

Introduction to Christian Ethics – Scripture and Authority in Christian Ethics

HPRS4092

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Scripture and Authority in Christian Ethics

In this initial section, we begin our exploration of specifically Christian ethics – the moral and ethical reasoning that takes place within the bounds of Christian historical traditions and utilises those sources and methods recognised within the Christian faith.

In doing so, I want us to begin by outlining some of the key moral valuations that underpin much of the way the Christian tradition has sought to think about ethics – most of which arise from specific scriptural injunctions.

Having examined these general moral valuations, this section then begins to introduce the special place that scripture, as a source of revelation, has in the development of Christian ethical attitudes as well as the differing attitudes towards different forms of scripture found in the Christian tradition.



Moral Valuations in the Christian Tradition



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Moral Valuations in the Christian Tradition

As we discussed in the previous section, moral valuations lie at the bedrock of moral and ethical reflection – when we choose to value some things over others.

One of the very first moral valuations we should address is the valuation of moral and ethical reflection itself – why does the Christian tradition value this activity in the way it does?

The opposite scriptural quotation goes some way to explaining this valuation – moral reflection is valued because it is integral to the development of knowledge, self-control, virtue, and faith.

⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷ and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. ⁸ For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Peter 1:5-8



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Moral Valuations in the Christian Tradition

Similarly undergirding much Christian moral and ethical reflection is a belief that good and evil do exist, that these are universal in nature, and that this moral judgement is accessible through the diligent application of faith and/or reason.

As we saw in the previous section, this is not always the case in ethical reflection – e.g. in morally relativist systems of thought – but it is a central commitment of the Christian tradition.

The moral judgments made by the tradition, and the ethical reflection based on them, are therefore absolute.

² Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. ³ So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? ⁴ Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?

Romans 2:2-4



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Moral Valuations in the Christian Tradition

So, where do these universal moral answers come from?

In the Christian tradition, moral goodness flows from God – who is himself good in an absolute way.

Just as God is Love, or God is Peace, describe characteristic qualities of the Christian God, so too does Goodness.

If we seek an answer to what is good, then it is only through and in the divine that we can find the reliable answer – God's being shows us goodness.

¹⁷ And when he was gone forth into the way, there came one

running, and kneeled to him, and asked him, Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?

¹⁸ And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God.

Mark 10: 17-18



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Moral Valuations in the Christian Tradition

Having identified the location where absolute and universal moral valuations can be found – God – the Christian tradition has also come to stress the importance of seeking out this knowledge in order to perfect and practice moral valuation that accords with it.

In this sense, it is possible to learn what pleases God and to practice doing so. Those who are mature in their faith in God are able to better discern the will of God, and should be able to better discern good from evil actions in new circumstances.

⁸ For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.

Live as children of light ⁹ (for the fruit of the light consists in all

goodness, righteousness and truth) ¹⁰ and find out what pleases the

Lord. ¹¹ Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but

rather expose them.

Ephesians 5:8-11



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Moral Valuations in the Christian Tradition

Following on from this assumption that moral action flows from one's knowledge of God's will, is the concomitant expectation that our external moral behaviour mirrors the extent of our relationship with the divine.

What this means is that external goodness mirrors internal goodness – without external morality, one cannot claim internal purity; without internal purity, one cannot have external morality.

This returns us to a number of the questions raised in the previous section about intent and motivation in ethics.

¹¹ Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good.

Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.

3 John 1:11

⁸ But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.

Romans 2:8



Moral Valuation

Because of God's perfect goodness, imbued within his character, what God wills must also be both good and perfect.

God's actions and will define, for us, what is good in a universal and absolute sense – this formulation offers the Christian ethical tradition (as well as, in similar forms, most religious ethical systems) a certainty for their ethical speculation.

Morality becomes following the expressed will of the divine which, while still requiring interpretation and application to new circumstances, is accessible to us through revelation.

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour^[i] and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?

⁴⁸ ***Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.***

Matthew 5: 43-48



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Moral Valuations in the Christian Tradition

This revelation of morality occurs through Scripture (e.g. reading the Bible), but also through the character of the divine.

God's nature is expressed through God's actions towards us – the ongoing wondrous gifts of creation, sustaining, and redemption – and it is through these actions that we fallible and broken humans are given examples to follow.

