

# Ethics and Religion

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People often use *ethics* and *morals* interchangeably. "She has no ethics" = "She has no morals." Both are about human values—the things we prefer or reject. However, some of our values are simply the spontaneous preferences that show in our behaviors, while others are thought-out principles we use to justify our choices. In this lecture, I will use generally use *morals/morality* to refer to the preferences that show in behaviors, and use *ethics* to refer to principles or criteria on which we base our preferences. Our question here, then, is how an ethics based on religion might reasonably justify one's moral preferences.

## *Opposed Meanings of "Good."*

All religions teach moral standards. Secular society teaches moral standards too. Not surprisingly, views from each side can conflict. However, the fundamental conflict lies not between religious and secular interests but rather between opposed meanings of "good." Some mean just "what benefits me or my group," and others mean "what is objectively better, without regard for who benefits." The first is a self-absorbed morality; the second is a self-transcending morality. These two moral stances are entirely opposed:

You may have grown up entirely in one or the other.

You may be waffling, sometimes making decisions based on self-absorption and sometimes based on self-transcendence.

You may have consciously and deliberately committed yourself to pursuing one or the other.

We find these two opposing notions of good among both the mainly religious-minded and the mainly secular-minded. Religious-minded people who follow the rules just in order to get to heaven and avoid hell are self-absorbed. So are secular-minded people who manipulate the rules for the advantage of themselves or their families. In contrast, those who aim always to do what is objectively better no matter what the rules say, are self-transcending; and this applies to both the religious-minded and the secular-minded.

## *Why Are There Opposed Meanings of "Good"?*

The source of the difference between these two meanings of "good" lies in human moral development. Our moral awareness grows. Moreover, the growth is a series of distinct widenings. In our earliest years self-absorption is necessary for survival. If we didn't cry and whine, our basic needs would not be met. In early childhood, self-absorption widens to a group-absorption. We feel a need to find our place in our family, among immediate neighbors, and often in our religious community. In our teen years we typically widen our concerns to encompass the good of our peer group and athletic teams. In early adult years, we further widen our concerns to include not only an entire school, city, and nation but also to start a family of our own and serve the public good through our jobs, military service, or volunteer enterprises.

This growth in moral awareness about better and worse is buttressed by a growth in understanding. This is an intellectual development by which one gains insight into moral development not only in oneself but also in all people who explore issues of ethics in the workplace, politics, the economy, technology, law, philosophy, and/or theology.

The problem is that people who stall at earlier stages in moral maturation themselves become parents, teachers, writers, public speakers, politicians, etc., who directly promote or at least teach by example their own stunted moral and intellectual standards. In this fashion, even a rich culture becomes morally and intellectually decadent. And because all people experience the early needs for self-absorption and group absorption, as well as a natural resistance to hard study, the possibility of individual and social decay can never be finally overcome.

So we face a disturbing question: Are we doomed to live by insufficient moral and intellectual development?<sup>1</sup> Or might there be yet another factor that can heal these wounds?

Fortunately, throughout these developments, some may also be taught about God's love. They believe they exist because God lovingly created them, Since God lovingly created each person, everyone else is worthy of their love. God in particular, as loving creator of beings he made to be in love with him, is worthy of everyone's



unconditional and unrestricted love. In this regard, they assume that they will become their best selves by letting their love continue to widen and deepen throughout their lives. The seed of religious love, whether planted early or later, naturally blossoms into a moral self-transcendence that opens one's heart fully to whatever is truly good, including the value of hard study of ethical issues. So it is that a religious love of God and neighbor is a permanent possibility for reinvigorating stalled moral and intellectual growth and ensuring that individuals and even entire cultures might live by the highest ethical standards.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Religious vs. Secular Authority***

Still, even among those who are morally self-transcending, there are conflicts between religious and secular perspectives. An issue underlying most of them regards the *authority* that allows a secular society and a religion to make claims the other side must respect. So we can organize many disputed moral views into four basic questions—what religions and secular society can each give to and receive from the other. On the left, below, are these four questions, and on the right are examples of the sort of claims made by each side:

