

Introduction: Deciding How to Decide¹

1 What is Christian Ethics?

It would be tempting, at the beginning of an introduction to Christian ethics, to try and come up with a brilliant, elegant and informative definition that expressed in a sentence or two what the subject is all about. I am not convinced, however, that it would be time well spent. In the Preface, I said that this book is meant to be a map of the territory known as 'Christian ethics' and the best way to find out what is on a map is to open it up and look at it. In the same way, the best way to find out what Christian ethics is about is not to try and describe it in abstract terms, but to get to grips with it. (It is also true, of course, that if you really want to get to know a region, staying at home and looking at a map is no substitute for actually travelling there. We shall return to this point in the final chapter.) So, in this opening section and the rest of this chapter, I shall only try to say enough to give an idea of the kind of terrain you will find yourself surveying when you open the map.

Words such as 'ethics' and 'morality', fairly obviously, have something to do with right and wrong, good and bad, obligation and value. Moral questions might be about what we ought (or ought not) to do, the way we ought to live our lives, the kinds of people – and communities – we ought to be. In everyday speech, 'ethics' and 'ethical' are often used to mean pretty much the same as 'morality' and 'moral'. When a doctor is found guilty of professional misconduct or a company director fiddles the company pension

fund, people often say, 'She/he behaved quite unethically.' They might just as well say, 'She/he behaved quite immorally', though this might create some confusion in the minds of people who believe (wrongly) that 'morals' are only about sex.

Many academic writers, though, distinguish between 'ethics' and 'morality'. Often, they use 'morality' to mean something like a phenomenon: the rules and principles we obey, our convictions about right and wrong, the ultimate values and goals by which we live our lives and so on. By 'ethics' they mean the academic *study* of that phenomenon: critically analysing our moral rules and principles, working out criteria for making judgements about right and wrong and the like. Not everyone makes this kind of distinction and different authors use the words in somewhat different ways, which can be confusing, but it is as well to be aware that the distinction exists.

If we talk about '*Christian ethics*', this suggests that in some way we are locating our talk of right and wrong, good and bad, obligation and value and so on in a context of Christian faith, practice and theology. Perhaps the map entitled 'Christian ethics' covers part of the territory found on the larger map entitled 'Christian theology'. Later in this chapter I shall say a little more about what we might mean by calling it *Christian ethics*. Another piece of terminology that you are quite likely to encounter in this context is 'moral theology'. Like 'Christian ethics', this refers to the study of morality in the context of Christian life and theology. In Western Christianity, largely for historical reasons, you are more likely to find Roman Catholics talking about 'moral theology' and Protestants about 'Christian ethics', but the two terms mean roughly the same.

2 What to Decide

So, what kind of territory will you find when you open the map entitled 'Christian ethics'? I said earlier that, contrary to some people's belief, it is not only about sex (though it does have things to say about sex). So what *is* it about?

It seems fairly obvious that ethics has something to do with making decisions about the right thing to do. If we ask what Christian ethics is about,

the first answer that is likely to occur to us is that it concerns *what* we decide: the content of our decisions and our moral lives. What should I do in this situation? What (if anything) should I advise, encourage or tell others to do? What ought we, as a society, to permit or prohibit? The following exercise should give you some idea of the range of issues that could be included under the heading 'What to decide'.

Exercise

Look through one issue of a daily newspaper and identify all the stories you can that raise moral issues of this sort: issues about *what we or others ought to do*. Write down, as clearly and briefly as you can, what the questions are – for example, 'Should patients be entitled to have help from their doctors in committing suicide and, if so, under what circumstances?'

When you do this kind of exercise, you can discover a huge number of questions with 'ought' or 'should' in them referring to every aspect of our private and public lives. There are questions about sex and relationships, the care, discipline and education of children and young people, how society should treat criminal offenders, medical care, particularly at the beginning and end of life, economics, international trade and development, the use of military power and much more besides. Questions of this sort are often labelled 'practical', 'applied' or 'substantive' ethics, though these terms have their problems. Many of these questions appear in this book. However, the 'What to decide' questions are not the only ones that Christian ethics is concerned with.

