Joined-up life: a Christian account of how ethics works

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Andrew J. B. Cameron

Joined-up Life

A Christian account of how ethics works
Where I live, everyone has something to say about sport. When it comes to Grand Slam tennis, Test Cricket, Formula One, the Australian Football League or the World Cup, anyone can offer an opinion. Everybody has something to say. No one gets to pull rank, because everyone is already an expert.

The topic of this book is a bit like that. Everyone knows something about living. We all have to work out what to do next based on what we want, who we’re with, and some tussles about right and wrong (about ‘ethics’). We’re all in the business of living, so maybe everyone is an expert on the topic of this book.

Why then would I presume to write about a joined-up life and about how ethics works? I could try to point to my credentials. I’ll tell more of my story soon; but in brief, I’m an ordained Anglican minister from the ‘Reformed’ and ‘evangelical’ wing of that denomination. I work in a theological college in Sydney, Australia, and over the past ten years have tried to help budding pastors and people in churches to live well as Christians. They call this kind of thing ‘ethics’ (which, as I’ll go on to explain, is not really my favourite word for it).

But so what? If I were you, those ‘credentials’ would not particularly impress me. Plenty of ministers are just plain hard work. It might turn out that my own expertise is no greater than your own. You face situations where I’d be clueless, cowardly or wrong. Just by being human we’re all in the same
boat. We impress ourselves when we do something properly. Yet our lives are often conflicted, fragmented and inconsistent. We find bad ways to be good and poor ways to do well. Mostly we just muddle along. 'Being in the same boat' doesn't qualify me to write about how ethics works, and I certainly can't claim to have cornered everything about good, bad and living well.

So I'll state my goal up front. This book is about finding our best humanity in Jesus Christ. It's about how to understand ethics as springing from Jesus. It seeks to show how identifying with Jesus Christ brings order and clarity to human life. In a world where everyone is an expert on right and wrong, this book tries to show how Jesus unifies the best of what you hear. He joins up messy lives.

You may have had 'Jesus Christ' attached to experiences and claims you want to forget. Something about Jesus (or his overeager people) has threatened your sense of who you are. But your worries would have surprised him. He thought he could set people free (Luke 4:18). He thought he could give people 'rest' (Matt. 11:28–30). He may still turn out to solve some of your life's concerns.

My interest in ethics began with some confusion. I enjoyed Christianity's message of grace – the open-handed kindness by which God accepts and loves people, including me, despite all my flaws and failures. But if grace was so important, why did Christians often seem anxious, guilty, work-obsessed or stern? I also loved Christianity's 'big picture': that since prehistory, God has worked to introduce Jesus Christ, the human worth watching. But why did Christians often seem unclear about life's details? I was young, and my perceptions might have been wrong. I can't quite tell in hindsight. I was certainly too harsh on people, including myself, who were themselves still learners. I later found people discussing these confusions under the heading of ethics. I also discovered that this heading is misleading, because Jesus (and his followers) thought that a lot of what we call 'ethics' would not set us free, nor give us any rest.

This book is the result of my journey through those puzzles. You won't find a history of ethics here (although you'll find some historical moments). You won't find answers to every ethical question (although there may be some). You won't find many moments of arbitration about moral dilemmas (because I don't think ethics primarily works that way). You won't find a rigorous treatment of social ethics here – that is, of those issues where we worry about what laws and policies a government should enact and uphold. I think

1. You could however visit the site of a group I'm involved in: <http://www.sie.org.au>.

I hope to offer you some new thoughts and practices. There are other excellent introductions to Christian ethics, some of which I mention at the end of this preface. But I've borrowed the format of this book from another author, who in frustration makes a comment that fits my own experience: 'I've lost count of the number of times I've tried to introduce this subject.' His method for handling his complex field was so clever that I copied it.

You don't have to read this book 'linearly' from left to right. Each part contains several self-contained chapters that address some specific aspect of Christian thinking about ethics and life. Each chapter will be peppered with references to other key chapters, such as the chapter on identity 'in Christ' (ch. 14), or to key concepts referenced to a specific page (e.g. getzels, p. 73; or discernment, p. 312). You should feel free to dip into any chapter you like. (This method means I continually return to words and phrases from previous chapters. I apologize to linear readers who find that repetitive.) Some readers find it helpful to keep a finger in the contents while they read, to stay oriented within the bigger picture.

I considered starting every chapter with some statement like this: 'It's ridiculous to imagine that this subject can be addressed adequately in the space of this chapter...' But the refrain became so monotonous that I'll say

it just once here. Every chapter of this book is ridiculous. I remind myself of a man driving a bus through a car park, sideswiping everything just to get to the other side. There are library shelves devoted to matters I barely touch upon. I'm sorry for the inevitable deficiencies. But because I believe people need these topics drawn into one overview, I've aimed for short or middle-sized discussions of each area. I've tried to make each chapter digestible in a sitting or two, in the hope that they synthesize a bigger picture of life.

The book is not for professional thinkers about ethics, but I've tried to distil some of their best thoughts. I've not mentioned every relevant book or article though. Some footnotes will offer a little more detail to readers who like that. I'll also list further readings at the ends of some chapters. These readings are eclectic, and some may be hard to find. Where an important work on ethics is absent, that's not necessarily a condemnation of it. (I may not have read it.) The readings that do appear are my best guess as to what might offer some further help, and many point to other relevant readings. Of course, I don't agree with everything they say. Asterisks show the level of the reading:

* a short or light summary
** of a style or at a depth similar to this book
*** requires serious concentration

I pepper the text with references to the Bible, whose context I may not pause to discuss. You might occasionally stop and look up some of these in a modern translation of the Bible, to get a sense of what its authors said. Along the way, I'll completely ignore several arguments among biblical scholars. Some of these interest me, but most don't, and you haven't picked up this book for them. As much as I can get away with, I'll tell you what I think and move on.

I have, due to a theological conviction and a social reality, assumed that the biblical literature offers a coherent 'story' of ethics. The theological conviction is that God somehow masterminded the activities of the separate biblical authors, which would lead us to expect some coherence, even if it's complex. (I consider this complex coherence when I speak of the Bible's 'story arc', ch. 19.) The social reality is that in the experience of Christian people the Bible comes at them as a whole. Its parts accumulate over time to create a moral vision.

I flit between several Bible translations. As I wrote, I checked them against original language texts. Sometimes I chose the one that seems closest; but the major translations are all quite good, so I usually just picked whatever sounded nicest in English. In this process, I so regularly chose the excellent Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) that it became my 'default'. You're reading the HCSB when the translation isn't noted. (I've retained its odd capitalizations.)

