Christian Theological Ethics

A Brief History

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(Links are live)

Introduction

Thought about ethics shaped by religious belief is not a fixed body of knowledge. It is an intellectual history, sometimes one idea leading to another and sometimes one being trounced by another. So, to understand any religion-based ethical system today, we need a history of theological ethics. And since Christian thinkers have contributed far more to theological ethics than thinkers of any other religion, the material in this account is a history of Christian theological ethics.

Histories are written chronologically, but the perspective of historians rises far above *Who* did *What, Where,* and *When*. Their interest is in what was *going forward* in a given culture. This "going forward" includes both improvements and breakdowns. Moreover, what was "going forward" was unknown by the vast majority of people whose lives make up that history. In other words, the historians identifies movements, trends, incentives, beliefs, biases, fears, myths, and opportunities that were *experienced* by the majority, that were *influential* in their lives, yet were practically *unnoticed* before a historian discovered them.

The brief history of theological ethics presented below traces the main ideas in history that shape the ethical reflections of Christians today. You will find out who originally developed some of the ideas about ethics you take for granted and some you regard as outlandish. You will also be bothered—at least I hope you will be bothered—by questions that you have been ignoring, or that never occurred to you. You will also be bothered by answers to the pressing questions of our day that satisfy no one, including yourself.

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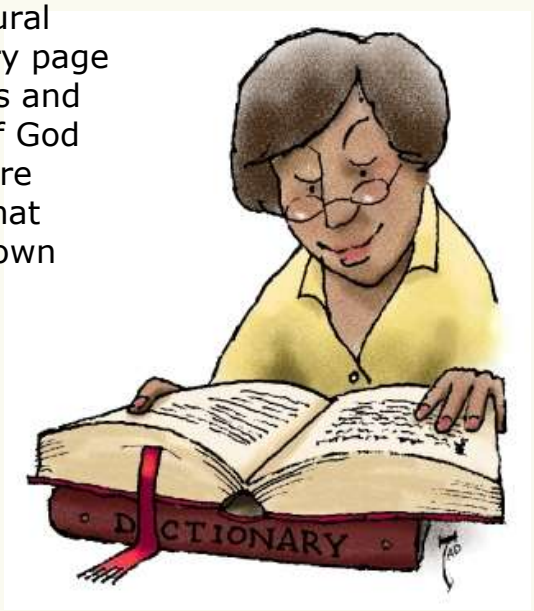
I: The Scriptural Witness



Since Christianity is a Jewish sect, the scriptural witness to morality and ethics shows on every page of the Bible. The New Testament shows Jesus and his disciples carrying forward the promises of God that appear in the Hebrew Scriptures. Both are indeed testaments—testimonies of authors that Christians today rely on to understand their own relationship to God and neighbor.

While these testaments are expressed in a variety of literary forms, they mainly point to historical events—an unfolding history of people's efforts to live better lives under God. Occasionally, they present specific moral guidelines on how to live out their relationship to God and neighbor.

The overwhelmingly moral concern throughout the Bible regards a relationship of love and commitment. Its morality is a covenant. God promises benefits to his Chosen People, in return for their love and fidelity. To understand the covenant is to understand a history—now of fidelity, now of infidelity, now of reconciliation.

This stands in strong contrast to the ethics of Plato and Aristotle (4th century BCE), who reflect philosophically on human nature to discuss virtues and what constitutes "the good life." Still, within a few hundred years, Christians will draw on philosophical ethics to support and explain their theological ethics.

Hebrew Scriptures

The major covenantal benefit for Hebrews is to be a thriving people, particularly a people settled on a land of their own. The reason God gives them laws and sends them prophets is chiefly to secure their livelihood as a community, generation after generation. This is the reason that underlies all moral requirements and prohibitions. Prior to about 200 BC, questions about an afterlife scarcely appear.

This is important to keep in mind as we read the laws and the prophetic proclamations. Modern Western self-consciousness is so highly individualistic that we tend to read these as rules and warnings about behavior that God deems "proper" quite independently of the well-being of our communities. Similarly, the self-consciousness of many modern

Christians is so heaven-centered that they take these texts as showing them the way to gain rewards for themselves in a life to come rather than as testimonies of believers about God's action in history.

Laws

Like all faith-based moral standards, Israelite laws were partly borrowed from neighboring cultures and partly received as direct commands from God. So their laws about slavery, property claims and money lending were similar to those of other nations. The clearest divine commands are found in the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:1-17; Dt 5:6-21). Here, it is important to see that these commands are particular specifications of a larger, overriding relationship-based command: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength" (Dt 6:4-5). Also, these are commandments meant to ensure the livelihood of the Israelite community; there is little evidence that the Israelites believed that they applied to any other groups.

Prophets

Similarly, the "jeremiads" issued by the prophets always connected national catastrophe with forgetfulness of God's desire to give livelihood to the entire Israelite community. The prophets consistently condemned any mistreatment of the poor, homeless, and oppressed, no matter how religiously one carried out religious rites and practices.

Wisdom

Most of the Wisdom literature (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiasticus, Wisdom) is borrowed, completely in style, and mostly in content from court circles outside of Israel. These practical views on the good life were blended into the Hebrew tradition. Their covenant with God, which included direct commands from God, did not prevent them from borrowing whatever wisdom was available to help ensure their well-being as God's chosen people. Indeed, the Hebrews made Wisdom a divine female, a motherly provider of life, of food, and of insight into life and death. (Wis 6:12-22; 7:22-8:8)

Overall, we can say that the "theological ethics" of the Hebrew scriptures demand that Israelites engage God in love and welcome the flourishing of their community as God's engagement with them. The significance of rules about offering sacrifices, ritual purity, cleanliness, sexual modesty, respect of families, loans, and immigrants lies in their effectiveness in keeping this mutual engagement alive.

New Testament

The "new" in the New Testament is:

> the proclamation *by* Jesus of the "Kingdom of God" and
>
> the proclamation *that* Jesus is the promised Messiah
> who pours out the promised Spirit of God into Christian hearts.

The moral standards contained in these proclamations are conveyed in two different media, as it were. First, there is God's invitation to live in the pattern of Jesus, who dedicated his life to healing and to reconciling others to God. This is the medium of history itself, as Christians seek to follow the example of Jesus and even of one another.[1] Second, there is the gift of the Spirit of God—Jesus' own Spirit. This is the direct medium of inner inspirations from God that will teach and inspire Christians until the end of time.

Kingdom of God

The Kingdom of God is not a territorial kingdom, as many Israelites hoped, but a reign of converted hearts. It is characterized by God's forgiveness of human waywardness and God's invitation that humans love and forgive one another in the same way. Here, there is some continuity with the Hebrew Scriptures (commonly referred to by Christians as the "Old" Testament) in the idea that morality is an *imitation of God*.[2] In Leviticus, God says, "You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lv 19:2). In Matthew, Jesus says, "So you must be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect" (Mt 5:48) and in John's first letter he says, "Beloved, let us love one another … He who does not love does not know God; for God is love" (1 Jn 4:7f).

In the New Testament, the central texts that present moral guidelines are the Beatitudes (Mt 5-7; Lk 6: 20-23). There are the familiar prohibitions against anger, lust, swearing, vengeance, moral pretentiousness, and critical judgment of others. But these are clearly the moral implications of those who welcome the Kingdom of God by completely trusting God and forgiving others. Similarly, the letters of St. Paul show that his concerns about morality are mainly positive directives to forgive, to maintain peace, to live humbly, to pray, and to avoid false teachers. His aim is to give light and encouragement for living through Christ in the Kingdom.

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[1] "Be fellow-imitators of me, brothers. Notice those who are already doing this so you may have us as an example." (Phil 3:17)

[2] For this view, see Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) p. 31. For this she credits William Spohn, SJ,. *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) p. 22.

His more specific recommendations about sex and marriage are carefully described as "suggestions" or as "from me and not the Lord" (1 Cor 7:12) or as "custom" (1 Cor 11: 16).

So the moral "teaching" of the New Testament should not be considered as just a set of defined behaviors to exhibit, even the admirable behaviors of forgiveness and self-sacrifice. Nor does the teaching arise from a philosophical reflection on human nature. Nor is it particularly concerned about moral dilemmas—the kind of problems we find in textbook case studies and in TV dramas. It is more accurate to say that the New Testament is primarily an affective communication with moral implications. The New Testament is an invitation to friendship. It announces good news—that God has given the divine self as completely as possible for the creator to give a creature. And it is an invitation to welcome God completely into one's life, particularly by joining God in forgiveness and self-sacrifice.

Jesus, Messiah and Son of God

New Testament writers testify to the faith of their communities that Jesus of Nazareth is not only the promised messiah (the "Christ"),[3] but also God's real and only "Son," given to the world to heal sin and give eternal life. The Israelite metaphor of "Son" represents the Christian belief that the "Father" gives his own self to humanity, as far as possible.

In his own person, Jesus, God's only Son, lived the life of God on earth. His example of compassion, healing, and forgiveness, even unto death, reveals in the flesh what life in the Kingdom of God is like. The testimony of his followers is that God raised him up after he died, not just for his own sake but also as a pledge of resurrection for all those who follow him.

Spirit of God

Writers of the New Testament also testify to the Holy Spirit. As promised through the prophet Joel, God will pour out his own divine spirit on all humankind (Acts 2:17). This is the very spirit of Jesus, the Spirit who lives on in Christians as teacher (Jn 14:26), leading them to complete truth by telling them all that is on the mind of the Father and Jesus (Jn 16:13-14).

The Spirit is divine love, flooding over in human hearts in love of both God and neighbor.

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[3] "Messiah" is a term in Hebrew and Aramaic. "Christ" is the term in Greek. They both mean "anointed." In the Old Testament, it refers to a savior who finds favor with God and would restore the dynasty of David. In the New Testament, it becomes a title given to Jesus and takes on the additional meaning of God's true Son. See "Messiah" in Xavier Léon-Dufour, ed., *Dictionary of Biblical Theology,* English translation under the direction of Joseph Cahill, S.J. (New York: Seabury Press, 1967), pp. 354-57.

"Our hope is not deceptive because because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us. (Rom 5:5)[4]

"As long as we love one another, God will live in us, and his love will be completed in us. We can know that we are living in him, and he is living in us because he lets us share his spirit." (1 Jn 4:12-13).

Scripture as Source of Moral Guidance

Overall, then, we can say that the "theological ethics" of the New Testament is an invitation more than a demand. Its authors invite readers to welcome God as coming in the historical tradition founded by Jesus of Nazareth and as coming directly into their own hearts as love—a love that teaches and inspires.[5]

These authors, in turn, believe that their invitation is God's own. This is a fundamentally important point on the relative authority of scripture and tradition. Many of the conflicting opinions about moral issues arise because one party takes a stand on scripture and the other on tradition. But all scripture is already tradition, in the sense that God's word in scripture is already "passed on" (*traditus,* in Latin*)* over a historical period through the hearts of faith-filled writers. This why there is a need for a two-fold discernment—a discernment of history and a discernment of hearts.

As history goes forward, moral clarity comes to Christians through God's self-gift in history and in hearts. Obviously, there is an ongoing need for discernment. Not everything done by Christians in history represents the pattern and desires of Jesus. And not everything that occurs in the hearts of Christians represents God's own love as Holy Spirit. So a dialectical attitude is needed.

Discernment of history takes place through hermeneutical studies of the original meaning of scriptural texts. (We have no "originals" of any book of the Bible, and in some places no one is sure what the authors meant.) It also takes place through historical-critical studies of the unfolding of authentic Christian traditions over time. (Many political traditions labeled

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[4] Note that God's "pouring out" of the Holy Spirit into the hearts of many is indeed a second gift. It goes beyond gifts of creation and of Christ Jesus. See also Acts 2:17-18, where the same Greek term for "pouring out" is used.

[5] The Spirit of Jesus lives on in Christians as teacher: "The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you" (Jn 14:26). "When the Spirit comes he will lead you to complete truth …All he tells you will be taken from what is mine, and everything the Father has is mine" (Jn 16:13-14).

"Christian" were a far cry from the authentic desires of Jesus for the "Kingdom of God.")

Discernment of history also tracks the emergence of new ethical concerns. For example, while the entire Bible calls individuals and communities to faith in God and love of neighbor, people simply accepted social institutions built on capital punishment, slavery, pre-emptive war, and the exclusion of women from positions of authority. Only recently have people of faith applied the word "evil" to these social institutions.

Discernment of hearts takes place through the practice of discernment of spirits to test which inspirations come from God and which do not. The inspirations coming from God are experienced as movements of love arising the God's presence as love in human hearts.

> "The Spirit of God has made his home in you. In fact, unless you possessed the Spirit of Christ you would not belong to him." (Rom 8: 9)

A litmus test for God-given inspirations is a deep sense of peace:

> "Let the peace of Christ be umpire in your hearts." (Col 3:15)[6]

That is, no matter how noble our inspirations seem from the perspective of a code of ethics, they still need to be tested to see if they harmonize with the peace of Christ in our hearts. This will be a peace that Christians learn through experience and that aligns well with the authentic teachings of Christ and his church.