<b>Authority Questions</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Do believers have a <i>valid contribution</i> to make to secular discussions on moral issues?	Believers ensuring that city planning does not disadvantage the poor. Proposing economic policy rooted in social justice. Educating psychologists to take seriously the "sin" of acting against one's better judgment.
Can secular society <i>legitimately reject</i> views from believers who base them on religious teachings?	Secularists eliminating mention of "God" on money and in the Pledge of Allegiance. Ignoring appeals to the 10 Commandments or Quran to support public policy regarding capital punishment.
Does secular society have a <i>valid contribution</i> to make to religions on moral issues?	Secularists promoting equality of opportunity for women and homosexuals to hold religious office. A fully democratic process for appointing leaders. Scholarly accounts of the historical contexts of religious teachings on moral issues.

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Can believers *legitimately reject* views from secular society that are based strictly on secular principles?

Believers in religion-based, tax-supported hospitals refusing to perform abortions and sterilizations. Publically condemning films that belittle religion or degrade persons. Advocating against embryonic stem-cell research, capital punishment, extra-marital sex, and pre-emptive war.

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## ***The Search for Common Ground***

Can these conflicts be resolved? If believers look to God as the source of ethical principles and nonbelievers look to reason, are both sides doomed to be permanently entrenched in irreconcilable differences? Or might there be a common ground on which everyone can ultimately reach consensus?

Perhaps you wonder, "What sort of ethics (moral principles) might be so universal that it appeals to secular minds and religious minds equally?" These principles have been pursued by both religious and secular minds, but always the prey slips away. When basic questions fail to find answers, it is often the case that the question itself has some hidden and mistaken assumptions. The key to unlocking this problem is this insight:

Ethical principles are not the basis of ethics.

If ethical principles—like "Do not commit adultery" and (in business) "Let the buyer beware"—were the basis of ethics, people could reasonably ask, "Where did we get these principles? Are they derived from other principles? Then where did we get those principles? There must be an ultimate base of all ethics which is not another principle."

We can see that this is a valid argument by noticing that our views about right and wrong are ultimately based on the *value judgments* people make in actual situations.<sup>3</sup> For example, experts in medical ethics often cite two ethical principles—"First do no harm," and "First follow patient wishes." But which is first? Whatever you answer, you do not deduce it from some further ethical principle. Or, if you do, how far back can you go? Sooner or later you find that certain people in history made a *value judgment* about what is first. They formulated this value judgment as an "ethical principle" based on certain timeless values they learned from experience in their historical circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

We do the same in raising our children. I grew up in a safe neighborhood, and I never heard my parents say, "Always lock the

door when you come home." Today, it's practically an ethical principle that parents in all cities teach their children.

This understanding of ethical principles as products of value judgments made by our ancestors helps us understand the origins of all the ethical principles that we accept—murder is wrong; lying is wrong; charity is good; honesty is good. As formulated statements, they all have birthdays. They originated in men and women long ago who made these value judgments in the face of particularly difficult problems. They formulated what they learned in principles meant to be passed down to generation after generation. In other words, all ethical principles are history lessons.

### ***Discovering the Criteria for Value Judgments***

But then, if ethical principles are formulations of value judgments people made at certain points in history, by what *criteria* did these people make these value judgments? Besides ethical principles, what possible criteria can people use to justify saying A is better than B, or X is wrong and Y is right? If we can identify these criteria, perhaps we will find a common ground for resolving differences in moral views and in the principles that support them.

Actually, there are a number of different criteria we use to make value judgments. We can discover the main criteria by a personal experiment. Consider this: You know, of course, that someday you will die. Everybody knows this, but this knowledge doesn't much change people's moral behavior. But suppose your doctor discovers that you have pancreatic cancer and tells you to get your affairs in order because you have about six weeks to live. Now your moral awareness sits up straight. Your feelings rush in; you can hardly believe it; you are angry or depressed. If you are religious, you argue with God who seems to care nothing about your well-being.

