

How to Make Ethical Decisions in a Complex World

Author: Patrick T. Smith

[Share](#) |

By Patrick T. Smith, Ph.D. (cand.)



A well-known and well-worn joke shared regularly when I was in grade school goes: "How do you clean Dracula's teeth?" The response: "Very carefully." When I think about the question, "How do we make ethical decisions in a complex world?" the response of the childhood joke somehow seems appropriate.

To be sure, there are many moral questions whose answers are very clear. For instance, we must not torture innocent people just for the fun of it. The immorality of this activity ought to be beyond dispute. Yet, we face many pressing ethical questions in our contemporary context that are difficult, and defy simple and unreflective responses. Unfortunately, we live in an age where many important ethical discussions are not thought through carefully and too often are reduced to click... s. When this happens in the Christian community, we are woefully unprepared to help ourselves and equip others to make good ethical decisions in a complex world.

The Bible in Christian Ethics

Many orthodox Christians correctly affirm the Bible, first and foremost, as the inspired narrative of God's loving plan of redemption for His creation. Does the Bible also help with ethical decision-making? Certainly. Divine revelation through Scripture has a primary role in Christian ethics. We must, however, take care not to misunderstand the nature of Scripture, nor to misuse the Bible in ethical decision-making. We must not think of the Bible as simply a book of moral precepts to be mined for making ethical decisions. If we do so, I think we miss its point.

Further, this approach increases the likelihood that we will err or misuse the Bible in ethics. The moral prescriptions of the Bible are authoritative for the Christian community when they are properly interpreted and appropriately applied in our contemporary setting.

Even with the high view of Scripture held by most evangelical Christians, many matters are not nearly so straightforward that one can find a verse or passage containing direct instruction on what to do in a given situation. Take, for example, the medical treatment of terminally ill or imminently dying patients. On one hand, Christian theology recognizes that human life is valuable and a tremendous good of which we are to be faithful stewards. On the other hand, it also recognizes that our human existence this side of the new heavens and new earth is not the highest good and that there is a time to die. Hence, it is often complicated to determine on

purely biblical or theological grounds exactly when someone should forego various kinds of therapeutic treatment at the end of life.

Further, "there are no direct discussions about war, genetic engineering, environmental pollution" and a number of other contemporary issues. So there is a deliberative process that must take place to discern how prescriptive biblical principles may be applied in complex situations. This is why the discipline of hermeneutics is so important in all facets of Christian discipleship. Regardless, Scripture has a prime place in Christian ethical reflection.

Complexity of Doing Ethics

Ethics is complex for several reasons. First, we are fallen creatures living in a fallen world (Gen. 3). As Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. notes, "sin distorts our character, a central feature of our very humanity. Sin corrupts powerful human capacities, thought, emotion, speech and act, so that they become centers of attack on others or of defection or neglect." This certainly in no small way affects how we live and the ethical decisions we make.

A second factor is that "we sometimes encounter competing ethical claims" (more on this below). Third, our individual decisions are often affected by a "plurality of publics." In other words, a number of people or groups have a legitimate stake in ethical decisions. To whom is one primarily responsible in making decisions? Last, the empirical facts may not be easy to discern or ascertain. It is widely recognized that in applied ethics many moral judgments hinge on non-moral facts.

To illustrate this last point, consider the ethics of organ transplantation. Of course, many take it to be morally unacceptable to harvest the vital organs of people who are not yet dead for the sake of saving others' lives. Since "successful transplantation requires that organs be removed from cadavers shortly after death to avoid organ damage due to loss of oxygen, there has been keen interest in knowing precisely when people are dead so that organs can be removed." And determining this is an empirical matter once the theoretical criteria have been established. Therefore, the empirical facts are crucial in assessing the morality of organ donation in a particular case.

Criteria for Making Ethical Decisions

In the midst of such complexity, the real, perhaps inevitable, possibility exists that ethical dilemmas will arise. An ethical dilemma can be understood as "a conflict between two or more value- or virtue-driven interests." In such circumstances, it is important to have some tools that can assist us in making sound ethical decisions. The following model represents just one such framework.

