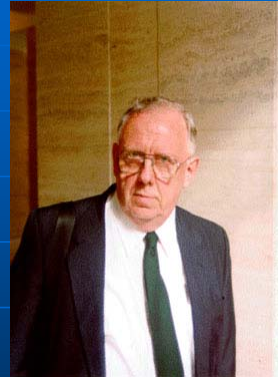
You would hardly find any theologian now who supposes that Christian ethics can survive for half a century in detachment from Christian doctrine and this is the very last moment when the church itself can come forward with outlines of Christian ethics in the absence of the theological foundation which alone makes them really tenable. Our people have grown up on a generally Christian atmosphere, and take it for granted that all people who are not actually perverted hold what are essentially Christian notions about human conduct. But this is not true.

–Letter cited in F.A. Iremonger, *William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury: Life and Letters* (1948)

Theology and Ethics

The “borrowed capital” of the Christian tradition in Western Society

-Alasdair MacIntyre,
After Virtue (1981)



Theology and the Nature of “the Good”

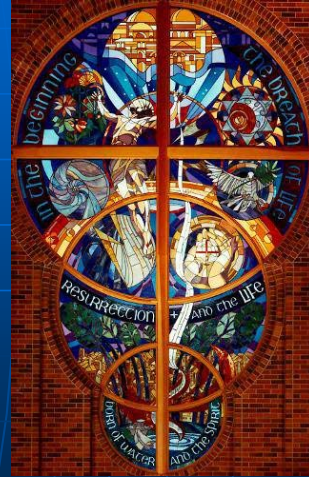
- What is “good” and why do we seek it?
- Socrates
 - Is the “good” good because the gods approve it, or do the gods approve it because it is good? (*Plato, Euthyphro*)
- Plato
 - Good as the highest, all-embracing, dominant idea or form, that which preserves and supports (*Republic*)
- Aristotle
 - The goal of all human relations and actions (*Nicomachean Ethics*)
- Matthew 19:16-18 (The Rich Young Ruler)
 - $\alpha\upsilon\gamma\alpha\theta\omicron\nu\ \rho\omicron\iota\eta\varsigma, \sigma\omega$ (*agathon poiesis*); good work
 - $\text{Οὐ\delta\epsilon\iota\varsigma\ }\alpha\upsilon\gamma\alpha\theta\omicron\varsigma, \text{ἐ\iota\ }\mu\eta\ \epsilon\iota\text{-}\text{j}\ (\text{o`}\ \rho\epsilon\omicron\text{j}\ \text{\AA})$ (*oudeis agathos, ei me eis ho theos*); no one is good, except God



Theology and the Nature of "the Good"

■ Implications

- All "good" comes from God; God's character defines what is "good"
- One can only be "good" in the derivative sense as reflecting the character of God and being in relation (through faith) with God
- The "good" we seek in "ethics" is God Himself and His glory
- Autonomy in ethics (seeking the "good" apart from God) is the nature of sin and death

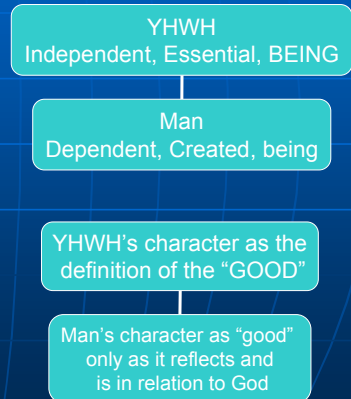


Theology and the Nature of "the Good"

■ Onto-Theology



■ Biblical Theology



Arthur A. Leff, "Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law" Duke Law Journal (1979) 6:1229-1249

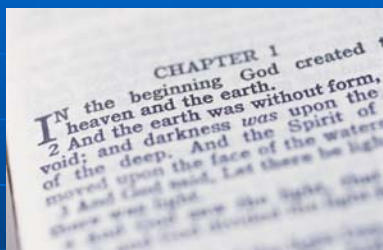
All I can say is this: it looks as if we are all we have. Given what we know about ourselves and each other, this is an extraordinarily unappetizing prospect; looking around the world, it appears that if all men are brothers, the ruling model is Cain and Abel. Neither reason, nor love, nor even terror, seems to have worked to make us 'good'. And worse than that, there is no reason why anything should. Only if ethics were something unspeakable by us, could law be unnatural, and therefore unchallengeable. As things now stand, everything is up for grabs.