Now the moral question overwhelms you: "What should I do?" The answer to this question is a value judgment—"I should do *this*" or "I should not do *that*." But what criteria do you use to make this value judgment? You might *think* you know how you would decide, but, just to be sure, it will help if you actually *experience* such a decision and then reflect on how you decided.

So please read the form below. Then print it out, check one of the two lines, sign it, and date it. The form appears as a separate item in the navigation pane for this unit—"Medical Directive Form."

To gain the most from this exercise, you need to check one of the three statements, sign and date it. (You do not hand this in.) Frankly, I'm pressuring you to make one particular value judgment: Should I let myself starve to death?

## Advanced Medical Directive for End of Life

If I lose

- the ability to recognize family and friends, and
- my sense of humor, and
- my appetite,

and if two physicians independently confirm that these conditions are irreversible, then do not force food or antibiotics on me, nor any water except to keep my mouth moist and comfortable.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement represents my wishes.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement represents my wishes with these changes: ...

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement does not represent my wishes.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

No doubt you have a few thoughts about starving yourself to death. You probably have several criteria for agreeing or disagreeing with the statement. Here are some of the usual intellectual criteria we use:

- **Ethical Principle:** Suicide is wrong.
- **Custom:** Nobody I know would agree to this.
- **Consequences:** I don't want to burden my family if I'm a vegetable.
- **Example:** Mom had cancer and eventually refused to eat, and she died in peace and comfort.

Besides these intellectual criteria, we also have affective criteria -- how the statement makes us feel:

- **Outrage** that medical forms like this are foisted on the elderly.
- **Threatened** by the decision, so I didn't sign it either way.
- **Apprehensive** about severing the ties to my loved ones like this.
- **Dismissive** about this little exercise here—in a lecture I had intended to read only to learn what some experts think.

### *Conscience and the Direction of our Lives*

In any case, if you took time to deliberate about signing the form above, you experienced certain criteria for making a value judgment. There are *many* criteria. In most decisions, one criterion doesn't automatically trump another. The best we can do is make the value judgment that resolves most of the questions. This is the work of what we call our "conscience."

Our conscience is different from our intellect. Our intellects can often give us *certitude*—that I have a thumb, that I have a job, that I have children. But our conscience seldom gives certitude. Rarely do we say, "This is right and that is wrong, no doubt." In most circumstances we make a choice based on the "best moral judgment" we can make, knowing that we may be ignorant of certain circumstances in a situation or ignorant of certain assumptions we have about morality itself. So, in many ordinary situations, instead of *certitude*, we speak of *conviction*. Here's a key difference between the two:

*Certitude* refers to some truth that we acknowledge as quite independent of who acknowledges it. So it remains legitimate to propose an ethical principle like "Love is better than hate" as a moral truth even for people who don't acknowledge it.

*Conviction* refers to some choice we propose as better for both the person who proposes it and for those it affects, despite areas of uncertainty that remain in many situations. We often realize that waiting for certitude is certainly wrong.

Our conscience is also different from our feelings. Feelings lean us toward some options and draw us away from others. But our feelings



are only *initial* indications of what *might* be good. They give us value hunches but by themselves do not determine what is objectively good. Everyone experiences guilt feelings; but morally healthy people consult their *consciences* to see if they are actually guilty.

Our conscience is not infallible. Typically, our consciences mature along a series of stage-like developments as we grow up.<sup>5</sup> As adults we sometimes discover we have been wrong about our priorities. Or we discover that not everything must be either right or wrong. Or we sometimes allow fear—or desire—to dictate our actions rather than follow our consciences. The issue here is not about grounds for being certain about right and wrong, but about the grounds for whatever *convictions* we happen to have.

This brings us to a basic point about ethics, a point that can revolutionize how anyone thinks about right and wrong:

*All ethical principles and moral judgments  
are ultimately based on conscience.*

No doubt, most of our ethical principles and moral judgments are inherited; this is natural. But inheritance just shifts the question back, ultimately, to persons formulating principles and making judgments that were not inherited but based on their own consciences.