There are so many people to thank that my intellectual debts are everywhere. I remind myself of another author, who said, 'it may be more true to say I am the editor of this book than to say I am its author.' The wisdom and teaching of my doctoral supervisor, Professor Michael Banner (while he held the position of F. D. Maurice Professor of Moral and Social Theology at King's College, London), has helped me greatly. He has an extraordinary capacity to see beyond all the superficial chatter around him, and to bring past theological treasures to bear upon the present. In Australia, among many good and faithful teachers, I must name my first mentor in Christian ethics, Rev. Michael Hill. He so clearly understands that our relationships are not the white noise against which we conduct our lives, but the reasons for our lives.* I remain deeply appreciative of Archbishop Peter Jensen's expansive, Christ-centred theological tutelage, and of his persistence in encouraging me to develop my knowledge of ethics. (I wouldn't have had the imagination to do so otherwise.) The writings of Professor Oliver O'Donovan (of the University of Edinburgh Divinity School) has also had a formative influence on me. I've borrowed liberally from all of them and from several others. I think of this book as my way to bring some of their thoughts to a wider audience. I don't want to embarrass them by aligning them too closely with it, though; its mistakes, oversimplifications and omissions are entirely mine.

I've been very dependent on research support provided by Des Smith, Lisa Watts and Andrew Ford. Several kind readers have worked through various drafts of this book: Tim Adeney, Matt Andrews, Josh Apieczonek, Kim Baker, Sarah Balogh, Brian Brock, Chew Chern, Rick Creighton, Andrew Errington, Andrew Ford, Olivia Kwok and Lisa Watts. The text would have been incomprehensible without their invaluable and generous feedback. IVP's Philip Duce has given warm and patient encouragement.

My wife, Mary-Anne, has been long-suffering and patient as always, and her intelligent and loving eye has enabled me to see this project, and myself, in a way I could never have seen alone. She's helped me to join up my wobbly life. My children, Amy and Thomas, have given far more warm interest and encouragement than I could rightfully expect of any two teenagers. (Several

4. For an appreciation of Michael's work, see Andrew J. B. Cameron and Brian S. Rosner (eds.), Still Deadly: Ancient Cures for the 7 Sins (Sydney South, NSW: Aquila, 2007).
pages of the book resulted from all the eggs Thomas cooked to keep me going.) Delightful people surround me.

I stress again that I say too little about every area. But the intention of this book is to offer a cumulative overview of ethics, as understood by a Christian. I’ll be glad if the book affects and enriches your ‘moral imagination’ (chs. 2, 10), but I’ll be gladder if Jesus’ new way to be human becomes your own.

Andrew J. B. Cameron
Moore College, September 2010

Further reading

_These books offer useful and very different Christian overviews of ethics:_


- **Hollinger, Dennis P.,** _Choosing the Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World_ (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002).


- **Volf, Miroslav,** _Against the Tide: Love in a Time of Petty Dreams and Persisting Enmities_ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

When and where does ‘ethics’ hit you in the face? This section looks at our initial awareness of ethics – the ways in which matters of right and wrong first present themselves to us in late-modern Western culture.

I’ll look at the word _ethics_ itself, and then go on to consider where it often hits us. Ethics often arrives in the form of a _decision_ we must make, sometimes urgently. We often think about _rules, rights, values_ and _results_. They form our immediate awareness of right and wrong.

Ethics can make people quite tense. Decisions are often hard; and rules, rights, values and results can leave us jaded and cynical:

- We’ve suffered under rules that stifle innovation, create meaningless paperwork and cover someone’s behind.
- We’ve battled for ages to uphold someone’s rights, or to resist someone’s claim to a right.
- The group we belong to holds some values that mean nothing to us, but we have to act as if they really matter.
- We work with someone who’s obsessed by results. They never notice the damage they do while achieving them.

As it happens, I don’t think that rules, rights, values and results make complete sense of right and wrong. I lead with them mainly because most people
think of them first. From where I sit, the surprises start to unfold in Part 2 and 
you should feel free to begin there.

We may have negative associations with ethics that go back further. We 
may remember young experiences of being a 'bad boy' or a 'bad girl', and 
the stupid hoops we had to jump through to become 'good'. For some of us, 
'goodness' was never reachable, always receding like a mirage.

If you don't experience the negative associations I've described, you may 
have received the best applications of rules, rights, values and results. Each of 
these can have a place in ethical thinking — as long as it 'knows' its place (cf. 
ch. 27), and isn't pressed into service to solve every problem.

1. WHAT IS 'ETHICS'?

In Part 1 we're considering our initial awareness of ethics — how matters of right and wrong 
first present themselves to us. This chapter begins to unpack the strange and broad word 
'ethics'.

A kind of talk about life surrounds us every day:

- 'Eric, you mustn't ever run onto the road! A car could kill you!
- 'Matilda, share the toys with your brother.'
- The values of this school are responsibility, respect, care, honesty, a fair chance for all, 
excellence, democracy, inclusion, understanding and tolerance.
- 'Good morning, and thanks for having me to your school. We're talking 
today about drugs. They feel great, and you'll feel a lot of pressure to 
join in. But illegal drugs will leave you jailed, or sick, or desperate, or 
dead.'
- New students must understand rules relating to intellectual property. Students must 
sign a declaration promising to submit their own work, and must acknowledge their 
sources.
- 'For vegans, it's wrong to kill and use animals for food and for other 
purposes. Consuming dead bodies repulses some. Others think that 
no human has the right to destroy an animal's life.'
- 'This community keeps sex for marriage. Married men and women
devote their sexual energy to their wife or husband. Networks of close relationships among singles are freed from the jealousies and distortions of sexualized relationships.

- 'The right to bear arms is fundamental to a free society.'
- 'The section manager, Zeke, turned up with that deadline-look in his eye. He handed me a folder. 'Ben, the bosses want to sign this afternoon. But if the client's going to bite, those figures on page 9 have to be lower. Over to you.' I froze over inside; I only had a vague idea of the figures, but guessed what was going down. I replied with the only answer I had at that moment. 'No, Zeke. I can't; I'm an honest person.'
- 'Corrupt police are using Tasers with excessive force against racial minorities. This injustice is endemic, and must stop.'
- 'We cannot continue to consume fossil fuels and heat the planet. We're exploiting natural resources, destroying ecologies, assaulting developing-world communities and stealing from our children.'
- 'I've worked hard for this. I've spent my entire working life doing things for others, and I've earned a break. No one is going to tell me what to do with our money. If I want to sell it all and travel around the world, I don't care what my kids think.'
- 'Mum, I can't put you into a home. After everything done for me? I really can't. You're not a "burden". Please, let's care for you here a little bit longer.'
- 'The deceased has consented to donate all his bodily tissues, with the exception of his brain tissue, for scientific and medical purposes.'

