Biblical Ethics

Introductory Matters, pt.2:
Ethical Systems

January 14, 2024
Adult Sunday School
Lewis Lake Covenant Church

Case Study:

Danny is thirteen years old, and was just diagnosed with cancer. Left untreated, it is terminal. However, with chemo-therapy and radiation, Danny's chances of survival are about 80%. Danny and his parents adhere to a native American religion which teaches the earth provides some kind of cure for every disease. They believe chemo-therapy, though it may be effective, is poisonous and harmful and despise the side effects. They deny treatment, and opt for 'alternative' forms in keeping with their religious beliefs. Child Protective Services wants to remove Danny forcibly from his home to administer chemo-therapy.

You are the judge. How do you rule?

What are the moral responsibilities claimed by Danny's family and CPS?

Does Danny's opinion matter? Why or why not?

Your ruling will set precedent for similar cases. Can you see your ruling applied in ways you would find morally objectionable?

Ethical Systems

I. Ethical Theories
  A. Consequentialist Theories
      1. How they work
          a. "An act is right if it is intended to produce a greater balance of good over evil than any available alternative."

          b. Actions that tend toward 'the greater good' are moral.

          c. The 'greater good' is defined "in terms of individual or corporate human flourishing."

          d. "Since morality is determined by evaluating results, there is no inherently good or bad act

within a pure consequentialist system of ethics."
ex., "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas!"

2. (Perceived) Benefits
   a. Avoiding the strictness of a law-based system

   b. Perceived ease and simplicity of application

   c. Popularity in the public square

   d. Ability to make moral judgments apart from any
      belief in God

3. Examples
   a. Ethical egoism, egoistic utilitarianism: the right
      choice is the one that advances one's own self-
      interest. (Ayn Rand)
      "Rand strongly rejected altruism as a basis for the
      moral life because rationally it is an impossible
      concept. 'The man who attempts to live for
      others is a dependent. He is a parasite in motive
      and makes parasites of those he serves. The
      relationship produces nothing but mutual
      corruption.'" (Hollinger 30)

   b. Ethical universalism: the correct path is the one
      that produces the greatest amount of good for the
      greatest number of people
      ex. Peter Singer, "The life of a newborn baby is
      of less value to it than the life of a pig, a dog, or a
      chimpanzee is to the nonhuman animal."

   c. Epicureanism/hedonistic utilitarianism: the
      correct choice is the one that produces the most
      pleasure

   d. Situationalism/idealistic utilitarianism: the right
      thing to do is to take the path that upholds a

given ideal

ex: Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*: "Whatever is the most loving thing in the situation is the right and good thing... Only the end justifies the means, nothing else."

e. Biblical examples: Ex. 20:12 (5th commandment); Prov. 7:24-27, 12:24; 1 Cor 7:12-6 (1 Pe 3:1).

4. Limitations
   a. Relies heavily on man's ability to perform "utilitarian calculus"

      i. Identify all possible courses of action
      ii. For each course of action, identify all people affected
      iii. For each person, identify every pain or pleasure likely to result from the action
      iv. Assign each of these pains and pleasures a numerical value
      v. Calculate the net gain or loss for each person
      vi. Sum up these gains and losses to get a grand total for each course of action
      vii. Carry out the course of action (Hollinger 35)

   b. "Man must be able to predict accurately the results of a given action in order to provide moral guidance."

   c. Ethical analysis can only truly be done retrospectively

   d. For any given action there are a myriad of results, some immediate and others in the distant future.

     e. Even if we could identify all outcomes of a given action, we would require some kind of standard to evaluate the consequences: "Principle of measurability"

     f. On a societal level, the ones with the authority to define good and evil are those in positions of power
"On a societal level utilitarian moral arrangements have proven disastrous, resulting in the endorsement of all varieties of injustice."

     g. Consequentialist ethics are "not inherently satisfying."
"Experience testifies that acting in one's own self-interest is not always fulfilling, especially given the perspective that comes with the passage of time."

B. Deontological Theories
   1. How they work
     a. Greek "Deon," meaning "duty or obligation."

     b. "Deontological theories make ethical judgments based on the morality of actions themselves."

     c. Do not ignore consequences, but do not use consequences as a primary basis for morality

     d. Because God is good and created a moral universe, we assume "that moral acts will produce good consequences."

          i. Not always immediate

         ii. Not always appreciated because God's idea of 'good' and ours may be different

   2. Examples

    a. Socrates
       i. Some things are intrinsically right or wrong
      ii. We articulate them by moral principles
     iii. The source of moral principles is reason
     iv. We have a duty to do the right and avoid the evil

    b. Immanuel Kant
       i. "To have moral worth an action must be done from duty."
      ii. "There must be a rational, universal principle to which one can ultimately appeal, and the moral duties from the maxim are inherently obligatory simply because they are duties."
     iii. "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."

    c. Divine Command Theory: "God has commanded what is moral and what is immoral."
       i. Appeal to special revelation (Micah 6:8)

    d. Natural Law Theory: "Humans either innately know what is moral and what is immoral, or they can glean such knowledge from means embedded within the created order."
       i. Appeal to general revelation (Rom 1:24-32)

3. Challenges
    a. Actions alone are insufficient grounds for morality (Matt 5:27-28)

    b. Resolving conflicts of moral principles and duties: the ethical dilemma

   i. Categorical imperative? (something that must always be obeyed, such as 'tell the truth')

   ii. Organize into a hierarchy of values?

