

I

Introduction

Ethics and religion are large and important areas of life. This book explores some of the main philosophical issues linking the two. To show where we’re going, I’ll first clarify three key ideas: philosophy, ethics, and religion.

1.1 Philosophy

We can explore how ethics and religion connect using various disciplines: history, law, anthropology, sociology, literature, biology, philosophy, and so forth. Our philosophical approach rationally debates big questions about ethics and religion. *Philosophy is reasoning about the big questions of life.*

If you search the Web for “ethics and religion,” the biggest issue is this (with many people arguing yes or no): “Is God the source of morality (so without God we can’t have genuine duties)?” This will be a central issue here. This isn’t the same issue as “Can atheists have a morality and be good people?” Practically all thinkers answer yes to this. Our issue, rather, is whether morality makes sense without God.

Religious philosophers tend, roughly, to be of two camps. Some see ethics as God’s commands (Part I, Chapters 2 and 3), while others see ethics as natural laws that have some independence from God’s will (Part II, Chapters 4–6). Both views have evolved sophisticated forms. I’ll argue that the best view for religious thinkers is a combination I call *divine-preference natural law*.

Along the way, we’ll get into other issues, such as, “How can we know right from wrong?” “How does morality relate to evolution?” “What

does loving-our-neighbor mean?” “How does the golden rule work?” “How are the commandments against stealing, lying, killing, and adultery best understood and defended?” “What duties do we have toward those of other faith perspectives?” “What are our duties toward God?” and “What difference does belief in God make to ethics?”

Part III, on ethics and atheism (Chapters 7 and 8), studies how atheists object on ethical grounds to belief in God and how they view ethics. I’ll also respond to their objections.

Philosophy differs from theology. Traditionally and roughly, *philosophy* uses only human reason, while *theology* adds divine revelation¹ (perhaps from the Bible or church teaching). We’ll mostly stay on the philosophy side of the divide, but sometimes (as in §1.3) we’ll wander across the fuzzy border.

1.2 Ethics

My opening sentence called ethics an “area of life,” but we can also see ethics as *moral philosophy*: the *philosophical study* of this area. Moral philosophy focuses on two key questions:

1. *Metaethics*: What is the nature of morality, and how can we reason about moral issues?
2. *Normative ethics*: How ought we to live?

Moral philosophy, accordingly, has two main branches.²

Metaethics studies the nature and methodology of morality. It asks questions such as, “What do ‘good’ and ‘ought’ mean?” “What are goodness and obligation?” “Do moral judgments express cultural conventions, personal feelings, self-evident truths, or divine commands?” “Are there objective moral truths (or facts) about right and wrong?” “How can we justify, rationally defend, or reason about moral beliefs, if we can?”

Normative ethics studies how we ought to live; it proposes general or specific norms, values, and virtues. It asks questions such as, “What are the basic principles of right and wrong?” “What is good or worthwhile in life?” “What is a just society like?” “What makes someone a good

¹ See St. Thomas Aquinas’s (1274) *Summa Theologica* (I, q. 1, a. 1).

² See my ethics textbook (Gensler 2011a), anthology (Gensler, Spurgin, and Swindal 2004), and encyclopedia (Gensler and Spurgin 2008).

person?” “What are the basic virtues and vices?” “What are the basic human rights?” “Is killing ever justified?” “Is abortion right or wrong?”

This book deals with both areas. Our initial question (“Is God the source of morality?”) is about metaethics. I’ll use *ethics* and *morality* interchangeably.

1.3 Religion

Occasionally this book takes *religion* in a wide sense, to include monotheistic, polytheistic, and nontheistic religions. I use this wide sense in Section 6.6, when I say that the golden rule is common to practically every religion, and in Section 7.4, when I discuss atheistic religions such as Humanistic Judaism.

