

ET 2.1 – Introduction to Christian Ethics

Review of "Meta-Ethics"

A. ET 2.1 in three lines:

Life is complicated
Scripture is sufficient
The alternatives are bankrupt

B. What have we talked about?

A working definition of ethics

Relating ethics to Biblical theology – what is God doing with the world?

Relating ethics to Systematic theology

- how ethics is a systematic discipline
- what do the 'doctrines' teach us about ethics?
- how is ethics the "missing loci"?

Relating ethics to Biblical studies

- the sufficiency of Scripture
- the importance of reading Scripture rightly – genre and moment in redemptive history

Frame's "perspectives" on ethics

- what makes a moral action?
- how is it to be identified and evaluated?

Questions of moral theology: definitions and distinctions

- what makes an act right or wrong?
- natural law
- moral responsibility and its modifiers
- degrees of sin
- institutional sin
- casuistry, conscience and the ten commandments
- types of duties and conflicting commands/prohibitions etc
- preaching ethics without being "moralistic"

Thinking about ethics – distinctions, precision, listening, identifying / responding to arguments

Law and grace

Meditation on OT law

Some names and movements in Christian ethics

Brief survey of the main non-Christian approaches

C. How do we put this together?

Ethics is about how we know what's right and wrong and how we do what's right. God made the universe and is running it now with the intention that his will will be done on earth as in heaven. God's revealed will defines what is right and wrong and it is right or wrong *because* the supremely good God says so. God's will is revealed in all sorts of ways but supremely (and savingly and sufficiently) in Scripture. No other revelation than Scripture is fully accurate or sufficient. Proper evaluation of a moral action will take into account motives, objectives, outcomes, and character as well as the conformity or nonconformity of the action itself to the 'law' of God – and all of these will be measured by Scripture teaching. We are responsible for actions which we knowingly choose and our responsibility is diminished where knowledge or consent are less than full. The sinfulness of an action derives precisely from its transgression of God's revealed will and thus its insubordination to his authority and departure from his purpose. Our generation of ethical norms from the data of Scripture will require all the usual care in reading the Bible and particular regard for genre, moment in redemptive history and the degree of generality / specificity in the material we are dealing with. Growth in wisdom, dependence upon the Spirit, prayerfulness are vital elements in our application of Scripture to ethics. Casuistry may be a helpful training discipline; conscience is not an independent source of ethical guidance; clear thinking, precise language and right personal motivations and demeanour are essential to proper ethical deliberation. The categories of "command" and "obedience", properly understood are entirely consonant and harmonious with love, the Spirit, free salvation, grace-gratitude etc and when Scripture has been properly read and applied then God's ethical requirements come to us as commands. All Scripture is given by God to equip us for every good work and no part of Scripture is to be neglected. Rightly reading the law of the OT is especially tricky because it combines a large quantity of apparently "ready-to-use" ethical commands with a place in redemptive history which must be carefully considered. Non-Christian schemes of ethics will fail epistemologically and personally but they will often present challenges which duly considered will lead to the refinement of Christian approaches. Various Christian schemes of ethics are often "theologies of emphasis" and these, too, can be helpful correctives.

Does that look like something as blindingly obvious as:

1. don't miss anything relevant in sizing up the situation
2. make sure you've correctly read and applied all the relevant Scriptures
3. try to cover all the angles
4. realize that you need God's help

?

It should!

D. A bit of a checklist ...

When giving consideration to an ethical issue, we will want to ask

1. Do we know what we are talking about?
 - what is and is not the issue?
 - what are the “facts”?
 - is our information accurate?
 - what distinctions / categorisations are to be observed?
 - are our definitions clear and precise?
 - what moral concepts are being used?

2. Do we know what others think about this?
 - does the church have a single mind on this question?
 - do the major Christian approaches have anything to add / correct / question / refine / reinforce?
 - non-Christian ethical frameworks
 - what have they to say?
 - what distinctions, perspectives do they help with?
 - where are their inconsistencies most obstructive?

3. Are there related or parallel ethical issues which connect with or illumine this issue?

4. Does what we know about the major doctrinal loci connect with or illumine the issue? Run through them.

5. What does Scripture have to say about this?
 - what are the relevant data?
 - run through the eras and clusters of Scripture revelation ...
 - what’s to be learned about this matter from life before the fall and after judgment day?
 - how does the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, enthronement, reign, and return of Jesus illumine this?
 - that is, has our place in the overall story of what God is doing with the world been taken into account?
 - have we run through OT narrative and wisdom and law and prophecy and psalms; have we run through gospels and acts and epistles and Revelation?
 - what redemptive-historical or other interpretative controls do we need to apply in deploying the Scriptural data we have amassed?

With a heap of possibly relevant Scriptural data on the table we ask questions from three perspectives ...

6. What is the normative perspective – what are the rules/norms?
 - principles
 - laws
 - relevant cases
 - proverbs
 - examples
 - what is the biblical warrant for each of these?

7. What is the situational perspective – what are the outcomes?
 - proper understanding of current situation?
 - and of the more/most desired situation?
 - what is the biblical warrant for each of these?

8. What is the existential perspective – who are the persons?
 - due regard for all affected parties, their circumstances, and their needs?
 - intelligently and feelingly inhabiting their life-position?
 - consideration of motives?
 - awareness of differing levels of responsibility and culpability?
 - awareness of ways in which observer's position may distort their reading of the matter?
 - recognition of need for the Spirit's power?
 - WWJD? Imagination and intuition suggest what? Cognitive rest?
 - what is the biblical warrant for each of these?

9. How is the argument / case for a proposed position formulated and presented?
 - language used precisely and consistently?
 - arguments properly weighed and well-constructed?
 - internal consistency?
 - conclusions stated with appropriate levels of certainty?

10. Have we exercised due self-suspicion – our likely biases and blind-spots? What would we *like* to be true?

11. Have we conducted the exercise in relationship and consultation with living fellow-believers (as well as with the tradition)?

12. Are we asking our question from a desire to know and do God's will and from a life devoted to Christ?

13. Have we proceeded with prayer and with a constant acknowledgement of our need for wisdom / the Spirit?