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THE HOW  
AND WHY OF  
LOVE

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*An* INTRODUCTION *to*  
EVANGELICAL  
ETHICS

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M I C H A E L H I L L

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# Preface

**I**N THE COURSE of teaching Christian ethics in local churches and in a theological college I discovered the need of a simple, clear and concise introductory text. I found two books that were brilliant. One was written from the perspective of Natural Law and would have been superb if I wanted to teach traditional Roman Catholic doctrine. The other was written from a liberation theology perspective and did not suit the needs of conservative evangelical Christianity. Both books were excellent from the point of view of clarity and logic. The text was simple and unambiguous. The logic was impeccable. Basic assumptions and presuppositions were stated and the arguments flowed sequentially. I looked for something comparable from an evangelical perspective but could find nothing.

What was needed was a book that explained and accounted for morality from an evangelical perspective in the same simple and clear fashion. In my search for such a text I discovered that there were many good books on Christian ethics from an evangelical perspective. Some were not written at an introductory level. Those that were did not meet the criteria that I had established. Evangelicals are committed to the belief that the Bible is the Word of the one true and living God. An implication of this understanding of Scripture is that it has to be understood as a unit. The message as a whole has to be understood if the bits and pieces are not to be taken out of context and distorted or misunderstood. Many of the evangelical texts on ethics that I read used a part of the Scriptures to develop an ethical theory. Some based Christian ethics on creation, others on the Ten Commandments, and still others on the Sermon on the Mount or the vision of the Kingdom to come. A part of Scripture was taken to represent the whole. The validity of this approach to Christian ethics was called into question by the

fact that these theories disagreed at significant points.

My study of the Bible confirmed what others had both perceived and proclaimed. The Bible has its own hermeneutic or way of understanding itself. The key to this understanding was the idea of promise and fulfilment. At the time of creation the Garden of Eden was full of possibilities and hope. The promise of these possibilities was thwarted by sin. Nevertheless God remained faithful to the promise. He worked in history to overcome the consequence of sin and to reveal his purposes for humankind. The revelation of his purposes was revealed in a number of stages. After the fall the assurance of redemption was expressed in his promise to Abraham. God's Kingdom was then foreshadowed in the nation of Israel, who, while being the people of God, were still slaves to sin. The sin of Israel and her kings could not frustrate the purposes of God. He eventually sent his only Son, the one true Israelite and promised king. Christ's death, resurrection and exaltation secured the forgiveness of sin and the redemption of creation. The substance of God's salvation was realised in Jesus' earthly ministry but it awaited consummation at his return.

The idea occurred to me that if the Bible was the Word of God and should be understood as a unit, then an ethic based on just part of the Scripture would be inadequate. The likelihood of an inadequate ethic was increased by the fact of progressive revelation. The earlier stages would be incomplete and the latter stages, taken by themselves, may require an understanding of the foundations laid in the earlier stages. Who knows what distortions would be contained in an ethic that took part of God's message as the whole? It was at this point in my search that I decided to turn my own hand to the task. I was determined to discern the ethical approach or approaches taken in the Scriptures and on the basis of this knowledge develop a theory of Christian ethics consistent with the Bible.

In outlining a biblically-based Christian ethic I have not tried to justify my presuppositions. I have simply adopted a conservative evangelical approach to the Bible in the hope that others have successfully undertaken the apologetic task of defending that approach. My explicit assignment has been to develop an ethic consistent with an

evangelical understanding of Scripture. The analysis and justification of all my presuppositions and assumptions would defeat the purpose of writing a simple introduction. The more scholarly work will have to wait for another time. Nor have I tried to address all the issues facing Christians today. My emphasis has been on the *method* of doing ethics and not on the *content*. In order to keep the text within a reasonable length for an introduction I have not specifically addressed the issues of social ethics. The book is limited to the area of personal ethics. It tackles the question—what should I do? The framework is set in place so that readers can address the question—what social structures ought we to have in our society? The issues of the nature of social justice, the structures of government, education, family etc, have been left for another time.

The number of topics in the domain of personal ethics is, as indicated above, limited. Detailed attention has been given to five issues. The first three topics are explicitly mentioned in the Scriptures. The other two topics are not taken up in the text of the Bible. The reason for this selection has to do with methodology. A different method has to be employed when examining issues not mentioned in the Scriptures. The nature of the different methodologies is discussed in the text. The discussion is clarified by the examination of both types of issues. The hope is that the reader, through the scrutiny of both theory and issues, will be able to test and approve what is “good and acceptable and perfect” to God (Romans 12:2).

I wish to thank Dr. Peter Jensen, Dr. Royle Hawkes, the Rev. Andrew Cameron, Dr. Megan Best and my wife, Wendy, for reading a draft of the text and offering comments and corrections. Their assistance has been most helpful. The faults and deficiencies in the text remain mine.

