

Mind the Moral Gap: A Relational Ethical Framework

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1. Introduction

Ethics talk seems to be everywhere today. Maybe it's because we live in the noughties? Institutional scandals concerning corporations such as WorldCom, Enron, HIH and One.Tel and churches – such as abuse issues – have made us aware of a gap between their noble mission statements and their ignoble practices. There seems to be an erosion of the ethical foundations of our society. It's based on a sense of social erosion or lack of community and trust. Many Australians and Christians sense a gap between our personal values (being good) and our practice (doing good), despite our prosperity (or doing well), as Hugh Mackay points out. These people are primary candidates for Christian socially responsible investment that taps into their sense of wanting to leave an ethical legacy to their children, grandchildren and students.

Many Australians have a flat-earthed view of ethics as mere morality. Our forefathers were picked by the best judges in England and churches were consigned to the role of moral policeman in a convict colony. So, like Pete Cook and Dudley Moore in their satirical skit about Paul's letter to the Ephiscans arriving and ruining an Ephiscan family's plans for a picnic in the sun, many Australians and perhaps Australian Christians think God's a killjoy because they only think in terms of 'thou shalt not's' or negative rules or commands. They don't realise the rules are designed for our delight and freedom to be the creatures we're meant to be as they become second nature to us (Ps 1:2, 112:1, 37:4).

In this context of competing ethical perspectives we need a consistent biblical ethical framework. This provides a process for making ethical judgments and rationally and relationally justifying them. People should be able to articulate their ethical framework clearly, so they are equipped to make everyday ethical decisions, and challenge the flaws in other ethical frameworks pushed on us every day. And also to give an ethical 'answer for the hope that lies within us' – 'with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously of your behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander' (1 Pet 3:15-16).

2. Ethical Frameworks

To examine some alternative ethical frameworks as they might apply to investment and superannuation decisions let's compare John Kleinig's story of Jack paying Jane a visit in hospital and the different ethical theories Jack might use to explain his visit when Jane thanks him. 'That's all right' Jack says:

- 'I was seeking to maximize my own personal pleasure' (hedonist, egoist).

A secular sort of hedonism exercises a strong pull over decisions about retirement, superannuation etc. The feeling is that we've worked hard enough, now it's time to enjoy life and have a pleasure binge. But from the perspective of Christian discipleship and service there is no real retirement, just perhaps a reorientation

towards greater rest as the body slows up (though people are retiring younger and healthier). We still live and work (unpaid) within the priorities of God's kingdom of right relationships.

- 'I thought it would increase the amount of happiness in the world' (utilitarian, means-to-an-end consequentialist). This secular do-gooder tries to maximise society's pleasure over pain but without a high view of human dignity or clear Christian relational goals for their retirement or superannuation.
- 'It increases the species' prospects of survival' (naturalistic, ethical evolutionist). This person thinks capitalism and investment is all about winning and killing the competition, getting the top return for your money.
- 'I was just doing my duty' (deontological, law-abiding citizen). This person will tend to major on negative, 'thou shalt not' criteria for avoiding sinful investments in e.g. alcohol, drugs, pornography. It has trouble providing positive ethical criteria for action or investment.
- 'God commanded me to' (divine command theorist). This is the same as the deontological view but from a more explicit theistic basis of divine duty. However, this may not have much sense of relationship, compassion, joy or Christ-like and Spirit-guided character. It also has difficulty dealing with ethical complexity e.g. investments in companies that are partly tainted by minor (e.g. 5%) involvement in liquor establishments.

What's missing in all of these theories? How would you feel if you were Jane? The visit would have lost all value. It was all so impersonal. Jane, a unique individual made in God's image was invisible. There was no real relationship expressed. Jack could have been talking to an empty bed. Does the visit still have ethical or even emotional value?

You don't have to say anything fancy in that situation. A mere, 'I thought it'd be a bit boring in here by yourself' or 'I just wanted to see how you were doing' would be enough to express genuine care. But behind that could be a whole relational theology based on us being made in God's image to rule and serve creation justly (Gen 1:26-8) and to love and serve each other like Christ did to us (Phil 2: 1-11). The 'good neighbour' view and all the rest had little compassion, unlike the unexpected good neighbour in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). Compare the true story of the good brothel owner who got out of bed and left his cosy home on a cold night when my son's friend, having been refused help to start her car by several respectable people, in desperation went into a brothel and asked for help. The attendant called the boss who came down and jump-started their car.

But compassion by itself is not enough, it needs a moral compass. One of the key points on the Christian moral compass is our view of persons or anthropology. As the Jack and Jane story shows, the link between ethics and anthropology is crucial. Who are Jack and Jane? Commands or rules are always given in relational contexts – Christians believe they come from a personal, relational, trinitarian God. Because commands are about living persons and relationships, they need to be applied flexibly according to relational or covenantal context.