*³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was **good**.*

*And there was evening, and there was morning —
the sixth day.*

Genesis 1:31

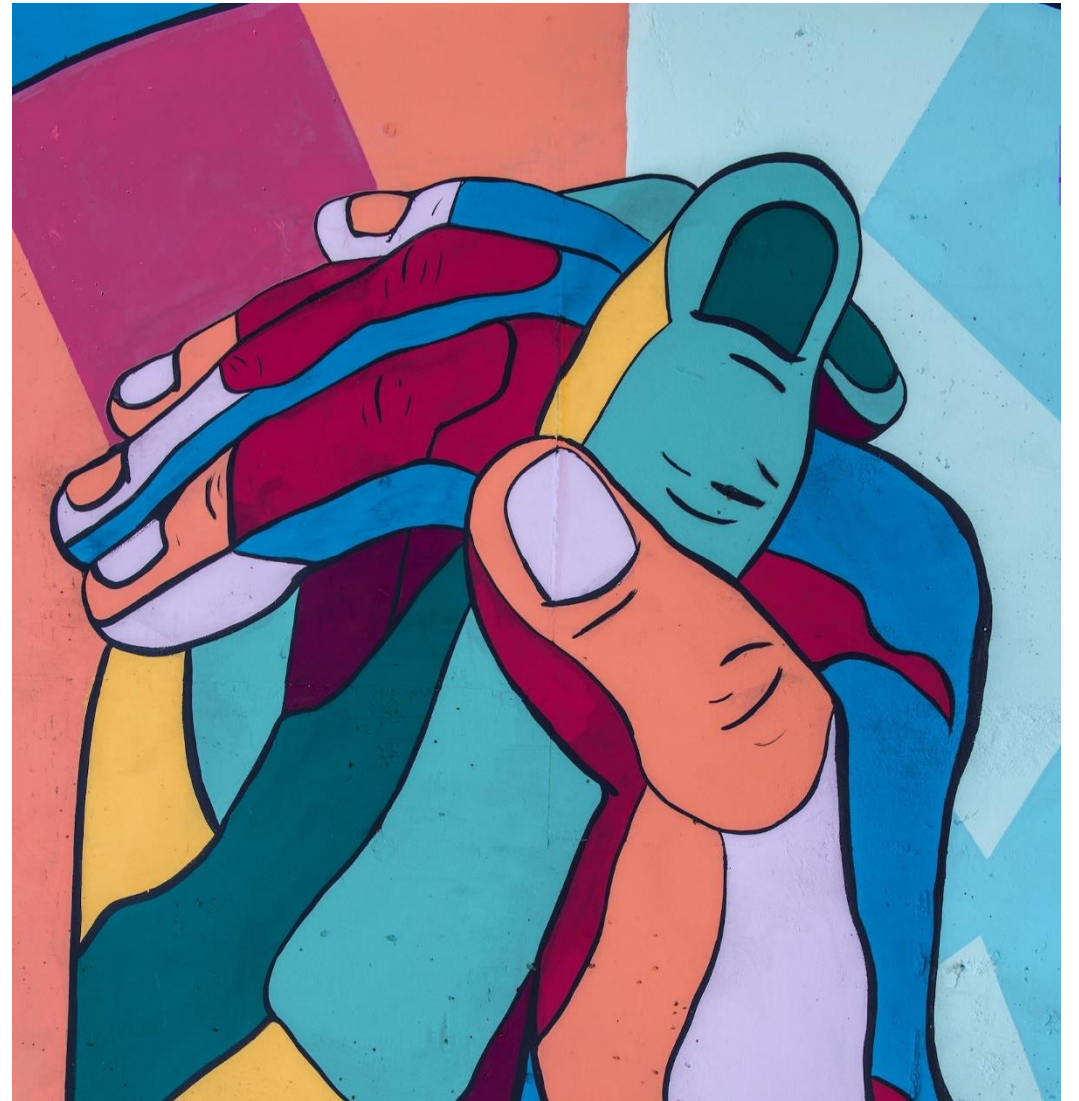


Moral Valuation

What then is the core moral assumption of the Christian tradition?

That the 'good' sought by morality and ethics can be found in the **revealed will of God**, through the **divine example** and through **scripture**, and that this can be relied upon **absolutely** and **universally**.