What we call our *conscience* is the specialized function of the human spirit by which we can consider *all* the criteria—inherited standards, intellectual analysis, affective dispositions, passing feelings—and to then make the value judgment based on *what is most in harmony with the direction of our lives*. We detect the "most in harmony" by a peacefulness pervading our entire consciousness. It is peaceful to the degree that we have considered all the relevant criteria and somewhat disturbed when we neglect certain criteria.

Whatever you did regarding the above Advance Directive form, you experienced this question about value: "What should I do?" And you experienced various criteria, some inherited, some intellectual, some affective. And you made a decision based on what is most in harmony with the direction of your life. Even if you considered *inherited* criteria, you likely wondered whether you should rely on them. Even if you did nothing (despite my pressure to do something) you experienced *questions* about what you should do about this exercise.



Keep in mind that the reason for this exercise is to discover what might be a common ground on which both secular and religious minds can agree. (For now, at least, don't let your personal question of how you want to die distract you from the question we're after, namely, how secular and religious minds can find common moral ground.) Knowing that everyone makes value judgments like this helps us resolve differences in moral opinions about prohibitions, duties, and achievements. Debates on "ethical issues" may seem like battles between contrary certitudes—"Your view is absolutely wrong" or "My view is absolutely right"—but far more often than not, moral views are revisable. Situations can change; we can change. Beneath their words, the debaters are dealing with the criteria they consider most relevant to the overall direction of their lives. This is why being open to understanding the moral direction of one another's lives (as opposed to trying to win a debate) maximizes the chances that all the important criteria have been considered. (Notice here how the process of a "dialectical hermeneutics" applies not only to grasping the significance of biblical texts but also to all moral quandaries.)

### *The Criterion of Love*

Let us pause to get our bearings. Here is what we have considered:

- Ethical principles are lessons drawn from history.
- These lessons result from the value judgments of real people in real situations.
- Value judgments are based on different criteria.
- One's conscience integrates these different criteria by their harmony with the the overall direction of one's life.

But the conscience of an individual is not yet the common ground. Individuals come up with different and often opposing stands. There is still a more fundamental criterion. It's the role that love plays in the overall direction of our lives. As we will see, it is love that provides the bridge between believers and the secular-minded, between the self-absorbed and the self-transcending. It is on that bridge that we find the common ground where religious and secular views on morality can merge.

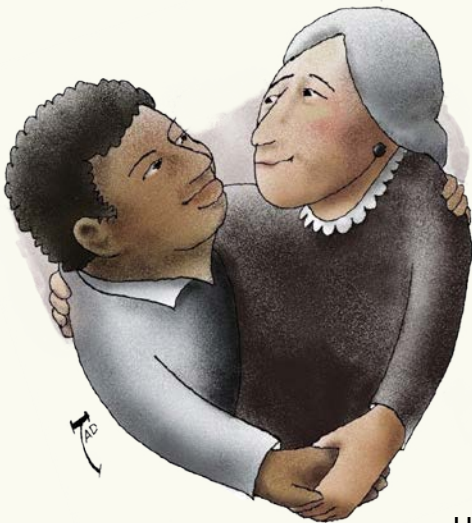
To see the role of love, then, ask yourself this: When I thought about signing the advance medical directive, did it occur to me that I would not make this kind of decision alone? To whom would I go for advice?

- In your mind, name the people you would probably ask.
- Now name the people who are deceased whom you wish you could ask.

It is very likely that you didn't select these people because of their counseling skills or medical knowledge or expertise in ethics. You probably don't feel you really *selected* them at all. More likely, you consider them as already a part of you.