## Section One



# UNDERSTANDING ETHICS

This section provides insights into the basic ideas and concepts used in ethics. It furnishes a framework for ethical thinking.

# What's Ethics All About?



FROM THE DAWN of history humans have engaged, successfully or otherwise, in the task of giving an account of the reality they experience. As rational beings, people need to be able to understand their experiences and control the outcomes as far as possible. The management of life seems to be an aspect of the human capacity to choose from the various options possible.

Over time, the knowledge accrued from the endeavours of life became so extensive that it was eventually broken up into a number of subject areas. Each of these areas takes up an aspect of reality and develops an account of that reality on which people can operate. Today people study a huge range of subjects ranging from astronomy to zoology.

This book is an attempt to give an account of one aspect of human life. Our attention will be focused on the area of understanding called ethics. Ethics is the study that attempts to give an explanation of people's moral experience. The accounts people have given of human moral experience are called ethical theories, and the fact that these accounts are called 'theories' indicates that they need to be justified. Reasons and evidence are demanded if people are going to adopt these accounts and commit themselves to operating on them. This book will attempt to give an account of human moral experience based on a biblical understanding of reality. It will be an evangelical account in so far as the author believes that the gospel is central to the Bible's understanding of reality. In the Bible the gospel has to do with the problem of sin and God's promise of salvation. The gospel maintains that God's promise is fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. With this in mind let us turn to an examination of morality.

## Morality

### *Definitions*

There is the wonderful story about the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle (384–322 BC). He came up with a definition of man (that is, mankind in general). He declared that man was a featherless biped. Another Greek philosopher of the time, Diogenes (c. 400–325 BC), plucked a chicken and ran it through the streets of Athens crying out, “Make way for Aristotle’s man”. No doubt the great Aristotle was embarrassed. But he wasn’t the last person to be embarrassed by trying to give a definition of some word or concept.

Definitions are notoriously difficult to get right. Yet this will not present a great problem if we realize that people can know things without being able to give an explicit verbal account, a definition, of what it is that they know. Young children can pick out humans from other animals such as dogs and cats from a very early age. They can do this without being able to give an account of what a person or human is. The fact that they can continually pick out humans without making a mistake is enough to convince us that they know what a human is.

As humans we know more than we can tell. This fact has not always been recognized. One group of eminent philosophers who influenced a great deal of educational theory in the western world actually defined knowledge as that which could be made verbally *explicit*. According to this view the young children we spoke about earlier did not really know the difference between a human and a dog. The claim of these philosophers that real knowledge had to be explicit is obviously false. It seems more reasonable to argue that people have knowledge or know something when they can use it or act upon it. There does not seem to be a need to require that people can make what they know verbally explicit. Our educational system recognizes that some knowledge and skills cannot be passed on verbally. In these areas people are required to do apprenticeships and pick up knowledge and skills by watching and copying.

Likewise, in order to get you to understand what morality is I do not have to come up with a watertight definition. It will be



enough to provide several examples and anecdotes for you to pick up the concept and be able to use it.

### *Some Examples*

Some time ago I was on a family camp. We were playing cricket with the children. At the camp it was decided that the younger children could get out twice before they lost their turn at batting. The adults only had to be dismissed once. One young boy missed the fact that he had been caught. The catch had been taken behind him and he did not see it. Later, when he was bowled and asked to surrender the bat to someone else, he was most indignant. “Every other child had to get out twice”, he declared. When the adults insisted that he finish his turn he shouted, “That’s not fair”. He saw the whole incident as an injustice. His fervent indignation was moral indignation.

Our young boy’s experience is not unique. We have all been engaged in, and continue to be engaged in, moral activities. A moment’s reflection on our experience will confirm this truth. People feel moral outrage, for example, when someone cheats them or betrays them.

In our modern world various moral issues have gripped our attention. The feminist movement has caused the issue of sexual discrimination in the workplace to occupy our minds. Newspapers reporting the views of medical experts calling for the legalization of heroin have provoked heated debate. Accounts of vicious rape-murders on the TV have aroused our moral passions. Morality may not be easy to define, but moral experience is such a universal thing that we can point to examples and people will know what we are talking about.

## **Morality and the Bible**

The Bible is full of morality. The ingredients are scattered throughout its pages. Moral rules, moral injunctions, and moral judgments abound. Moral values and moral virtues are explicitly

adopted and promoted. For example, when Israel comes together as a people to proceed into the Promised Land they are given commandments which include the following moral rules:

You shall not murder

You shall not commit adultery (Exodus 20:13-14).

These commandments are re-iterated for Christians in Romans 13:8-10 where the moral principle behind the rules is identified. These rules are specific applications of the general principle—love your neighbour as yourself. Besides moral rules and principles we find lists of virtues and vices in the Scriptures:

Whoever is righteous has regard for the life of his beast (Proverbs 12:10).