These 'quotations' are all semi-fictional, but you'll recognize something in most of them. They'll remind you of uncertainties in your own life, and of discussions important to others. These are those situations and conversations where something matters to someone and the stakes are high. If he or she acts (or doesn't act), something is protected and something precious may be lost. Several features of the list above are worth noticing:

1. They range in focus. Some concern what individuals do. Others are about how to handle one-to-one relationships. Yet others are about how we should act as a group. The non-human world also features highly.
2. Most seem to be about how what we do now affects people (or the planet) in the future.
3. Different forms of language are at work: commands and rules; best guesses about future results; settled habits of action and feeling (e.g. 'care', 'honesty'); and weighty abstract terms (e.g. 'right', 'injustice', 'freedom', 'exploitation').
4. Many areas of life are included.

It seems quite mad to try thinking about all this at once. The ways we think and act as individuals, in relationships and as groups, such widely ranging language, informed guesswork about the future, and all in so many different areas of life - how could anyone sum up all that? Yet whether or not we realize it, we each attempt to do so all the time. This activity goes by the name of ethics.

Although 'ethics' is a plural noun, it's used as a singular since it encompasses all this activity. The Oxford English Dictionary tells me that ethics is 'the science of morals'. So I dig around under 'moral', 'morals' and 'morality' and find, among other things, that the 'moral' is 'ethical', and 'morality' is about 'ethical wisdom'.! Hmmm.

Looking further under 'ethics', I find that it's 'the department of study concerned with the principles of human duty'. Looking further under 'moral', 'morality' and 'morals', I find that these concern 'character or disposition, considered as good or bad, virtuous or vicious' and 'the distinction between right and wrong, or good and evil, in relation to the actions, volitions or character of responsible beings'. (At least 'morality' isn't just about sex!)

Some make a distinction between ethics and morality. They think morality refers to specific norms held by particular people and their communities - their list, if you like, of what matters most. They think that ethics refers to the general study of right and wrong, beyond specific norms. This distinction may be helpful in some contexts, but most now ignore it. For better or worse, most people use these words synonymously. So I reckon it's simpler to say that ethics and morality describe and analyse our thoughts and feelings about right and wrong acts and conditions. (This arena used to be called 'practical reason' - our thoughts about our practices. This label unfortunately also sidelined the meaningful aspect of these thoughts.)

But although I've risked a simple definition of our subject, I don't think ethics or morality is simple. I think this area is complex (ch. 10). By 'complex' I don't mean 'impenetrable', or 'only for experts and clever people'. Normal, everyday people do complex things all the time. Even breathing, scientists tell me, is complex. So is walking, talking and having relationships. Rather,
I mean that it cannot and should not be oversimplified. Unfortunately, people attempt to oversimplify ethics all the time. For example:

1. ‘I did my duty. I did what anyone should do in that situation.’ Deontology makes ethics into the search for the general set of requirements that apply to all people.2
2. ‘I do what the law requires. You can’t expect more than that.’ Legalistic deontology reduces ethics to obedience to some pre-existing list of rules.
3. ‘Just follow God’s commands; he’s all you need.’ Divine command deontology presents ethics solely as obedience to rules declared by God.
4. ‘I was following orders. That’s what I do.’ Authoritarianism, yet another form of deontology, sums up ethics as obedience to some human authority.
5. ‘I’m in tune with nature. I protect what’s natural, and do what nature intended.’ Natural law pictures ethics as our response to whatever we think the planet and our place in it was meant to be.
6. ‘Respect each other’s rights, and everything else will follow.’ Human rights thinking reduces ethics to the identification and defence of elementary entitlements called ‘rights’.
7. ‘This organization values innovation, loyalty and excellence.’ Values thinking simplifies ethics into a list of settled habits and patterns of action and feeling that we call our ‘values’.
8. ‘I didn’t hurt you, because I don’t do that. I’m a kind and gentle person.’ Virtue ethics frames ethics primarily as a description of our regular personal habits.
9. ‘I take my lead from the people around me. My community shows me what’s right.’ Communitarian thinking defines ethics as the norms, practices and agreements arising from stories told by those alongside whom we live, work or worship.
10. ‘I live by my own code. No one tells me what to do.’ Voluntarism limits ethics to the activity of our will to choose what matters.
11. ‘I did nothing wrong; I meant well. I can’t help how it turned out.’ Intentionalism (a form of idealism) reduces ethics to the motivations and plans we bring to our actions, as if performance and results don’t matter.

Each simplification is reductive or reductionist (which is a kind of swear word among scholars). Reductionists believe that some necessary truth can suffice to explain everything.

Yet at various times in life, some point on the list above offers the best explanation or suggestion about what to do. If there’s a ‘kernel of truth’ to everything listed (and I think there is), it isn’t surprising that people try to make each into the key that unlocks every door.

But the danger of ethical reductionism is in what it misses:

- If I follow only duty or rules, I may fail to see someone’s rights.
- If I do only what my community does, I may fail to see when the group is destroying the natural habitat that sustains it, or is forgetting helpful rules, or is victimizing and bullying a few people within it.
- If I define myself by my values or virtues, I may fail to examine the actual actions that make up my days and my life.
- If I focus on achieving happiness or good results, I may ignore and destroy the relationships of trust and loyalty essential to a well-lived life.

So by saying ethics is complex, I mean that we do better when we keep an eye on everything in the list (and perhaps on other things as well).

People often find ethics boring, depressing and terrifying. They’re bored when people start throwing around words like ‘complexity’ and ‘reductionist’, rather than just being practical. It’s depressing when it seems to be more about what we do wrong than what we do right. (When was the last time you felt good about yourself in a conversation over climate change, money or child rearing?) It becomes terrifying when we suddenly find ourselves in rapidly unfolding real-time situations where we don’t know what to do.

I’ve felt all of these, and don’t always love thinking about ethics. I don’t think of myself as an expert, because I often feel as mixed up, discouraged and confused about ethics as the next person. I’m not sure I even believe in...
‘ethicists’, if we imagine them to be a class of people with a monopoly on wisdom. At best, this book is part of a conversation between limited humans who are trying to discern what’s best. Ethics is an arena where we really do need each other.