As Micha 6:8 next summarises:



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*With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?*

*Shall I come before him with burnt
offerings, with calves a year old?*

*Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of
rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?*

*Shall I give my firstborn for my
transgression, the fruit of my body for the
sin of my soul?*

***He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness, and
to walk humbly with your God?***



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Scriptural Injunctions



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Scriptural Injunctions

These moral valuations to be found in the Christian scriptures outline the key operative judgements within Christian ethics as a whole.

While this has been presented in a relatively straight forward way – lacking difficulties of translation, hermeneutics, interpretation, or genre – it also leaves open a number of problematic tensions within the structure of Christian ethics.

I want us to quickly hit on some of these areas now, in order to more fully illuminate the reading you will be doing for this section.



Scriptural Injunctions

The first of these is this:

Even if we know good from evil, and know we are supposed to do good, why does it matter what we do if God is all-forgiving and gracious?

Does the forgiving nature of God mean that our actions, good or evil, are ultimately meaningless?

Unsurprisingly, the biblical text offers a number of reasons why we should continue to practice morally good behaviour:

Matt. 4:7 – “*Jesus answered him, ‘It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test’*”

John 5:29 – “*And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation*”

We should not test God’s graciousness nor should we expect no punishment for evil.



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Scriptural Injunctions

The second is this:

Why, if we are created by the innately good God in his image, is it so hard for us to do good?

Within the biblical text, we see a number of ways of approaching this issue, largely exploring the nature of sin and its connection to morally bad behaviour.

Largely, humans are considered within Christian ethics to be both ignorant of the good, and often, deliberately engaged in evil behaviour.

Matthew 7:11 – *“If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!”*



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Scriptural Injunctions

However, this negative view of the nature of humanity is not absolute or total. While we are often ensnared by evil, common grace (living with others, laws, government etc) allows us to recognise the good more easily.

We still know, as God does to us, how to give good gifts – how to recognise other people as in some way the same as us and deserving of the same goods as us.

We are not necessarily selfish – but can learn to be giving of ourselves to others.

²¹ So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²² For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

Romans 7:21-25



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Scriptural Injunctions

This tussle between our sinful natures and our recognition of the good is, obviously, at the heart of Christian ethics.

But where does this sinful nature arise from?

Within the Christian tradition, there are two internal sources of our sinful nature – the original sin of Adam and Eve, and our own personal sinful actions.

Original Sin:

“¹² Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned” – Romans 5:12

Personal Sin:

“There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” – Romans 3:22-25



Scriptural Injunctions

Further to these two internal sources of our sinful nature, the Christian tradition also posits a number of external sources of temptation to sinful behaviour – the devil or spirits etc – which cause us to be tempted away from a correct course of action we have recognised.

This, of course, relates back to the discussions about intent and recognition in ethics that we have previously been discussing.

External Forces:

“¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

Ephesians 6:12



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Conclusion



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Scripture and Authority in Christian Ethics

As we have seen in this lecture, the notion of a 'biblical ethics' and the use of scripture in ethical reasoning is a complicated business, full of moral valuations, ethical judgements, and inter-locking assumptions about the nature of our actions.

Ultimately, Christian ethics which engages with scripture does so because of a belief that the Bible offers a guide to moral action that is certain and true – and one that can assist us in overcoming our sinful and distracted natures.



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And yet, as should also have become clear, the Bible does not contain within it specific answers to all moral questions – a great deal of our contemporary lives lie completely outside the frame of the biblical text – and we must, when seeking answers within the text, be open to the interpretative and hermeneutical task required.

Over the next couple of sections we will begin to examine the way in which different Christian traditions have incorporated scripture into their broader ethical reasoning as well as how they have attempted to extract certain principles of moral behaviour from it.



Reading

The reading for this section is two chapters from the book, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*:

BIRCH, B., LAPSLEY, J., MOE-LOBEDA, C., & RASMUSSEN, L. (2018). A Two-Part Consensus. In *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life: A New Conversation* (pp. 3-12).

BIRCH, B., LAPSLEY, J., MOE-LOBEDA, C., & RASMUSSEN, L. (2018). Biblical Authority. In *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life: A New Conversation* (pp. 39-60)