3 How to Decide

When we are faced with moral decisions – particularly difficult dilemmas in which the right choice is not obvious – a second sort of question arises: '*How* should we decide?' What criteria should we use to tell right from wrong? Where should we look for moral insight, guidance or authority? What influences should shape our moral judgements?

This is not to say, of course, that the first thing we do when faced with a difficult dilemma is work out answers to these 'How' questions, then apply our answers to the problem at hand. Such a procedure would almost certainly be too laborious and time-consuming for our countless everyday moral decisions, and even the more difficult problems that confront us from time to time often demand answers too urgently to allow us the luxury of starting from first principles on each occasion. However, when we are trying to work out the right thing to do in a difficult and confusing situation, we will find ourselves assuming some answers to the 'How' questions, whether we realize it or not. In other words, we will have some idea of *what counts as a good reason* for doing A or not doing B.

Suppose I discover that an old friend of mine is being sexually unfaithful to his partner and she does not know. Should I tell her? All kinds of arguments for and against might occur to me: she has a right to know the truth; he has a right to my loyalty; infidelity is wrong; it might cause them both pain if the truth comes out; it might cause *more* pain in the long run if it doesn't; I hate conflict and find emotional scenes embarrassing; he has been annoying me lately and this will be a good way to get back at him; and so on.

Some of these reasons will weigh more heavily than others, and I will probably dismiss some of them as trivial, irrelevant or plain bad reasons for a decision about what I *ought* to do. The point is that, whether I am aware of it or not, my decision about what to do presupposes a whole set of decisions about *how to decide* what to do.

These decisions about how to decide may only be partly conscious and will have been shaped by many factors: my upbringing, faith commitment, past experience and reflection and so on. Also, in the future, I might look back on the decision I am making now and be critical of the way that I made it. Perhaps I should have paid more attention to the teaching of the Bible or the Church; perhaps I should have taken less notice of what I had been taught by my parents; perhaps I should have been more sensitive to the consequences of my actions. The next exercise invites you to reflect in this way on some of your own past moral experience.

Exercise

Write a brief description (one or two paragraphs) of a moral dilemma or situation from your personal experience. (It might, for example, be about a difficult decision that you or someone close to you has had to make.) Try to state as clearly as possible what the issue or dilemma was. Also state, as clearly as you can, how you (or the person in the situation) decided what to do: what were the reasons for and against; what factors influenced the decision; where did you, or they, look for guidance?

Keep your answer to this exercise – you will be invited to return to it in the final chapter.

Questions of this second sort – the ‘How’ questions – often go by descriptions such as ‘moral theory’, ‘ethical method’ – or even ‘methodology’, a favourite word of academics.

One way to ask the ‘How’ questions in Christian ethics is to ask what are its *sources* – in other words, where Christians should look for moral insight, guidance or authority – how those sources should be used and how they should be related to one another. One common way to classify the sources (used, for example, by the New Testament scholar Richard Hays, whom we shall meet again in the next chapter) is as *Scripture, tradition, reason* and *experience*.²

By *Scripture*, Christians mean the writings collected together in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and the New Testament – the rich mixture of writings of various kinds, written over many centuries in many different settings, that you will find between the covers of something entitled ‘Holy Bible’ in your local bookshop. By calling this particular collection of writings ‘Scripture’, we are marking it off from other writings that come from the same places and times and claiming that it has some kind of special status and authority within the community of Christian faith. (It must be said, of course, that Christians disagree hotly about exactly what kind of status or authority it has and even about which writings count as ‘Scripture’.) If we are to regard Scripture as a source of moral authority, we shall need to understand these writings in their own contexts. What kinds of literature

are they – history, saga, poetry, law, biography, instruction, warning? What moral content do they have? How do they communicate it – by issuing commands, telling stories with a message, giving examples to follow? We shall also need to tackle the question how (if at all) these texts, written in very different times and places to ours, can speak to our lives, situations and dilemmas.