If there is an objective moral order or moral ecology, are we time-bound, biased, self-interested and self-justifying beings able to perceive it and fit in with it? Given the ample evidence of historical and contemporary experience of our constant tendency to turn that moral order to our own ends, we cannot build an ethical system that assumes our objectivity, such as utilitarianism. In the end, because we're time-bound,

only God can be a consequentialist or utilitarian.

A relevant factor of our anthropology and theology at this point is that we are relational beings, made in the image of a relational, trinitarian God of love. Our ethical systems should function within relational communities of accountability. Principles are not to be individually determined, custom made, like designer dresses for Hollywood celebrities on Oscar night. Nor are they simply one size fits all – they are elasticised in a way – applied contextually to see if they fit - but not just by myself, as I can easily fool myself, so I ask someone else, and preferably not the person selling me the outfit – so their fittingness to the context is discerned by the community who can say as in Acts 13 and 15 ‘it seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us’.

The Three Elements of Ethics

To gain an ethical compass we need to do justice to at least three key points on the compass. C S Lewis, the late great writer of the Narnia stories wrote in *Mere Christianity*, pp. 65-7 that making ethical decisions is like:

‘a fleet of ships sailing in formation. The voyage will be a success only, in the first place, if the ships do not collide and get in one another’s way; and secondly if each ship is seaworthy and has her engines in good order. As a matter of fact, you cannot have either of these two things without the other. If the ships keep on having collisions they will not remain seaworthy very long. On the other hand, if their steering gears are out of order they will not be able to avoid collisions. Or, if you like, think of humanity as a band playing a tune. To get a good result you need two things. Each player’s individual instrument must be in tune and also each must come in at the right moment so as to combine with all the others.

But there is one thing we have not yet taken into account. We have not asked where the fleet is trying to get to, or what piece of music the band is trying to play. The instruments might all be in tune and all come in at the right moment, but even so the performance would not be a success if they had been engaged to provide dance music and actually played nothing but Dead Marches. And however well the fleet sailed, its voyage would be a failure if it were meant to reach New York and actually arrived at Calcutta.

Morality, then, seems to be concerned with three things. Firstly, with fair play and harmony between individuals. Secondly, with what might be called tidying up or harmonising the things inside each individual. Thirdly, with the general purpose of human life as a whole: what man is made for: what course the whole fleet ought to be on: what tune the conductor of the band wants it to play.

You may have noticed that modern people are nearly always thinking about the first thing and forgetting the other two. When people say in the newspapers that we are striving for Christian moral standards, they usually mean we are striving for kindness and fair play between nations, and classes, and individuals; that is, they are thinking only of the first thing. When a man says about something he wants to do ‘‘it can’t be wrong because it doesn’t do anyone else any harm,’’ he is thinking only of the first thing. He is thinking it does not matter what his ship is like inside provided that he does not run into the next ship. And it is quite natural, when we start thinking about morality, to begin with the first thing, with social relations. For one thing, the results of bad morality are so obvious and press upon us every day: war and poverty and graft and shoddy work. And also, as long as you stick to the first thing, there is very little disagreement about morality. Almost all people at all times have agreed (in

theory) that human beings ought to be honest and kind and helpful to one another. But though it is natural to begin with all that, if our thinking about morality stops there, we might just as well not have thought at all. Unless we go on to the second thing – the tidying up inside each human being – we are only deceiving ourselves.

What is the good of telling the ships how to steer so as to avoid collisions if, in fact, they are such crazy old tubs that they cannot be steered at all? What is the good of drawing up on paper, rules for social behaviour, if we know that, in fact, our greed, cowardice, ill temper, and self-conceit are going to prevent us from keeping them? I do not mean for a moment that we ought not to think, and think hard, about improvements in our social and economic system. What I do mean is that all that thinking will be mere moonshine unless we realise that nothing but the courage and unselfishness of individuals is ever going to make any system work properly. It is easy enough to remove the particular kinds of graft or bullying that go on under the present system: but as long as men are twisters or bullies they will find some new way of carrying on the old game under the new system. You cannot make men good by law: and without good men you cannot have a good society. That is why we just go on to think of the second thing: of morality inside the individual.