C. Character/Virtue Ethics
 1. How they work
  a. Rather than ask, "What ought we to do?" these theories ask, "What ought we to *be*?"

  b. Virtue is built, not by analyzing results (consequentialist) or exploring moral laws (deontological), but "in concrete communities through the stories or narratives the community tells."
   ex. Jordan Peterson

  c. "Actions spring naturally from the inner core of a person."

  d. "At crucial moments of choice, most of the business of choosing has already been done."

 2. Examples
  a. Aristotle
   i. Everything has some end, or goal of existence (medicine- health; architecture-house; symphony-music)

   ii. The end, or goal of humans is happiness (well-being).

   iii. "He is happy who is active in accordance with complete virtue."

   iv. Moral virtues are not attained by nature, but by repetition, becoming habits

 b. Stanley Hauerwas
   i. There is no universal ethic or universal moral principles

   ii. 'Morality is always rooted in, nurtured, and sustained by a community with a vision of what it means to be good and human.'

   iii. "What is at stake in most of our decisions is not the act itself, but the kind of person we will be."

   iv. Morals more like an artist with his work than a critic analyzing the artist's work.

   v. "To be like Jesus is to join him in the journey through which we are trained to be a people capable of claiming citizenship in God's kingdom of nonviolent love."

 c. Biblical example: Matt 12:33-37

3. What it gets right
 a. Ethics is more than doing the right thing: the heart matters.

 b. Morality is not just what we do, but who we are

 c. Ethics does take place within a narrative structure

4. Challenges

      a. Overemphasis on character: "Good" people can do terrible things.

      b. Overemphasis on narrative: Truth comes to us from God, not from the community

      c. Overemphasis on community: the totality of reality goes far beyond our community

      d. Inevitably relativistic: no two communities are identical

II. Source of Moral Authority

"All ethical systems, whether deontological or consequentialist in orientation, have a source of moral authority."

  A. Options

    1. Human constructions – from man
      a. Subjective
      b. Created
      c. Changeable

    2. Transcendent sources – from God
      a. Objective
      b. Discovered
      c. Unchanging

  B. *Summum Bonum*: "Highest Good"
    1. Biblical Ethics: "the glorification of God"

    2. Secular ethics: "the path that advances one's own self-interest"

    3. "Consciously or not, participants in moral events always act with a *summum bonum* in mind."

    4. "Can a system of ethics that has man as its source of moral authority ever produce purely benevolent, altruistic acts?"

      a. Man's natural moral abilities are corrupted

      b. Unregenerate men have the ability to perform seemingly meritorious acts (Matt 7:11)

      c. Good gifts are not morally praiseworthy if done for immoral reasons (e.g. as a precursor to child abduction)

C. Moral Pitfalls
"All too often advocates of Christian moral systems such as biblical ethics fall prey to distractions that put self in the place of moral authority."
  1. Kinds of pitfalls
    a. Personal emotions
    b. Past experiences
    c. Perceived practicality
      "It is not possible to separate emotions and experiences from ethical evaluation. Indeed, even if it were possible, it would not be advisable, for emotions and experience are parts of being human... the challenge is not to let anything trump the Word of God..."

  2. Identifying one's moral authority
    a. "Moral choices tend to be defended in the same manner in which they are held."
      ex. An emotional reaction to a contrary moral stance may indicate one's morality is based more on emotion than Scripture.

    b. Stated belief + actual practice = actual belief.
      "The actions of a man betray his heart; the externals expose the internals; profession shows confession; and ethics reveal theology."

III. Conduct, Character, and Goals

A. Conduct, or practice: "deontological... focuses on external acts and behavior." One's relationship with others.

B. Character, or person: "ontological... focuses on motives and internal disposition." One's relationship with himself.

C. Goals, or purpose: "teleological... focuses on the design or intended end." One's relationship with the future.

D. Why all three are necessary:
Sometimes the same conduct has differing morality, even in Scripture:
   1. Murder is prohibited, yet capital punishment is prescribed
   2. Premarital sex is immoral if consensual, but not immoral for one violated against her will (Deut 22:23-27).
   3. Eating meat sacrificed to idols is both allowed and prohibited.
   4. Usury forbidden to Jews, but allowed with foreigners (Deut 23:19-20)
   5. God told Balaam to accompany Midianite princes, then nearly killed him for doing so (Num 22:20ff)
   6. Paul circumcised Timothy but not Titus, and both for the sake of Jews.
   7. Christians must speak truth, but truth spoken lovelessly is sinful.

"So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

- Jesus