By insolence comes nothing but strife (Proverbs 13:10).

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the Kingdom of God (Galatians 5:19-21).

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

## Morality and Ethics

By now we should have some idea of what morality is all about. Later in the book we might attempt some kind of definition of morality, realising that it is bound to be inadequate at points. However, for the moment we can work with the intuitions and understanding about morality that we have picked up from the sections above.

This book is not just a book about morality. It is a book about ethics. Hence we need to be clear about the difference between morality and ethics. Ethics is the *study* of morality. As such, ethics

has three distinct aspects. These areas are known as descriptive ethics, normative ethics and meta-ethics.

### *Descriptive Ethics*

In the study of ethics we begin with the *descriptive* task of trying to identify the moral standards and rules that people adopt. Prior to World War II, the majority of people living in Australia would very probably have shared a common morality. It would have generally been agreed that divorce and homosexuality were morally wrong. Had we been alive then we could have ascertained the moral beliefs of the population by taking a survey. In doing this study of morality we would have been engaged in ethics; that aspect of ethics we call *descriptive ethics*.

Christians engage in the task of descriptive ethics when they study the Bible. For example, a person might go through the Gospel of Mark and list all the moral rules, principles and values found there. As a consequence of this study the person would locate the morality of Mark's Gospel.

A study of various societies and cultures will show that there appears to be a variety of moralities. That is, there are groups of people who have different sets of moral beliefs and values. The significant point to notice here is not that many moral values overlap but that some do not. Some, for example, believe that monogamy is a moral virtue and others believe that polygamy is. It does not appear that both can be right. *Descriptive ethics is not concerned to locate the right set of values but simply to ascertain the moral standards that people have or have had.*

### *Normative Ethics*

The conflict of moral values allows me to introduce the second aspect of ethics. This is the aspect called *normative ethics*. The fundamental task of normative ethics is to locate moral standards that we can operate on and live by. In doing normative ethics we go beyond the descriptive task. *Normative ethics is not satisfied with*

*locating standards that people have or have had. It is concerned to locate standards to live by. It attempts to locate a set of moral values that are right and true.*

One aspect of the task of normative ethics is that of *analysis*. In normative ethics we analyse the rules, principles, values and virtues of a particular morality and see how all the parts or aspects fit together. Analysis will allow criticism of a particular morality but it will also lead to the next task of normative ethics, which is the task of *justification*. Justification is the task of demonstrating that we have the right values and virtues, principles and rules. That is, in normative ethics we attempt to show that a particular set of moral values meshes with reality in a way which is more adequate than other sets. In this way we attempt to vindicate our morality. If we are looking for standards to live by it will be important that we have the right set.

### *Meta-ethics*

Sometimes the study of ethics goes beyond analysis and justification and asks questions that are raised by the very analysis of morality itself. Questions like:

What is moral value?

Can moral values be justified?

Are moral values objective? (That is, are there true and false values?)

In asking these questions we are not focusing on any particular moral rules or values but taking up an examination of the *kinds of things* we are dealing with in the study of ethics. These are the kinds of questions that can be asked of all normative theories. This aspect of ethics is generally called *meta-ethics*. As a discipline it deals with the second-level questions that come up when we study ethics. Talking about moral values prompts questions about the nature of values. The examination of the nature of values does not help us to locate particular values that might operate as norms. It is, therefore, not part of the task of normative ethics. Nor does it help us to jus-

tify any particular set of values as such. *Meta-ethics focuses on and examines the assumptions made and concepts used by any and all ethical theories.*

## Focusing on Normative Ethics

Analysis is a fundamental part of doing normative ethics. The following anecdote illustrates the type of analysis in which normative ethicists engage.

Grandma was planning to visit a friend in the country, which required her to stay overnight. Her instructions to Grandpa before leaving, were: “turn off the soup when you come home from golf”. Next day she returned to find the soup (luckily!) still simmering in the stockpot. Grandpa’s flustered explanation was, “...but it rained, and I didn’t go to golf”.

It is not hard to understand the thinking behind Grandma’s injunction. She knew that the soup had to be cooked for several hours. She calculated that the time would be up when her husband returned from golf. Hence the particular instruction to turn off the soup when he got home. Grandpa thoughtlessly failed to go behind the instruction to the reasoning that produced it. He failed to understand the intention of the command and so failed to see how to fulfil the intention when circumstances changed.

Many people are like Grandpa in this anecdote when it comes to Christian morality. They take the moral commands and instructions from the Bible and obey them, but they do not go behind the command to see the reasons for them. Morality becomes simply a matter of obeying rules and directives. Normative ethics, on the other hand, looks behind the particular injunctions to see what is going on. As a result it helps us to be morally consistent in changing conditions and circumstances.