But I do not think that we can stop there either. We are now getting to the point at which different beliefs about the universe lead to different behaviour ... For example, let us go back to the man who says that a thing cannot be wrong unless it hurts some other human being. He quite understands that he must not damage other ships in the convoy, but he honestly thinks that what he does with his own ship is simply his own business. But does it not make a great difference whether his ship is his own property or not? ... whether I am so to speak the landlord of my own mind and body, or only a tenant, responsible to the real landlord? If somebody else made me, for his own purposes, then I shall have a lot of duties which I should not have if I simply belonged to myself. Again, Christianity asserts that every individual human being is going to live for ever, and this may be either true or false. Now there are a good many things that would not be worth bothering about if I were going to live only seventy years, but which I had better bother about very seriously if I am going to live forever. Perhaps my bad temper or my jealousy are gradually getting worse – so gradually that the increase in 70 years will not be very noticeable. But it might be absolute hell in a million years: in fact, if Christianity is true, Hell is the precisely correct technical term for what it would be

It seems then, that if we are to think about morality, we must think of all three departments: relations between man and man: things inside each man: and relations between man and the power that made him. We can all cooperate in the first one. Disagreements begin with the second and become serious with the third. It is in dealing with the third that the main differences between Christian and non-Christian morality come out.'

(This is very helpful. But there's one element CS Lewis, writing soon after World War II, forgot. It's the ocean, the environment. The voyage wouldn't be a success if the ships dumped oil and garbage in the ocean or carried noxious weeds or ecologically destructive pests to the rest of the world. This is very significant for Corporate Social Responsibility, Triple Bottom Line Accounting and Socially Responsible investment).

Returning to our three aspects of a mixed or comprehensive ethical theory. In table form we can see these three elements of ethics as:

Commands	Rules	Principles	Social	Deontological
Character	Roles/Responsibilities	Persons	Personal	Virtue ethics
Consequences	Results	Purpose	Eschatological	Teleological

So, speaking more philosophically or technically our three primary ethical building blocks are: deontology (from Greek *dei* – must or duty), virtue (Greek *virtus* – skill, strength, excellence) and teleology (Greek *telos* – end, purpose or goal). We can outline these using different alliterations: acts, agents and aftermath (Graham Cole) and also commands, character and consequences or rules, roles and results (Preece)¹.

Deontological ethics deal with acts in themselves, the principles (more general e.g. love God and man, care and development of earth) commands, laws or rules (more specific). These are normally absolute principles, which may be drawn from revelation from different religions' scriptures or from the Bible for Christians or from reasoning as in some kind of universally accessible natural law (Aristotle and much Roman Catholic ethics).

Virtue or Character ethics deal with the qualities, traits and motivations of the character or agent, whether individual or institutional. Motives and attitudes make a big difference. For example, people are killed quite regularly and accidentally by an agent driving a car, but it is much more culpable if a driver is intentionally driving to harm a pedestrian. It is difficult discerning the evidence of our own or someone else's character or reliably working out our own or their motives or attitudes. As Jeremiah 17:9 (cf Hosea 10:2) says 'the heart is deceitful above all things'. It is not enough just to rely on having the right attitude. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. The internal and more subjective dimension of ethics needs balancing by the external and more objective commands/rules and consequences/results. Further, the development of right character on a continuous, not just occasional or ad hoc attitudinal basis, requires what Stanley Hauerwas calls *a Community of Character* in his book by that name.² Again, it should "seem good to the Holy Spirit and to *us*", not just *me*.

Consequential (teleological) ethics are focused on the results of an action. Utilitarianism is an extreme form of consequentialism which excludes the other aspects of ethics. Utilitarianism "focuses on consequences or goals of action, not character (virtue) nor divine commands or any absolute rules."³ Peter Singer and others offer a modification of utilitarianism, called "preference utilitarianism", which consists in "maximizing the preferences or choices of the greatest number of all rational, choosing persons and minimizing the pain of all sentient (feeling) creatures"⁴

From the outset I want to affirm the necessity of all three elements of the ethical process. It is reductionistic to attempt to sift one out and use it exclusively. It's a bit like saying that the Mona Lisa is 5 gallons of brown paint, one of red, two of blue etc. Ethics is a multi-dimensional art.

It is also worth considering how interdependent the three categories are, and what interconnections can be made between them. For example, there are important links between deontological and utilitarian ethics summed up in the biblical concept of 'you reap what you sow' (cf and contrast the Hindu/Buddhist concept of karma):

some consequences are not just a matter of chance. Acts that are bad in themselves can be expected to have bad effects of a particular kind that is not

¹ See GR Preece ed. *Rethinking Peter Singer*, IVP, 2002, 144.

² Uni. Of Notre Dame Press, 1982.

³ Preece, *Rethinking Peter Singer*, IVP, 2002, 19.

⁴ *Ibid*, 19.

just accidental... There is a rational, conceptual link between them and their results. These consequences are a sign of what was wrong with the act in the first place.⁵

In sum, given these factors, we should give due emphasis to commands, character and consequences or principles, persons and purposes to have an adequate ethical framework.

⁵ Mary Midgley, quoted in Preece, *Rethinking Peter Singer*, 28.