However, I’m also optimistic that, given time and a bit of reflection, our ethical deliberations can make more sense. Maybe I’m cheating slightly to have this optimism, because I think that Christianity offers a sort of ‘unified field theory’ for ethics (Parts 3–6). But even if Christianity isn’t (yet?) a part of your journey, please don’t be discouraged, fearful or contemptuous. We may still be able to travel together, conversing and learning along the way.

2. DECIDING

In Part 1 we’re considering our initial awareness of ethics – how matters of right and wrong first present themselves to us. We may think ethics is simply about deciding what to do. But this chapter raises three problems for that view, and invites us to expand our ‘moral imagination’.

When I chat to people about ethics, they usually focus upon some decision they need to make. In these moments of decision, our awareness of ethics is often at its most acute:

- ‘Should we smack our toddler?’
- ‘Should we send our child to a government or to a non-government school?’
- ‘Should I stay with that difficult husband or wife?’
- ‘Should I buy a Pontiac Firebird?’
- ‘Should a surrogate mother bear our child?’
- ‘Should we turn off father’s life-support machine?’
- ‘Should we tax carbon emissions?’
- ‘Should the Internet be censored?’
- ‘Should we turn away asylum seekers if they’re “illegal immigrants”?’

I feel tense just looking at these questions. Each represents a high-stakes moment in the life of a person or his or her community. We often have to
make these decisions within a limited period. A different future hangs on the outcome.

Deciding 'what I/we should do' seems most obviously to be the core-business of ethics. Surely 'ethicists' (if we believe in such beings) should be experts at perusing some situation and then offering excellent advice about what to do. If ethics cannot finally decide, then surely it hasn't earned its keep. But is ethics really all about making difficult decisions?

I suggest you'll do yourself a disservice if you think that ethics only, or even mainly, concerns decision-making. Now this will seem a strange claim for anyone raised in the modern West, where ethics mainly concerns acts - specifically, those acts we're obliged to do or not to do. In the list of questions above, the clue to this mindset is in the repetition of the word 'should', one of English's most serious obligation-words.

I can think of three ways in which this approach to ethics malfunctions. The first problem is decisionism (a word also found in other contexts and with other meanings), where we simply make any decision for the sake of it. We give up trying to think through a difficult decision, and in frustration exclaim, 'It doesn't matter what I decide I just have to decide something!' That exasperation is understandable and 'just deciding' may be quite valid if there are two or several good courses of action (as is often the case). It may also be valid if we're keen to avoid the passivity of non-decision, which can in turn become the way we make decisions. But if deciding hardens into a habit where the priority is only on deciding and acting, we become 'decisionist'. Decisionism short-circuits the task of reflecting upon and carefully deliberating over what's actually right.

The second problem, analysis paralysis, seems to me far more common. Most people I know are not 'decisionist': they don't pride themselves on their power to decide and act without thought. To the contrary: they agonize over thoughts in dozens of different directions. Their agony consists, it seems, in uncertainty. They imagine themselves taking various courses of action, and then think of several reasons why each may be wrong. (This comment, sadly, doesn't apply so much to political discussions, where we could wish each side were more ready to imagine itself wrong.)

What's gone wrong here? I don't mean to be unkind to anyone wrecked by such agonies. But their mistake has been to pack all of their serious thinking about ethics into these moments of decision. They're not only thinking through the decision itself - they're straining to do a lot of catch-up thinking about how ethics works.

In reality, our decisions are the proverbial tip of a much larger iceberg. Most of what we bring to a decision occurs subconsciously. Whether we realize it or not, each of us has a moral imagination (or a moral vision). Currents around us constantly shape it. We then bring this imagination to every decision. It furnishes us with the options and tools available to us when working through a decision.

When no decision is at stake, most people are not very interested in the shape of their 'iceberg', and even less in reshaping it. That is, people don't take the time to consider what gave them their moral imagination, and whether to expand, change or challenge that moral imagination. When they need to make a decision, they're constrained by its limits, even though they work desperately to expand it while the clock is ticking on the decision itself.

The concept of a moral imagination enables us to see the third problem. In the first, I make decisions too quickly. In the second, I make decisions too slowly. Both share the third problem, where I think my decisions are the only arena for doing my moral thinking. This problem is a failure of moral imagination.

What could it mean to have 'a failure of moral imagination'? Our moral imagination contains the options and tools that may help to solve a problem. But if I never read or discuss such options and tools when no decision is at stake, I cheat myself out of liberating new possibilities. I may never have heard that others have helpfully considered some dilemmas. I may never discover that in some decisions there's such a thing as two right answers. I may fail to imagine a better way to frame the entire decision. I may never be in a position to question, challenge or abandon the entire project that generates the decision. It may never occur to me to try changing the conditions that shape my life, or that of the group around me. 'A failure of moral imagination' describes a way of wandering through life without stretching or challenging the way I wander through life.

An old adage describes military combat as 'weeks of boredom punctuated by moments of terror'. An overemphasis upon decisions turns ethics into something similar. There will always be acts to get right and decisions to make. But we do well to imagine ethics as a terrain far more rich and wide-ranging than mere decision-making.

The pages that follow are an attempt to help us discover that terrain, and so to stretch our moral imagination. I'll continue to refer to our moral imagination or vision, and to how we may expand it. The term isn't meant to imply that we should dream up unheard-of, imaginary moral solutions. It refers to the moral inheritance we bring to each scenario (or 'moral field', ch. 10): the options and ways of thinking that are at our disposal. I'll contend that Christianity expands our moral imagination by giving us deeper insight into problems, and more solutions to work with, than the moral inheritance given to us by whatever other background we've come from.
3. RULES AND CODES

In Part 1 we're considering our initial awareness of ethics — how matters of right and wrong first present themselves to us. We’ve seen that the need for decision often drives ethical thinking. The next chapters consider the kinds of bases upon which people make their decisions. The first of these are the rules and codes that surround us.

Our earliest awareness of 'ethics' often begins with rules, usually issued by a mother, father or some other carer:

- 'Eric, you mustn't ever run onto the road! A car could kill you!'
- 'Matilda, share the toys with your brother.'

What makes these rules work? In Eric's case (above), the rule quickly transmits wisdom. Parental safety rules save children's lives. These rules act like a 'wisdom pill', compacting years of experience into a small packet. The child receives a way to function that saves him much trial and error (including errors leading to death). Eric has been 'vaccinated' with a rule-shaped shot of ethics.

However, Eric's mother also included a quick glimpse of the reasoning behind the rule. ('A car could kill you!') At that moment she not only brought to bear the force of her authority, but also initiated Eric into rational discussion about it. The rule is good due to its good reason.

Matilda (above) also receives a wisdom packet, but its reasoning is different.

