

Definition of Moral Right & Nature of Christian Ethics¹

I. Definition of Moral Right

1. Might is right.

One definition is might is right. It could be whoever is in charge of the military or whoever could sway the most people in the country. Whoever has got the most power is right.

The refutation is that one can have the most power but can still be evil. Just because you are powerful doesn't make you good. A few examples: Nero, Hitler and Stalin. These guys' names are synonymous with evil, yet they were powerful within their own domains.

2. Culture defines right.

The second view is that morals are cultural mores; they are basically cultural norms. What is right is whatever your culture defines as right. The community decides what is right. The point is that if this is true, then one culture cannot condemn another. The Americans cannot say Nazi Germany was wrong to butcher six million Jews. Once you make the community the giver of the moral laws alone, with no higher authority to appeal to, you cannot settle a dispute between two communities.

3. Man is the measure of right.

Pythagoras, the ancient Greek philosopher, said that man is the measure and this basically teaches that each person decides what is right for himself. What is right for me is right for me, and doesn't have to be right for you and vice versa. Again, we bring into the picture Hitler to refute this. If this is true and man is the measure, and you decide what is right and no one else can tell you differently, then how can you justify the actions of Hitler? If man is the measure, then Adolf Hitler is his own measure of what is right and the right thing for him to do was to kill six million innocent Jews.

4. Human race is the basis of right.

At the Nuremburg trial, the human race got together and sit down to judge Hitler? So the human race decides what is right. The refutation is that the world could be wrong in the past and it could be wrong now. There was one time where the consensus was the world was flat. Well, the human race was wrong. The world is not flat. There was also the consensus that slavery was right. It was only recently that western civilisation felt guilty about it and put a stop to it. But until that point it was a normal part of life. You had your slave

¹ Topics are gleaned from Dr. Phil Fernandes' course on "Introduction to Christian Ethics".

masters and your slaves. If you owed some money to some guy and didn't pay off the debt, you became that guy's slave.

The world could be wrong even if the whole world was in agreement. There was a time when they thought slavery was right and some communities still practise it.

5. Moderation is right.

There are some who think that right is moderation; as long as you don't go from one extreme to another. Sometimes moderation is the best course to take. Sometimes you get a preacher who says that if someone did something wrong, it was the demon's fault. And then you get another preacher who says it is sinfulness and it is never the demon's fault. You have two extremes and it is moderate to say, "Yes, most of the time, it is human sinfulness but that doesn't mean the demon can't get involved in the picture and influences us to do evil."

However, there are times when extremism is right. If some guy takes out a machete and comes after your wife, to take a moderate position is not the best thing to do. The best thing to do is to subdue the guy and take the machete out of his hand. Self-defence sometimes works when your nation is being invaded by a nation that wants to enslave your people. In a rescue mission, if someone is drowning and you have the ability to save him, taking a moderate view is not the best course.

So moderation is not always the best course.

6. Pleasure is right.

Right is whatever brings the most pleasure—that's another view. The Epicureans in the 4th century BC had this view. What they viewed as pleasure was more peaceful-like. Strict Epicureans were not the kind heavy into sexual immorality. There was more moderation in their kind of pleasure. But Epicureanism had degenerated into hedonism—whatever brings pleasure is right. Whatever brings pain is wrong; if it feels good, do it.

There was this story about a guy who was fired from his job, his wife left him, and he was in debt. His life was torn apart. So he went for a drive, stopped at the red light, saw the bumper sticker of the car in front that says, "If it feels good, do it." So he thought to himself, "Why not? Everything has gone bad." So he stepped on the gas and slammed his car onto that of the other guy. The other guy came out of his car all upset, but the guy who slammed the car told him that it felt good. The point is this—even the people who say, "If it feels good, do it," would not be telling that to Adolf Hitler, or to a guy looking to kill with a machete in his hand.

Not all pain is bad. Ask the body-builders. You don't get those muscles without pain—no pain, no gain. Surgery—sometimes you have to go through

a tremendous amount of pain to heal some kinds of ailments. So not all pain is bad and not all pleasure is good. There are people into sadomasochism who say inflicting people or themselves with pain or receiving pain brings them pleasure. But that's not good.

Not all pleasure is good. In fact serial murderers have admitted that they derive a certain amount of pleasure in killing their victims and that doesn't make what they did right.

7. The greatest good for the greatest number is right.

This is what is usually referred to as utilitarianism. Sounds real good until you look at it a little deeper. The refutation is, first of all, you have to ask yourself, "What is good?" John Stuart Mill was a utilitarian and he tried to define what is good by saying, "What is good is the greatest good for the greatest number." That is like saying, "The definition of a boxer is a person who boxes with other guys."

