

Annunciation Lent Course 2024: Making Moral Decisions

Talk 1. How do we decide what is right?

As Christians we want to do the right thing. It would be easy if we had an infallible faculty of intuition which automatically guided us in the right way, but in fact we have to use our reason, and our conscience has to be “formed”.

Divine Command Theory: This defines “good” as whatever God commands.

Even in ancient times Plato saw that there was a philosophical problem with this idea. He asked whether an action is good because God commands the action, or whether God commands an action because it is good. If the first is chosen, it would imply that whatever God commands must be good: if God commanded someone to hurt others, then the cruelty and abuse would be moral. If the latter is chosen, then morality is no longer dependent on God, defeating the divine command theory. Additionally, if God is subject to something greater than himself, then God loses the quality of omnipotence.

There is also a practical problem. Where do we discover what God commands? Protestant Christians would point to the Bible as an infallible source but that is not as easy as it appears at first.

Do we give preference to the Old or New Testament, and what happens when they disagree? Jesus himself corrected the morality of the Old Testament.

These are ancient texts written in Hebrew and Greek. How can we be sure that they have been translated and interpreted properly?

How do we distinguish between moral laws and ritual laws (e.g. eating pork)? Jesus gives some detailed teaching but in general we still have to use reason.

Illustrations:

1. In Biblical times (Old and New) slavery was common and accepted. Does that mean it is acceptable for present day Christians? Obviously not.

2. Some Protestants allow remarriage after divorce, on the basis of Matthew 5:32: “But I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (*unless the marriage is unlawful*) causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery”.

They translate the words in brackets as “except in the case of adultery” and so allow divorce and remarriage after adultery. But Mark, Luke and Paul’s letters do not allow any exceptions to the indissolubility of marriage. Also, Matthew uses a different word here (porneia) to the usual word for adultery (moicheia).

Utilitarianism or Consequentialism

Many governments base their laws on Utilitarianism, an ethical system developed in England by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). Their basic teaching was that actions are right or good if they promote happiness, wrong or bad if they produce unhappiness. For them “happiness” means “pleasure” and “unhappiness” means “pain”. Overall, we should aim for “the greatest happiness of the greatest number”. Bentham said we should calculate what will bring us intense, long-lasting pleasure, seeking to do those things and avoiding anything which would cause us pain. Mill added that there are “higher” pleasures, connected to the mind, which have more value than the “lower” pleasures associated with the body. He said “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied”.

This kind of approach makes a lot of sense and we all think like this at times, even accepting a measure of “pain” for the greater good - for example the minister to the sick or Habitat for Humanity volunteer. But there are also problems with making the outcome or consequences the key to morality (“the end justifies the means”).

1. Individuals may not have the mental capacity to do the calculation. In practice, then, we have entrusted our moral decision making to others - to Congress or to Parliament, where representatives are trusted to work out what rules will bring about the greatest happiness for the greatest number. We know this can lead to the abuse of minorities, as when they Native Americans were forced off their lands.
2. Consequences are uncertain: the second amendment probably seemed harmless at the time but there have been some very painful consequences of it in later years.
3. Bentham wrote: “Everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one” - or, as we would say, everybody is equal under the law. That sounds fine but in fact certain people do count as more than one for us. If parents had to choose between saving their child from some disaster and saving a brilliant scientist, we would not criticize them for saving their child.
4. Can one person be unjustly sacrificed for the sake of the majority? (torture)

Deontology: Kant’s Categorical Imperative

Deontologists argue that an action or rule can be right even if it does not produce the best consequences. The great representative of this school is Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). He said we should use our reason: if we can universalize our moral choice, it is right - “I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law”. This is like the “golden rule” of the Bible: “Do unto to others as you would wish them to do unto you”.

Natural Law

The Catholic Church takes the moral norms of the Bible very seriously but it has also favoured Natural Law thinking, pointing out that God has given us reason and free will. We have to work out what is right by reflecting on our human nature and then doing whatever makes us the best humans possible.

What is involved in being a human?

* **We are animals.** This means we should do (and have a right to do) what promotes our life and physical health. We want to live (so abortion and euthanasia are bad); we want to grow and mature (so nourishment and medical care are rights; torture is wrong); we want to reproduce (artificial contraception and the limiting of families, as in China, are wrong); we want to raise our young (so the family unit is important).

* **We are social animals.** Whatever assists our life in society is good (government, basic laws), whatever isolates us is bad (prejudice).

* **We are intellectual or rational animals.** This means we should acquire knowledge and develop our minds. Thus education is good while anything which frustrates our desire for knowledge is wrong (lies, ignorance).

So each area of human nature suggests certain laws. Note also that there is a hierarchy in human nature, so the social is more important than the animal (we might limit our reproduction for the sake of society) and the intellectual is more important than the social (we rightly isolate ourselves to concentrate on serious thought and work).

* Religious people will want to add one more thing about human nature. They will say that **we are spiritual animals.** The need to develop this side of our lives and reach eternal life with God would permit chastity and the hermit life, although these are not obviously desirable at the lower levels.

Try to apply these approaches to the following cases:

* Was it right to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

* Would it be right to kill a hobo in a hospital to use his body parts for several sick men with families who are dependent on them?

* Would it be right to fabricate evidence against a known criminal if it was impossible to get a conviction in any other way because witnesses refused to talk?

* Should the “right to bear arms” have some limitations?