

Christian Ethics. How Should We Live?

1. Introduction: The Moral Quest

Sunday, May 1, 2005

10 to 10:50 am, in the Parlor.

Everyone is welcome!

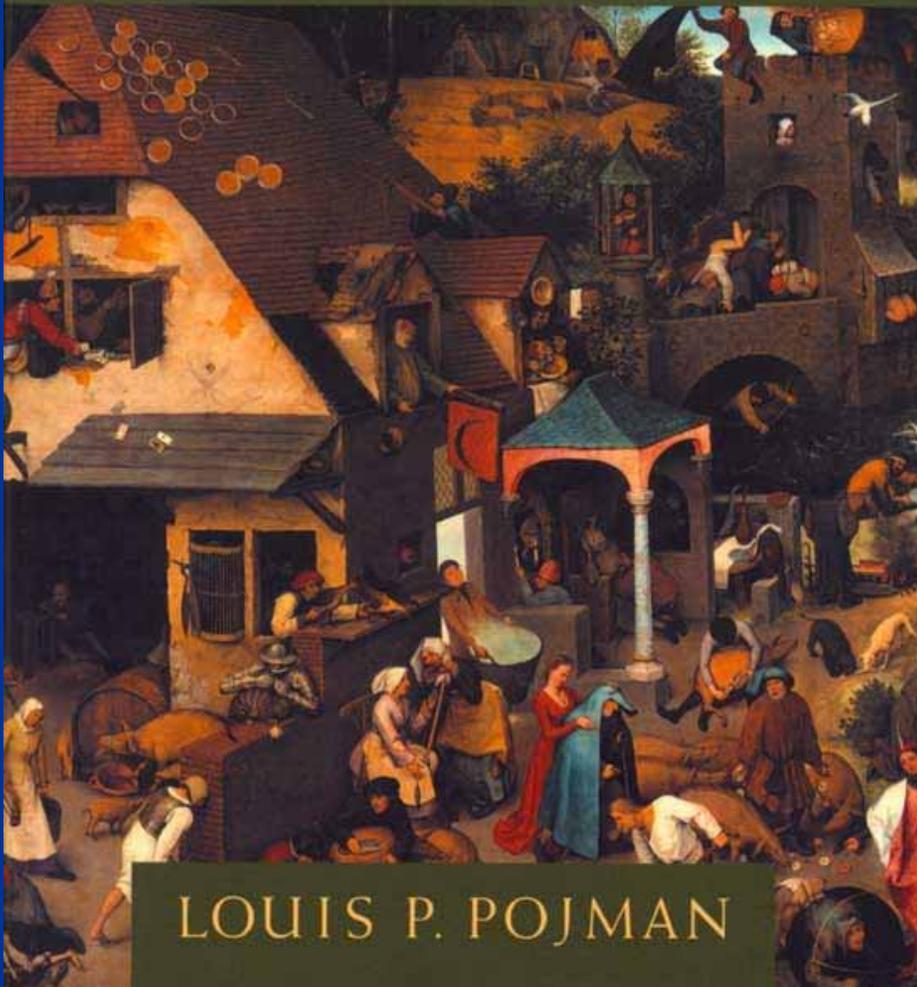
St. John in the Wilderness

Almighty God, who created us in your image: Grant us grace fearlessly to contend against evil and to make no peace with oppression; and, that we may reverently use our freedom, help us to employ it in the maintenance of justice in our communities and among the nations, to the glory of your holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

- Book of Common Prayer, p. 260

HOW SHOULD WE LIVE?