This is because when we speak of *self*-consciousness, our *self* is always a connected self. Each of us is a child of parents and a companion to companions. Where we cherish these relationships, and even where we abhor or simply lack them, we experience the impulse to include each other in doing better. People with a healthy self-world image don't imagine themselves as peering out upon the world from the little red wagon of their egos asking others for a helpful push now and then. Rather, they imagine themselves as walking arm in arm with companions in the same direction. Everyone experiences themselves as radically social every time they do something with others—sing a duet, play tennis, contribute money, work on a production line, even cast a ballot in the privacy of a voting booth. When we see a little girl stumble, we spontaneously reach out save her from skinning her shins. When a friend asks *me*, "What are *you* doing this weekend?" I often say something like, "*We* are going to .... "

Our "personalities" are connected to an "interpersonality" that is so immediate we seldom think about it. Whether or not we notice it, our *self-consciousness* is also a *we-consciousness*.



This impulse to love is part of a deep awareness of ourselves as part of a "we." When we relish being alive, we simultaneously relish certain relationships. As part of taking good care of ourselves, we commit ourselves to nourishing our close friendships and our broad loyalties to our fellow workers, our countries, and our nationality groups. We feel a push, an undertow, an attraction within a gravitational

field in which human masses are pulled toward one another. Without discounting the value of solitude, every religion and philosophy recognizes that it is not good to be completely alone. The impulse toward love pushes us toward moral wisdom. For when we successfully

bond with others we gain a higher perspective on what really is better because we complement our personal viewpoints with their viewpoints. We commit ourselves to joint enterprises, subordinating our personal hopes and risks not simply to be more effective in reaching our personal goals but also, and mainly, to enrich the life we share with others. We surrender our precious egos to a sharing in which the distinctions between giving and receiving gradually seem to vanish.

Do you see how important it is to notice how love can reveal values beyond our sense of individual responsibility? Certainly, our personal sense of responsibility often tells us only what seems better from our personal perspective. It tells us what may be in harmony with the direction of our individual, autonomous life at a point in time. It reminds us of our duties, as parent, shopkeeper, accountant, and so on. But love—the assumption of connectedness—can reveal what is better from all perspectives and for any time. It works by opening our hearts to consider not only what other people think but especially how their perspectives, like ours, flow from the same impulse toward love. What counts is not simply the direction of our individual lives but also of the direction of the life we each share with others.

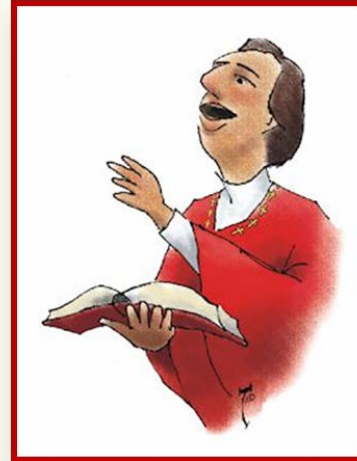
In contrast, the direction of life of those for whom "good" means just *good for me or us* is a self-absorbed life. They may even love their friends, family, and country, but their love is circumscribed. (Think the wealthy who pride themselves in taking care of their loved ones while ripping off those they care nothing about.) They too will make decisions based on a harmony with the direction of their lives. However, that harmony has overtones of dissonance, owing to a resistance to letting the natural, open-ended instincts of their love lead to a morality that transcends the well-being boundaries of the ego and the group and seeks the objectively better over personal and group preferences.

## ***Religious and Secular Criteria***

The impulse toward open-ended, unrestricted love drives many toward religions that celebrate being in love with God. Monotheistic religions in particular hold that in our everyday lives God engages us in two ways:

- Pouring a love into our hearts that seeks the objectively better.
- Presenting a "word" in human history that reveals what a life engaged with God is like.