Ongoing Presence of God

Moreover, the New Testament is testimony that Christians recognize that God gives himself to us on earth doubly. First, God comes into our hearts as love, in the eternal person of the Holy Spirit:

> When Christians are hard put to find the right words to pray, God's Spirit in them does the praying for them (Rom 8:26) and will teach them everything, reminding them of everything Jesus said (Jn 14:26).

Second, besides God's self-gift as love in human hearts, the New Testament also depicts God as coming personally as Christ Jesus in history.

> "The Word was God….All that came to be had life in him….The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us." (Jn 1:1-2, 13-14)

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[6] Many English translations say "rule" or "reign" in hearts. But the Greek word is a sporting term referring to what umpires do. They "rule" whether an action is fair or foul, safe or out. An significant exception is the The New American Bible, which translates this as, "And let the peace of Christ *control* your hearts."

> "He who did not spare his own son but handed him over for us all, how will he not freely give us all things along with him?" (Rom 8:32)

At the same time, the Father, Jesus and the Spirit are always one; they always come together, as it were:

> "God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts—the Spirit who cries, "Abba, Father!" Gal 4:6

> "The Spirit of God has made his home in you. In fact, unless you possessed the Spirit of Christ you would not belong to him." Rom 8: 9

> "Out of his infinite glory, may he give you power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong. So that, planted in love, and built on love, you will, with all the saints, have the strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth until, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God." Eph 3:16-19.

It is important to keep in mind here the conviction of Christians that God freely gives his own complete self to us. Christians came to believe that Christ is "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God" (Nicene Creed, AD 325) As this person, Christ freely and deliberately gives himself to us in love, as far as humanly and divinely possible. As always one with the Father and Spirit, he comes both as historical word "spoken" along the historical chain of generations and as his own inner Spirit of Love sent from the Father and flooding human hearts.

Here we gain insight into the historical origins of the doctrine that God is a trinity. How did the first Christians come to believe this?[7] Is it simply because Jesus spoke of a Father and a Holy Spirit that his disciples did the math? Hardly. Rather, it was a revelation of their historical, affective, and interpersonal selves. They understood their relationships with Jesus and their personal experience of his spirit as God giving the real divine self to the world. The evidence that these engagements are actually a double gift of God's own self lies in their analogy of a father giving up his only son for our sake and their metaphor of God pouring the self-same divine spirit into the hearts of anyone, a spirit that cries, "Abba, Father!" Eventually Christians formulated this double self-gift as being engaged with a God whose eternal self must be a sort of trinity—a Loving Source, speaking the Word who joins our historicity, and flooding our hearts with the Word-welcoming, world-loving Spirit. ***Table of Contents***

[7] The question of the historical origins of doctrine on the trinity involves a self-understanding just as any doctrine about one's salvation does. Any answer to the more tortuous question of *how* the one God can be somehow three belongs to philosophy, and is not an essential element of faith.

II: Turn to Philosophy

Ethical "Visions"

There is an important difference between an ethical vision and an ethical philosophy. Essentially, a vision is a description, and a philosophy is an explanation. We grasp a vision by our imagination, and we grasp a philosophy by our understanding.

Throughout history, certain writings by comprehensive thinkers have profoundly influenced how ordinary people envision life, despite the fact that very few ordinary people ever read these writings. This happens because teachers like me translate and condense the original works into more recognizable ideas. Then, all but their best students assume that they understand these profound ideas when they have a vivid picture of how the world really is. So, in popular literature and one-hour TV specials, we have the "Vision" of Homer, Plato, St. Paul, Galileo, or Freud about how life really works.

In the history of ethics, there are many distinct "visions" about good and evil. Each can be traced to profound thinkers, but they continue to dominate people's thinking over the centuries because they can be easily pictured in a person's imagination, and not because they can be easily understood in a person's mind. Of course, picture-thinking is absolutely essential for children. They have not yet developed their minds along the lines of rigorous logic, inductive reasoning, and systematic organization of a wide range of otherwise piecemeal insights. And without a good education, many never grow beyond picture thinking. So ethicists must take seriously the fact that most people will live by the images they inherited from parents or learned in school. The images of ethical standards of most people are apt to be a blending of different, sometimes even even contradictory, images which they simply assume about life.

To get beyond the ambiguities of picture-thinking, and to reach genuine understanding of ethical views, what counts are the questions that lead to these views. So, in this course, we will focus on these questions. I think you will find that many people today—yourself included—wonder about the same issues.

This is why the subheadings below will be questions.

"What Has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"

This famous question of Tertullian (died about 220) expresses an ongoing concern about how reason relates to faith. (Athens stands for Greek philosophy and Jerusalem stands for Judeo-Christian faith.). Evidence of engagements between reason and faith abounds in early Christianity.

Luke and Paul

In the letters of Paul and Luke's G*ospel* and *Acts*, it is especially clear that the gospel should be preached to the whole world. This "world" is not just the globe but also the "worlds" of business, family-raising, and even philosophy. Paul accepts the worship among Athenians of "An Unknown God" but moves it forward to preach the God "in whom we live and move and exist" (Acts 17:23-28)[8]. Later Christians will seek to find a synthesis between Christian beliefs and secular philosophies—particularly Justin "Martyr", Clement of Alexandria, and Origen.[9]

Justin (martyred about 161)

Being familiar with both Judaism and Plato, Justin integrates these views with Christianity. He presents Christ as both Word and Law—terms particularly meaningful to Platonist philosophers and Jewish believers. He proposes that this Word, who is Christ, is actually present and working the hearts of people everywhere, whether or not they realize it. It is Christ in them who gives them some knowledge of God's love and God's Law. As God's Law, Christ is himself the "new Law" in continuity with the Law found in the "Old" Testament.

Notice that this question is still relevant today: Can people who never heard of Christ be still motivated by Christ? If so, then preaching is not so much a matter of bringing something unfamiliar to them but of inviting them to notice what is already alive in their hearts. In the late 1900s, Karl Rahner refers to these people as "anonymous Christians."[10]

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[8] Because Paul is speaking to Greeks, phrase he probably borrowed this phrase from their philosophy that we live, move, and have our being in God.

[9] This material is taken from Bernard Häring, "How Free and Creative Was and Is Moral Theology?" in Ronald P. Hamel and Kenneth R. Himes, eds., *Introduction to Christian Ethics: A Reader,* (New York: Paulist, 1989) 33-48.

[10] Rahner, Karl, *Theological Investigations* vol. 14, trans. David Brooks. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976), 283

Clement of Alexandria (died about 214)

Gnosticism, from *gnosis*—the Greek term for *knowledge*—refers to the belief that authentic life is found only by living in the higher realm of knowledge, rather than the lower realm of visible, material reality. So it opposed the Jewish account of creation, where God saw the entire material world as "good." There were many gnostic movements in the early years of Christianity that shaped early Christian writing.[11] Among the Dead Sea Scrolls, unearthed in Egypt in 1947, were found *The Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Truth, Treatise on the Resurrection, Gospel of Philip, Wisdom of Jesus Christ, Revelation of James, Letter of Peter to Philip, On the Origin of the World* and other writings. These were known among the first generation of Christians, but were excluded from the "canonical" or official writings of the "New Testament" being formed at that time. Also owing to their anti-material views of life, many gnostics taught that Jesus only appeared to be human;[12] he did not really suffer and die a "human" death.[13]

The gnostic view of life has always had its adherents throughout history, as we can see in spiritual movements that take dim views of our physical, historical condition and seek fulfillment in the higher realms of knowledge.

Clement of Alexandria aimed to take over the gnostic instinct by naming Jesus Christ as the perfect Gnostic. Those who come to know Christ know the "secret"—that true life lies in goodness and love. This is not a secret in the sense of "secret societies" that withdraw from the world but rather an inner commitment to be light to the historical world and salt of the populated, material earth. The Christian secret of living well is to be as unbounded in goodness as God himself is.

In this effort, Clement relied on Platonic philosophy that envisions all-embracing spiritual ideas as actual realities, or concrete abstractions—

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[11] For an account of Gnosticism in early Christianity, see Dairmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (Viking Penguin, 2010) pp 121-22. See the index for further mentions.

[12] The belief that Jesus only appeared to be human is called *docetism,* from the Greek, "to seem, to appear as."

[13] In the view of Bernard Lonergan, gnostic thought "was totally undisciplined; it had no … scientific control of any sort; it was free speculation about God…." Gnostics thought "they could fit Christianity into their preconceptions, but their views in general involved a total distortion of the Christian message." See "Theology as a Christian Phenomenon," in R. Croken, F. Crowe, and R. Doran, eds., *Philosophical and Theological Papers, 1958-1964,* Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan v. 6 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press,1996) 255.

particularly the concrete realities of goodness and love.[14] At the same time, his thought on marriage was influenced by the Stoic view that sexual intercourse presented grave dangers to the spirit.

Origen (died about 254)

Where Clement of Alexandria aimed to "fulfill" gnosticism by pointing to Christ as the true gnostic, Origin (possibly a student of Clement) opposed gnosticism by presenting a full-blown systematic theology aimed to make sense of the universe quite apart from gnostic influences. This was likely influenced by the fact that many gnostic proponents such as Valentinus (died about 160) had developed full-blown systems of their own.[15]

So, for example, to explain the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Clement uses Platonic categories such as Perfect Unity, Logos (Word) and World-Soul as steps emanating downward from the Father. (The official doctrine that God is a trinity of equal "persons" would not be defined until 100 years after his death.) Another example is his view that in the end, all evil will be abolished and even that all evil persons and devils will be restored in Christ.[16]

Perhaps the doctrine that played the strongest role in everyday Christian living is Origin's teaching, drawn from Plato, that humans find their ultimate fulfillment in a loving contemplation of God. A commitment to "loving contemplation of God," in turn, can overlook, even reject, views that regard the body as somehow God's enemy.

Athens & Jerusalem

So, over the 200 years from Paul to Origin, Christians engaged philosophy for four reasons:

- to refute errors
- to deepen the meaning of their faith for themselves
- to express the faith to people familiar with the questions of philosophy

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[14] In contrast, Aristotle distinguished between existing *things* and the *principles* or *laws* that govern how things move and rest. This aligns well with modern science. No one considers gravity an existing material entity but rather a *principle* or *law* that governs how maerial things move and rest.

[15] Some of this material is from Edward Moore, "Origen of Alexandria (185 - 254 A.D.)," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* See http://www.iep.utm.edu/o/origen.htm

[16] In Ephesians 1:10, the author states that all things will be brought to Christ as the Head. Origin interprets this as saying that even the most evil persons and devils will be saved, although seemingly through multiple reincarnations.

- to proclaim Christ as the revelation of the full meaning of life as sought by philosophers.

The dialog continues to our own day, owing to developments on both the side of reason and the side of faith. Since the Enlightenment, many people regard human reason as as replacing faith and religion. Reason produced modern technology and economics, which raises new moral problems for which the Bible offers no direct guidance. On the other hand, reason also produced modern technique of hermeneutics, which help eliminate naïve interpretations of what the biblical authors really meant. It also produced the modern discipline of historical criticism, which helps alert religious believers to the real, messy, history of Christianity and the ongoing need for reformation. Faith supports the idea that humanity is not self-sufficient—a view clearly supported by the evidence of history. It also proposes that love is the highest principle of all human living—a love that includes not only love of friends, family, and country, but also the love of God by whose love everything created came to be.

Why Do We Do Wrong?

We learn about major threats to a sound theology from the theologians who not only quashed them but burned their books. What remains are condensed versions of heresies and heretics in which orthodox theologians highlight the errors and omit the merits. Still, most of the heresies we know about seem to keep popping up, as if the mind itself was somewhat prone to certain errors. In the writings of Augustine, we find two such heresies that propose explain why we do wrong: Manicheanism and Pelagianism.[17]

Manicheanism

This movement is named after *Mani,* a 3rd century Persian who aimed to synthesize what he regarded as the beliefs of the major religions, particularly Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Babylonian popular religion, and a few elements of Christianity.

The Manichean view of why we do wrong is that there are two equal but opposed universal forces, one for good and one for evil. (Philosophers refer to this as an *ontological dualism*—a duality in being itself.) Our human condition is essentially a battle between these two forces.

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[17] Much of this material is taken from Michael Banner, *Christian Ethics: A Brief History* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) ch. 2 (pp. 23-41) and from Bernard Häring (cited above). For an encyclopedic view of Augustine's life and thought, see http://www.iep.utm.edu/a/augustin.htm.

Manicheans point to a distinction between Matter and Spirit found in both Greek philosophy and Christian scriptures. But rather than regard Matter as subordinate to and benefitting from Spirit (the gnostic view), Manicheans regard the two as eternally equal and opposed. We do wrong because we give in to the needs of our bodies and not to the needs of our spirit. Relying in part on Aristotle, they also believed that women are just deficient males.