AN INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS



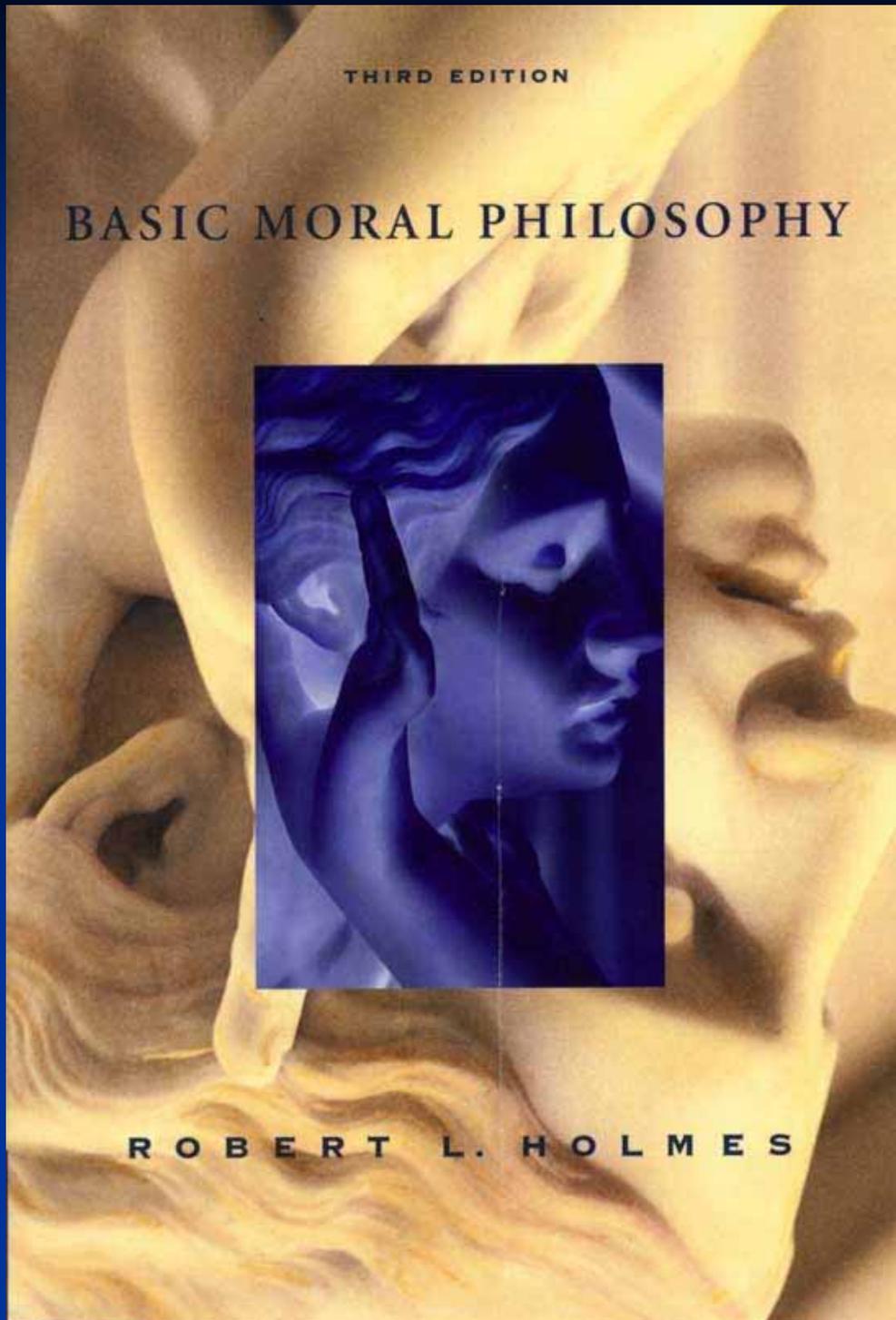
- **How Should We Live? An Introduction to Ethics, Louis P. Pojman, Wadsworth Publishing, 2005. ISBN: 0-534-55657-4.**
- **Dr. Pojman is professor of philosophy at the United States Military Academy**

THE MORAL QUEST

FOUNDATIONS
OF CHRISTIAN
ETHICS

STANLEY
J. GRENZ

- **The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics,** Stanley J. Grenz. InterVarsity Press, 2000. ISBN: 0-830-81568-6.
- Dr. Grenz is professor of theology and ethics at Carey / Regent College in Vancouver, B.C.



- **Basic Moral Philosophy, Third Edition**, Robert L. Holmes. Thomson Wadsworth, 2003. ISBN 0-534-58477-2
- Dr. Holmes is professor of philosophy at the University of Rochester.

Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

- 1 Peter 1:14-16 (NRSV)

Introduction

How Should We Live as a Society?

- Advances in modern science and medicine have made old ethical problems more acute, as well as created new ones:
 - Is abortion always wrong? What if amniocentesis reveals the fetus has a severe birth defect?
 - Is euthanasia always wrong? What if it is used only as a means to a “death with dignity?”
 - Genetic engineering. Can experimenting on human embryos be justified if it might cure genetic diseases?

Introduction

How Should We Live as a Society?

- Science has made us aware of the impact of how we live on the environment.
 - To what degree can we exploit and consume our natural resources in order to build more houses and factories, provide cheap transportation and modern conveniences?

Introduction

How Should We Live as a Society?

- We now live in a global rather than a “local” economy.
 - Is it okay to use cheaper labor in countries with poorer standards of living in order to make our higher standard of living more widely available to others in our country?
 - When does “cheap labor” become exploitative or “slave” labor? Where do we draw the line?
 - Are we under obligation to try to improve those poorer standards of living?

Introduction

How Should We Live as Individuals?

- Every day we each face personal decisions on how we should live.
- We understand many of these decisions matter. We ask:
 - Am I doing the right thing?
 - How will this affect who I am? How might it change me? Will it change me for the better?
 - How might it affect others?

Introduction

How Should We Live?

- What is *good* and what is *bad*?
- What actions are *right* and what actions are *wrong*?
- As individuals, and as a society, we are continually facing such questions. We are, in other words, continually having to make **ethical (= moral)** decisions.

Introduction

How Should We Live?

- Deciding what is *right/wrong*, *good/bad* can be difficult and complex, and there is no consensus even among Christians on the methods and criteria to use.
- Consider these scenarios:

Introduction

Some Ethical Challenges

- In the novel *Sophie's Choice* by William Styron, Sophie is required at a Nazi concentration camp to choose which of her two children the Nazis will execute. If she refuses to choose, they will execute both children.
- What should Sophie do?

Introduction

Some Ethical Challenges

- You are driving a trolley down a track. The brakes fail. If you do nothing, the trolley will kill ten people crossing at the upcoming red-light.
- There is fortunately a side spur you could turn the trolley onto and spare the ten people. However, there is a child playing on the side spur, and if you turn the trolley onto it, you will kill the child.
- What should you do?

Introduction

Some Ethical Challenges

- You discover proof that your parents have embezzled a large amount of money from the company they work for. You have confronted them, but they deny the charge. If you report them, they will go to prison and their lives will be ruined. If you don't report them, the company will be ruined.
- What should you do?

Introduction

Some Ethical Challenges

- You and 19 friends are spelunking in a cave on the ocean. Your friend Fred gets stuck in the cave opening. The tide is rising. If you don't get Fred through the opening, everyone (except Fred, whose head is outside the cave) will drown. Fortunately, you do have some dynamite with you.
- Should you blow Fred out of the entrance to save everyone else?

Introduction

Some Ethical Challenges

- It is World War II and you are hiding two Jewish refugees.
- Two Nazi soldiers come to your door and ask if you have any Jewish refugees in your house.
- Should you lie or tell the truth?

Introduction

Some Ethical Challenges

- Your wife is dying of a rare cancer.
- A pharmacist in your town, after years of research, has discovered a drug that will cure the cancer, and is charging 10 times the amount it takes to manufacture it.
- After borrowing from everyone you can, you have gathered only half the purchase price.
- You go to the pharmacist, who refuses to sell the drug to you for half-off, declaring that he discovered the drug and is entitled to make as much as he can from his discovery.
- Should you steal the drug?

Ethical Relativism versus Ethical Objectivism

Ethical Relativism vs. Objectivism

Terminology

- Are there universal moral principles that apply to all people, regardless of the time or place that they live?
 - 1. *Yes*: **Ethical Objectivism** and **Ethical Absolutism**
 - 2. *No*: **Ethical Relativism**
 - **Conventional Ethical Relativism (Conventionalism)**: Moral principles and truths are purely a product of the culture.
 - **Subjective Ethical Relativism (Subjectivism)**: Moral principles and truths depend on the individual. “Morality is in the eye of the beholder.”
 - 3. *No*: **Ethical Nihilism**.
 - There are no ethical or moral truths.