If she's reached the 'why' stage ('but why do I have to share, Daddy?'), then Daddy has a tough job. For Eric, self-preservation on the road obviously seems like a good reason. For Matilda, the 'good' of curtailing her desires (ch. 7) for the sake of her brother is much more contestable. What could her father say in response?

1. He could draw upon his authority: 'Because I said so, Matilda.' She'll comply if she fears his punishment — or, if their previous relationship has grown such great trust in him that she feels sure the instruction is for her best, even if she cannot quite see how.

2. He could include her in a communal family norm. 'Matilda, sharing is what we do around here.' This response widens the rule, making it applicable to all. Matilda may simply calculate that at least she'll benefit when her brother and father also follow it; or she may so want to identify with and belong to the group that its norms shape her own identity.

3. He could risk a full philosophical claim about what's inherent in her as a human. 'Matilda, honey, although it doesn't always feel like it, people aren't built to think only of themselves. Everyone is precious, and we're made for each other, to help each other. When you live like that, you'll become happier because the people around you are happy.' If she can follow this argument, Matilda might suspect that he's spinning a powerful yarn (a 'metanarrative') to control her; or that he's named something she recognizes to be deeply true within her own experience of being human.

Matilda and Eric's cases raise several questions:

- Why does it seem better to attach a reason to a rule, and what makes some reasons better than others?
- Why are self-preserving reasons instantly clearer to us than other-person centred, society-building reasons?
- Are any of the father's reasons obviously superior?
- If he opted for point 3 above, how could he know all that? Indeed, why not rather say to Matilda, 'Take those toys from your brother, honey. Only the strong get ahead in this world' (ch. 11)?

You may now pause to consider: what rules confront you? If I asked you to list all the rules that come at you every week, you could immediately list dozens or hundreds. At the 'small' end of the spectrum are the rules we
observe in our domestic lives with others, such as we saw for Eric and Matilda. The 'heaviest' are the laws that surround us. In the middle are all sorts of packages of rules: policies, regulations, protocols, professional codes, directives, standing orders, council ordinances, house rules, pool rules, dress codes and 'enforced etiquette' (such as on a Sydney bus, where I can sit in a red seat until a person with a disability or an elderly person needs it).

(We could even expand the net to those 'unwritten rules' we only gradually become aware of. My wife and I visit a food co-op that sells 'organic' products grown locally. Although thin people who buy tiny amounts of food populate it, we fatties buy lots of food for our family. We gradually became aware, without anyone saying so, that the thin people consider this practice quite wrong. But such 'unwritten rules' are hard to get a grip on, so I'll save this kind of experience for when we think about social influence, ch. 8.)

Many people believe that the Bible is loaded with rules (ch. 23). However, if we could put the biblical authors into a time machine and show them around our world, they'd probably pity us. 'How can you possibly function under so many rules?' they might ask. They'd be incredulous and appalled. Incredulous, because there are literally millions more rules in our lives than what they proposed for the good life. Appalled, because they had a clear sense of how limited in usefulness rules really are.

Of the published rules that surround us, a recent phenomenon is the rise of the professional 'code'. These lists of rules guide our activities in our work role. In my own case, I'm required to live by a code called *Faithfulness in Service*, which has been in national use by the Anglican Church in Australia since 2004 (with additions made by my local patch of Anglicans in 2007).¹ It first appeared to stop sexual abuse by church workers, but has grown to become a guide to church workers in many areas. Here are a few clauses from this code:

- 'You are not knowingly to make statements that are false, misleading or deceptive.' (6.9)
- 'You are to avoid situations of conflict between your personal financial interest and your pastoral ministry responsibilities.' (8.8)


This code is now quite long, with some twenty pages covering pastoral relationships, relationships with children, personal behaviour, sexual conduct and financial integrity. It's useful and was necessary. We could muse about what went wrong to make such detailed codes necessary for those once regarded as community leaders in ethical integrity, but that story is too complex for me to tackle here. (I comment on church sexual abuse in ch. 34.) Rather, and moving now beyond the specific example of this particular code, what do we learn about 'morality' by the existence of such codes in our professional worlds?

- First, codes highlight how our work exists for others, not for fulfilment, reputation or consumption (ch. 41).
- Secondly, codes attempt to illuminate where we're most prone to self-deception by highlighting those desires, drives and impulses that tempt us to exploit and harm others (chs. 7–9).
- Thirdly, when codes address a variety of circumstances they highlight the complexity of morality (ch. 10), and seek to address and anticipate that complexity in advance.

In short, these codes are moral documents that help us see our profession's proper place in society, and the personal forces we carry at our worst. The code's multiple rules try to help us through potentially complex and chaotic moral situations.

But even if they're necessary, they're insufficient. A code alone isn't rich enough to tell us what our profession is for; indeed the code writers may not have taken the time to consider the matter deeply (or even shallowly). The rules in a code may highlight the desires and drives that tempt us, but cannot burrow deep into our psyche to change them. Ironically, the code may even inflame them. And however many situations a code tries to address, some novel combination of factors will always confront us. We then either act in the 'spirit' of the code, or dodge through those gaps we call 'loopholes'.

Rules seem unpleasant, and we often indulge our impulse to get around them. We can imagine that robots may follow rules simply and easily, but humans generally don't. As with Matilda and the toys, we've strong and fixed ideas about what's best for us, and these have deep emotional roots. But rules slice sharply across these desires (ch. 7).
In his tract *What Is Enlightenment?*, the eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant issued a clarion call against 'heteronomy' (which he describes as any ethical claim 'imposed' upon us by another) in favour of 'autonomy' (where we use our own reason to determine right from wrong). Modern Matildas and Erics find it a whole lot harder to obey a rule if they cannot see its reasoning for themselves. (Of course, this attitude has been helpful in running democracies because we can now have public discussions about the reasons for laws, as was actually Kant's intention.)

What would a Christian account of the Bible's rules have to say about heteronomy? In the Bible, rules are not stand-alone entities. They're embedded in a total picture of reality (ch. 23). We do well to know this reality, and how the rule emerges from it. As in Matilda's father's third option, the biblical authors continually unpack this account of reality and how we humans inhabit it.

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4. RIGHTS

In Part 1 we're considering our initial awareness of ethics — how matters of right and wrong first present themselves to us. This chapter considers one basis upon which people make decisions and form rules: those lists of good things we defend for each other and ourselves, now known as our 'rights'.