These views are not that strange. Many people of faith detest the body, resent its sexual urgings, and the slow losses that come with age. Many hope to finally leave their burdensome bodies behind and rise spiritually to heaven. Many imagine Satan and God as engaged in an eternal battle for human souls, as if God and Satan were equal in power. Many (women as well as men!) think of females as essentially less than males, less capable of wisdom and leadership. We often find politicians who name their enemies "evil incarnate" so as to justify killing them or taking over their countries in the name of the opposite power, good.

Still, Augustine could not square this view with the clear teaching of Scripture that there is only one God, who made the entire material world and saw that it was good.[18] God made the angels, some of whom "fell" from God, becoming the devils that are the source of human temptation. God made humans, and God made sex. He expected that the dead who are raised on the last day will still be male or female, equal in dignity.[19]

Pelagianism

The Pelagians were a group who strenuously opposed the Manichean dualistic views of reality as a battle between good and evil forces. His core doctrine about faith and ethics is that God created everyone and everything as good. There is no "evil" god. And God, being all good, made us naturally good. The so-called "original sin" of Adam and Eve set a bad example of pride, but it did not infect human nature itself as being more prone to evil because of their sin. Similarly, Christ does not give a new nature to Christians or a new power for living virtuously but rather a good *example* of humility for Christians to follow in leading a virtuous life.

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[18] For Augustine's teaching about Manichaeanism, see http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1401.htm.

[19] Banner (above, 29-30) cites Augustine's *City of God* for Augustine's view that both sexes are preserved in the afterlife: "…if the souls of the saints are to be reunited to bodies, it shall be to their own bodies, in which they have endured the miseries of this life, and in which, to escape these miseries, they served God with piety and fidelity" (Bk 22, Ch 27). Also: "The sex of women is not a vice. … The one who created both sexes shall restore both" (Bk 22: Ch 17).

Not that living a virtuous life was easy. Asceticism and self-discipline are essential.[20] Pelagius himself, a contemporary of Augustine, spent his adult life in Rome preaching a strong Christian asceticism: Goodness is within us. But we are on our own. God created everything, but leaves it to our intelligence and good will to live our best. In other words, we do wrong because we don't try hard enough to do right.

The Pelagian view thrives among people of deep faith even today. God gave us life and expects us to live virtuous lives so as to return to him in the afterlife with a good report card. What counts during our life on earth is our naturally good willpower and determination. "Do your best and God will do the rest." Stephen Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989) is an example of how attractive this mindset can be. (In 1996, *Time Magazine* named him among the "25 most influential Americans.")[21]

Augustine (died 430)

To Augustine, Pelagius' moral optimism contradicted his personal experience of wishing to do what is right but acting against his own wishes. There is something fundamentally wounded in our very nature. Does this seem incomprehensible? Are there times when we truly want one thing yet choose another? Suppose you are convinced that X is something you ought to do. Suppose, further, that you actually want to do it, are able to do it, and are not prevented from doing it by outside circumstances. Is it really possible that you would deliberately act against your own better judgment and actual wishes?

In Ovid's *Metamorphosis* (7, 21), Medea complains about an ailment that affects us all. She was heartsick in love with Jason and convinced that she would do wrong to pursue him. But she admits:

> I see the good, and I approve it too,
> Condemn the wrong—and yet the wrong pursue.

And St. Paul's *Letter to the Romans* (7:18-19):

> Wanting the good is in me, but not the doing.
> I don't do the good I want, but rather the evil I don't want.

And St. Augustine in his *Confessions* (8.8.20) realized that while his limbs obeyed what his mind commanded, his soul could not obey what his soul knew what is right:

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[20] Some of this material is taken from MacCullogh, 306-08, 330.

[21] See http://www.worldbusiness.org/about/academy-fellows/stephen-covey/

> I was greatly disturbed in spirit, angry at myself with a turbulent indignation because I had not entered your will and covenant, O my God, while all my bones cried out to me to enter, praising it to the skies. The way there is not by ships or chariots or feet--indeed it was not as far as I had come from the house to the place where we were seated. For to go along that road and indeed to reach the goal is nothing else but the will to go. But it must be a strong and single will, not staggering and swaying about this way and that--a changeable, twisting, fluctuating will, wrestling with itself while one part falls as another rises.
>
> If I tore my hair, struck my forehead, or, entwining my fingers, clasped my knee, these I did because I willed it. Yet I did not do that one thing which seemed to me infinitely more desirable. Thus my body more readily obeyed the slightest wish of the soul in moving its limbs at the order of my mind than my soul obeyed itself to accomplish in the will alone its great resolve.

What Medea conceived as our human *fate,* Paul conceived as our human *sin,* and Augustine conceived as an intrinsic *alienation* from both God and within our own souls. For Medea, we can be destined to oppose our better selves, even unto death, and the gods seldom lift a finger. For Paul, God calls us to a destiny beyond this world, and gives us the grace in this world to heal our self-opposition. For Augustine, we are called to be reconciled to both God and ourselves in a way that depends on God's initiative, because humans are incapable by themselves of turning a willingness into a choice. We may be free in principle, but not in practice.

The core problem with Pelagianism, then, is a denial of our need for God's grace to help us—to free us, really—to actually choose what we know is better. This powerfully affects the prayer life of those who realize it. They do not assume that it's up to them to impel themselves to do what is right; they beg God to impel them.

What is Doing Right?

Augustine not only opposed the Manichaean dualism of Good and Evil and the Pelagian optimism that God's grace is not needed for everyday decisions. He also gave us a higher perspective on what the core problem of wrongdoing really is. It is not in certain deeds named "wrong." It is certainly not equated to the ordinary mistakes we call "bad choices" nor in sexuality, despite its moral ambiguities. The problem is that we act against our own nature. We want the good, but we choose the bad.

Human nature itself is wounded—wounded by the sin of Adam and Eve.[22] That sin, which we all inherit as their progeny, is the sin of pride whereby we believe we can be our own masters.

Besides this brilliant insight into our lack of effective freedom, Augustine also founded a positive ethics based a single, highest virtue: our love for God. (This opposes the intellectual ethics of Stoics that the highest virtue is reason; and opposes the contentious ethics of the Manicheans that the highest virtue is a goodness that fights against its opposite evil.) He reinterpreted the classic four cardinal ("pivotal") virtues of Socrates as all functions of love for God. Thus:

- *Temperance*, surprisingly, is not restraint but "giving itself entirely to that which is loved."
- *Fortitude* is not brave acts but "love readily bearing all things for the sake of the beloved."
- *Justice* is not simple fairness but "serving only the loved object, and therefore ruling rightly."
- *Prudence* is the wisdom to distinguish between what helps and what hinders this love.23

Thus love for God is both the ultimate motive for good acts and the ultimate criterion for judging the goodness of an act.

Moreover, Augustine makes a strong case that love is not just "*of* God" but "*is* God." Anything we do in genuine charity is God's doing in us. This is why Augustine gave this famous advice:

> Finally, I give you a short precept:
>
> Love, and do what you want.
>
> If you hold your peace, hold it through love;
> if you cry out, cry out through love.

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[22] Augustine's view that the sin of Adam and Eve infected everyone may be based on a biological assumption, since proven erroneous, that all humans were contained in the sperm of Adam. He says we must "conclude that in the first man all are understood to have sinned, because all were in him when he sinned; whereby sin is brought in with birth and not removed save by the new birth... in Adam all sinned, so to speak, *en masse*. By that sin we became a corrupt mass." Retrieved on April 19, 2009 from http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/beliefs/originalsin_7.shtml (A page on "Religion and Ethics" hosted by the BBC.)

[23] See Augustine's "On the Morals of the Catholic Church. http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1401.htm, chapter 15.

If you correct another, through love correct;
if you spare another; through love spare.

Let the root of love be within you.
From this root nothing but good will come.[24]

Augustine here is giving a homily on the First Letter of John to believing Christians. He does not discuss whether an ordinary charity in pagans is God in them as well. On the one hand, pagans do not knowingly love God in their ordinary acts of charity. On the other, neither can we expect Christians to be aware of loving God as their motive for each distinct act of loving their neighbor. In today's highly secularized society, if it is true that love *is* God regardless of anyone's explicit knowledge of this, then believers can expect to find agreement with nonbelievers on a number of moral issues, provided only that both sides are motivated by love.

On the practical matter of sex, Augustine's views have been criticized for centuries. He regarded intercourse as oriented exclusively toward reproduction—influenced probably by the teachings of the Manicheans, the Stoics, and Plato.[25] Those who prevent conception commit mortal sin, and those who have intercourse motivated by sexual desire and not reproduction commit venial sin. The "concupiscence" of sexual desire is sinful itself, which accounts for the transmission of Original Sin to offspring. This view dominated Catholic teaching on sex and marriage until the mid-1900s.[26]

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[24] From Homily 7 on 1 Jn 4:4-12, par. 8. See http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf107.iv.iii.html.

[25] In Plato's dialogs, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus,* he exalts the ascent of the *eros* of the spirit to a vision of Beauty itself, leaving sexual intercourse as a "degraded and wasteful form" of erotic expression. See http://www.iep.utm.edu/p/plato.htm#SH5c

[26] Bernard Lonergan made the decisive distinction between two purposes of marriage—an *essential purpose* of reproduction and an *excellent purpose* of deepening mutual love. See "Finality, Love, Marriage" (University of Toronto Press: 1988; first published in *Theological Studies 4: 1943)* 17–52.

III. The Turn to System

Background: The Need for a Philosophical System

Around 1120, Peter Abelard (1079-1142) published "Yes and No"—a list of 158 propositions related to Christian faith, which were both affirmed and denied by sources in scripture, the Fathers, the councils, and reason. He made no attempt to reconcile these contradictions; his purpose was precisely to raise questions, arguing that "by doubting we come to inquiry, and by inquiry we grasp the truth."[27]

For the preceding 1,100 years, apparent contradictions among Christian beliefs were resolved by establishing the authority of the source. Of course, the Bible was primary. For non-scriptural sources, most theologians relied on Augustine, who, in turn, relied on the views of the philosopher Plotinus, a disciple of Plato, regarding notions of *good* and *truth* and *virtue*.[28] But in Abelard's list there were no clear indications that one authority is more reliable than any other. This created a crisis because then there could be no single "catechism" on Christian beliefs and teachings.

However, in many places in Abelard's list, it seemed like different authorities used the same word but with different meanings. So a solution to this dilemma was to develop a system where each term is clearly defined and the entire set of terms interlock with each other. Neither Plato nor Augustine provided such a comprehensive system, and the crisis Abelard created in theology lasted for at least 150 years. Then, in the nine years of 1265-1274, Thomas Aquinas published just such a comprehensive system in his three-part *Summa Theologica,* part two of which he devoted to ethics.[29] Throughout this work, Thomas relied both on the newly-recovered philosophical system of Aristotle[30] about our

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[27] For example: God is one; God is not one. The Son has a source; the Son has no source. God knows everything; God does not know everything. See Latin text at http://individual.utoronto.ca/pking/resources/abelard/Sic_et_non.txt

[28] Augustine read very little, if anything, of Plato or Aristotle, mainly because he didn't read Greek, and Latin translations were not available.

[29] The treatment below follows Shawn Floyd, "Aquinas' Moral Philosophy" from the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. See http://www.iep.utm.edu/a/aq-moral.htm.

[30] Aquinas' reliance on Aristotle was deeply suspected by Christian theologians and philosophers. Since the beginnings of Christianity, the works of Aristotle were practically unavailable to Christians, particularly in Western countries. They were preserved mainly in Arabic translations from the original Greek, and, in the 1100s, translated into Latin. Access to the original Greek texts became available to European areas in 1204, when Western armies captured Constantinople, and then about 1265, when the Flemish

knowledge this world and on the beliefs of Christians as found in Scripture, the early councils and on various theologians—especially and Augustine—about our knowledge of the supernatural. Relying on Aristotle's definitions and system of interlocking terms, he knocked off one "question" after another, first by citing opposing views, then by introducing a philosophical definition, and concluding by asserting his resolution of the apparent contradiction.

Four Philosophical Terms Relevant to Christian Ethics

There are four particularly important ideas that Aquinas introduced to theological ethics and are still relevant to today's ethical issues: *natural law, virtue, evil,* and *common good.*[31]

Natural Law

Aquinas imported from Aristotle the idea of a "human nature," and that we live well when we act according to our nature. He combined this with the Christian view that God's grace is necessary to live beyond our nature in union with God. Notice here the assumption that there is a "super-natural" order—an order of reality "above" the natural. I say this here because much of today's secularism assumes that there is nothing but the natural order of things.