I usually take “*religion*” more narrowly, as “monotheistic religion.” My *Ethics and Religion* book is mostly about ethics and God. “God” is understood as in the great monotheistic religions, roughly as Copleston and Russell (1948: 390) agreed to in their radio debate: “a supreme personal being – distinct from the world and creator of the world.” While I’m Christian,³ most of the same issues are important in Judaism, Islam, and other religions with a supreme God.⁴

Religions are often analyzed as *creed-code-cult*, where *code* usually has much moral content. To keep us from thinking too abstractly about God’s will, it will be good to look at the moral content of one particular religion. Being Christian, I’ll talk about the Bible. Those of another faith might reflect on the moral content of their faith.

The Bible is a faith account of God’s action and humanity’s response. While the Bible lacks systematic ethical treatises, it teaches morality in its stories, heroes, sermons, prayers, exhortations, proverbs, and commandments.

While the Jewish Law in the Old Testament has 613 precepts, most central are the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17 and Deuteronomy

³ I’m Catholic (a Jesuit priest) and interested in world religions and interfaith relations. My last book, *Ethics and the Golden Rule* (Gensler 2013), had symbols for eight world religions on the cover and said much about the golden rule in the religions of the world.

⁴ Harris (2003) and Brody (1974) talk about divine command theory and its foes in Judaism. Al-Attar (2010) and Michel (2010, 197–99) discuss this dispute in Islam; Al-Attar (2010, 109) asks, Does God *create* or *clarify* morality?

5:6–21). We can divide these into three groups. The first group has duties to God:⁵

1. You shall not worship false gods.
2. You shall not take God's name in vain.
3. Keep holy the Sabbath.

Other duties toward God include faith, hope, and love; obedience; and prayerful responses of praise and thanksgiving. Duties to other people are indirectly duties to God, because they express obedience to him and concern for his creatures.

The second group has duties to family:

4. Honor your father and mother.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
9. You shall not covet your neighbor's spouse.

For a family to flourish, the husband-wife bond must be strong; adultery typically harms or destroys families. Further duties between spouses include affection, communication, and avoiding cruelty. Children are to honor their parents; this involves obedience and, later, friendship with and caring for parents in their old age. Parents are to care for their children and help them grow into responsible adults; later, they're to provide emotional support for their adult children through life's difficulties. There also are duties to brothers and sisters, to other relatives, and to those of one's social units (such as villages and nations).

The third group has duties to everyone:

5. You shall not kill.
7. You shall not steal.
8. You shall not bear false witness.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

We are not to kill, steal, lie, or be envious. Other duties are to show respect and politeness toward others, help those in need, show gratitude and reparation, and be just toward the weak and powerless (as emphasized by the prophets).

Wisdom and love are key. So we have Nathan's similar-situation story that helps King David see his error (2 Samuel 12:1–13), commandments to

⁵ Traditions differ on how to number the commandments and on which books constitute the Bible. In giving passages from sacred texts, I use my own words to express the ideas clearly in modern American English.

love God above all things and one's neighbor as oneself (Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18), and the golden rule (Tobit 4:15) and its application to aliens ("Don't oppress aliens; you know how it feels to be an alien from when you were aliens yourself in Egypt"; Exodus 23:9). There's some universalism from the beginning, as Genesis 1:27 tells of *all* humans being created in God's image and likeness.

The Old Testament was an agreement between God and the Jews: God would guide and protect them, and they'd worship and obey God. The New Testament extends this to all.

In the New Testament, the most important commandments are the love norms and the golden rule:

- Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength. This is the greatest commandment. The second is similar: Love your neighbor as yourself. These sum up the Law and the prophets. (Matthew 22:36–40)
- Treat others as you want to be treated, for this sums up the Law and the prophets. (Matthew 7:12)

Also important are the beatitudes (such as "Blessed are those who suffer persecution for the sake of doing right, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"; Matthew 5:3–10), loving your enemies (Matthew 5:38–48), the Good Samaritan parable that illustrates this (Luke 10:29–37), Jesus's example ("As I have loved you, so you are to love one another; this is how people will know you are my disciples"; John 13:34–35), Paul's poem about love ("Love is patient and kind, not jealous or pompous"; 1 Corinthians 13:1–13), and Paul about how nonbelievers can know the moral law ("The demands of the law are written on their hearts"; Romans 2:13–15).