People need to make decisions (ch. 2), and rules can be useful guidelines (ch. 3). But deeper reasoning has to come from somewhere, and people draw on various discourses to give that reasoning. One of those is the language of rights, as in these examples:

- 'You have no right to take my things.'
- 'Everyone has the right to life.'
- 'No! Every woman has the right to choose.'
- 'Everyone has a right to employment. Employers have no right to discriminate on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation or disability.'
- 'No! Employers have the right to hire whoever they choose to pay, and to fire whoever they choose not to pay.'

Rights have become a powerful and popular language for moral discussion. (For simplicity in this chapter, from now on when I say 'rights' I'll generally mean 'universal human rights'. But technically, there are rights that hold only
for some in some situations, and are not universal; and some argue for the rights of non-humans. Philosophers and theorists argue about what a right is, and how to define it. I'll try to do so in a roundabout way.

What makes you 'you'? That's quite an abstract question, yet we do have some clear hunches. I'd cease to be me if someone sliced me in half. The problem isn't just that I'd be dead, but that I'd have lost something essential to making me 'me'. Similarly, some believe I'd no longer be 'me' if my brain was damaged and I lost some skill I'd honed over a lifetime, or if I lost all my memories.

Now I'm glossing over a lot of complex discussion here, because 'me-ness', 'you-ness' and identity in general are notoriously difficult to pin down. But I simply want us to notice the way we think of ourselves as composed of various things that help make us who we are. We think we've a proper claim to keeping them.

A right is a *moral* part of that profile. To have a right to liberty is a way of saying that liberty is *also* necessary to make me 'me', so I've a proper claim to liberty. Rights are a shorthand way of quickly pointing to what we may reasonably and properly claim if we're to be properly human. I could equally say I've a right to my memories, to some skill I've honed, or to the left half of my body. I could also do so on your behalf, observing that you have a right to these things. Therefore, when we make a list of rights, we make a list of good acts or states to which someone is entitled. Beneath every rights-claim is a view of what's essential to our humanity and of what we want to defend and keep. As legal expert Leif Wenar puts it, 'rights are entitlements (not) to perform certain actions or be in certain states, or entitlements that others (not) perform certain actions or be in certain states'.

We all have views of what's essential to our humanity. Some Fijian gold miners, too tired to enjoy sex at night, thought they had a right to a 'sex break' during the day. Some University of Massachusetts students thought they had a right to a unisex toilet. An old Japanese man sued against a skyscraper based on his right to sunshine. A man who underwent a sex change argued for the right of men who undergo sex changes to compete in women's athletic competitions. Slightly embarrassingly, the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) defends the right to 'periodic holidays with pay' (Art. 24). People of the world: note that you have an Australian Prime Minister to thank for this insertion.

We can lampoon the concept of rights by using examples like these, but the critique is mistaken. In these cases, the mistake is what each claimant thinks is essential to his or her humanity, not necessarily in the term 'right'. (I'm not even sure the Japanese man was being at all silly.) People often draw the boundary too widely around what they think of as essential to their humanity, but it doesn't follow that *nothing* is essential to each person's humanity. More serious rights-language consists in an agreement among different people about what's essential to humanity. After the Nazi atrocities, UNDHR signatories agreed that life, liberty, security and equal protection before the law were essential and should be defended and upheld. They also spelt out some opposites. We each have the right not to be enslaved, tortured, cruelly or degradingly punished, or arbitrarily arrested or detained. For philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, the language of rights is 'for bringing the patient- or recipient dimension to speech. Rights-talk is the language one needs to speak up for the wronged of the world'. In other words, Wolterstorff views the terminology of rights as essential if we're to discuss justice, because it often describes what the recipient of justice lacks. (As important as the 'patient' is, I don't believe that such a primacy of rights can sufficiently arbitrate justice for a harmonious *community*. See further the readings below.)

You'll notice that over the last few paragraphs my exposition of rights has inexorably drifted into the direction of law and justice. We can and do use rights-language in everyday moral discussion. I could say to my wife, 'You have no right to talk to me like that!' My friend could say to me, 'Tell me what they said about me: I've a right to know!' Such rhetorical outbursts pack a punch in everyday life, but we don't often sit down to analyse them. They may or may not work; the discussion moves on. But rights-language gains traction and becomes more significant in the realm of law and justice, and it isn't easy to talk about rights in abstraction from this legal realm.

1. Indeed, this book will question some of our conceptions of identity. Perhaps my memories, skills, body and whatever else I care to list do not suffice to define my identity, if it is only known truly by God and found in Jesus Christ (ch. 14).
Unfortunately, it's quite hard to sum up all the issues here. I'll simply make a few general observations.

Several other legal instruments have followed the UNDHR, which seek to outline rights in more detail. This body of thinking has eventually made its way into the legal structures of some UN members' states. In general, they list goods to defend, and stipulate how to test other laws against that list. For a range of technical reasons, the human-rights laws of these member states have varying degrees of effectiveness.

Proponents of such charters hope they'll defend the weak and marginalized, and give lawmakers a moral compass. Opponents object that each 'fuzzy' right doesn't sit well with the precision of the rest of the law. They also object to the way only one set of goods becomes frozen into legislation. There are many other arguments for and against. I'm an opponent, but I'm not very useful to other opponents, because I find it quite hard to attack the proponents' hope for a just society and for better law.

I'm also an opponent for a smaller, local reason. A human-rights charter in a neighbouring state excludes 'abortion or child destruction' from the right to life (see n. 5, below). This exception suggests that in my part of the world the game is rigged. The charter purports to interrogate all existing law, except those laws that the ruling elite decide are too precious to risk scrutiny. We're asked to believe in 'universal human rights'; yet no 'right' can be permitted to upset our fetish for excluding the unborn from our moral community (cf. ch. 22). This episode leaves me somewhat sceptical about rights-law.

Many Christians vehemently oppose this kind of law. They worry that it may be used against freedoms of religious belief and practice, even though it's supposed to uphold these. They also have some philosophical concerns.

5. For example, the Australian state of Victoria's Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act (2006) sets out to defend these rights: to recognition and equality before the law; to life (although amazingly, not including 'abortion or child destruction', §48); to protection from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment; to freedom from forced work; to freedom of movement; to privacy and reputation; to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief; to freedom of expression; to peaceful assembly and freedom of association; to protection of families and children; to take part in public life; to cultural rights; to property ownership; to liberty and security of person; to humane treatment when deprived of liberty; for children in the criminal process; to fair hearings and in criminal proceedings; not to be tried or punished more than once; and against retrospective criminal laws.
5. VALUES

In Part I we're considering our initial awareness of ethics — how matters of right and wrong first present themselves to us. In this chapter we consider the way the term 'values' is used both to describe 'ethics' in general, and to name settled patterns and habits of action and feeling that form part of our identity.