Tradition has a bad press in modern (or postmodern) society. It is often taken to mean something fusty, backward looking and static – the kind of thing that is appealed to by people who write letters to the newspapers and sign themselves ‘Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells’. The phrase ‘the dead hand of tradition’ sums up nicely how we often understand the word, but it could not be further from what is meant by tradition as a source of Christian ethics.

Richard Hays defines tradition, in the sense I mean, as ‘the Church’s time-honoured practices of worship, service and critical reflection’.³ In other words, it is a shared understanding within the Christian community about the kind of community it is, where it has come from, what it exists for and, in the light of that, how it and its members ought to live their lives. That shared self-understanding is both formed and expressed in a variety of ways: by the community’s worship and prayer, its preaching and teaching, the lives, relationships and understanding of its members, the thinking and writing of its scholars and so on. This is anything but static. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre writes that a healthy tradition is characterized by vigorous conflict and argument, including argument about the fundamental goods or goals that the tradition itself ought to be pursuing.⁴ Part of the ongoing argument within the medical community, for instance, should be about what counts as ‘good medicine’ and how we know it when we see it. Similarly, part of the ongoing argument in a Christian community will be about what that community exists for – and, therefore, what counts as a good life in the context of that community. Those who argue for the importance of tradition point out that it provides a store of collective experience and shared memory on which Christians and Christian communities can draw in their living and acting. In this way, it saves the Christian community from having to ‘reinvent the wheel’, beginning its moral deliberation from scratch, in each new generation.

In some forms of Christianity, tradition becomes crystallized into official

Church teaching. The idea is that the authorized leaders and teachers of the Church have the responsibility of expressing the community's shared self-understanding. The teachings produced by the Church's leadership are authoritative expressions of its tradition, which are intended to guide the faith and practice of the community and shape the future development of the tradition. This is roughly what is meant in Roman Catholicism by the 'Magisterium', or teaching authority, of the Church.

Our third source is *reason*. Obviously, anyone who makes any kind of moral decision cannot avoid using his or her reason in at least a minimal sense. However, I mean more than this by describing reason as a possible source of moral authority.

To count reason as a source of authority is to say that human powers of thought, understanding and argument can give us insight into what is good and right. Some traditions of Christian thought emphasize this claim. Humans, they argue, have been created by God with minds that are able to grasp something of the moral structure of the created world. This view is found, for example, in the natural law tradition, which we encounter in Chapter 3. Other Christian traditions, as we shall also see, are more pessimistic about the ability of our reason, unaided by divine revelation, to tell us what we need to know about right and wrong.

In a different way, some kinds of philosophical thought also stress the power of human reason as a source (possibly the only proper source) of moral authority. This view is characteristic of what Alasdair MacIntyre has called the 'Enlightenment project' in ethics.⁵ By this he means the attempt, from the eighteenth century onwards, to justify moral judgements and provide criteria for moral decision making based solely on reasoned argument, without appealing to tradition, received wisdom or external sources of authority, such as the Bible or God's law. In Chapter 4 we encounter two classes of ethical theory that originated in the Enlightenment project. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment was, in part, a response to the rise of modern science, and in Chapter 5 we explore some of the questions that the natural sciences raise for Christian ethics. In Chapter 6, we examine MacIntyre's critique of the Enlightenment project and his proposed solution to its problems.

