Foundations of Christian Ethics

Dilemma Ethics vs. Foundational Ethics (see p. 3 for a deeper treatment)

*Dilemma Ethics*: in terms of goods in conflict.
- Doesn’t reinforce the good; often is practice in making “the good” disposable;
- As a starting point, may erode basic values

*Foundational Ethics*: the basic values that undergird “the good”
- A better starting point to establish “the good” first.

Christian Ethics is the study of moral decision making: making right choices and avoiding sinful choices. The study of Christian Ethics involves four topics:

- **God**: our understanding of who God is in relation to us and our choices;
- **Moral Formation**: the formation of our conscience and habits that recognize the good and exercise good judgment.
- **Good**: discerning the basic values: what is ‘the good’ to be desired, or ‘the evil’ to be avoided;
- **Moral Judgment**: the analysis and use of moral principles in given situations

**God**:
God comes first—not ethics!
How we act affects how we pray and love, and who we worship.
But God loves us first—God’s grace saves us, not our behavior.
The ultimate end of Christian Ethics is *God*, not “goodness.”
Notice that with God at the center, ethics are not based on “self-interest,” freedom, efficiency or social utility.

**Moral Formation**:
Thus Moral Formation is intertwined with Christian Formation. The human conscience is not automatically pure, but rather beset by fallibility. The conscience must be formed to recognize the good and our wills formed to seek the good and avoid the evil. For Anglicans, ethics is not so much a code or a philosophy, but a matter of daily Christian living (“practical piety”), formed in a community of word and sacrament, in the practices of prayer, reading scripture, and relationship with God together.

The Anglican saying of “Scripture, Tradition and Reason” helps us: Scripture is the basis of our understanding of God and the Christian life. Our reading of scripture is guided by the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking through the life of the church in history and today. We seek God with our God-given capacities of understanding, being guided by the Holy Spirit. Notice the primacy of scripture and the subsidiary place of reason.

**“The Good”**
How do we determine what is good? There are three approaches, and each is important in the Christian life. Here is a summary (the three are explored in detail in pages 3-7):

- **Law**: righteousness is obedience (& sin is disobedience).
- **Purpose**: righteousness is living in accordance with God’s purposes.
- **Relationship**: righteousness is right relationship with God and others (and one’s self).
Discerning ‘the good’ in terms of Law & Obedience:
The Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1-17 or Deut 5:1-21)
Jesus’ New Commandment (John 13:34: love as Christ loved us)
Teachings of the church such as the “Seven Deadly Sins” and Seven Virtues.

Primacy of God above all else in our lives, and the dignity and worth of every human being.
Knowledge of right & wrong does not come from our preferences or desires (we often get it wrong). Our conscience must be formed to avoid vice (habits of the heart that lead to sin) and promote virtue (good habits of the heart, and gifts from God (faith, hope and love). We are also called to love sacrificially for others.

Discerning ‘the good’ in terms of the purposes of God:
Drawing principles of action based on what are God’s purposes in aspects of life, such as life itself, sex, marriage, government, etc. For example, Jesus grounds rules of marriage in the Genesis creation account. This approach often understands most sin as “disordered loves,” abuses of the natural order, requiring re-formation of our conscience and will.

Discerning ‘the good’ in terms of relationship:
Rather than determination of “guilt or innocence,” this approach describes our situation in terms of our closeness to God, allowing our brokenness and God’s forgiveness and help of us to be part of our assessment, and avoiding faulty legalism. Laws and purposes inform our daily engagement in this relationship.

Moral Judgment: the analysis and use of moral principles in given situations.
Informed about good and evil and formed in relationship with God, we then live in a complex world involving challenging moral decisions. “The good” is often unclear or mixed with the evil or imperfect, and often, our alternatives and understanding is limited. How do we make good decisions? Often, our moral decisions are complicated by the systems of relationships and external factors involved. It is helpful, therefore, to determine to what extent we can effect an outcome, and to what extent we are responsible. These are questions of agency.