The Bible gradually develops toward higher approaches to morality. It can appeal to higher motives (unselfish love and gratitude to God) or lower motives (punishments and rewards); this is fitting, because it has to appeal to many people.

The Bible and sacred texts of other religions don't explicitly discuss most of the issues that this present book deals with – such as "Is God the source of morality?" So any scriptural contribution to these issues would have to be indirect.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-05244-4 - Ethics and Religion
Harry J. Gensler
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-05244-4 - Ethics and Religion
Harry J. Gensler
Excerpt
[More information](#)

PART I

ETHICS AS GOD'S COMMANDS

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-05244-4 - Ethics and Religion
Harry J. Gensler
Excerpt
[More information](#)

2

Divine Command Theory

Is God the source of morality, so without God, we couldn't have genuine duties? This is a burning issue for philosophers and nonphilosophers alike. Politicians, preachers, and parents often insist that the very existence of society requires the strong moral values that only religion and religious moral education can provide. Atheists protest that they're misunderstood and discriminated against and can be as moral as believers.

This chapter considers the traditional *divine command theory* (DCT), which sees genuine duties as depending on God's will; I'll introduce DCT using C. S. Lewis's somewhat similar view. Chapter 3 discusses modified DCTs that assert a qualified dependence of morality on God's will.

2.1 C. S. Lewis

Clive Staples Lewis (1898–1963) was born in Belfast. He taught medieval and Renaissance literature for thirty years at Oxford and then ten more at Cambridge. He became famous for his children's books and Christian apologetics. His books sold 100 million copies and remain influential today; a show of hands in my logic course, with mostly philosophy graduate students, showed that most had read Lewis.

Lewis became an atheist as a teenager, driven by the problem of evil: "My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust" (Lewis 1952: 38). In midlife, he returned to God as an Anglican and came to defend "mere Christianity" (what Christian groups hold in common).

The BBC asked him to do radio talks about his faith. Lewis accepted, even though he saw himself as an amateur and beginner in religion; he

thought that, as a layman and former atheist, he might have something special to say to people who struggle with faith. His classic apologetic work, *Mere Christianity* (Lewis 1952), came from earlier radio talks and sold 11 million copies. We'll focus on his "Right and Wrong: A Clue to the Meaning of the Universe."

Lewis provides an ideal introduction for us because he's clear, insightful, entertaining, and influential – and avoids technical issues better discussed later.

Lewis (1952: 3–32) argues that there's an objective moral law and that this requires the existence of God.

First, Lewis contends that pretty much everyone recognizes objective moral duties. He defends this in various ways.

We've all heard quarreling. People say things like, "How'd you like it if someone did the same to you?" – "That's my seat, I was there first" – "Leave him alone, he isn't harming you" – "Give me some of your orange, I gave you some of mine" – "But you promised." People here appeal, not to likes and dislikes, but to standards that they expect others to recognize. These others typically accept the standard but claim that their action doesn't violate it or that they have a good excuse for violating it. So both parties recognize a law or rule of fair play or decent behavior. We assume that everyone knows the standards (except perhaps an unusual defective individual).

But don't different cultures disagree deeply about morality? There are moral differences, yes, but not a total difference. Moralities are mostly the same. People differ on what people you ought to be unselfish to – whether only your family, or your fellow countrymen, or everyone. But they agree that you ought not to just put yourself first. People differ on whether you should have one wife or four. But they agree that you must not simply have any woman you like. The golden rule ("Do as you would be done by") sums up what everyone has always known to be right (Lewis 1952: 82).

People who say that they don't believe in a real Right and Wrong will go back on this later. They may break their promise to you, but if you try breaking one to them they'll complain "it's not fair." A nation may say treaties don't matter; but then they spoil their case by saying that the treaty they want to break was unfair. But if there's no Right and Wrong, then what's the difference between a fair treaty and an unfair one?

Some object that the so-called moral law is just a social convention put into us by education. But we may be educated about objective truths,