Our fourth source is *experience*. As with reason, it is hard to imagine any kind of moral deliberation that does not make at least minimal use of our own

and others' experience, but to describe experience specifically as a source of moral authority can mean a variety of different things. It can refer to the role of the individual's conscience in moral decision-making and action. It can mean an inner conviction in the hearts and minds of believers and Christian communities about God's will and guidance. It can also mean an approach to Christian ethics that takes as its starting point the concrete experiences of people's lives – particularly those of people who are oppressed or marginalized in some way. This starting point is characteristic of the various 'theologies of liberation', some of which we meet in Chapters 7 and 8, which often draw on experience in order to critique biblical texts or aspects of the Church's traditional teaching.

These sources can be used in many different ways and combinations.⁶ Some Christians have held that Scripture alone has authority in relation to Christian faith and morality and other sources must be treated with the utmost suspicion (this is the so-called *sola Scriptura* position). Alister McGrath gives the example of the sixteenth-century radical Protestant reformer Sebastian Franck, who dismissed Church tradition as a source of authority: 'Foolish Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, Gregory – of whom not one even knew the Lord, so help me God, nor was sent by God to teach. Rather, they were all apostles of Antichrist.' The more mainstream Protestant reformers, including Luther, Calvin and their followers, regarded tradition more positively, but refused to see it as an independent source of authority that could be weighed against Scripture. Rather, its role was to help us understand and interpret Scripture, which remained the ultimate source of authority. Richard Hays says the same about reason and experience: they are not independent sources of authority, but stand in a 'hermeneutical relation' to Scripture. In other words, they help us to read and interpret Scripture rightly and bring its guidance to bear on new and unfamiliar situations.

For other Christians, two or more of the sources have roughly equal status. For example, a strong strand of Roman Catholic thought regards both Scripture and the traditions of the Church, handed down from the apostles, as vehicles of God's revelation in roughly equal ways. Some Anglican thinkers, taking their cue from the seventeenth-century theologian Richard Hooker, regard Scripture, tradition and reason as working in a kind of creative tension with one another.

4 The Person Who Decides, and What a Good Life Looks Like

The discussion so far might make it seem as though Christian ethical theory is all about how to make moral decisions and resolve dilemmas, but that is only one sort of question that Christian ethics asks. According to some writers, one of the problems with the 'Enlightenment project' is that it has overemphasized these 'How' questions and neglected others that are at least as important – what we might call the 'Who' questions. As we shall see in Chapter 6, philosophers such as MacIntyre and theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas have argued that we need to refocus our attention on questions of *virtue* and *character* in ethics.⁷ In other words, we need to think about not only what we should do and what rules or principles we should follow but also *what sort of people, and communities, we ought to be.*

Our characters – the kinds of people we are – are formed by the choices we make, habits we develop and examples we follow as we grow and develop through life. Our individual moral decisions and actions will flow from our character: if we have a virtuous character, we will find it easier both to know what is right in a particular situation and to do the right thing. Hauerwas and other theologians have emphasized the importance of the Church as a 'community of character' in which our characters are formed and we develop the skills for living a good life. If this is so, then the shared life of Christian communities and the practice of their ministers – those who lead Christian communities and give pastoral care to their members – will be crucially important for Christian ethics. In the first part of Chapter 9, we return to this issue by exploring the relationship between Christian ethics and pastoral care.

So far, I have distinguished between 'ethical theory' and 'practical' or 'applied' Christian ethics. Some courses in Christian ethics (including some that I have taught in the past) make a sharp divide between the two. Some deal mostly with one or the other: either they concentrate on theory (the 'How' and 'Who' questions) and only refer briefly to practical issues by way of illustration or they focus on practical issues and offer only the bare minimum of theory as a kind of ethical toolkit. Others cover both theory and practical issues, but keep the two apart in separate sections.

I think these approaches are unsatisfactory, because the separation between theory and practice in ethics is artificial and potentially unhelpful. Obviously ethical theory ought to inform our thinking about practical issues; if it does not, we run the risk of basing our conclusions on unexamined assumptions and prejudices. However, practice informs theory as well: by reflecting on the decisions we make and the real lives of Christian people and communities, we gain greater insight into the 'How' and 'Who' questions of ethics.