And we live together. We have responsibilities to our neighbors and ourselves. We may not be accountable for another’s actions, but we play a part in social systems that can do great harm (such as racism) or great good. How do we act to support the good in the system? Principles of justice (there are several) and respecting the dignity of the individual through autonomy play roles here as well. But they are complex and can sometime mask more selfish ends.

• Agency and responsibility: Our role and ability to effect outcomes in a given situation.
• Doing Good (Beneficence): act so as to further ‘the good.’
• Avoiding Evil (Nonmaleficence): act so as to avoid evil.
• Justice: treating equals equally
  Justice can be based on merit, need, effort, or common benefit
• Autonomy: respect for self-determination of others. Autonomy is not a good in itself, however, for human choices often are sinful. Coercion of others can violate dignity and trust, so limits to human freedom are carefully chosen, usually in terms of the common good, relying on principles of justice. Autonomy does not relieve us of our responsibility to encourage the good in others and decline to participate in the evil of others.
**Good & Evil: discerning ‘the good’ to be desired or ‘the evil’ to be avoided:**

This Christian Living then forms our understanding of what is Good and what is Evil: what constitutes obedience or disobedience; what is in line or out of line with God’s purposes; what connects us to God and each other as whole persons, or what separates us or is self-destructive. **This Moral knowledge is not the same as Moral Judgment** (see below), but without knowledge of ‘the good,’ no good judgment is possible.

**Dilemma Ethics:** Secular discussions of ethics (and sometimes discussions in the church as well!) often involve what is called “dilemma ethics.” These are conversations about ethics that often immediately jump to the moral dilemma of two goods in conflict. For example, the scenario of a person suffering terminal illness: does one relieve suffering or extend life? Scenarios such as this one tend to oversimplify and create false conflicts, and they tend to make either ‘good’ expendable, ultimately based upon private opinion. The effect of this approach is often the erosion of any basic knowledge of the good in the first place. How can we discuss the dilemma before first understanding why we value both life and relief of suffering, and how we came to hold such values?

**Foundational Ethics:** Thus the starting point of a discussion of ‘the good’ must be in its foundations, not in its dilemmas. These foundations are best understood by using all three ethical approaches to describe the good and the evil: law, purposes and relationship. These three are, of course, related. One can say that the ultimate purpose of the Christian life is full reconciliation with God and with others (as a whole self). Thus one can chart the purposes of difference aspects of life to their ultimate purposes in this relationship. One can also see the value of law as simplified principles that mark the behaviors that are in line with these purposes. In the Christian life, law is not the end in itself, for the ultimate good news is in God’s forgiveness of our sins. This restores us to God’s purposes and reconciles us in relationship with him in new life.

**Discerning ‘the good’ in terms of Law & Obedience:**

Christians recognize that we do not have the capacity to perfectly obey God’s law. Our hope is not in the law, but rather in God’s grace and forgiveness. Nonetheless, we recognize the value of the law as a teacher in the Christian life, and by God’s gift of the Holy Spirit, we seek to obey God and live holy lives that the law describes. The law is practical and less intuitive, but we avoid the law becoming an idol in itself.

Obedience to God is described in Holy Scriptures and the teachings of the church, most prominently in

- **The Summary of the Law**
- **The Ten Commandments**
- **Jesus’ New Commandment**
- **Traditional wisdom such as**
  - The “Seven Deadly Sins” (or “Capital Sins”) and
  - “Seven Cardinal Virtues.”
- **Other teachings of the church**
The Summary of the Law:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind [or strength]. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Matthew 22:37-39: Jesus quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18

This grounds the law in our primary relationships, with our primary obedience to God. We cannot know how to love our neighbor without loving God with our whole lives. We cannot love God if we do not also love our neighbor. All laws and obedience stem from this summary. We know ‘the good’ by knowing and loving God, and loving our neighbor follows. Note that love of self is not emphasized by itself in scripture—only in relation to God’s love for us, and forgiveness of us, despite our sins. Our tendency is to abuse our love of self. Only in God’s love can we rightly love ourselves.