Ethical Relativism vs. Objectivism

Culture Relativism vs. Ethical Relativism

- **Ethical Objectivism** and **Ethical Absolutism** do not deny that there is **Cultural Relativism**:
 - Cultures vary widely and have different moral codes which may:
 - Include some ethical principles that are unique to the culture and which are not universal,
 - Apply universal ethical principles in ways unique to the culture.
- **Ethical Relativism** goes beyond **Cultural Relativism** by insisting that there are *no* universal moral principles or truths at all.

Ethical Relativism vs. Objectivism

Culture Relativism vs. Ethical Relativism

- **Ethical Relativism** – that moral principles or truths are relative, purely a product of the culture -- would insist, for example, that:
 - Western society has no basis to condemn the practice of female circumcision in Northern Africa (cutting off the external genitalia)
 - Estimate: 4 to 5 million women suffer this each year.

Ethical Relativism vs. Objectivism

Christian Ethics

- All systems of Christian Ethics start by declaring there *are* universal moral principles or truths that we can use to judge the rightness or wrongness of an action, whatever the culture, place, or time.

What Are the Universal Moral Principles?

Universal Moral Principles

How Many Principles?

- Any Christian ethical system is a **ethical objectivism** system, claiming that there are universal moral principles that apply to all time and all places.
- But what are the universal moral principles?
How many are there?

Universal Moral Principles

One Principle

- Some systems claim *one and only one* universal principle. Examples:
 - **Immanuel Kant:** the “categorical imperative”
 - Christian Ethics of Joseph Fletcher and Paul Ramsey: Act out of love. Do the loving thing.
 - **Utilitarianism:** Act so to bring about the greatest balance of good over evil for the greatest number of people.
 - **Ethical Egotism:** Act so to bring about the greatest balance of good over evil for oneself.

Universal Moral Principles

Multiple Principles

- Other systems claim multiple universal principles. Examples:
 - Christian ethical systems based on the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount
 - The Moral Theology of the Roman Catholic Church, based on:
 - Divine Law
 - Natural Law

Universal Moral Principles

Multiple Principles

- When a system has multiple principles, there may be a potential for conflict between the principles. How do you resolve such conflicts?
- The Medieval Scholastics proposed the **Doctrine of Double Effect** to decide how to act when some action would have both “good effects” and “bad effects.”
 - This doctrine is often used in Roman Catholic ethical arguments, and is part of “Just War” Theory.

Universal Moral Principles

Doctrine of Double Effect

- Four conditions must be satisfied for an act to be morally permissible:
 - 1. **The Nature-of-the-Act Condition.** The action must be morally good, or indifferent.
 - 2. **The Means-Ends Condition.** The bad effect must not be the means by which one achieves the good effect.
 - The Stoics “Let justice be done, though the heavens fall.”
 - 3. **The Right-Intention Condition.** The intention should only be to achieve the good effect. The bad effect, while foreseen, must be an unintended side effect.
 - 4. **The Proportionality Condition.** The good effect must be at least equivalent in importance to the bad effect.

Universal Moral Principles

Doctrine of Double Effect

- By the **Doctrine of Double Effect**, if you are attacked by an assailant, you can defend yourself, even if it causes the death of the assailant.
 - You may not intend the death of the assailant; it must be an unintended side effect (3. The Right-Intention Condition).
 - You may not use disproportionate force (4. The Proportionality Condition).