1. **Gather the Facts.** In many cases, issues are resolved by becoming clear on the details of the case. We need to ask, "What is the context of the ethical deliberation?" Given that we make ethical decisions in specific circumstances, if we don't have the facts, moral assessment is not possible.
2. **Determine the Ethical Issues.** Sometimes we face situations that present personal and professional difficulty, but may not constitute an ethical dilemma. Here, it is important to identify as specifically as possible what are the competing moral interests that stand in need of resolution.
3. **Determine What Virtues and Principles Have a Bearing on the Case.** If the conflict we are addressing actually is an ethical dilemma, then, of course, there are competing values or principles that underlie it. After identifying these principles, the task is to determine which ought to be afforded more weight in the context where unavoidable moral conflicts emerge.
 This approach, sometimes known as graded absolutism or ethical hierarchialism, sees moral rules and principles as *prima facie*. This simply means that at first glance or all things being equal, these rules carry moral obligations in most situations, but may be overridden by other ethical considerations in situations where there are genuine moral dilemmas. "Clearly," for a Christian ethic "biblical principles are to be weighted more heavily."
4. **List the Alternatives.** A very important part of this model is to ask: "What are the courses of action that may be taken?" When this is done, we'll see that some decisions eliminate themselves. We should always strive to be as creative as possible to get around a moral dilemma. The more alternatives that can be generated, the better likelihood we have of discovering an option that minimizes the potential negative consequences of our decisions.
5. **Compare the Alternatives With the Virtues and Principles Employed.** It may well be the case that most, if not all but one or two alternatives, can be ruled out when we apply the relevant principles and values to them. "In order to make a clear decision, [we] must weight one or more virtues/values more heavily than others." One worry with the graded absolutist approach or ethical hierarchialism is that some may simply "use the notion of *prima facie* rules as a smokescreen for picking and choosing which rules [they] wish to adhere to in any situation."
 In order to avoid this scenario, certain conditions must be met when overriding a *prima facie* rule: (1) Justifiable public reasons must be offered in favor of the overriding principle; (2) It should be done as a last resort; (3) "We should seek the action that least violates the principle being overridden;" and (4) The overridden principle should leave "moral traces," which is an awareness of the moral weight concerning the decision being made.
6. **Consider the Consequences.** If one has not been able to completely rule out possible alternatives when applying the rules, then the positive and negative consequences of the decision should be determined and assessed as well as can be done.
7. **Make a Decision Consistent With a Christian Ethic.** We must avoid the "paralysis of analysis" and make a decision. Sometimes this means choosing the best available alternative even if not ideal. Whatever decision is to be made, it should be as consistent with a Christian ethic as humanly possible given the unique features of the scenario.

To consider how these steps can be applied in a concrete situation, take the example of a man hiding Jews during World War II. The facts are that soldiers are tracking down people of Jewish background and unjustifiably executing them. The man is asked in a very forthright manner if he knows their whereabouts. That individual has the opportunity to protect human lives by concealing the location of Jews on his property. The ethical issue here is that there is a moral conflict between telling the truth and saving a life when it is in one's power and ability to do so.

In determining what virtues and principles bear on this case, it is important to reflect on the biblical teaching that God is a God of truth. He expects His people to be truthful and lying lips are an abomination to God (Proverbs 12:22). Also, God places a high value on human life and expects us to do the same (Matthew 22:37-39). When we have an opportunity to save the life of another or to prevent evil from coming upon others, we have a responsibility to do so.

What are the alternatives for a person in this situation? To tell the truth or deceive in order to protect human life, it would seem. (For the example employed here to illustrate how the criteria may be used, let's assume no other alternatives are available.) When comparing the alternatives, it seems that there is an unavoidable conflict. The question now becomes, "Which of the moral principles, both deeply ingrained in Christian ethics, ought to be afforded more weight?"

When one considers the consequences, it is almost certain that human life will be lost unjustifiably by revealing the location of the Jews. Some may decide that while lying is not ideal, the principle of saving a life through some form of deception is morally permissible, given the situation. However, these same individuals should also stress that it is morally imperative not to make this a common practice for the sake of mere convenience. Deception should only be chosen when there is an unavoidable conflict with grave consequences in the balance.

Character and Community

It is important to know that ethical decision-making cannot be reduced simply to identifying and applying rules and principles. A crucial part of Christian ethics is about determining what we ought to do in this way. Applying guidelines, while important, is only part of a proper Christian response. Just as important is reflection on, and development of, the kind of persons we are to be. Christians must strike a balance between what some have labeled decisionist ethics and virtue ethics. The former category provides answers to the question, "What ought I to do?" whereas the latter addresses the question, "What kind of person should I be?" Most certainly, character counts.

Moreover, ethics is a profoundly communal exercise. We are created as social beings. Certain shared moral responsibilities and moral bonds are moral requisites of genuine community. It is difficult, indeed, to overstate our interdependence with one another. Therefore, we most often do not make ethical decisions in isolation. Nor do we grow in character apart from the

community that helps form and shape it. Kyle Fedler describes these points nicely when he writes:

"[T]he development of Christian character is absolutely central to the Christian life. To be a Christian is to be shaped by the values, commitments, and worldview of the community of faith to such a degree that one begins to internalize certain virtues and dispositions.... While belief and action are vital to being a Christian, one must also allow oneself to be shaped and molded into a particular kind of person, to develop a set of virtues that reflect what we as Christians claim to believe about the world."

This is why being a member of a local church body is so important for followers of Christ. In the context of the Christian community, we can see the transforming power of the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of God's people. Making ethical decisions in a complex world is not merely a deliberative process, though it is certainly no less. We make ethical decisions in the midst of complexity in a holistic way that includes with our mental deliberation the appropriate kind of character that is developed by reflecting on God's Word and His world amidst the community of believers (Romans 12:1-2).

© Copyright 2010 Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. All rights reserved.
Permission granted to FMCIC to post on website