Matters of right and wrong are often now referred to under the heading of 'values'. It's become a summary word for morality and ethics. (If I send a child to one school instead of another for her to 'learn some values', then I'm saying I want her to receive some ethical instruction.) But confusingly, morality can also refract into lists of discrete 'values'. For example:

- The values of this school are responsibility, respect, care, honesty, a fair chance for all, excellence, democracy, inclusion, understanding and tolerance.

These 'values' have been borrowed from the Australian State school system. They're an amalgam and paraphrase of values-lists put out by the Commonwealth, New South Wales and Victorian educational authorities. They gained some prominence during a public and political discussion in Australia about values in schools. Some perceived that independent religious schools were the place where a child might learn some values. Government school systems countered this view with lists like the one above. It strongly emphasizes the quality of relationships in a community: all the values listed make sense only when other people are around. The list assumes that every person in the school is equally precious. However, we could imagine a completely different list, where other people are peripheral and their importance not as obvious:

- Kandii's values are assertiveness, self-fulfilment, achieving her potential, self-esteem, independence, autonomy, personal productivity and self-acceptance.

Which of these lists — the schools' or Kandii's — is 'best'? The concept of 'values' alone cannot tell us, for technically each list describes only what someone, well, values.

We all have an inner list of what matters to us. As Jesus once put it, 'where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (Luke 12:34; cf. p. 191). The term 'values' appeared much more recently, to articulate these internal treasures that differ for all of us.

Therefore, simply to speak of 'values' doesn't enable us to decide between the schools' list and Kandii's. On the face of it, whether or not any of those values are better or worse is impossible to tell. Each list only tells us what Kandii and the educational authorities treasure. A person (let's call her Carmen) could equally say:

- My values are meals with friends, tennis, the natural environment, free-range chickens, skydiving, Mozart, cuddles and Smirnoff.

Of course, you may not agree that a person could 'equally' list these as 'values' alongside 'honesty', 'autonomy' or 'tolerance'. You may argue that although the items on Carmen's list are 'valuable' to her, we mean something bigger than individual preferences when we refer to 'values'. Carmen has listed only her preferences. If you think Carmen's preference-list differs from Kandii's and the schools' value-list, then why does it? Where does the difference lie? I suggest the lists differ in two respects. The first is personal and the second cosmic.

The personal reason for why they differ is that Kandii has listed settled patterns of action and feeling describing how she generally thinks, feels and acts. Carmen has told us what she likes, but nothing tells us how often she enjoys each thing, if at all. In contrast, Kandii claims her values are what you would see driving her if you watched her for a few days. We often describe the overall summation of these settled patterns of action and feeling as her character. Similarly, the schools' organizers want to see settled patterns of action and
feeling among school children, which would give a school a particular character (or culture, as we’re more likely to say of a collective).

You may also have a cosmic reason for thinking that the schools’ and Kandii’s lists differ from Carmen’s. ‘Respect’, ‘honesty’, ‘independence’ and ‘autonomy’ in Kandii’s and the schools’ lists all seem much weightier than Carmen’s love of tennis and chickens, for they rely on reasons beyond personal preference to explain what makes them good. For example:

- ‘We respect each other, because everyone is equal and their diversity is precious’ or ‘because everyone is made and loved by God’.
- ‘We’re honest because we need relationships; but relationships cannot survive if we deceive each other.’
- ‘Independence and autonomy enable people to function as well as possible without interference or exploitation by others.’

Each of these reasons relies on something bigger than the value-holder. Something about reality itself makes sense of each value. We may disagree about which reasons, and whose account of reality, are correct. But at least we would agree that to understand morality you would also have to understand something of the reality we inhabit together.

We would therefore be moral realists or morally objective, because we believe that morality describes something beyond us all that claims us all, in which we all participate together (ch. 22). Of course, some people think that values are only a list of preferences like Carmen’s, that nothing cosmic is involved and that we can find no meaningful agreement about reality itself and how it shapes morality. This view is moral relativism or moral subjectivism.

These settled patterns are a different approach to ethics than ‘rules’ or ‘rights’:

- They tell us more about who a person is than what they do.
- They’re ‘fuzzy’ or ‘vague’. They describe a person’s ‘vibe’. They’re about a person’s style, but they don’t predict specific actions.

1. I do not use the terms ‘fuzzy’ and ‘vague’ as a put-down. A word is fuzzy or vague when we’re unsure of its ‘edges’, even though it points to something real. We cannot be sure where ‘hot’ begins, yet it’s still helpful. Even Mount Everest is ‘vague’: no one quite knows exactly where it starts (or, in a blizzard, where it stops). So it is with a virtue term such as ‘kindness’ – it may be hard to describe where it starts and stops (cf. p. 193), but we know it when we see it.

So because of Kandii’s assertiveness, independence and self-acceptance, she’ll reliably deal with shopkeepers, bus drivers and bureaucrats differently than she would if she’d valued submissiveness, patience and politeness. Her values describe something of her character, and give a general ‘ballpark’ of her likely and unlikely actions.

If we went back as little as two centuries, people did not talk of values. Yet they were very interested in settled patterns of action and feeling. They would describe a person’s character as courageous, temperate, prudent or just. Or people could be described at more length, as when Jane Austen characterizes the humble but attractive Mrs Smith: ‘here was that elasticity of mind, that disposition to be comforted, that power of turning readily from evil to good, and of finding employment which carried her out of herself’.

What we call ‘values’, they called virtues. Virtues were not matters of personal preference; they were patterns of action and feeling that should arise in response to our world. But at the end of the nineteenth century the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (ch. 11) asserted that a virtue ‘has to be our invention, our most personal defence and necessity’. Here we begin to see a shift from an idea of virtues as applicable to all, to the modern idea that we each have self-chosen values.

Christianity has its virtues (ch. 30). These, say the biblical authors, are good and right for us all, and bring personal meaning and joy. In fact, ‘joy’ is one of the settled patterns of action and feeling that Christians begin to discover (Gal. 5:22). The ‘treasures’ of our ‘heart’ (p. 195) that we now value (ch. 7) can move, shift, change and grow into something the Bible calls ‘love’ – for God, each other and the world around us.

When that happens, we see some merit in the values of the Australian school system. We also begin to suspect that Kandii has missed the significance of the planet and of the people who surround her, even though she may be right to rejoice in how good it is to be a free agent.

I’ve suggested, then, that what we know of as values have their ancestral root in what were once known as virtues. I’ll go on to suggest that virtues, in turn, are ultimately indebted to the character of God (ch. 21).

