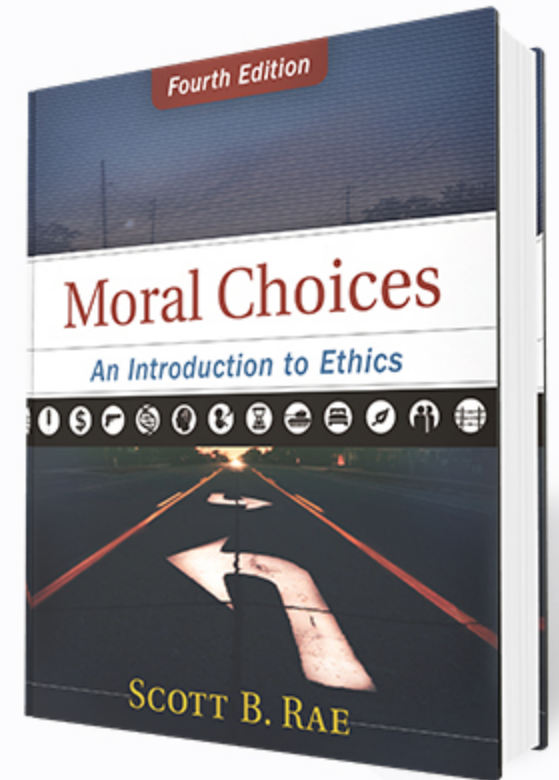


# Chapter 2: How to Think about Morality



# Class Guidelines

- We have a large class. So a few procedural things:
  - Please submit questions in the chat to John.
  - We will select questions most helpful/clarifying for class discussion.
  - Be prepared for potential breakouts, randomly assigned.
  - Breakout leader will be person who has a birthday closest to December 25th.

# Introduction

- Moral disagreement between people can have intractable differences.
- An overlooked reason why is that people often apply different methods of moral reasoning.
- Different methods presuppose a different criteria why an act is moral. There is variation of within each ethical system.
- NBC's sitcom *The Good Place* was a deliberate exploration of different moral philosophies in story form - esp. *Contractualism*

# Types of Moral Reasoning

- Emotivism
- Deontological Systems
  - Divine Command / Natural Law / Reason
- Teleological
  - Utilitarian (rule vs. act) / Consequentialism
- Ethical Egoism
- Relativism
  - cultural relativism vs. subjectivism
- Virtue Ethics

# Types of Moral Reasoning

- Emotivism
  - Emotivism is not an ethical system of reasoning, rather, it is a theory about metaethics and the language of morality.
  - Emotivism is not concerned with making moral judgments, but rather expressing how one feels about an action.
  - “Abortion is wrong” is nothing more than “Abortion, yuck.”
  - Emotivism does not account for the place of reason in ethics.
- This is not an excuse to lack emotional intelligence in ethical discussions.

## • Deontological Systems

- Deontological systems of ethics are principle-based systems.
- An action is right or wrong depending on whether or not it adheres to certain moral principles.
- Examples of Deontological Systems are:
  - Divine command (Ten Commandments Ex. 20; Dt. 5)
  - Natural law
  - Ethical rationalism (extended treatment in chapter)
    - Kant's *Categorical Imperative*: duty X must be true for all people in all circumstances.
    - Any moral system must be able to *motivate* a moral action without *compulsion*.
    - People cannot change their moral duty just by changing their desires.
    - Note: Kant is trying to find a rational basis for morality without descending into relativism apart from divine revelation.

## • Deontological Systems

- Problems with deontological systems
  - Principles can be in conflict (Hebrew midwives, Ex. 1; Rahab, Josh. 2)
  - The commands can be arbitrary.
    - Is a divine command good in and of itself or merely because God said so?
    - Does that mean the principle stands outside of or above God?
  - How do you know that's a timeless principle?
  - How do you guard against legalism or cultural arrogance?
- Commands in scripture are rooted in God's eternal unchanging character.
  - In other words, whatever a loving God commands is good.

- Utilitarianism (Biblical examples: Lev. 20:22; Prov. 22:3 and many more)
  - Utilitarianism is a teleological ethical system, that is, it is concerned with the end result of an action.
  - For utilitarians, the moral choice is that which produces the best result.
  - The greatest good for the greatest number of people, or the action that produces more good consequences than harmful ones.
  - It should be very clear most public policy is debated on utilitarian grounds by people of all stripes.
- Act Utilitarianism: sexual assault is bad because of the harm to the victim (implication if a particular act of assault doesn't produce harm it may not be bad)
- Rule Utilitarianism: sexual assault is always bad because it always produces harm



- There are four reasons why Utilitarianism is appealing:
  - It is relatively simple to apply by anticipating if a course of action will produce more harm than good.
  - It avoids the rigid legalism that can be associated with deontological reasoning.
  - It does not require an appeal to religious authority, making it the ethical system of choice for secular societies.
  - It resonates with the widely held intuition that consequences do play a role in determining the morality of a decision.
- “Harm and Benefits” based on prior principles
- Requires foresight into what might happen, that is **not** something we can necessarily know.

# • Utilitarianism

## • Challenges to utilitarianism

- One could justify all kinds of clearly evil actions such as rape, slavery, and even murder.
- This can be “ends justify the means” kind of thinking which is antithetical to the Christian faith. Because our opponents are so bad, we *have to do X*.
- It is very difficult to predict exactly what the consequences of any action would be.
- The most significant objection to utilitarianism is that it must smuggle in a prior commitment to moral principles.
  - For example, murder being wrong based on the fact that it did greater harm to the victim. The value of the overall good must presuppose that each life is sacred with an intrinsic dignity and worth, otherwise what is the harm in taking a life?