These two ideas—nature and grace, or natural and supernatural—have always been in tension, not only in theological debates but also in our personal lives. Some days we enjoy our human nature as creative and good-willed; there seems to be no need of grace. Other days we resent the struggles of life and the frailties of our nature; we long for the grace of divine strength to overcome our frailties and rise above our merely human nature. So what is the case? Are grace and nature opposed? If not, how might we understand how grace and nature are related?

Dominican William of Moerbeke and others translated them from Greek to Latin. See http://www.mathpages.com/home/kmath219/kmath219.htm

[31] This material on Aquinas and subsequent Thomism depends largely on Michael Banner, *Christian Ethics: A Brief History,* (West-Sussex, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) chapter 3 (42-55).

Aquinas proposed that our natural woundedness is open to healing by super-natural grace. Or simply, "grace *perfects* nature." Grace enlightens our darkened minds to understand life more deeply. It strengthens our feeble wills to choose what we know is better. The progress of the human race would not be possible without grace. Human history would be a horrid mess of confusion and hatred. Also, grace also transforms human mortality into a divine immortality in a manner that loses nothing of our nature. Nothing that is truly human is lost in our ultimate union with God in heaven—no friendship, no good idea, no family dinner, no kind word, no twinkle in the eye of a loved one, no sweet chirp of a sparrow, not your eyes on these words right now.

If grace perfects nature, then a harmony must be possible between faith and reason. What is needed is a faith that heals the biases that infect human reason, so that our "reasonable" nature may be healed to see reality more fully and cooperate with it more energetically. Still, despite our biases, we can know some truths about God from reason alone—that God exists, is good, is creator, etc.

In this perspective, a faith-based ethics that rejects reason altogether throws out the baby with the bathwater. It has been called "fideistic" or a "Divine Command Ethics"—the idea that what counts is belief in God and God's commandments, not any human philosophy.

What are the core features that belong to our nature? Aquinas names three:[32]

> Self-preservation (shared with plants and animals)
>
> Sex and caring for offspring (shared with animals)
>
> Seeking to know the truth about God and engaging in social relations (proper to human reason alone)

Aquinas presented this list as the main kinds of pursuits or needs proper to humans. Later followers of Aquinas developed a more detailed "Natural Law Ethics," which we'll speak about below.

Virtue

For Aristotle, actions are good or bad insofar as they contribute to or detract from achieving the goal of being fully human. That goal he refers to as *well-being* or *happiness*. We move toward that goal by developing *virtue.* The word comes from the Latin, *strength*; it means a habit of excellence.

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[32] *Summa Theologica*, Prima Secundae. Q 94, a 4. See http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2094.htm . Note: This site gives the complete work in English.

Cardinal Virtues. We can name many virtues—foresight, self-control, confidence, etc. But Aristotle proposed (borrowing from Plato)[33] that there are four virtues in particular upon which all the other virtues hinge. (Called "cardinal virtues," from the Latin *cardo,* "hinge.") Aquinas adopted these same virtues for his account of ethics.[34]

One is the ability to maintain self-control and be restrained in eating, drinking, and sex. This is the virtue of **Temperance** or Restraint. Its subordinate virtues include *chastity, sobriety*, and *abstinence*. Plato considered this virtue important for the working classes.

A second is the ability to persist against obstacles to doing what is good. This is the habit of not letting unreasonable fears overcome us. This is the virtue of **Courage**, with its subordinate virtues of *endurance, magnanimity,* and *hope*. Plato considered this virtue important for soldiers and adventurers in any field of life.

Third is the ability to be reasonable and fair in making decisions that affect others. It is the habit of being concerned about the common good. This is the virtue of **Justice**.

> A C*ommutative Justice* regards exchanges between people. This meaning usually applies to contracts that define exchanges of labor and wages.
>
> *Distributive Justice* regards the distribution of goods and services across society. The mainly applies to the economy, to obligations to participate in government, and to the problems of poverty.
>
> *Legal Justice* regards claims sanctioned by laws. It applies both to redressing wrongs (bringing criminals "to justice") and to developing laws to protect citizens.
>
> Other virtues that hinge on justice are *religious piety, liberality, friendship,* and *gratitude*. This virtue, according to Plato, applies between all classes and types of people.

The fourth is the ability to make wise decisions in specific situations where laws and standards do not clearly apply. It was obvious to Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas that in many ordinary situations ethical rules are not sufficient for knowing what to do. This is the virtue of **Prudence** or Wisdom. Other virtues that hinge on prudence are *memory, intelligence, docility, shrewdness, reason, foresight, circumspection, and caution. Epikeia* (or "equity") is the virtue of adapting and making exceptions to

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[33] *The Laws*, Bk. I, 631

[34] *Summa Theologica*, Secunda Secundae, Q 49, a 1-8

general laws or principles in specific circumstances.[35] Plato considered this virtue important for any leader or ruler.

Theological Virtues. The Christian belief is that we are called to supernatural life but cannot reach it on our own. So besides the four hinge (cardinal) virtues, Aquinas identifies three virtues that God gives to humans, and that have God as their object—virtues he names "theological." These are faith, hope and love.[36]

Our minds are clouded, partly because of Original Sin and partly because of the inability of created beings to understand their creator. So we do not naturally know what God is like and what God may desire. Hence God plants in us the virtue of **faith**, which is the gift of a *supernatural eye* for what is really true about reality and truly better in God's eyes.

Our wills are weak, partly because of Original Sin and partly because we lack the physical and emotional stamina to endure suffering and to overcome obstacles to living the life God desires of us. Hence God plants in us the virtue of **hope**, which is the gift of the *supernatural guts* to persist in the everyday struggle to live in God.

We would not even recognize our need for faith and hope were we not already in love with God. Nor would we realize that **love** itself is a virtue that God plants in us—the gift of a *supernatural heart*. The Christian tradition associates this with the gift of the Holy Spirit, who cries in us, "Abba, Father!"[37]

Virtue Ethics. Recently, some philosophers have proposed a "Virtue Ethics"—a return to the views of Aristotle and Aquinas on virtues as a foundation for ethics. This is mainly in opposition to *deontological* views that see duty as the foundations and to *utilitarian* or *consequentialist* views that see outcomes as the foundation.

Aquinas' overall teaching on the virtues is important for keeping the habits of persons at the forefront of ethical reflection. It prevents an exclusive reflection on the morality of individual acts and highlights the need to inculcate good habits, both in the young and in the dissolute. But notice that while some ethicists take their stand on a Natural Law Ethics and others on a Virtue Ethics, Aquinas stands on both.

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[35] *Summa Theologica,* Secunda Secundae, Q 120.

[36] In the Bible, the classical triad of faith, hope and charity appears only in the letters of St. Paul, although the Greek philosopher Heraclitus (d. 475 BCE) made somewhat informal mention of them in his writings.

[37] Mk 14: 36; Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6

Evil

Throughout history, people have been baffled at how humans can have such high aspirations and such corrupt performance. Believers and nonbelievers alike have always wondered how a good God could have created evil, or, even if God just "allows" evil, for what possible purpose?

Augustine had a profound insight into evil. Actually, we might call it an "inverse insight" because he realized that there is nothing there to understand! What does this mean? He reasoned like this: By "pure evil," we think of something that has no goodness whatsoever. But how can there be something that has no goodness whatsoever? Certainly to exist is good, not matter how poorly. So something with no goodness whatsoever cannot exist. So the idea of a "pure evil" is only an idea, not a reality.

Aquinas expanded on Augustine's reasoning by proposing that goodness and existence are really the same. Therefore any *evil*, or *badness*, or *sin*, is essentially the *absence of something that ought to exist*, not the presence of something that does exist.

From this view, we can draw three significant conclusions in line with Christian beliefs. One is that it opposes the *Manichaean* view of the universe as governed by the two opposing forces of Good and Evil. This view lies behind the inclination of many people today to name a Hitler or an Iraq or abortionists or mass murderers as "intrinsically evil" and, for this reason, alone, deserving of death—the ethics prominent in most cowboy and intergalactic movies.

A second conclusion regards the question of *theodicy*—the question of why an all-good God would create evil in the first place. If evil is not an existing reality but an absence of a goodness that ought to be present, then it is more accurate to say that God *allows the absence* of goodness, which, after all, is obvious from the fact that we can grow in goodness, and there could be no growth unless something was lacking. Granted, this is small comfort to victims of evil, but it does put a priority on rehabilitation over punishment. Rehabilitation aims to make up what is lacking in the evildoer, while punishment aims to destroy some imaginary, Manichean "evil force" lurking in the evildoer's soul.

A third conclusion regards the commonsense "vision" that relies on *mental pictures* to view the universe instead of *understanding* its structures. The idea that evil has no positive existence is almost impossible to picture. It can undercut the familiar belief in a "purely evil" Satan. But the idea does answer our questions for understanding what to do about evil—namely, make up for what is lacking rather than imagine it's a force to be destroyed.

Common Good

To understand the meaning of a "common good," start with a particular good. A pizza is a particular good. But no one makes a pizza "from scratch." There are wheat and tomatoes to plant, harvest, and pack; pigs to raise, slaughter, and process; distributers, bankers, trucks, trains, pizzerias, grocery stores … Well, you get the idea. All our social institutions are good things, but what makes them good is a collaborative process, an organization of materials and workers to provide an ongoing flow of particular goods. So "order" itself is a good. You can't eat it or store it, but it underlies almost everything we can eat or store. It may be called a "good of order" as distinct from "particular goods."

Now mere organization may not be truly good; both Hitler and Mother Teresa were organized. So we criticize those organizations or setups that degrade human life. And here is where the concept of a common good comes in. It is a good of order that is objectively good as well. We might define it like this:

> The common good is the order that benefits all fairly.

Here's Aristotle:

> "The attainment of the good for one person alone is, to be sure, a source of satisfaction; yet to secure it for a nation and for cities is nobler and more divine."

Aristotle's expression "more divine" refers generally to an order that transcends the human, but not necessarily to specific gods, let alone the God of monotheism. In many places, his expression is equivalent to "nobler."

Aquinas took over Aristotle's view and incorporated it into a perspective that believes in a supernatural "order":

> "The supreme good, namely God, *is* the common good, since the good of all things depends on God."[38]

The idea of a common good holds a central position in Christian ethics today. Notice that it can make sense equally to unbelievers who honor the "nobler" as well as to believers who honor "God." The idea presents a bulwark against the forces of Individualism today.

A particularly important application of the idea lies in the area of authority. Individualists and extreme Libertarians regard authority mainly as something necessary to protect their private interests. In contrast, democratic institutions and religions regard authority as necessary to

[38] Citations by David Hollenbach, *The Common Good & Christian Ethics* (Cambridge UP, 2002) 3-4.

promote the genuine well-being of all in ways that often require forgoing private satisfactions and interests.

Thomism

It took about 300 years before Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* was accepted as the standard textbook on Christian ethics, but once it was accepted, it remained the primary work among Roman Catholics until the mid-1900s. This movement to rely on Thomas Aquinas was usually referred to as "Thomism." In the past 60 years or so, Thomism has been criticized from many quarters as being overly rational and deductive, to the detriment of views founded more on religious faith. And Thomists were criticized for making their "Natural Law Ethics" more important to ethics than Aquinas himself believed.

For example, Aquinas cites only a few "natural laws," and apparently left it up to the virtue of prudence and the practice of *epikeia* to discern right and wrong in particular cases. But many Thomist moral theologians appeal to Aquinas' view of natural law to justify their condemnations of every incidence of homosexuality, extra-marital sex, divorce, abortion, artificial birth control, suicide and euthanasia.

For another example, take the "Five Proofs for the Existence of God" in his *Summa Theologica.*[39] With fierce determination, Thomists have for centuries presented them as arguments that should be logically compelling to unbelievers, despite the evidence that few were ever compelled. But in the introduction to the *Summa,* Thomas himself explains that this work is for Christians who are beginning instruction in theology. Thomas' use of *probari,* which could mean a "proof" in a logical argument, here means a reasonable confirmation of what is already accepted in the minds of believers. Where Thomas regarded theology as faith seeking understanding, many Thomists regarded his effort to provide reasonable understanding of the meaning of "God" as rather an effort to compel belief based on reason.

Still, in the 1900s, other theologians who rely heavily on Aquinas have come to the fore under the title of "Transcendental Thomism." The "transcendental" refers to their focus on human existential desires for God and love of God as a basis for moral truth, not as opposed to reason but as transcending reason and healing its biases.[40] This development

[39] See Aquinas' five "proofs" in Doc Sharing. (*Summa Theologica*, Prima Pars, Q 2.)

[40] Bernard Lonergan is considered a leading "transcendental Thomist" by others, although this title doesn't come close to capturing the breadth of his work.

incorporates the newly-emerged disciplines of historical criticism, textual hermeneutics, political theology, and religious psychology.

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IV: Faith & Works

In the 1500s, two wise and holy Christians made enduring contributions to Christian ethics—**Martin Luther** (1483-1546) and **Ignatius Loyola** (1491-1556).

Luther emphasized the general importance of faith over good works. This was a key doctrine in his attempt to reform the Roman Catholic Church and to protest[41] its policy of promising heavenly rewards in return for money.