Further reading


6. RESULTS

In Part 1 we're considering our initial awareness of ethics — how matters of right and wrong first present themselves to us. We've seen that the need for decision often drives ethical thinking, and have considered the kinds of bases upon which people make their decisions. This chapter addresses an approach called 'consequentialism', where good results determine right and wrong. We also consider how this approach differs from simply being future-oriented in our practices.

Plenty of people I know would have no patience for this book. 'Stop junking everything up,' they object. 'Let's keep it simple. It's all about results.' For them, ends really do justify means. The way to test the rightness of some policy or action is simply to look at its outcome:

- 'I had to leave that woman. I've never been happier.'
- 'The US had to detonate the A-bombs over Japan, or millions more would have died in the war.'
- 'If the Guatemalan military had not made its opponents disappear, the Communists would be in power by now.'
- 'We'll live together for as long as it works. A piece of paper isn't going to make any difference.'
- 'Waterboarding is necessary for intelligence gathering and national security.'
When I’m driven by some craving (ch. 7),
what he destroys along the way. He doesn’t think these are moral consider­
ations, because he’s decided in advance to ignore them. Once he’s home, he
must have driven well, because he’s home. This driver has not even evaluated
his future happiness very well, because he’s failed to imagine how unpleasant
home becomes once police, lawyers and angry relatives are banging on the
door. Like an addict, he must then engage in a new round of consequentialism
to get out of the mess.

At its worst, consequentialism has nothing to do with ethics. It simply
describes someone getting what they want by doing whatever they have to.
When I’m driven by some craving (ch. 7), I dignify my actions by claiming that
the end justifies the means. The Nazi Adolph Eichmann drew up timetables
for the trains that freighted Jews to the death camps. But by the seventh season, Jack’s consequentialist excesses have
become a habit. At 3.25 p.m. he advocates threatening to kill the wife and child
future state are good. The consequentialist is very motivated by this good — but
she doesn’t pause to analyse what makes it good, and whether her actions
to get it will damage some key ingredient of its good. Nor does she pause to
consider whether other ‘goods’ will be ruined by her actions.

So I lie to get ahead but find that once ‘ahead’, I’m lonely, because good
relationships need trust, and trust needs honesty. Or we carelessly kill civilians
to win a war, so that those who are left hate the ‘freedom’ and ‘justice’ we
say we offer. Or I refuse to ‘complicate’ my relationship to a partner with any
promises, but then find we cannot prosper, because we needed assurances of
fidelity all along. These absurd failures of moral imagination (p. 25) are every
bit as bad as we saw in the driver above. At its worst, consequentialism mas­
querades as thoughtfulness, but is a thinly veiled concoction of craving for
future fantasies alongside the failure to imagine well.

The fourth-century theologian Augustine replied to a buffoon called
Consentius, who had a grand plan to return ex-Christians to Christianity
through an elaborate deception. These former Christians had been lied to by
a charismatic leader, so Consentius thought it might be clever to bring them
back to Christianity though trickery. Augustine’s response turned into an
attack on consequentialism in general. We can all imagine situations where it
seems right to commit a small evil to stop someone else doing a bigger one.
We then become willing to commit a few large evils to stop many smaller
ones. Before long, argued Augustine, all boundaries are torn up and evil
reigns. To be ‘wise’ in this sort of way – ‘what’s it but to lose one’s wits’, asks
Augustine, ‘or rather, to be downright mad?’

Augustine could be picturing a prison hellhole, or a deranged and
toxic corporate culture (such as the last days of Enron), or total war.
Consequentialism looks easy and simple, but fails to notice that its own real
consequences are more likely to be the dissolution of the structures, habits
and practices that makes life in society worth living.

I said above that scriptwriters love this stuff. In the second season of the
 television series 24, Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) threatens a terrorist’s family
with death, forcing the terrorist to give up the whereabouts of a nuclear
bomb. But by the seventh season, Jack’s consequentialist excesses have
become a habit. At 3.25 p.m. he advocates threatening to kill the wife and child

vol. 3, Moral Treatises, tr. C. L. Cornish, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,
(accessed 15 July 2010).
of a corrupt Secret Service agent to make him talk. Two FBI agents baulk at his plan, but Jack mocks them: 'When are you people going to stop thinking everyone else is following your rules? ... You've got one of two choices. You can either phone the President and explain to her that your conscience won't allow you to do what's necessary ... or you can simply do what's necessary. Pick one!' The problem is that by Season 7 of 24, Bauer's world has disintegrated around him, despite his good intentions. FBI Agent Larry Moss, like Augustine, tries to point out this pattern. 'Look at yourself. You've lost everyone and everything you ever had by doing what you think is necessary. ... Jack, the rules are what make us better.' ‘Not today,' Jack replies. Ironically, Jack's 'not today' has become his motto every day on 24. In this way, the show cleverly explores the long-term consequences of consequentialism.

The time has come to qualify my rude rejection of consequentialism. First, the problem with consequentialism isn't its interest in the future. Everyone who wants to live well has to consider the future. Even Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher and arch-opponent of consequentialism, who valued duty above all else, had to consider the future. (He tried to find what his duties were by asking 'what would happen if everyone did what I'm about to do?' This diagnostic question is future-oriented.) Those who defend rights calculate the future effects of policies and actions upon our rights. Those who think ethics is primarily about people becoming 'virtuous' think futurewards about what kind of person they're becoming. Christians are future-oriented when they act as 'retrievalists', seeking to retrieve and maximize as much good as possible on all fronts, even in horrendous situations.

Consequentialism's flaw isn't that it's future-oriented. It's flawed because it excludes too many relevant considerations. It doesn't train us to evaluate the merits of rules, or to discern whatever our 'conscience' is trying to protect, or to consider what kind of person our action might make us. It doesn't contemplate what makes various rights worth defending. It can be careless with the existing structures of our social and natural environments, and is poor at considering longer-term effects upon those environments.

Secondly, a subspecies of consequentialism deserves marginally more respect, because it isn't so reckless. Utilitarianism began life as an objection to the elitism and injustice of eighteenth-century England. Social reformer Jeremy Bentham cut through incoherent laws with a clarion call of appealing simplicity: that the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation. Bentham used this principle to identify good social policies and just laws. Utilitarianism has been refined since Bentham. For example, the Australian ethicist Peter Singer seeks to maximize preference satisfaction among as many sentient beings (not just humans) as possible.

I'll not outline or comment on utilitarianism here, although I think it suffers from many of consequentialism's deficiencies. I simply want to concede that this version of consequentialism sets out to find the best for a society, and that utilitarians are not necessarily selfish and thoughtless.

Further reading


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