

## Ethical Systems Through a Christian Lens



## Stem-Cell Debate



Believed federal funding ought to be made available to help provide cures for diseases, etc.



Wanted to limit federal funding for stem-cell research because fetuses must be destroyed to obtain some types of stem cells

## Stem-Cell Research

- A major issue in the most recent presidential election.
- Surveys show that 65% of Americans are in favor of stem-cell research.
- A majority of Americans are opposed to destroying an embryo to harvest stem cells

## How Do We Decide?

- Surveys?
  - People are changeable. Should morality be based on what is popular at a given time?
- Rational discussion?
  - What principles are to be used?
  - Principles such as “Each person should have a right to decide his own fate” are not universally held. Where does this come from?

## Problems with Naturalistic Ethics

- No authority
  - no way to go from what “is” to what “ought to be”
- Inadequate information
  - No way to properly assess the many competing values in ethical dilemmas

## Why Naturalistic Ethics is Partially Successful

- must live in a world created by God -- forces a “reality check” on ethical systems
- can’t escape the fact that humans are made in the image of God and tend to think like God whether they want to or not.
- naturalistic ethics “borrows” from the influence of Christianity in the culture

## We Are Inescapably Ethical

- How do you react when someone does you wrong?
- Why *should* we believe what is true?
- Why do you feel a sense of obligation (or guilt) concerning your behavior even if nobody is watching?

## Christian Ethics

- Adequate authority -- God as creator has right over his creatures
- Sense of obligation -- God is *personal* Creator; obligation is relational
- Adequate information -- God's image in us and God's revelation to us in nature and in the Bible

## The Agony of Ethical Dilemmas

- Christian ethics can explain why there are ethical dilemmas:
  - Sin and blindness create confusion about ethical obligations.
  - The curse creates unwanted consequences of our choices.

## Testing the Options: No Absolutes

- Relativism
  - logically impossible to live with
  - “*You have no right to impose your morality on me.*”
  - “*Each person can define his own morality.*”
  - These statements are ethically loaded.

## Systems with One Absolute

- Situation ethics
- Kant's categorical imperative
- Utilitarianism
- WWJD -- “What would Jesus do?”
- “Let your conscience be your guide.”

## Situation Ethics

*“Always do the most loving thing.”*

- Why???
- How can we know what is most loving?
- How can we criticize the action of others?
- How can we define justice in this context?

### Situation Ethics

- denies that there are non-negotiable specifics to expressing love.
- Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." (Jn. 14:15)
- **Grain of truth:** You shall love the Lord God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself.

### Kant's Categorical Imperative

*"An action is ethical only if I can with consistency will it to be universally acted upon."*

- Why???
- The only logical basis for this norm would be this norm -- circular!
- Implies a hidden set of values. What is "with consistency?"

### Kant's Categorical Imperative

- **Grain of truth:** Jesus' Golden Rule -- "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

### Utilitarianism

*"Do that which will bring about the greatest good."*

- How do we define the greatest good?
- Forces us to predict the future
- Can bring great guilt feelings if we fail to foresee consequences
- Bottom line: the end justifies the means

### Utilitarianism

- **Grain of truth:** The greatest good is the glory of God. Therefore, we must obey him in the specifics.

### WWJD: "What would Jesus do?"

- Basically a Christianized version of situation ethics
- Ignores all the specific instructions in the Bible put there for our information
- Ignores the uniqueness of the person and mission of our Lord and Savior

### The Jiminy Cricket Ethic

*"Let your conscience be your guide."*

- Conscience is merely the faculty of moral judgment.
- The principles upon which conscience acts must still be determined.
- Some people have hardened consciences.
- We may not go against conscience, but we must properly inform our conscience.

### Picking from Single-Absolute Systems

- *"Sometimes one of these methods works better than another. You have to evaluate them on a case-by-case basis and pick the one that works best."*
- Pick on what basis? This new basis becomes the new single absolute!

### Systems with Many Absolutes

- Conflicting absolutism
- Graded absolutism (hierarchicalism)

### Conflicting Absolutism

*(Due to the fall,) there are inevitable conflicts in absolutes; therefore, choose the lesser of evils.*

- This implies that sin is unavoidable.
- If sin is unavoidable, then the choice isn't a moral one.
- The Bible teaches that this situation can't happen. (1 Cor. 10:13, Heb. 4:15)

### Graded Absolutism (Hierarchicalism)

*There are real conflicts in absolutes, but they are ordered so that it is not sin to violate a lower one if necessary to keep a higher one.*

- Conflicts not possible, since ethics are rooted in God's nature.
- It masks a single **absolute** absolute that provides the order for the absolutes that really aren't.

### One/Many Absolutes

- Unqualified absolutism

*There are many absolutes that do not conflict when properly understood, all of which find their unity in supreme love to God and love to neighbor as self.*

### Unqualified Absolutism

- Grounded in the revelation of the Bible
- Does not force man to be omniscient; forces him to rely on God to define the greatest good, the highest love, etc.
- No ultimate conflict between our duty and our happiness
- Requires both ethical actions and ethical motives (the highest being love)

### An Ethical Heart

- Can a lecture on ethics make someone ethical?
- Christianity teaches that no one can be truly ethical apart from a change of heart.
- Only actions done with love to God and a desire for his glory are truly ethical.
- Only Jesus Christ can bring about this radical change of heart.

### Resolving Ethical Dilemmas

- Some right choices have agonizingly difficult consequences.
- Some dilemmas are only hypothetical.
- Some dilemmas spring from faulty interpretation of the Bible.
- Positive duties are stewardships to be pursued within the bounds of the "thou shalt nots."
- Fully avail yourself of the wisdom of others and the Bible.

### Conclusion

- The standard ethical systems all have elements of truth but also serious shortcomings.
- Christian ethics provides an explanation for people being ethical as well as for ethical dilemmas.
- Christian ethics provides a justification for ethical authority.
- Christ provides not only a system but enablement to become ethical inside and out.
- Christian ethics is a coherent option in the marketplace of ideas.