

## STRAY NOTATIONS ON THE COMPLEXITY OF ETHICAL BEHAVIOR

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Ethics and morality relate to the interpersonal realm, with humankind. Since persons in relationship constitutes the most complex reality there is, ethics is a complex discipline.

A. The complexity of ethical theory comes from the fact that several principles determine right and wrong, and these principles are not of equal value. There is a plurality of unequal principles. Purpose, relationship, and nature are three primary factors that form the morality matrix; but subsidiary ones come into the picture as well.

(1) We prioritize the purpose of God over other considerations. Divine purpose precedes nature, law, and human convention in ethical decision making. Putting divine purpose ahead of nature is important because it avoids the determinism—the stimulus-response existence—that could otherwise obtain if nature were the ultimate basis for behavior. Nature as the ultimate category could mean that whatever a person could do would be good. In terms of the “broad arrow” concept, the boundary of ethics would be congruent with natural ability.

The priority of divine purpose over nature means nature has a place that comes from God’s purpose in creating nature; what is good or better derives from his purpose, but not deterministically so. The correlation cannot be deterministic because of the nature of the purpose—to bring into being among humankind what would reflect God’s own nature to sufficient degree that it would make interpersonal relationship possible. By its nature, such a purpose would not be limited to creatures are determined.

Putting purpose first implies that science does not render the decisive word on what is good since there is not a one-for-one relationship between nature and behavior. The nature that persons have is one that includes rationality, choice, and affection, which are not deterministic in the positive sense, that is “from zero up.” Determinism relates to freedom by being on the outside setting restrictive boundaries while freedom is on the inside moving within the limits of that “broad arrow.” Determinism works from infinity down.

Making divine purpose the basis for the highest good allows for the possibility of positive commandment beyond advice and moral commandment. Moral commandment derives from the nature of things and the implicit ways of carrying out purpose. In many instances, however, there is more than one way to accomplish something; yet in certain cases God may specify the way he wants us to do it. His right to do so rests in his prerogatives as creator relative to his purpose and in authority based in previous grace. Since there are some elements of circumstance—like eternal divine purpose—that do not change, there are some uniform behaviors for all times, places, and people.

Besides divine purpose there is human purpose. Actions are measured relative to effect, consequences, results. Human designs imply appropriate actions relevant to them, and that is acceptable as long as human purpose does not override divine purpose.

The priority of purpose explains why it is not good to cast pearls before swine (Matthew 7:6). Goodness is referenced to consequences.

(2) the priority of interpersonal over personal. What is for the common good may call for something detrimental to one person’s welfare.

(3) the priority of the personal over the impersonal

(4) the priority of spirit over flesh. Being created in the image of God means that we have the capacity to curb physical drives by transcendent values. We need not get caught up in the principle that goodness correlates with what is most physically healthful (Mark 7:19).

(5) the priority of the eternal over the temporary. Delayed gratification is an example of this principle. Immediate gratification can be more selfish and less satisfying in the long run.

(6) The welfare of the many takes precedence over the welfare of the one.

(7) the priority of personal responsibility over the responsibility of other people for “my” actions

(8) the priority of what works over what does not work. Pragmatism is okay, then, if it is not made ultimate. Inconsistency is the main problem with pragmatism, unless what works is referenced to the highest, the most, and the long-term. Machiavellianism (ends justify means) is likewise at fault at this point. Not every way of getting a result takes properly into consideration the persons, *etc.*, involved in the process; and it may not in fact achieve a result that is appropriate, given the nature of those involved in the process.

B. The complexity of ethics and morality comes secondly from the fact that they are not a clearly bounded category. For one thing, they are part of a larger category that deals with how a person ought to act. The full range of particulars include the following:

(1) behaviors that are always right or wrong as based, say, on divine purpose

(2) behaviors that are not wise even if not necessarily wrong as based on the nature of things or given the usual character of other people and attendant circumstances. In regard to revelation, wisdom vs. law corresponds with advice vs. commandment.

(3) behaviors that are based in human custom and invested by intentionality with certain unnecessary, but nevertheless present, meaning(s). The idea of custom as culture can be traced down through narrowing levels all the way to an individual’s “idio-culture,” that is, personal preferences regardless of the way they come to be the way they are. My actions need to respect his preferences as well as my own.

(4) Actions done toward things or involving things. Though not considered matters of morality, such actions are nevertheless measured as at least relatively good or bad by whether, or how well, they accomplish intended ends.