For that reason, I shall try to keep theory and practice together in this book and enable each to inform the other. The book's structure is based on ethical theory, with each chapter introducing one major theoretical topic, but each chapter will begin with one or more case studies in sexual, medical, social and environmental ethics. The case studies will both introduce practical issues in these areas of 'applied' ethics and open up the theoretical questions that are introduced in the chapter. The chapter will then conclude with a discussion of the practical issue, which will draw on the theory discussed in that chapter as well as referring to other areas of theory when necessary. This may be a less tidy approach and possibly a slightly more confusing one than others, but I think it is also truer to the way Christian ethics actually works in the lives of people and communities of faith. I shall try to provide enough signposts through the book to help you find your way around without too much difficulty.

5 What Makes It *Christian* Ethics?

So far, I have been somewhat vague about the significance of the adjective 'Christian' in 'Christian ethics'. For example, is Christian ethics only concerned with the moral standards by which Christian people and communities should live their lives or do Christian moral conclusions apply to everyone, believer or not? Take the claim 'Christian ethics prohibits adultery', for example. Does that mean 'Christians should not commit adultery' or 'Christians believe that no one, Christian or not, should commit adultery'? Also, how, if at all, does 'Christian ethics' differ from 'ethics', plain and simple?

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The Catholic moral theologian Vincent MacNamara helpfully breaks this issue down into questions about the *distinctiveness* and *specificity* of Christian ethics.⁸ The 'distinctiveness' question is about 'how Christian faith bears on moral life', as he puts it. You can, of course, be morally sensitive and concerned without having a faith commitment, but, if you are a Christian believer, your faith commitment is bound to have some implications for your moral vision and life. To the extent that it does, your ethics will be *distinctively* Christian. This distinctiveness might be evident both in the content and in what MacNamara calls the 'context' of Christian ethics. 'Context' here means our understanding of God, the world and our place in it, as that understanding is shaped by the Christian story, centred on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The story gives us a worldview that shapes our moral vision and priorities and supplies a distinctive motivation for our moral judgements and conclusions. For example, it might lead us to value and respect all human life because we believe that every human person is created and loved by God and each one is a person for whom Christ died.

The *content* of Christian morality, too, can be said to be distinctive insofar as it follows from some aspect of Christian faith. For example, many Christians (though not all) hold that abortion and euthanasia are always wrong because they contravene the principle of respect for life that I have just stated.

The question of 'specificity' is about whether or not Christian ethics leads to any conclusions that would not be shared by non-Christians and might even be objectionable to them. For example, some Christians and churches hold positions on issues such as abortion, birth control, homosexuality and war that are radically at odds with the prevailing views on those questions in Western liberal democracies.

The debate about the specificity of Christian ethics has been conducted particularly within Roman Catholic theology during the past half-century or so. On one side has been the 'Autonomy' school of thought associated with theologians such as Hans Küng and Josef Fuchs. This school of thought holds that Christian faith teaches nothing about the *content* of moral obligation that could not, in principle, be known by any person of good will, regardless of his or her religious commitments. In other words, ethics is autonomous. Christian faith does, however, offer a distinctive context and motivation for

moral obligations and teaches specific religious obligations, such as love of God and vocation to religious life.

This view has been opposed by the 'Faith-ethic' school of thought associated with Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), Hans Urs von Balthasar and others. This holds that Christian faith *does* teach specific moral obligations that could not be known by human reason in the absence of a faith commitment.