Loyola provided highly practical rules for discerning which inspirations about good works come from God and which do not. As the founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), he too aimed at reforming the Church—not by condemning excesses but by reforming the clergy through in-depth theological, philosophical, and secular education.[42]

Every advance in ethics began with a new, unresolved question. So each of the following reviews of Luther and Loyola will each begin with *The Question* they each sought to resolve. This will tie later assumptions about ethics to the achievements of these Christian leaders.

Martin Luther

The Question

Roman Catholics were taught that it is necessary to do good works to get into heaven. This seems reasonable enough, but it raised disturbing problems. It portrayed the spiritual life as a reward-punishment game; you earn God's forgiveness by doing good works. The Church reinforced this assumption by granting "indulgences"—assurances of a reduced sentence in Purgatory, and even complete amnesty by going straight to heaven at death. What made matters worse, a highly-promoted "good work" was to contribute money to the Church. So a thriving business grew up of "selling indulgences" which brought income to the Church and solace to the Christian. While the practice of selling indulgences was eventually stopped, the idea of "gaining indulgences" through good works, especially prayers, continued to influence Roman Catholics up until the Second Vatican Council (1963-65).

In effect, the Church had accepted a Pelagian ethics. It was the common belief that we can, we must, take the first step toward greater holiness.

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[41] Hence the name "protestant" for the many offshoots from the Roman Catholic church.

[42] At the same time, the Roman Catholic Church initiated its own reform at the Council of Trent (1545-1563).

Our success in directing our own moral resources to the good earns a heavenly reward. This, of course, was something that St. Paul and St. Augustine did not accept. They believed that self-improvement to earn God's grace was not possible without God first giving us the "prevenient" grace. A *non*-Pelagian ethics would highlight first asking God for the prior light to see and the strength to choose what God desires.

The question for theological ethics here is this: Does God first give us the desire and power to do a specific good work or does God expect us to take the first step?

Luther's Response

As an Augustinian monk in Germany, Luther himself felt burdened by the idea that God requires good works for entrance into heaven.[43] For him, it amounted to being still under a "law," which contradicted the clear message of St. Paul that in Christ we are free from the law. What awakened Luther was this text from his letter to the Romans:"*The just person will live by faith."*[44] This could be understood as meaning that if you do works that are "just," then you will have faith. But this was not what St. Paul meant or what Luther understood. They believed that justification is God's free gift. We cannot earn justification in God's eyes by any good work whatsoever.

Divine Command Ethics. For theological ethics, this means that faith is the source of both our knowledge of what is good and of the strength to do it. We humans cannot, by ourselves, do anything that *earns* justification from God and eternity in heaven. So a Christian "ethics" along these lines will be a "Divine Command Ethics."[45] It will draw its principles from scripture and perhaps also from historical agreements

[43] In this section, I rely on Michael Banner in his *Christian Ethics: A Brief History* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) chapter 4 (66-70).

[44] Romans 1:17. Here, Paul is citing Habakkuk, 2:4. Much of his letter to the Romans is focused on how Christ replaces the law. Later scholars will interpret the biblical meaning of "justice" as fidelity to promises, not fidelity to rules.

[45] The "Divine Command Ethics" has also been called "voluntarism," meaning that the ultimate nature of all reality is not what is reasonable to God's mind but God's will—*voluntas.* It has also been called "fideism," meaning that the ultimate basis for all morality is faith—*fides.*

among believers about what God commands. In the Hebrew bible, the Ten Commandments and the books of the prophets represent a Divine Command Ethics, while the wisdom books (mainly *Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiasticus,* and *Wisdom*) blend in wisdom "commands" from neighboring cultures.

This "Divine Command Ethics" also appears in the "commands" of Jesus in the New Testament, although St. Paul shifts the emphasis from obedience to laws to welcoming a new life in Christ, whose "command" is mainly to love and serve one another. It also appears in the work of William of Ockham (approx. 1288-1348). He opposed Thomas Aquinas' view that God's grace can liberate human reason to know something of God and God's will.[46] Such a view, he thought, would allow human reason to judge the reasonableness or goodness of God's will. It would make God himself subject to what is according to reason and goodness; but God cannot be subject to anything like a higher reason or more noble goodness. If anything is true or good, it must be simply because God wills it. Therefore God's *will* must be the basis for all ethics. This explains why a good God could command Abraham to kill his son Isaac: it must be good simply because God willed it.[47]

However, a pure Divine Command Ethics has been criticized on two counts: It carries no criteria for resolving opposing claims about what God wills. A current example is the debate among some religions whether or not God wants to exclude women and/or homosexuals from positions of authority in their congregations. It also tends to suppress intelligent and responsible questions insofar as it insists that X, Y, and Z are wrong simply because the church says so.

Suspicion of Reason. Luther's view of the centrality of faith has a second important effect on ethics, namely, that our very dependence on reason is an ever-present danger to faith. Indeed, Luther once called reason "the Devil's whore." Followers of Luther were thereby highly suspicious of the practice of "casuistry"—the reasoned consideration of each individual "case" (*casus*) to determine whether or not certain religious or ethical principles apply or might be adapted in some way. If human reason could redirect or modify God's commands, then God

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[46] For a more complete discussion of Thomas Aquinas and William of Ockham, see James Brent's "Natural Theology," parts 5 and 6, in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy at http://www.iep.utm.edu/t/theo-nat.htm#H5

[47] In 1999, Lutherans and Roman Catholics published their *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.* It represents a far more balanced view and resolves most of the apparent differences. See http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html

becomes subject to human reason. The discipline of ethics itself was regarded as suspect by many.

Anti-Secular Worldview. A third effect of Luther's nearly exclusive emphasis on faith regards how Christians regard the secular world. In scripture, Christ himself is proclaimed as being sent into the world to save the world. There are scriptural passages on Christ sending his disciples into "the world" to be "in" the world but not "of" the world. So how should the Christian regard secular life? St. Augustine portrayed the relationship in his *Two Cities* (The City of Heaven and the City of Earth). These two cities are *not* the same as "this life" and "the next life." Rather than dividing life along a two-phase timeline, Augustine divided our human condition into an ever-present choice of two loves. There is the love arising from concupiscence (self-regarding pleasure) and the love arising from charity (the love of God and neighbor). These two "cities" are mingled together so that God's love penetrates secular society through the power of charity that God gives to humans.

Unfortunately, *Two Cities* is a huge, rambling work, and very few Christians have read it. It was far easier to rely on picture-thinking to imagine two physical worlds following each other as "this life" and an "afterlife" than on understanding "two intermingling love worlds." We might say that Christian ethics at that time was largely adolescent: as teenagers do today, it accepted a reward-punishment vision but had yet to learn the mature discipline of sorting out the loves in one's heart. This reward-punishment view is exactly the burden Luther found unacceptable, but did not entirely escape. While he rejected the reward-punishment vision, he proposed a vision of faith-above-reason that still looked to a next life as so important that the idea of doing the good works to help redeem this world fell into the shadows. The "religious life" had become the term to describe those women and men who left secular involvements to pursue a higher level of being Christian.

Now it must be said that Luther did not deny the value of good works. He clearly believed that people of faith will, by nature, do good works. They will become true disciples concerned about his world. But because his writings were mainly in respond to abuses, and because he wrote in brilliant but provocative language, a balance between faith and works was lost on people who never read the majority of his writings. Just as "Thomism" represents theologians who "applied" only this and that belief of Thomas Aquinas, so "Lutheranism" represents people who did the same with Martin Luther.

In 1937, the Lutheran pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, published his *Cost of Discipleship.* There, he criticized Christianity's widespread lack of concern for this world—a concern for the world that he

insisted was demanded by a true discipleship under Christ. In its place was the "cheap grace" of a faith that had no secular engagement and no concern for a holiness that loves the world God created—only a holiness that flees the world. His criticism was prophetic for German Lutherans and Roman Catholics alike, as is evident from their silence at the rise of Hitler and the growing evidence of the murders of millions of Jews, homosexuals, Gypsies, and mentally handicapped. The Nazis executed Bonhoeffer in April 1945 for his association with the plot to assassinate Hitler. He left an uncompleted, but now published work titled *Ethics.* There he still underscores the primacy of God's will as the basis for any ethics that will genuinely serve human well being.

Ignatius Loyola

The Question

About the time that Luther realized the centrality of faith over works, Ignatius Loyola realized the centrality of discernment of inspirations over unaided reason. Both lived in largely Pelagian Christian cultures: Do your best and God will do the rest. Luther objected to the idea that unaided human reason can even know what God wills. Presumably he would begin his prayer by a deep suspicion of his own reason and an utter faith that God freely and totally accepts him, no matter what he thinks or does.

In contrast, Loyola believed that God regularly inspires us to do, or not do, certain acts. Rather than suspect human reason, he subordinates reason to experiences of God's own desires. However, it is not an easy matter to discern which inspirations are from God and which are not. So Loyola encouraged people to begin their prayers by asking to receive God's own desires about concrete matters.

The question for theological ethics here is this: Does God give his own desires to those who ask and, if so, how does a person discern which desires are God's?

Loyola's Discernment

To help others discern which of their many spontaneous desires come from God, Loyola drew up his "Rules for Discerning Inspirations."[48] I

[48] Ignatius does not provide a title for these rules. I propose "Rules for Discerning Inspirations" as representing the brief introductory material he provides: "Rules for understanding to some extent the different movements produced in the soul and for

strongly recommend that you read them.[49] For example, Loyola defines "spiritual consolation" and "spiritual desolation" in quite practical terms. You may be surprised to learn that "feeling high" may be a "spiritual desolation" and "feeling sad" may be a "spiritual consolation."

Also, he warns that some experiences of "spiritual consolation" may be from the Devil, and he suggests ways to detect this. He also warns against making any decisions whatsoever, as far as this is possible, when we are in a state of "spiritual desolation."

A Divine Inspiration Ethics. Loyola simply assumes that God can and will give inspirations to anyone. These are not earned in any way, nor can anyone cause them by various spiritual exercises, no matter how many. But while they sometimes occur without warning, they occur more often when a person asks God for them: "Come Spirit, Come Christ, wider, higher: Fill our hearts with your desire."

These "inspirations" may be an enlightenment of the mind to understand, as when a person might ask in prayer for the grace to understand what Jesus meant by "Greater things than this shall you do" (Jn 14:12). Or they may be an effective desire to do something, such as Augustine's reception of an effective desire to part company with his mistress, or an alcoholic's reception of an effective desire to stop drinking.

Obedience to Church Teaching. Loyola's focus on discernment of inspirations is an Ethics of Better. His Ethics of Law may be summarized by his view that if the Church says X is wrong, then X must be wrong. In his "Rules for Thinking with the Church,"[50] he justifies this view by stating that it is the "same Spirit and Lord" who gave the Ten Commandments that rules and governs the Church.

The Expectation of Conviction, not Certitude. Loyola normally expects that these inspirations come with the *conviction* of a person in love, not with the *certitude* of a person who uses reason to know God's will. In practice, this means that we still cannot usually be certain that we are doing God's will. Or, to put this in a more Augustinian perspective, God's will is not some fact to discover about his state of mind. Rather, God wills that we love and do what we want—provided only that our wants are actually motivated by the love God pours into our hearts. In his own life, Loyola regularly sought "confirmations" of earlier decisions—

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recognizing those that are good to admit them, and those that are bad, to reject them." In the many editions of his *Spiritual Exercises,* these begin at paragraph 313.

[49] For my own translation, search online for "Writings of Tad Dunne" and select "Rules for Discerning Inspirations."

[50] *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951) par. 352-70. (Other editions retain the paragraph numbering.)

sometimes by asking for further inspirations and sometimes by reviewing church regulations and standards.

The Priority of Desire over Reason. In his *Spiritual Exercises,* Loyola lists three times when a "good choice of a way of life" may be made—for example, whether to marry, stay single, or enter a religious congregation. One "time" is the experience of complete and unhesitating desire to choose a certain option. (The psychologist Abraham Maslow discovered that many people have such "peak experiences," but often don't recognize them as such.[51]) A second "time" is the experience of various contrary inspirations. Here is where his rules for discerning inspirations are needed. A third is a time of tranquility when no particularly strong inspirations or desires are experienced. In this third time, he recommends weighing the options more by reason and logic, but still with the initial prayer asking God to give an effective desire that is a share in God's own desire.[52]

We might say that the issue of faith and reason never bothered Loyola. He regularly relied on reason for many decisions, but mainly during the "time of tranquility," when he felt no strong inspirations one way or another. He clarified how the practice of discerning inspirations, after asking God directly for divine inspirations, can bring Christians to certain levels of conviction that God is actively moving them to this or that choice about should be done.

A Retention of Casuistry. Still, Loyola saw a fitting place for reason in the service of faith (supported in great part by his having been educated in Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*). As a result, priests of his Society of Jesus became known for their ability to apply and adapt general moral principles to specific cases—the practice known, sometimes with contempt, as *casuistry*.