If you talk to a communist, the greatest good for the greatest number is to have communism take over the world and subject everyone to it. Then there would be this utopian society characterized by benevolent government that ensures the safety and general welfare of its citizens. A capitalist would have a totally different view. He'll say free enterprise system will bring the greatest good to the greatest number rather than a welfare state.

So it doesn't really answer anything. It doesn't define what good is. It just assumes that we know what the greatest good is. Also, we can't accurately predict the future. Even if we can figure out now what the greatest good for the greatest number is, we can't accurately predict the future. What we consider the greatest good for the greatest number now may blow up in our faces some years from now.

8. What is desired for its own sake is right.

Aristotle said what is right is what is desirable for its own sake. He used moral values as an end, not as a means to an end. In other words, don't be kind to others just to get yourself rich. He said, "No, you are kind for the sake of being kind."

Refutation is that this doesn't define what is good. It just says what is good is good for its own sake. I desire to be kind just because I desire to be kind. Well, Hitler desired to be ruthless to the Jews because he desired to be ruthless. That doesn't mean he is right. We often desire what is evil. The end doesn't always justify the means just because you desire something.

9. Right is indefinable.

Right is what is indefinable. There is no way to distinguish what is right from what is wrong. Well, if some guy just runs out of the crowd, jumps onto the

stage and punches me right on the nose, and you say you can't define that as evil, you have got a problem with your philosophical thought. I mean, it is pretty clear that when somebody punched you in the nose without any reason, what he did was wrong or there's something wrong with him. There is no way to clearly distinguish right from wrong by saying right is indefinable.

II. Nature of Christian Ethics

1. Good is what God wills.

The Christian view says that good is what God wills. However, what God wills, he wills in accordance to his good nature. His will flows from his nature. God himself is the ultimate authority or standard on what is good. Christian ethics is based on God's will. God never wills something contrary to his good nature.

If God wills something because it is good, what a lot of people will argue is that therefore there is something above God. If God wills something because it is good, then the standard that is good is above God. But there is no standard above God. God is the ultimate standard. God is the perfect good. God is good by his nature. And so, when God wills something, he doesn't arbitrarily call it as good. It is good because God wills it. When God wills something, it is good and the only reason it is good is because it is in his good nature.

2. Christian ethics is based on God's will.

Christian ethics is based on God's will and that God never wills something contrary to his good nature. Thus, to practice Christian ethics as we seek to do God's will in different situations is to practice the virtues of God's good nature in our lives.

3. Christian ethics is absolute.

Christian ethics is absolute. God's nature does not change. God's nature does not change and therefore, the moral obligations that God commands are binding everywhere. He may also give temporary commands like the Old Testament commands that were given just for the nation of Israel at a particular time (e.g. Old Testament sacrifices). But when God makes moral commands, he writes laws in the conscience of man. His moral obligations are always binding everywhere and on everyone. That is what is meant by absolute. It is not like murder is wrong in this case but not wrong in that case.

4. Christian ethics is based on God's revelations.

There are God's revelations in nature which are called natural or general revelations—general because they are given to all men. Romans Ch. 1 & 2 said the invisible God has revealed the existence of his power through the visible universe that he has created. Then there are supernatural revelations

which are also referred to as special revelations where God has revealed himself to men through the Bible. They are special because not everyone has read the Bible, and of course the fullness of God's supernatural revelations culminated when God became a man in the person of Jesus Christ. Through these supernatural revelations, God's ethics are revealed to us much more clearly than natural ways.

5. Christian ethics are prescriptive.

Christian ethics are prescriptive, not descriptive. If Christian ethics were descriptive, all they do is describe what is—e.g. if you merely tell someone you have murdered a person, you are just describing what has happened without prescribing the act as wrong. If there is a God, this God can supernaturally intervene and do something a little different. So the laws of nature are descriptive; they describe the usual way things occur, but they can't rule out miracles because they are not prescriptive of how things ought to be when God comes into the picture. Christian ethics is God prescribing what ought to be rather than what things are.

6. Christian ethics are deontological.

Deontological theories (derived from the Greek word for duty—*deon*) base morality on certain duties or obligations, and claim that certain actions are intrinsically right or wrong (i.e. right or wrong in themselves) regardless of the consequences that may follow from those actions. What makes a choice or an action right is its conformity with a moral norm. Thus, an agent has a duty to act in accordance with a moral norm. In other words, the moral rule determines what is right. "Thou shall not kill"—if you go and kill somebody then that rule determines that the action is wrong.

There is a pragmatic approach to ethics where what is right is what works. If killing all your political enemies gets you elected into office, then that is right. A lie will often work. Sometimes a doctor tells his patient, "You have 99 percent of pulling through," though he tells the nurse that actually he has only got a 40 percent chance. But the patient needs to feel confident, so the doctor lied to him. Well it works—the guy's confidence went up and he pulls through though it doesn't make it true—it's still a lie. Just because something works doesn't make it true.