There are rough parallels to this debate within Protestant ethics.⁹ For example, referring particularly to medical ethics, James Gustafson wrote in 1975 that 'For most persons involved in medical care and practice, the contribution of theology is likely to be of minimal importance, for the moral principles and values can be justified without reference to God, and the attitudes that religious belief grounds can be grounded in other ways . . .'. This kind of view has been opposed by other Protestant thinkers, such as Stanley Hauerwas, who has conducted a powerful campaign over many years to keep Christian ethics theological. Two years after Gustafson wrote the words just quoted, Hauerwas replied: 'To be sure, Christians may have common moral convictions with non-Christians, but it seems unwise to separate a moral conviction from the story that forms its context of interpretation . . .'.

To some extent, this debate reflects a more basic disagreement in theology about the possibility of 'natural theology' – that is, whether or not it is possible for us to have any reliable understanding of God and the good simply on the basis of our reason and our knowledge of the world without the help of special revelation from God. In twentieth-century Protestant theology, this question was most famously debated in the disagreement between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner in the 1930s.¹⁰ Questions about the relationship between 'ethics' and 'Christian ethics' are revisited in the second part of Chapter 9, where we explore the relationship between Christian ethics and wider public ethical debates.

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6 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have tried to give an initial idea of what might be meant by 'Christian ethics' and what you will find as you explore it further in the rest of the book. One thing that will have become clear already is that Christians, and Christian communities, vary widely in many aspects of their moral thinking and living. Another is that our moral understanding and living is shaped in complicated ways by where we come from. Our moral judgments and actions are guided by deeply held convictions, considered views, unexamined assumptions, semiconscious beliefs, emotional dispositions, character traits and experiences of life and faith. These things, in their turn, have been shaped by the communities that have formed us, relationships that have been most significant to us, environments we have lived in and so on, as well as things we have read, discussed and thought about.

All theology, and all ethics, comes from somewhere: there is no 'view from nowhere', no completely neutral stance. This book is no exception. It is an attempt to give as good and undistorted a map as possible of the territory called 'Christian ethics', but it is inevitably a map drawn from a particular perspective. I am a relatively privileged white male, a husband and the father of children, uncomfortably aware that I shall soon have to start describing myself as middle-aged. My Christian faith has been formed by the Evangelical tradition of Protestantism and membership of a so-called 'non-conformist' church in the Reformed Christian tradition,¹¹ but has also been influenced over the years by many of the other traditions described in this book. I am an ordained minister of my church, which has given me a certain amount of status and power and a particular experience of caring pastorally for Christian people and communities. Before I studied theology and was ordained, I was trained as a research scientist. All these things, and many more, have shaped my human and Christian identity and my perspective on Christian ethics.

One of the lessons to be learned from the 'theologies of liberation' introduced in Chapters 7 and 8 is that we need to become critically aware of our own perspectives and biases. As we note the many influences that shape our moral vision, we may find that we gladly own some of them, that others must

be modified and perhaps that some are better left behind. I hope that this book will help you to develop this critical self-awareness of your own moral vision, whether you count yourself a member of any faith community or none.

One thing that this book does not do to any significant extent is engage with the moral visions of faith communities other than Christian ones. In part this reflects limitations in my own knowledge and experience and also the limits of what can be done well in one book. I take the view that the encounter between different religious traditions, if it is not to be superficial and simplistic, must be informed and supported by a thoroughgoing engagement with the traditions concerned. I hope that this book will at least be useful in supporting the Christian end of such dialogues about moral questions, even if it does not offer much help with the actual processes of encounter.

Suggestions for Further Reading

There are many general books on Christian ethics from a wide variety of perspectives, some better than others. One very useful volume that goes further into many of the topics covered in this book is by Robin Gill (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

It is worth beginning to read the writings of leading theologians of the past and present on ethical subjects. Wayne G. Boulton, Thomas D. Kennedy and Allen Verhey (eds), *From Christ to the World: Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994, is a valuable collection of sources.

For quick reference on a variety of topics in Christian ethics, the following dictionaries may be found useful:

David J. Atkinson and David H. Field (eds), *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, Leicester: IVP, 1995.

John Macquarrie and James F. Childress (eds), *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, London: SCM Press, 1986.

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