Loyola's views are still relevant to a faith-based ethics. But they require training in the art of discerning inspirations, and, usually, help from a spiritual director who understands the art.

The practice of discerning inspirations is practically unknown to Christians who hope to reach certitude about God's will. This misguided hope probably stems from a doubt that God will bestow enlightenment and courage to anyone who asks; so they hope to "reach up" by unaided reasons to discover God's will. Strangely, many Christians today are still wed to the idea of moral certitude. And because people rarely achieve moral certitude, a resentment against God's silence can set in or, worse,

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[51] *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* (New York: Viking, 1970) 22, 86, 88-90.

[52] The "three times" are found at paragraphs 175-178. The rules for the third time at at paragraphs 179-189.

a rejection of the entire belief that God is good or even exists. I say "strangely" because in modern science, we live quite well without certitude. The theories of gravity, evolution, psychological repression, dysfunctional families, etc., are all "best available explanations of the data." No respectable scientist proclaims them as "true." Likewise, our strongly-held moral views are not defended as "true" but as "best available views about what ought to be done." A theological ethics for today does well to stay open to even better views on what should be done about the economy, pre-emptive war, euthanasia, and the many dimensions of sexuality.

Ethics for Individual Behaviors

Both Luther and Loyola were powerful influences on how Christians thought about moral issues, with Luther influencing Protestants and Loyola influencing Catholics. But it must be said that until about 75 years ago, Protestant and Catholic ethics alike have been preoccupied with *individuals* doing good and avoiding wrong. Ethics was often taught using case studies, where students tried to discern what was the right thing for an individual to do. This is good, of course, but it was usually accompanied by an anti-secular attitude. "Secularism" was an evil to be avoided.[53] What was missing was a patently political ethics concerned with engaging the social, political, and economic *structures* that oppress the poor and trample the downtrodden in a highly secular world.

Today, however, many ethicists include the socio-economic dimensions of ethics in their work. As we will see in our treatment of 20th century ethics, the emergence of the disciplines of sociology, critical historical studies, and political economics raised new questions about how society itself—with dynamics quite different from the dynamics of making personal choices—can be healed of its moral wounds.

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[53] In 2005, Pope Benedict XVI promoted a significantly more positive approach to secularism: "At this moment in history, when cultures continue to cross paths more frequently, I am firmly convinced that a new reflection on the true meaning and importance of secularism is now necessary". See http://burkescorner.blogspot.com/2008/09/sarkozy-benedict-and-case-for-positive.html.

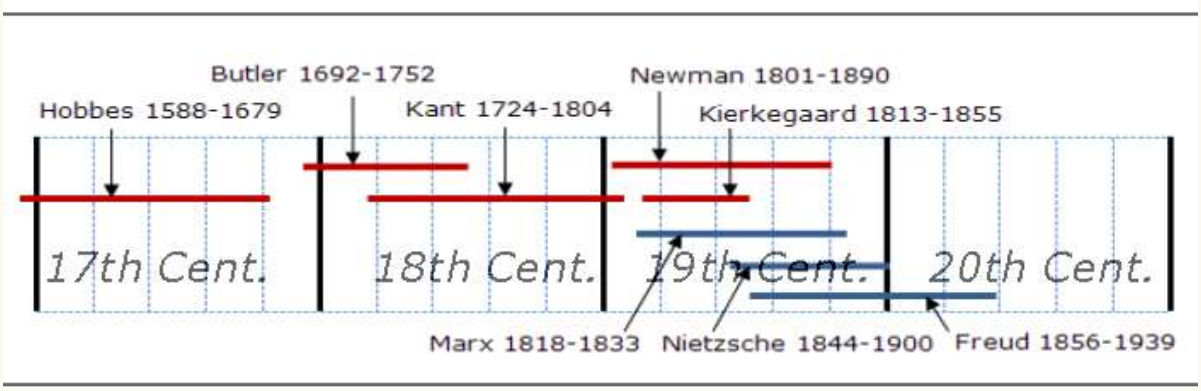
V. Turn to the Subject

The Subject as Moral Source

Overview

Up until the mid 1500s, to understand what is *good* and what is *evil,* people of faith looked mainly to the Bible, church teachings, and the laws of human nature. But the emergence of modern science and the new kinds of focus on reason that came with the "Enlightenment," opened up an entirely new source of knowledge about the world and of claims to objectivity, namely, the inner workings of individual subjects.

This "turn to the subject" radically changed the course of philosophy, especially in the areas of authority, human well-being, political theory, and the methods of science, history, theology and ethics. For an overview of its effects on ethics, we will look at five thinkers who, over a space of 300 years represent different theories of how events occurring within the consciousness of human subjects can be a source of moral norms.



- Thomas Hobbes pointed to individual *appetites* and revulsions as our ultimate moral source.
- Joseph Butler pointed to conscience.
- Emmanual Kant pointed to an "inner moral law" under the dictates of *reason.*
- John Henry Newman widened Butler's focus on conscience as the voice of moral behavior to include its voice as pointing to intellectual truth.
- Sören Kierkegaard pointed to God's will as communicated directly to individuals. (Kierkegaard's focus on the uniqueness of individual

inspirations and their *free choices* set a foundation for existentialist philosophies.)

Then we will review three, more recent thinkers who brought *suspicion* on subjective sources of morality.

- Karl Marx held that a capitalist economy causes the *illusion of freedom* in ordinary people.
- Friedrich Nietzsche reduced all moral concern to a *will to power* present in every individual.
- Sigmund Freud studied how *repression* distorts the psychologies of practically everyone.[54]

These three thinkers are the main sources of present-day suspicions of the human subject as a source of moral norms, as well as a sense of *nihilism,* or futility, about finding any reliable source or objective validity of moral norms.

The following section, then, will expand on these ideas about moral norms existing in the subject. The section after that will cover the key ideas in the suspicion of the subject.

The Turn to the Subject

Thomas Hobbes

As Protestant Christians separated themselves from the Roman Catholic Church, they were headed for trouble in a Europe where governments were strongly and officially tied to Roman Catholicism. The results were the "Wars of Religion"—86 years of wars (1562-1648) where faith problems were inseparable from political problems. Today, western countries honor a *Principle of Non-involvement* in religion by the state,[55] but it was these wars of religion that played a major role in developing this principle.

The effects on Christian faith were devastating. As Catholics and Protestants were killing each other, Christianity showed itself very unlike the religion of peace described in the New Testament. The Christian vision of a "win-win game" of social interaction was displaced by a "win-lose

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[54] This overview skips over many influential persons and topics. See, in particular, http://www.rsrevision.com/Alevel/ethics/a2conscience/index.htm. This same material is available in our course under the title, *The Idea of Conscience – A History,* in Doc Sharing.

[55] The Constitution of the United States establishes that the state cannot support or endorse any particular religion. Because it does not prevent religions from making demands on the state, metaphors of a "separation of church and state" or a "wall of separation" are misleading. The more fundamental principle is freedom of religion.

game," where different sides select different scriptural texts to justify taking up arms against the others. Religion itself was viewed as incapable of contributing to people's well being in any significant way. These years mark the major shift toward "secularism" in European countries. Many religious groups emigrated to North America where religious freedom and mutual toleration were the guiding political ideas.

It was during those years that Thomas Hobbes worked out a comprehensive theory of both politics and ethics.[56] The continuing wars of religion helped turn his attention to the principles of modern science that Francis Bacon (d. 1626) proposed. Here is a summary of Hobbes' ideas that relate to a theological ethics:

- Reality is fundamentally material—nothing but "matter in motion." The laws of nature can be extended to human living. There is no such thing as a human soul.
- The words *good* and *evil* are always used in relation to the person using them. They represent nothing more than a person's appetite or revulsion. There is nothing that is simply good or evil in itself.[57]
- The fundamental drive of humans is self-preservation. But life in a society based only on self-preservation is "poor, solitary, nasty, brutish, and short."
- Therefore, it is reasonable to give up certain private desires to a monarch for the sake of social peace and cooperation. He refers to the monarch as "Leviathan." The agreement to forgo private desires he names "the social contract."

As you can see, these views effectively eliminate theology and reduce ethics to a strategic and willing transfer of personal freedoms to a monarch (although individuals maintain the right to replace ineffective

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[56] Materials on Hobbes are taken from Michael Banner, *Christian Ethics: A Brief History* (United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) 70-73 and from "Hobbes' Moral and Political Philosophy, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2002/entries/hobbes-moral/

[57] Here is Hobbes' original quotation: "But whatsoever is the object of any man's appetite or desire, that is it which he for his part calleth good; and the object of his hate and aversion, evil; and of his contempt, vile and inconsiderable. For these words of good, evil, and contemptible are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: there being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves; but from the person of the man, where there is no Commonwealth; or, in a Commonwealth, from the person that representeth it; or from an arbitrator or judge, whom men disagreeing shall by consent set up and make his sentence the rule thereof."

monarchs). This view was attacked from many sides because it assumes that humans live essentially for pleasure (hedonism) and that all moral views are simply what people prefer (relativism). Still, Hobbes drew attention to the question of whether external, public moral standards are ultimately grounded on subjective events, and not on Scripture or religious authorities or on natural laws that supposedly apply to everyone. As subsequent events showed, Hobbes' challenge played a major role in launching the "turn to the subject" in philosophy.

Joseph Butler

In reaction to Hobbes' materialist views, Joseph Butler insisted that we have a "faculty" by which we approve or disapprove certain actions—a faculty that cannot be doubted.[58] His central concern was the existence of such a faculty. For evidence, he points to the frequent and obvious moral judgments in human speech, to our desires to be perceived by others as virtuous or as having moral character, and to the concerns of peoples everywhere that justice, veracity, and the common good should characterize out governments.

While he was somewhat indifferent as to whether this moral faculty is called *conscience* or *moral reason* or *moral sense* or *divine reason* or a *sentiment of understanding*, or a *perception of the heart,*[59] he brought the category of *conscience,* as a clearly defined term, to a prominence in ethics that it never had before.

He places conscience at the top of a hierarchy of human faculties. It is higher than sentiment and feeling since it is by conscience that we discern which sentiments and feelings we should follow. It is even higher than reason, although it relies on reason (more than sentiment) to judge right and wrong, better and worse. As bishop of the Church of England, he regarded conscience as God's gift of a guide that is natural to every person.

Emmanual Kant

Among the many reactions against Hobbes' materialist and relativist views of ethics, Emmanual Kant assumed that morality is a reality in its own right and cannot be reduced to matter in motion.[60] His main contention was that for every human, there is a "moral law within." He named this law a "categorical imperative," meaning a duty that applies

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[58] See "Joseph Butler" in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* *http://www.iep.utm.edu/b/butler.htm*

[59] For a quotation, see Banner, 74-75.

[60] Material on Kant is taken from Banner 77-85 and from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/

categorically in all circumstances. Other duties may result from having chosen certain goals (if I want to lose weight, then I have a duty to exercise), but the core duty of all humans lies within; it does not depend on goals.

What is this categorical imperative? Kant gives several formulations, but two are particularly clear:[61]

- Always act according to a maxim that you would desire would be a universal law.
- Never act in such a way as to treat humanity, whether in ourselves or in others, as a means *only* but always as an end in itself.

Notice how the first requires that we consider the good of all humanity in any act. Notice how the second acknowledges that while we need to treat some people as means to our ends, we must simultaneously treat them as ends in themselves. Also, Kant was critical of other motives for moral behaviors, such as self-interest, self-preservation, personal happiness, and sympathy for others. He distinguished himself among moral philosophers by taking his stand on *reason*. Other influential philosophers take their stand on other subjective faculties: Joseph Butler, as we saw, stands on *conscience.* David Hume (1711-1776) stands on *moral character,* Sören Kierkegaard stands on *free choice*.

Within Kant's long and complex analysis of human knowledge, it seems clear that he holds that all claims about God come from human reason detecting the moral law within. This of course is the direct opposite to a Divine Command ethics that puts faith above reason. It also is difficult to reconcile with a Virtue Ethics that puts moral character above reason.

John Henry Newman

With Newman, we pick up the thread of *conscience* explored earlier by Butler. While Newman was teaching at Oxford, he founded the "Oxford Movement" aimed at upholding ancient Christian beliefs and practices and opposing the general drift among Protestants toward simplicity in both belief and practice.

In his studies of the early centuries of the Church, he discovered that many Christians regarded Christ as he did—as a divine person with a

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[61] Here are four formulations of his categorical imperatives: (1) "Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law." (2) "We should never act in such a way that we treat Humanity, whether in ourselves or in others, as a means only but always as an end in itself." (3) "Act so that through your maxims you could be a legislator of universal laws." (4) "Act in accordance with the maxims of a member giving universal laws for a merely possible kingdom of ends"

divine soul in a human body—but not with a truly human soul. To his shock, this view was condemned at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 in favor of regarding Christ as one person with two natures—one fully divine and one fully human.[62] Which was true? Did the person Christ have a fully human nature, with a fully human soul, mind and human will? Was he truly ignorant about many things? Or did he have only a divine soul, mind and will? Did he know the thoughts of everyone he dealt with? Newman accepted the belief that Christ had both a fully divine and a fully human nature.