Universal Moral Principles

Doctrine of Double Effect

- By the **Doctrine of Double Effect**, in war:
 - You may bomb a munitions factory to destroy the enemies weapons even though you foresee that innocents around the factory may be killed.
 - You may not intend however to kill the innocents (3. The Right-Intention Condition).
 - You may not use more force than necessary to accomplish your mission (4. The Proportionality Condition).
 - By the Doctrine of Double Effect, the carpet bombing of German cities in WWII, and the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, were of questionable morality, because a strong case can be made the violated Condition 4. The Proportionality Condition)

Universal Moral Principles

Doctrine of Double Effect

- The Roman Catholic church has use the Doctrine of Double Effect to argue doing an abortion is wrong to save the life of the mother, because, it violates:
 - Condition 1. The Nature-of-the-Act Condition. The act of killing the fetus is not a moral or indifferent act.
 - Condition 2. The Mean-Ends Condition. The bad effect must not be the means by which the good effect is achieved.

Universal Moral Principles

Doctrine of Double Effect

- However, removing a cancerous uterus in a pregnant women is acceptable, because:
 - Condition 1, the Nature-of-the-Act Condition, and Condition 2, the Mean-Ends Condition, are satisfied. The *act* is removing the cancerous uterus, morally indifferent.
 - Condition 3, the Right-Intention Condition, is satisfied. The intention is to remove the cancer; the death of the fetus is an unintended side-effect.
 - Condition 4, the Proportionality Condition, is satisfied. The good effect (removing the cancerous uterus and saving the mother's life, is proportional to the bad effect, killing the fetus.)

Universal Moral Principles

Doctrine of Double Effect

- The Trolley Problem. Turning to the side spur and killing the child violates Condition 2 of the Doctrine of Double Effect, the Mean-Ends Condition (= The bad effect must not be the means by which one achieves the good effect.)

Deontological Ethics versus Teleological Ethics

Deontological v. Teleological Ethics

- A fundamental distinction between ethical systems is whether they are **deontological** or **teleological** ethical systems
 - 1. **Teleological Ethics.** The morality of an act is based on the outcome or consequence of the act (Also called Consequentialist Ethics).
 - 2. **Deontological Ethics.** The morality of an act is based in the act itself (Also called Nonconsequentialist Ethics)

Deontological v. Teleological Ethics

- For example: lying:
 - In **teleological** systems (= consequentialist ethics), the morality of lying would depend on the *consequence* or *outcome* of the lie.
 - In **deontological** systems (= nonconsequentialist ethics), the very act of lying is seen as intrinsically wrong.
- If the Nazis ask if you have Jewish refugees in your house:
 - In a teleological approach, it is okay to lie to try to save the refugees.
 - In a very strict deontological system (such as Immanuel Kant's), the moral act is to tell the truth, because lying is an intrinsic evil.

Deontological v. Teleological Ethics

- The most common system of teleological ethics is **Utilitarianism**: always act to bring about the greatest amount of good and the least amount of evil the greatest number of people.
- Utilitarians would say:
 - *In the Trolley Problem*: turn down the side spur to save 10 lives, even though the child will be killed.
 - *In the Costal Spelunkers Problem*: blast Fred away if it is the only means to save the other 19.

Ethics of Being versus an Ethics of Doing

Ethics of Being vs. Doing

- Thus far we have been talking about **Ethics of Doing** (= **Action-based Ethics** = **Ethics of Conduct**), emphasizing the morality of *actions*.
- Another approach to ethics is an **Ethics of Being** = **Virtue-based Ethics** = **Aretaic** (Greek *arete*, meaning virtue) **Ethics**.
- Virtue-based ethics says that what is fundamental to ethics is the kind of person we are, our character and motivations.

Ethics of Being vs. Doing

- There is clearly a relationship between our character / personal virtues, and our actions / conduct. Three views of that relationship can be described as:
 - **Ethics of Being (= Virtue based Ethics):** virtues are what is essential in ethics and have intrinsic value. Universal Principles are derived from virtue.
 - **Ethics of Doing (= Action based Ethics):** Action-guiding principles are what is essential in ethics. These principles build character and virtue.
 - **Complementarity Ethics or Pluralistic Ethics:** Virtue-based ethics and action-based ethical systems are complementary and both are necessary for a complete ethical system.

References

- **How Should We Live? An Introduction to Ethics**, Louis P. Pojman, Wadsworth Publishing, 2004. ISBN: 0-534-55657-4
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