From this basic summary, we find two basic principles: the primacy of God above all else in our lives, and the dignity and worth of every human being. Thus actions and attitudes that diminish God in our eyes or before others are clearly sinful. Likewise, actions and attitudes that diminish other people, even sinful people, are also sinful. In no case are we to be the arbiters of right and wrong—such judgment is not up to our fallible preferences or desires, but rather up to God. Our conscience must be formed to avoid vice (habits of the heart that lead to sin) and promote virtue (good habits of the heart, and gifts from God).

The Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:1-21):

1) I am the LORD your God, you shall have no other gods
2) You shall not make for yourself an idol
3) You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God
4) Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy
5) Honor your father and mother…
6) You shall not murder
7) You shall not commit adultery
8) You shall not steal
9) You shall not bear false witness
10) You shall not covet…

The first four describe love of God, the last six, love of neighbor. We can both observe and infer both basics of ‘the good’ and ‘the evil.’ The emphasis on avoiding evil in the language of the Ten Commandments betrays the problem: our tendency to do evil.

Jesus’ New Commandment:

“Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” John 13:34. We are to exhibit love, not only by the human standard of our love for ourselves, but by Jesus’ standard of his sacrificial love for us in dying for us—even while we were still sinners. Thus the law is not a law lived for punishment of others, but a law of love.
“The Seven Deadly Sins” or the “Seven Capital Sins:”
The Church tradition (pulling from philosophical traditions) includes this list of sins as an aid in identifying sources or trends in evil. Their explanation takes us to questions of purposes of our desires and passions. These sins have been called “disordered loves” because they warp natural and wholesome desires and passions created for good purposes. But as a list, they can also function as a sort of list of disobedience.

1) Pride: the primary sin of putting self over God
2) Greed: covetousness, inordinate desire for things, can lead to sins such as theft
3) Envy: hatred for someone because of a good that they have; hardly a love at all, for it is a hatred of someone or the good itself because it is good.
4) Wrath: inordinate anger, usually that leads to other sins such as violence or hatred
5) Lust: inordinate desires of the flesh (especially sex, but other desires as well)
6) Gluttony: inordinate desire for excess (including, but not limited to food)
7) Sloth: not so much laziness, as much as inaction borne from despair; rejection of the grace and blessings of God.

Seven Virtues:
The Cardinal Virtues:
1) Prudence: practical wisdom: knowing what to do and when to do it.
2) Justice: fairness: treating equals equally. Although it may be appropriate for the ordering and protection of society, using “justice” primarily as just punishment is rarely theologically Christian, since Christ paid the penalty for us, showing mercy over just punishment due.
3) Fortitude or Courage: the proper balance between foolhardiness and cowardice.
4) Temperance: the proper balance between inordinate desire and the loss of desire.

The Theological Virtues: gifts from God that form our human capacities
1) Faith: the knowledge of God (forms the mind)
2) Hope: confident expectation and openness to the future (forms the will)
3) Love: the experience of God in relationship with God (forms the whole person)

Other Teachings of the Church: help us to apply the principles of the Christian Life to new conditions or situations, such as drug abuse, mass media or biological technology. Episcopalians often avoid strict rules on contemporary issues, though a counter example would be racism, or certain forms of sexual abuse or misconduct in the church. Because such teaching might not be explicit in holy scripture, they are more subject to debate, especially from a protestant view. But many churches (especially the Roman Catholics) develop principles from scripture that buttress church teaching on contemporary issues.

Generally speaking, Protestants have tended to express ethics in terms of obedience and disobedience. The Protestant Reformation was shaped by language of justification under the law (see Romans). So the works of the Christian life traditionally were evaluated with the same language by Protestants.
Discerning ‘the good’ in terms of the purposes of God:

This approach is more characteristic of Roman Catholic moral theology. Catholic teaching acknowledges the commandments, but infers from them, and from classical logic, the purposes of God in various aspects of life. This then forms general principles which can be applied to various situations.