This discovery of the beliefs of the early churches played a key role in Newman's view of the role of conscience.[63] While he accepted the now common view that conscience is a moral faculty, he reckoned it as also an intellectual faculty. That is, conscience is not only an inner voice about right and wrong *behavior* but also about right and wrong *belief*. It can lead us not only to what is good but also to what is true. It was his conscience, not his reason alone, that brought him to accept the teaching that the one person Jesus Christ is divine by nature and has, at the same time, assumed a fully human nature. (A core reasoning in many of the arguments used at Chalcedon runs like this: If we deny Christ's divinity, we are not saved by God. If we deny his humanity, it is not our full humanity that is saved.)

A Christian theological ethics aligned with the teachings of the early Church supports and promotes this view. It emphasizes the importance of following our conscience regarding both morality and truth. It sees conscience as leading us to not only to right behavior but also "right understanding" of those truths presented in Scripture and tradition. In a significant respect, this sets the stage for the current open question in Christian ethics: Shall we follow our consciences in assessing the validity of interpretations by Church officials of Scripture and tradition? Is the voice of conscience the ultimate court of appeal when debating about church teachings?

Sören Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard presents a strong argument that Kant's ethics undermines Christian faith because it is ultimately based on human reason and

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[62] For some history leading up to this view of the Council of Chalcedon, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1960) chapter XII, "The Christological Settlement" especially §6.

[63] Newman was deeply interested in what occurs in subjects when they think. In his groundbreaking work, *A Grammar of Assent,* he develops categories (a grammar) to explain how anyone assents to some truth. This work deeply influenced Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984)

human will.[64] Where Kant proposed that our human wills should conform to human reason, Kierkegaard insisted that our wills should be conformed to God's will. (Kant claimed that humans could not even recognize the God in the gospels as good and holy except by comparison with the *idea* of moral perfection within human reason.) Also, Kierkegaard insisted that God gives commands to individuals that could not be reached by reason. He points to Abraham, whom God ordered to kill his own son as an example of how God can command what reason finds abhorrent.

Keep in mind that Kant, Butler, Newman, and Kierkegaard are deeply moral people who take very seriously the need for an ethics that genuinely improves life for everyone. Even today, people of faith still find themselves pulled between their reason and their faith. (My reason says that efforts to assassinate Hitler are justified, but my faith says they are not. My faith prompts me to help a homeless woman, but my reason warns against risking my family's safety by getting involved with desperate people.)

A highly influential aspect of Kierkegaard's thought is that *reason* cannot be the ground and justification of moral views because all human reasons have premises or assumptions for their starting points.[65] As starting points, they cannot be justified by reason but only by free, autonomous *choices*, often made in "fear and trembling" (the title of one of his works). What counts is how each person decides to exist.

Existentialism

This is why Kierkegaard is regarded as a forerunner of the philosophy of "existentialism," named later by Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and used by many theologians today.[66] Where classical philosophy focuses on human nature—those aspects of being human that apply to all humans, existentialism focuses on the unique meanings that individuals attach to their lives—particularly about death, uncertainty, freedom, and fundamental choices on how to be. A key idea that emerges from existentialism is "authenticity." What does it mean *for me* to exist

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[64] Material on Kierkegaard is taken from Michael Banner, 80-85 and from Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: Simon & Schuster / Touchstone, 1966) 215-218.

[65] For example: In ethics we speak of "good." But do you assume the word means *helpful,* or *efficient,* or *pleasant,* or *beneficial for me*, or *beneficial for us,* or *objectively better regardless of the cost to me or us.?*

[66] Materials on existentialism are taken from Bernard Lonergan, "On Being Oneself," from his "Lectures on Existentialism," now Part Three of *Phenomenology and Logic: The Boston College Lectures on Mathematical Logic and Existentialism,* v. 18 of the Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan (University of Toronto Press: 2001) 219-318. Lonergan delivered these lectures in July, 1957.

authentically? It is one thing to define a human as a rational animal, but quite another to recognize that a human is not defined by a definition but by a demand for a choice: Be yourself!

The overall effect on theological ethics today is to take the concerns of individuals very seriously and to oppose "applying" moral principles and "natural laws" to concrete situations without considering what things actually mean to people. Particularly with death and sex, the moral issues depend a great deal on what they mean to people, and people attach quite different *meanings:* Is death the worst thing that can happen to you? Do you really regard it as a passage to something better or just the end of you? What does sex actually mean for you: A healthy way to show your love? A clumsy way to beget children? Agonizing urges you'd rather not have? What makes sex really good for you?

Still, taking into account the concrete circumstances of individuals is not all that new. Even Aristotle and Aquinas took a highly individual and concrete view of ethics. Their main principle was that "good" is not an abstraction. When we ask what *type* of thing some X is, we expect abstract words like "a brown X" or "a wide X." But if you ask me what type of car I have, I might say "brown" or "wide," but I won't say "good." This is because you are looking for a *feature* it shares with other things, not a *quality* it has in itself. Our words "good" and "bad" refer always to concrete qualities, not abstract features.[67] Goodness doesn't exist in the mind or in the sky. It exists in real things, real people, real events. So if there is no abstract good, then abstract moral principles are not enough to determine what concretely is good.[68] To deal with the particular, they pointed to the virtue of prudence and the casuistry of *epikeia* or *equity* as ways to make good moral judgments about concrete situations.

Suspicion of the Subject

As philosophers and theologians "turned to the subject" to establish moral norms, they discovered that subjective consciousness can be false, faked, shifty, and masked. So, from several different approaches, other philosophers grew suspicious of the consciousness of subjects.

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[67] This comparison of abstract adjectives like "red" to concrete adjectives like "good" is well treated by Alasdair MacIntyr at pp. 57-59.

[68] Lonergan points out: "According to Aristotle and St Thomas, who constantly repeats it, *Verum et falsum sunt in mente; bonum et malum sunt in rebus* [Truth and falsehood are in the mind; good and bad are in things.] … abstract moral precepts do not suffice…they can be no more than pointers to the direction or location in which the good lies, or limits indicating where the good does not lie." "On Being Oneself," above, 243.

Karl Marx

Karl Marx was ardently interested in what sort of political economy would best help all individuals to be truly free. As we know, he proposed that a socialist government is more appropriate to our social nature and would eliminate the blocks to freedom imposed either by a monarch or by a capitalist political economy.

In his view, a core problem with capitalism is that it creates not only a two-class society—the wealthy, entrepreneurial bourgeoisie and the poor, laboring proletariat—but also a "false consciousness" or an "illusion of freedom" among the proletariat. Under capitalism, a person's identity is practically defined by where they fit in the division of labor. It is difficult for anyone to escape one's role as metalworker or mail carrier or cook. Even honored professionals (lawyers, priests, poets, scientists) are reduced to paid laborers. One's identity is also defined by one's private property, which must be protected against any interference from others. The problem is that capitalism effectively blinds people from realizing how un-free they have become. [69] We see this blindness even today, as individualism is highly prized and natural social relationships are replaced by functional ties among replaceable persons.

Also, according to Marx, all "eternal truths" proposed by religions and ethics are actually expressions of class interests, as demonstrated by a feature "common to all past ages—the exploitation of one part of society by the other."[70] It seemed obvious to Marx that the social consciousness of every sort of social arrangement, in every past age, is dominated by certain ideas inimical to human nature which cannot be eliminated unless there is a total elimination of class antagonism. Religion itself is a wicked fantasy dreamed by people who, like someone taking opium, have yet to achieve their full human potential, To combat religion is to fight a disease that prevents human freedom.[71]

Marx clearly showed how powerfully a political economy shapes people's self-image and how surreptitiously it can rob people of their natural freedoms. It shows in the blind, intense pride people take in the work they do for the monetary profit of others. He brought into philosophy the idea of "alienation," in which persons are content to live in ways that are alien to their own nature as social and free. At the same time, he

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[69] MacIntyre, 212.

[70] *Communist Manifesto,* part II. See http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/classics/manifesto.html Note that most "religious conflicts" today are strongly affected by class differences.

[71] See Marx's "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" (1844) at http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm

effectively undermined any belief in objective moral standards stemming from religion. For Marx, a theological ethics would be just part of the myth imposed by capitalists on laborers.

Friedrich Nietzsche

In his book, *On the Genealogy of Morals,* Friedrich Nietzsche assumed, like Hobbes, that moral standards have no objective meaning except to the person who relies on them.[72] But he went further to ask why, if morality has no basis in truth, is there so much agreement about right and wrong, virtue and vice? What is the origin, the genesis, the *genealogy* of morals?

He proposes that it lies in our deepest natural instinct: the *Will to Power*. We want power; we feel a capacity to be persons of strength; we hate being pushed around by circumstances or other people. We want power more than happiness. Then, where people are power-less, *resentment* festers against the power-full. This resentment finds its outlet in the idea of "moral values" which the weak can boast as their own and look down on the strong who evidently lack them. Strong is bad; weak is good. This is why the weak, particularly in Christianity, promote the "virtues" (from the Latin for *strength*) of humility, long-suffering, self-sacrifice, self-contempt, celibacy, companionship with the poor, and asceticism. Nietzsche calls this strategy an "imaginary revenge" against those dedicated to self-affirmation and pride—the *Ubermensch* (the "Super-man").[73]

In a celebrated phase, Nietzsche announced, "God is dead." What he meant was that the idea of God and the corresponding ideas of morality and virtue, no longer work for people's pursuit of well-being. What emerges is a *nihilism* that sees nothing (*nihil)* worthwhile in ideas about universal moral standards, let alone in beliefs in a creator-redeemer God in whom all things make sense and with whom all creation will be restored.

So, where Marx dismisses morality as just a tool of political-economic class interests, Nietzsche dismisses it as an invention by which wimps get even with the bullies. In both cases, a theological ethics is regarded as a powerful myth that just perpetuates oppression.

Sigmund Freud

Freud's great contribution to the world was his establishment of psychology as a science. As part of his science, he proposed certain

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[72] Materials on Nietzsche are taken from MacIntyre, 222-226, and from Banner, 86-98.

[73] This citation is made by Banner, 88-89.

categories as useful for "psycho-analysis," two of which enter easily into ethical reflections: the *subconscious* and the *superego.*

If we have a subconscious, and it works largely beneath our notice, then the moral quality of our actions is *not* dependent on our free and deliberate choices. Where we used to say, "The Devil made me do it," many now say, "I guess it was just my subconscious." On the one hand, there is some merit in recognizing that our moral actions are not always free and deliberate. So some murderers can justifiably plea temporary insanity. On the other, there is a clear danger in believing that certain instincts for evil lurk in everyone and can spring up without our control. We can too easily absolve ourselves of wrongdoing and too easily tolerate reckless behavior in our children and not teach them about consequences of their actions. But on both hands, morality is easily reduced to guilt feelings alone; the notion of an objective right or wrong, better or worse vanishes in a subconscious cloud.

Freud also proposed that the demands we feel in our consciousness are the result of our Superego, by which he meant expectations of parents and society that have taken up permanent residence in our consciousness. Here too, the moral status of our actions is reduced to social approval and disapproval.

Moral Nihilism

Notice that all three thinkers give causal explanations for why we have a sense of morality. All three suspect consciousness. Marx suspects it for being overly impressionable to the forces of the political economy. Nietzsche suspects it for cleverness in taking revenge against the strong-willed. Freud suspects it for undermining our well-being by working underground.

Notice also, that all three practically annihilate morality as anything objective. This is more serious than a moral relativism that only reduces the scope of morality to individual choices and personal desires to care for others, as we see in postmodern forms of ethics. They rather effectively challenge the idea that right and wrong have any real meaning at all.

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VI: 20th Century Issues

New Issues

The 20th century has seen a flood of unforeseen moral problems that deeply concern people of faith:

- Abortion. Personal decisions. Legalization.
- Duty to participate in government.
- End-of-life decisions. Euthanasia.
- Environmental Concerns.
- Gender inequality.
- Homosexuality.
- Global economy. Wealth and Poverty.
- Pre-emptive war. Torture.

Moral opinions on these issues vary considerably. A major reason for these differences is the absence of a theory of theological ethics that everyone agrees on. Another major reason is that adherents of even the best available theological ethics conclude that only the prudence of someone with an informed conscience can settle on what seems best—a view supported by many philosophers and theologians over the centuries. In the meantime, there are a number of new ideas and approaches that affect how people of faith think about morality today. Below are some of the leading voices. New or controversial ideas are in bold.