These religions—mainly Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—agree that God's love comes into human *hearts as love*, seeking the good from within persons. But they disagree on how God comes into *history*. Some say as a book, some a prophet, some a code of laws, some a chosen community, and some a historical person who is God's self-gift. Still, they recognize that the heart's love does not infallibly discern the better. They know very well that God's entrance into human history can be overlooked or noticed but misunderstood. Along with non-believers, they recognize that even the value judgments of the faithful are not infallible, and that they must "work out their salvation in fear and trembling."<sup>6</sup>



This is why religions promote the practice of *discernment*. What counts are the criteria used for discerning which inspirations of the heart to trust and which interpretations of historical events to accept. Like all matters of conscience, the criteria for spiritual discernment boil down also to *what best harmonize with the direction of our lives*. The lives of religious believers are directed toward fuller, loving engagement with the One who gives them their lives and with any neighbor whose life is also God's gift. They spontaneously interpret "our lives" as the lives they share with others and God.

From a moral point of view, the direction of the lives of secular-minded "nonbelievers" who lead their lives by love is not all that different from that of believers. While they may not acknowledge a personal God as preached by any religion, they trust love. They put no artificial restrictions on how far they will let love take them. As morally converted, they are self-transcending persons. They are committed to an open-mindedness that is unafraid of questions, and to an open-heartedness that is unafraid to befriend the stranger. They too interpret their lives as lives they share with others. While they may maintain a cautious distance from religions, they too discern among their inspirations by looking to what best harmonizes with moving their shared life toward ever deeper and ever wider loving.

## Conflict Resolution

By seeing how love is the highest criterion for value judgments, we can envision what happens on this bridge where the religious and the secular meet. If both sides are *open*, one thing is for sure: Neither side is out to prove the other wrong. Neither uses logic like a club. They each assume that their views are probably one-sided and are eager to enlarge and refine them by hearing other sides. Also, each side is aware that their hard-earned ethical principles of their tradition are lessons learned by their ancestors in situations that may be quite different from today's.

Neither side expects to find absolute *certitude* but rather struggles to find a common moral *conviction* applicable in often messy situations. They anticipate that some compromise may be necessary for a greater good. They may disagree, but they do not disown or disregard. To the degree that both sides are committed to being authentic—being fully attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible, and in love—they link arms in a common pursuit of the best available opinion on moral issues. In this respect, they refuse to "agree to disagree" because it dodges a more fundamental responsibility to a shared search for agreement based on a common commitment to authenticity.

And should one side come with a self-absorbed moral horizon, we can hope that he or she recognizes in the other the inner harmony of the self-transcending horizon they in fact desire. They may well respond to the invitation implicit in the attitudes and actions of the self-transcending to trust their love all the way.

- Tad Dunne

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Lonergan summarizes this problem of our moral impotence as follows: "...the less developed one is, the less one appreciates the need for development and the less one is willing to take time out for one's intellectual and moral education." See his *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. F. E. Crowe and R. M. Doran (University of Toronto Press, 1957), p. 650.

<sup>2</sup> Lonergan presents his analysis of how religious love heals moral impotence is based in *Insight, op.cit.*, pp. 650-656, 715-725 (in the original 1957 edition, pp. 627-33, 696-701).

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3 Here I rely on a distinction between a value judgment and a factual judgment. A value judgment recognizes what is better or worse; a factual judgment recognizes what is true or false. In ordinary speech, we imagine the heart as the source of our value judgments and the mind as the source of our factual judgments.

4 In this case, the first principle above was formulated by Hippocrates, around 340 BCE, for aristocracies. The actual text reads, "I will prescribe regimen for the good of my patients according to my ability and by judgement and never do harm to anyone." The extraction of the precept, "First do no harm" was introduced by a 19th century surgeon, Thomas Inman. The second principle above was formulated by a consensus among physicians in the 1960s when principles of democracy focused on the rights of self-determination by individuals.

5 Lawrence Kohlberg identifies three major stages in the normal development of conscience: A reward-punishment stage, a social convention stage, and an autonomous-universalist stage. Many websites are available via a search under "Lawrence Kohlberg."

6 "Fear and trembling" appears in many books of the Bible: Jg 7:3; Ps 2:11, 55:5; Exk 12:18; Mk 5:33; 1 Cor 2:3, 2 Cor 7:15; Phil 2:12; Eph 6:5.