One can see the beginnings of this line of thinking in Jesus’ teaching. Jesus raises the bar from simply murder to mere insult against one another. In the matter of divorce, Jesus acknowledges the allowance for divorce in the Old Testament law, but says “in the beginning it was not so” and quotes Genesis: “Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (Matthew 19:4-6). Here, Jesus grounds his teachings in the purposes of God for marriage, or the underlying purposes behind the prohibition against murder.

The church has likewise developed descriptions of ‘the good’ by attempting to discern the purposes of God in various aspects of our lives. For instance, if the purposes of human life are to glorify God in this life and the next, and if life itself is a gift from God, and if murder is a violation of God’s gift of life, then suicide or euthanasia is against God’s purposes. Such willful destruction of human life is against the purposes of life, even in the face of suffering.

Likewise, if the purposes of sexuality are union between husband and wife and the procreation of children, then sex outside of marriage is against the purposes of sexuality. This matches up with scriptural prohibitions against fornication and adultery, for instance, but this principal can be applied to the abuse of the sexual relationship within the bonds of marriage: such abuse is against the purpose of mutual union between husband and wife. “Natural Law” is a school of thought that develops this thinking extensively, and is highly valued by Roman Catholics. This approach often understands most sin as “disordered loves,” abuses of the natural order, requiring reformation of our conscience and will. This kind of ethics tends to be highly systematic, setting up its own internally consistent thought structure.

Discerning ‘the good’ in terms of relationship:

This approach softens the approach of bare laws or complex thought systems to apply relationship with God as the basis of the moral life. This approach more readily incorporates God’s grace into the picture, whereas either the laws of scripture or the ‘natural law’ leave only blunt objection to flawed human life. The model of relationship accepts the reality that our relationship with God is broken by sin, but renewed by Jesus, under repair by the Holy Spirit, and awaiting its full wholeness in heaven. This model acknowledges the moral law, and the purposes of God that underlie that law, while bridging the distance between our flawed humanity and God’s holiness.

Without learning obedience or understanding the purposes of our lives, the model of relationship struggles for lack of practical supports. With the practice of obedience and seeking such understanding of God’s purposes, however, ethics as response to God in relationship with God avoids the legalism or idealism that can themselves become idols. Properly informed, Relationship ethics provides an appropriate context for decision making, and connects us to the formative practices of prayer, word and sacrament in the Christian Community.
## Pros & Cons of these three approaches to Christian Ethics:

### In terms of “Law:”

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<th>Pro</th>
<th>Con</th>
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<tr>
<td>Clarity &amp; consistency</td>
<td>Can lead to legalism (trusting in the law, not God)</td>
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<td>Many are easy to remember</td>
<td>Sometimes hard to interpret or apply</td>
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<td>Applies to everyone</td>
<td>False sense of righteousness (rather than relying on God’s grace)</td>
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### In terms of God’s purposes:

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<td>Expansive, leads to principles</td>
<td>Can get 2 or 3 layers removed from scripture</td>
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<td>Can apply to new situations</td>
<td>Can get backed into a logical corner</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brings nuance vs. legalism</td>
<td>Can form a new kind of legalism</td>
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<td>(‘the spirit of the law’)</td>
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### In terms of relationship—with God and with others in Christ:

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<tr>
<th>Pro</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sets a high priority on grace, mercy and forgiveness</td>
<td>Could be used to dodge the law</td>
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<tr>
<td>more about the relationship, less about legalism</td>
<td>Risks evaluating the relationship only on one’s own subjective terms (bias…)</td>
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<tr>
<td>more about what is shared including accountability</td>
<td>-or on the model of transactional mutual self-interest vs. self giving</td>
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<tr>
<td>no room for self-righteousness</td>
<td>Risks forgetting about relationship with God as the basis</td>
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### Perhaps Covenant integrates Law, Purposes (“laws written on your heart”) & Relationship

### Moral Formation (to form our consciences):

- Knowing the law
- Understanding God’s purposes
- Engaging in relationship with God
- Engaging in relationships with other people in Christ