## • Ethical Egoism

- Ethical Egoism is a teleological ethical system wherein what is right or wrong is determined by what is most beneficial to one's self.
- Actions that advance one's self-interest are moral, those that do not are immoral.
- Three arguments in favor of ethical egoism:
  - Looking out for others is a self-defeating pursuit.
  - Ethical egoism is the only moral system that respects the integrity of the individual.
  - Egoism is the hidden unity underlying our widely accepted moral duties.

- Ethical egoism suffers from five problems.
  - Cannot settle conflicts between groups without appealing to other systems of ethics.
  - Collapses into anarchy. Its the *Libertarianism* of ethics.
  - Egoism is an arbitrary ethical system that divides the world into two categories: me and the world. It unjustifiably asserts the primacy of myself over the benefit of the world.
  - Egoism is based on the false premise of psychological egoism, that is, humans are only capable of acting in their self-interest; yet that is demonstrably false (even Kant argued to show altruism is real).
- Scripture requires believers and unbelievers to a balance(?) of self-interest and altruism.
  - **Better:** Scripture may appeal to our sense of self-interest, but only to call us to the best way, to emulate Christ's sacrificial love in all things - for God and for neighbor.
  - Even Christian conscience is aimed at pleasing God, loving brothers and sisters in Christ, and so others may know Christ (1 Cor. 8-10). NOT for individual freedom.

## • Ethical Relativism

- ER maintains that universal moral facts do not exist and that what is right or wrong is dependent on either the dictates of a particular culture or on individuals.
  - Notice: Relativism *is not necessarily amoral*. Only that morality is *dependent* on culture/individual.
- There are two forms of Ethical Relativism
  - Cultural relativism
  - Moral subjectivism
- Biblical examples of Ethical Relativism is arguably meat sacrificed to idols, holy days, etc. 1 Cor. 8-10; Rom. 14-15:7.

## • Ethical Relativism

- Cultural relativism is the view that what makes an action moral is what a particular culture believes about the action.
- Moral subjectivism says that morality is determined by an individual's tastes and preferences.
- Moral subjectivism is expressed in such common claims as, "It's true for you, but not for me!"
- Postmodernism and multiculturalism, both of which emphasize the role that cultural frameworks play in our acquisition of knowledge, contribute to the popularity of relativism.

## • Ethical Relativism

- There are good reasons to reject relativism as a system of ethics.
  - There is a greater degree of moral consensus among cultures than what many believe. This observation undermines the central argument for relativism, that relativism is the logical conclusion of early anthropological conclusions.
  - Many observations of moral differences turn out to be differences in practice but not value.
  - Relativism is guilty of being self-defeating when it makes the absolute claim that there are no absolutes.
- *Caution:* The tendency for cultural arrogance has been demonstrated over and over again in church history. Whatever relativism's flaws, it has clearly demonstrated the role of culture in ethical thinking.
  - Biblical tension to wrestle with is the divisions between Jews and Gentiles in the New Testament as not simply theological but also cultural and personal.

- All of the moral theories (with the exception of emotivism) are action-based systems. Such systems focus on actions and whether or not they are moral.
- In doing so, these systems appeal to principles, ends, or cultural norms.
- Virtue theory is different.
  - Rather than determining the morality of an action in terms of simply doing the right thing, **virtue theorists are concerned first and foremost with the moral agent performing the actions.**
  - It is an ethics of character, not duty. It addresses motives and who an action reveals you to be.
  - The term “virtue” can be hard to define for one who does not root morality in something other than humanity.
  - But, for the Christian, virtues are identified, developed, and modeled in the biblical text and within the Christian community.



- Virtue ethics maintains that
  - One will not experience moral dilemmas without already possessing certain virtues.
  - Moral life is not limited to action, but includes attitudes and motivations.
  - Virtue ethics emphasizes and requires moral development within community.
  - NT Wright argues NT did not embrace Aristotle's virtues (*After You Believe*). But replaced them with the cardinal Christian virtues: **faith, hope, and love**.
- There needs to be a blending of virtue and principles in order to adequately account for the demands of Christian ethics.
  - It is difficult to see how Christians could ignore virtue theory given the teachings of Christ.
  - Virtue-based ethics should play a significant role in Christian ethics, but it is insufficient on its own as an ethical theory.

# For More Information, Ch. 2

- An example of 7 different people using different kinds of moral reasoning in the case of physician assisted suicide. (every ch. does this)
- The Case of Objective Morality vs. Evolutionary origins for morality
- A description of Emotivism
  - That is that moral statements are nothing more than statements of one's personal feelings about it.
  - This is connected to the philosophical movement known as *logical positivism*. That the only true statements are those that can be *empirically* proven.
  - The weaknesses of emotivism and logical positivism illustrate the limits of empiricism and science to guide us in moral reasoning. *Science cannot give us moral principles.*

# Questions for Reflection

- **We are not here to win arguments, but to honor God and honor people. People's arguments need to be respected and heard, and at times refuted. But above all it must be motivated by love, not hate, respect, not derision, hope, not fear.**
- Knowing people do not argue within strict ethical categories, how is this information useful in *understanding* a moral argument?
- How are you challenged to identify the kinds of moral reasoning you have used, and what its potential weakness are? (You may need to think of a particular issue)
- Examples of issues being argued on deontological grounds, or utilitarian grounds, or ethical egoism, or ethical relativism, or emotivism?
- How does virtue theory differ from action-oriented theories? Examples?
- What is the relationship Rae gives between multiculturalism and relativism? Do you agree, why or why not? What is the danger of drawing this connection to sharply?
- What are passages in the NT that show how the gospel brings unity not uniformity, diversity but not relativism, for conflicting cultural practices and values in the church? How may it apply to conversations about ethics?