Leading Voices & Ideas

Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923)

Following the seminal work of his mentor, the pioneering sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920), Ernst Troeltsch was deeply aware of the **historicity** of human institutions, cultures, and even moral standards.[74] As a German Protestant, while he did stand for moral absolutes, his investigations

[74] Materials on Troeltsch are drawn largely from William Schweiker, "Ernst Troeltsch's *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches."* in G. Meilaender and W. Werpehowski, *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics* (Oxford University Press: 2005) 415-432.

raised questions about the validity of all sorts of claims regarding the structures of the Church and how the Churches (Protestant and Catholic) should relate to the State. He raised the consciousness of ethical thinkers to recognize the **significant difference between the human sciences and the natural sciences** (particularly how psychology, sociology, anthropology, and economics require higher methods than physics, chemistry and biology). Regarding a theological ethics, he believed that the **origins of Christianity** cannot be fully explained by economic and social forces, nor by the assumptions embedded in language, but in **the desires of individuals for holiness**. That is, human consciousness is naturally open to transcendent love.

Karl Barth (1886-1968)

On the verge of World War I, 93 German intellectuals published a manifesto siding with the nationalist war aims of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Horrified by this move, Karl Barth realized that theology **had lost its connection with the challenge of Christ** and that Lutheran believers were so focused on how faith is not earned by works that they ignored what works Christ would have them do—particularly works that would pitch them into political struggles and debates about Christian witness and action.[75] He reacted against the liberal theologies that so deeply explored the reasonableness of the Bible and its role as literature, that they ignored the challenges it presents to one's self-consciousness, one's life, one's entire culture. In place of theologies that stressed the reasonableness of accepting Christ, he stressed Christ's challenge that we accept him and carry out the duties that come with living the Gospel. The Christian does not evangelize by rational argument but by challenge and invitation.

In this, Barth retrieves the "good works" that were lost to much of the Lutheran tradition.[76] But his theological ethics are not a simple matter of occasional good works but rather of a new self-awareness drawn from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It represents a **theological anthropology that sees humanity as continuing in present history the salvation gained by Christ**. For Barth, all of theology is about ethics—the life of Christians bringing Christ's salvation to the world. Or,

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[75] Barth was called "the century's greatest Protestant theologian" by Michael Banner in *Christian Ethics: A Brief History* (United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) 99. The materials on Barth are largely taken from Banner's book, pp. 99-107.

[76] This effort was also pursued by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), whose work *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937; English:1948) stressed that "the Christian is identified not by his beliefs, but by actions, by his participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world." For an overview of his theology, see *http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/exposes/bonhoeffer/general.htm*

to put this in reverse, all ethics is about God's work in history. In this perspective, to be a person is to be for others, not for oneself.

H. Richard Niebuhr (1919-1962)

In his *Christ and Culture* (1951), H. Richard Niebuhr presented five models of **how Christ relates to cultures**.[77] In each, we can see different views of what a theological ethics should be about:

Model	**Theological Ethics**	**Examples**
Christ *Against* Culture	Condemnation of unrighteousness. Call to repentance and right action. Revelation has priority over reason	Tolstoy. Monasticism. Barth.
Christ and Culture *in Paradox*	Restraint and control of sin and corruption. God gives us reason for our use, but it is easily corrupted and cannot pass judgment on God's commands.	Paul. Luther. Kierkegaard.
Christ *Transforming* Culture	Lifting up and healing brokenness. Restoration of forgotten possibilities. Reason is corrupted by wrong love. But faith restores reason as being from and toward God's love.	Augustine. Calvin. Edwards. Lonergan.
Christ *Above* Culture	Faith fulfills the natural law. Reason and revelation are in harmony, but the Gospel reveals more than reason can discover.	Aquinas. Anglicanism.
Christ *of* Culture	Reason and revelation are separate but equal. Revelation not essential for faith or life. Jesus exemplifies society's best insights. Ethics focuses on rational reform and the perfection of imperfect secular arrangements.	Deism. Social Gospel. German Lutheranism.

Niebuhr's work on sociological models gave birth to the **"model" thinking** we see throughout theologies today. It helps us understand that different cultures have quite different *images* of Christ's work in history and of Christian moral living. However, while *images* can reveal tendencies and assumptions, they do not explain or justify or criticize any particular theological ethics.

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)

Reinhold Niebuhr (brother of H. Richard Niebuhr and fellow Protestant) called his approach to political and economic problems a "Christian

[77] Materials on H. R. Niebuhr are drawn largely from D. M. Yeager, "H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture"* in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics,* 466-486.

Realism."[78] By this he meant a "realistic" assessment of **how inept humans are** at doing better. In his view, we overestimate human nature. We are far less free emotionally and intellectually than we think. In his *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1945), for example, he proposed that **individuals can act morally but societies cannot**. His skepticism about the moral idealism of individuals led him to suggest that only a social revolution could really improve societies. He drew attention to the fact that **Jesus did not leave us an ethics regarding the social order.** Nothing in the New Testament suggests that we should be critical-minded about the culture or class we belong to. Still, it is our nature to transcend our tribal customs, our reasonable conclusions, and inherited moral standards, and the reason for this is ultimately religious. We are made to do God's will but we must live with the reality of always falling short of our aspirations.

Vatican (1891-1995)

Over the last century, Roman Catholic Popes issued a number of encyclicals and other documents regarding social ethics, all of which were directed at meeting new challenges. Below is a short list that illustrates these newly emerging concerns and the corresponding newly envisioned role of the Church:

1891: Rerum Novarum ("On the Condition of Labor," Pope Leo XIII)

> This is considered the first "social encyclical" from the Catholic Church. It responds to the dehumanization of laborers brought about by the Industrial Revolution and to the expectation, particularly in Russia, that class struggle is necessary to bring about promotion of a Socialist political economy. It promotes instead the **dignity of laborers, the right to form unions, and the right to own private property.**
>
> Presents the **Church as teacher and clarifier of moral principles, under "Jesus Christ…her teacher and leader."**

1931: Quadrigesimo Anno ("After 40 years," Pope Pius XI)

> Forty years after *Rerum Novarum,* this encyclical focuses more strongly on the unequal distribution of wealth, promoting, instead the ideal of a "**distributive justice**" in which the lowest income classes still earn the wages and benefits that allow for their basic well-being. It also promoted the **Principle of Subsidiary Function** (now called the Principle of Subsidiarity)—a standard of social order

[78] Materials on Reinhold Niebuhr are drawn largely from Robin W. Lovin, "Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man,"* in in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics,* 487-502.

by which the authority of the State should not be totally centralized but held also by local associations who could meet local problems more effectively.

The **Church acts as a courageous voice against** the currents of a **liberalism** that neglects the poor and a **socialism** that oppresses the individual. Here too, the Church **speaks as a teacher**, "so that the **unchanged and unchangeable teaching** of the Church should meet new demands and needs more effectively,"

1961: Mater et Magistra. ("Christianity and Social Progress," Pope John XXIII, 1961)

Calls for a greater awareness of the need for all peoples to live as one community with a **common good**. Special attention is focused on the plight of the farmers and farm workers in depressed rural, agricultural economies as well as problems of **international justice** "in which all **economic activity** can be conducted not merely for private gain but also in the interests of the common good."

The **Church teaches and guides with maternal care**.

1963: Pacem in Terris. ("Peace on Earth," Pope John XXIII)

Covers the entire spectrum of relations between individuals, between the individual and the community, and between nations. Affirms the inviolability of **human rights** and identifies numerous rights specifically. Peace on earth, based on mutual trust, can be well-founded only if undergirded by a unity of right order in human affairs arising from a genuine respect for and adherence to the law of God.

Generally, it presents the **Church as a repository of moral principles based on reason**. There is little appeal to the Bible.

1965: Gaudium et Spes ("Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World." Vatican Council II)

Regards the "joys and hopes" (*gaudium et spes)*, the grief and anguish of all people as shared by all followers of Christ. A core ethical principle is the **inherent dignity of the person**: "Believers and unbelievers agree almost unanimously that all things on earth should be ordained to humanity as to their center and summit."

Christ's Church is a servant church, helping all to live fruitful lives in a world of rapid changes in our **understanding of history, science, and the social order**.

1967: Populorum Progressio. ("On the Development of Peoples," Pope Paul VI)

> Calls attention to the worsening marginalization of the poor. Presents the various dimensions of an **integral human development** and the necessary conditions for growth in the solidarity of peoples. Asserts the **right of any nation to pursue its own development**. Upholds the principle that the **common good takes priority over the right to private property**. Supports a readiness among developed nations to pay higher taxes and higher prices on imported goods in order to respect the rights of underdeveloped peoples to pursue their own development.
>
> **Church is at the service of all peoples** "striving to escape from hunger, misery, endemic diseases and ignorance [and] of those who are looking for a wider share in the benefits of civilization and a more active improvement of their human qualities."

1971: Octogesima Advenians. ("A Call to Action," Pope Paul VI)

> Realizing the need for a genuine renewal in domestic and international societal structures, Paul VI calls on Christians to live up to the **duty of participation in social and political reform** as a way of discovering the truth and living out the Gospel.
>
> **Church "moves forward with humanity** and shares its lot in the setting of history." Announces the Good News of God's love and of salvation in Christ. Clarifies how men and women can live according to "God's plan of love" and to realize the fullness of their aspirations.

1993: Veritas Splendor ("The Splendor of Truth," Pope John Paul II.)

> This is the first encyclical directly on **theological ethics**, and was addressed to the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church. It presents **Christ as the living moral law** who invites us to follow him. It presents human **freedom as impossible unless it is based on the truth of our nature**. It warns that views of the **historicity of morality** easily turn into a relativity and loss of moral absolutes. It defends the idea of **"intrinsic evils"** (such as abortion and adultery) and the justification of the Church's absolute opposition to them. It highlights how individual choices constitute a "**fundamental option**" either for or against truth, the good, and God.
>
> Church is a **defender of the truth about human nature**—that we cannot do good without God's grace and that some objects of human choice are intrinsically evil.

Notice here that prior to Vatican II (1963-1965) the Church presented itself as a teacher and repository of unchanging moral truth. From Vatican II forward, the Church presented itself as a servant, undergoing development, and adapting to historical conditions of real people. *Veritas Splendor* (1993) seems to have been a response to issues of a growing moral relativism across the world.

A further move forward is evident in the 21st century. For most of the 20th century, popes emphasized the Christian duty to meet **poverty through charity,** and promoted a vision of a single, **worldwide public authority** (such as the United Nations) to coordinate efforts at world peace and an end to poverty. Benedict XVI (formerly Joseph Ratzinger, a world-renown theologian elected Pope in 2005) emphasized the Christian duty to meet poverty also through **political participation**, **advocacy**, and front-line **collaboration** with humanitarian agencies. Also, deeply aware of the variety of human cultures and of a global economy, he proposes meeting poverty and war through **new and various forms of collaboration** at the international level—such as trade unions, labor unions, consumer associations, microfinance agencies, and political involvements at all levels. He seems to have let go of the idea that a worldwide public authority would be beneficial.[79]

The Vatican also published specific recommendations entitled, "Towards Reforming the International Financial and Monetary Systems in the Context of Global Public Authority."[80] The report spoke of "the primacy of being over having," of "ethics over the economy," and of "embracing the logic of the global common good." Among other initiatives, it proposed the establishment of a **global central bank**—a sort of Economic United Nations—that would coordinate the regulations governing central banks of major countries. It remains to be seen whether this marks a new era of **economic participation** by the Catholic Church.

Looming Issue: Method in Ethics

Are these developments all positive? Will some brilliant ideas cast others into shadow? Historically, what is really moving forward here? To a large extent it is simply too early to tell. It is the nature of our historical condition that participants in events hardly ever understand what "historical development" they are a part of. This is why we need historians; they detect key threads that participants failed to notice.

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[79] This material is taken from Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Benedict's Global Reorientation," *Theological Studies* 71:2 (June 2010) 291-319.

[80] Prepared by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and published in English on October 11, 2011. http://www.zenit.org/article-33718?l=english

Still, we can at least say this:

> The discipline of theological ethics is on a search for a method that most ethicists agree on.

What should this method accomplish? Here are some of the problematic issues we have already considered that beg for resolution. An effective theological ethics should:

- Resolve the opposition between reason and faith.
- Establish both *nature* and *historicity* as elements of the human condition.
- Encompass both *religious* and *secular* ethics.
- Clarify the relationship between the *autonomous individual* and the *common good of society.*
- Move forward from an *ethics of suspicion* to an *ethics of healing*.
- Clarify the origins of "moral principles"

In this course, I have been following the lead of Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984). In his groundbreaking work *Insight* (1957), he explored what we do when we know anything and choose anything. In a subsequent, equally groundbreaking work, *Method in Theology* (1972), he proposed a method for theology which, in his view, most theologians can agree on. It is not difficult to see how his work applies to a theological ethics.[81]

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[81] My own book attempts to lay foundations for such a method in ethics. See *Doing Better: The Next Revolution in Ethics* (Marquette University Press, 2010)