Arthur A. Leff, "Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law" Duke Law Journal (1979) 6:1229-1249

We are never going to get anywhere (assuming for the moment that there is somewhere to get) in ethical or legal theory unless we finally face the fact that, in the Psalmist's words, there is no one like unto the Lord. If He does not exist, there is no metaphoric equivalent, no person, no combination of people, no document, however hallowed by time, no process, no premise, nothing is equivalent to an actual God in this central function as the un-examinable examiner of good and evil.

Reflecting the Character of God

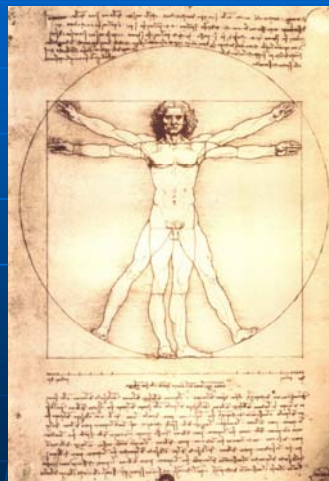
The Imago Dei



- Only three Biblical texts
 - Gen 1:26-28 (after the creation of man)
 - Gen 5:1-12 (after man sins)
 - Gen 9:6-7 (after the flood)
- Fundamental importance of what it means to be human
 - cōn "*nephesh*"; embodied soul, also of animals
 - Defining ourselves in terms of God, in His image (slx "*tselem*") and likeness (twmd "*demut*")
 - Defining ourselves in terms of ourselves is prideful and sinful

What is the *Imago Dei*?

- Physical properties, mind (*nous*), rationality, imagination (image), soul
 - Irenaeus: image/likeness; nature/supernature, reason/faith, *superadditum bonum*
 - Boethius: *rationalis naturae individua substantia* (undivided substance of a rational nature)
- Focus on some sort of property
- This is never addressed in Scripture. Why?
- Wrong question



What does it mean to be made in the *Imago Dei*?

- Focus on relationship and role
- ANE use of sovereign “image”
- Our relationship to God
 - To reflect His character
 - To do His will
 - To rule His kingdom
- Exodus 20:4-5 (Deut 5:8-9)



What does it mean to be made in the *Imago Dei*?

- **xn:y** “placed” (yanuah)
 - From “rest” (Sabbath Rest, Promised Land, Heaven)
- **db;[** “to serve” (abad) and **rm;v'** “to keep” (shamar)
 - Used throughout the Pentateuch for spiritual service
 - “Keep” the commandments and to obey God’s Word
 - “Serve” and worship the Lord
- **hWc** (tsavah) Commandment, to give charge
 - Covenantal blessings and cursings
 - Learning and submitting to Torah (law, word, commandment)
 - Die (physical) and “Die” die (alienation/separation)

What does it mean to be made in the *Imago Dei*?

- Our relationship as Male and Female
 - Unity in diversity, not monads
 - Made for harmonious relationship
 - Emphasis on male /female unity (marriage) and fruitfulness as a consequence of the *Imago Dei*
 - Made for community and fellowship
- Our relationship with Creation
 - **hd'r** "radah" have dominion
 - Stewardship, vice-regent of the Sovereign

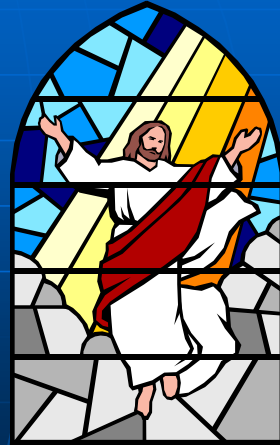
The *Imago Dei* after the fall

- Satan's lie: to be like "god"
 - Something else is required other than the "*Imago Dei*"
 - We will know "good" and "evil" apart from God's word, autonomously
- Relationships remain (the *Imago Dei*)
 - Now corrupt (a curse, no longer a blessing)
- Noetic effects of the Fall
 - Christian ethics will have "grey" areas
 - Secular thinkers may still have something to teach us about "ethics" (*Imago Dei* not completely lost)



The *Imago Dei* Renewed in Christ

- Christ is the perfect image and representation of God, THE *Imago Dei*
 - Prophet, reflect the character of God
 - Priest, do the will of God
 - King, rule God's kingdom
- "Ethics" is Sanctification
 - Being renewed in Christ, THE *Imago Dei*
- Eschatological dimension of renewal
 - Addressing ethical issues "between the times"



Ethics is Theology

- God
- Creation
- Man
- Sin
- Christ
- Justification
- Sanctification
- Holy Spirit
- Church
- Eschatology



- Science
- Philosophy
- Politics
- Justice
- Environment
- Marriage
- Art