A number of the biblical writers do go behind the moral commands and attempt to give an account of some aspect of morality. James, the brother of Jesus, engages in normative ethics

when he suggests that morality is unified. In his letter he writes,

If you really fulfil the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”, you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For he who said, “Do not commit adultery”, also said, “Do not murder”. If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law (James 2:8-11).

The moral commands of the Bible fit together because they all issue from the same person. God is offended if any of the commands are broken. One cannot be selectively moral.

The apostle Paul also engages in an aspect of ethical theory when he ties several of the commandments together in Romans 13:8-10. Like James, he takes up the rules not to commit murder or adultery. Paul sees these rules as expressions of the principle of loving one's neighbour. The rules are unified by the fact that they have the same purpose—that of loving one's neighbour. We can fit both Paul's and James' thinking together and conclude that God's general purpose is that people should love one another and that this finds particular expression in not committing adultery or murder etc.

A number of biblical scholars have argued that the biblical writers were not interested in normative ethics. In a sense this is true. The biblical writers were not interested in theorizing about morality *per se*. They were not interested in analysing and justifying their moral values in the systematic way a modern ethicist might. Nevertheless they understood their moral rules and values as having a rationale, or reason for being. As we have already seen, both Paul and James understood their normative material to have a place in a broader understanding. When they point out this broader context and the way the moral material relates to it, they are implicitly doing normative ethics. This book is an explicit attempt at normative ethics. It is an attempt to construct an ethic on the basis of an evangelical understanding of the Bible.

## Terminology

For the purposes of this book we will use the words '*ethics*' and '*morality*' to refer to different things. Admittedly in everyday usage we frequently use the words '*ethics*' and '*morality*' as if they refer to the same thing. We might say that so-and-so has no ethics or no morality, in which case we probably mean that the person in question does not appear to have moral standards or values. In this book, however, we will use the word '*ethics*' to refer to the study and analysis of morality. Adopting this sense of the word '*ethics*' will have its consequences. While it may be true that everyone has a morality, it is certainly not true that everyone has given explicit thought to seeing that the moral standards and rules they operate on are consistent or justifiable. Not everyone has an ethic.

## The Need for an Ethic

At this point it will be helpful to introduce another distinction. This is the distinction between synthetic and analytic knowledge. A child, three or four years of age, might be able to pick out bulls from other animals and objects, and not make a mistake, in which case we would say that the child knew what a bull was. We would claim that the child had a certain knowledge. I want to call this knowledge *synthetic* knowledge. At such an early age the child might not be able to give a verbal account of the difference between a bull and a cow, in which case we would claim that the child does not have an *analytic* knowledge of cows and bulls. Analytic knowledge is knowledge that one can make explicit through language. Despite the lack of analytic knowledge we would still want to insist that the child knew what a cow was.

Getting back to ethics, we have seen that people can have a morality without having a normative ethic. People can hold moral beliefs and operate on moral rules without ever having analysed how they all fit together. That is, people can have a synthetic knowledge of ethics without having an analytic knowledge of it. People might have an intuitive apprehension of how their morals fit together, without being able to explicitly state how. What is more,

people can operate quite adequately without this analytic knowledge until they are faced with a conflict of values or until their morality is challenged by another moral system. Down through history there have been communities that have operated for a relatively long period of time on a traditional morality without feeling the need to analyse or question it. Fortunately or unfortunately, ours is not one of those communities nor one of those times. We must have an ethic as well as a morality.

It is extremely unfortunate that some Christians take a 'tell me what to do' attitude when it comes to studying Christian ethics. They are happy to study particular moral issues like abortion and homosexuality, but unwilling to put the time and effort into studying the theory that enables them to understand why certain ethical conclusions are reached. 'Just treat the issues' is the cry. An analogy may be drawn between helping the hungry and teaching ethics. The 'just treat the issues' attitude is similar to the attitude of the hungry who say 'don't bother to teach me how to grow food, just give me the food'. Not only is this attitude shortsighted, it is morally irresponsible.

C. Stephen Layman gives three reasons for developing an analytic account of morality or ethical theory (Layman, 1991). Firstly, theories tell us the sort of thing we need to know to settle moral issues. This need is strongly felt in a society like ours where traditional rules will not cover the situations generated by modern technology. Traditional rules do not cover issues like sperm donation, surrogate motherhood and the ozone layer. Secondly, theories present us with a general picture or vision of the moral life. A theory will give us a sense of the general direction we ought to be heading. This sense can give us rough moral guidance and set the parameters of our moral search and research. From this point we can go on and spell out the details. Thirdly, having a theory helps us to be consistent and avoid bias. Our capacity for moral outrage can be selective. We can be violently opposed to abortion on demand and not concerned about an unjust war in which our nation has some participation. Consistency is a virtue in morality. These three reasons alone are enough to drive us to study ethics.