C. Finally, ethics is not a discrete domain because it stands inside a larger dynamic whole that comprises life in the practical sense. So, not only is it complex within itself and lacks clear boundaries in some cases; it is made complex by its interaction with other facets of the real whole that life is with others. The external factors include the following:

(a) the forgiveness-reconciliation process. On occasions when someone acts wrongfully toward someone else, repentance-forgiveness can undo the disintegrating effect on their relationship. In fact, this process is an ongoing one in every human relationship or there would be no relationships. Most systems can tolerate a certain amount of what is foreign or dysfunctional.

(b) the impact of an individual’s chemical-natural make-up on his behavior. Some people’s genetic constitution may make it harder to do some things like control anger and violent behavior.

(c) awareness, knowledge, ignorance, intentionality. Where there is no revealed commandment or where the revelation that has occurred has not become known, love (Second

Great Commandment/Golden Rule) and expediency must serve as approximate, interim principles.

(d) The rightness of our actions depends on how it affects other people's behavior and well-being. We are our brother's keepers; we have a certain amount of responsibility for how our actions impact him. Here belongs weaker-brother considerations, where, within reason, the rightness of what we do depends on the impression it makes on other people.

(f) The presence of temptation in the form of evil example, social pressure, reinforcement affect responsibility and culpability.

(g) the judgment process. Just because something wrong has been done, it does not have to be "held against the person" who did it. It may be overlooked because of ignorance or forgiven because of repentance. In regard to divine-human association, we say that the inequities of the time of proclamation are gathered up in the process of eternal judgment.

It may be argued that no action in itself is wrong; its rightness or wrongness depends on circumstance, motive, and attitude. We would be speaking here only of what could be called "fundamental actions," actions aside from context. It is not the taking of a human life that is wrong, but murder; not sexual behavior, but adultery.

In the practical situation ethics is not an exact science because elements of relativity may be involved.

(1) In some cases, it is a matter of degree of what is best. This is particularly true of what is called "method." There is more than one way of accomplishing some purposes. The efforts would be counterproductive, while others might vary in their effectiveness. Here belongs the effective-efficient variable, where something may take longer and require more effort, but it gets the job done because participants more readily take interest in it.

Some behaviors are neutral in moderation, but become sinful in the extreme. Eating food is one thing; gluttony is another. This is what is meant by "nothing in excess," the principle of moderation.

Advice belongs under degree (as well as how, perhaps) because it relates to minimizing risk, a degree matter. When people disobey a commandment, they commit a sin; when they disregard advice, they take a risk. Some things are possible without negative effects, but it is not "wise" to do them or to do them in some ways.

Some deeds are good; that is, there is nothing wrong with doing them; but there are other deeds that may be better. A ready example is Paul's advice not to marry under stressful times or in the interests of certain roles in ministry (1 Corinthians 7).

Eudaemonism can be a useful concept because it teaches that the *summum bonum* is what brings the greatest pleasure to the most people for the longest time. There are many ways individuals or the human race could live and yet survive, but the happiness of many must be sacrificed for the pleasure of a few. Some ways of living might give more intense temporary pleasure but would lead to greater long-range sorrow. They might satisfy certain parts of our being—the physical—without addressing the psychological dimension of life.

(2) Ethical behavior depends on how people go about what they do. "*Speaking the truth in love*" suggests that there are bad ways to do good things. A difference exists between premeditated and unpremeditated sin. Machiavellianism (the end justifies the means) does not give due value to the importance of how something is done.

(3) Occasionally we are forced for practical reasons into a “lesser of evils” approach to behaviors. This factor plays a part in divorce, war, and certain abortion situations like saving the life of the mother.

(4) Expectancy is relative to opportunity, ability, revelation/knowledge, the level of faith. *“To whom much is given much is required”* (Luke 12:48). Condemnation is withheld in times of development but not in times of maturity. Jesus told his disciples repeatedly that there were many things he had to tell them, but they could not bear them yet. He was enunciating the principle of readiness.

“According to your faith” makes different performance levels acceptable even though we agree that the moral ideal does not change.

(5) Why something is done greatly affects its rightness—intentionality, motive. This observation is especially true of “fundamental actions,” actions without reference to circumstance, or context. Taking a person’s life in capital punishment or by accident is a different thing from murder. Getting drunk for purposes of having a leg amputated is different from getting drunk just for effect; the same applies to the use of alcohol for medicinal purposes.

Finally, there are certain distinctions implicit in factors cited above.

- (a) Things equally wrong are not equally destructive.
- (b) Things can be wrong without being held against a person.
- (c) Omission as well as commission belong under ethical considerations.

The practical advantage of recognizing that ethics is not a discrete domain or an exact science is that for practical purposes we do not have to be absolutely right about everything we do, even when there is a definite right or wrong involved. There are qualifying factors like motive and attitude that reduce the harmful effect of behavior on relationships. There are retrieval systems that can reverse the effect of past sin on present relationship—reconciliation.