This second edition has been revised and expanded to remain current with the most recent scholarship. It includes new research throughout, new material on stem cell research, and updated material on homosexuality and on genetic engineering.

"A welcome updating and expansion of a text I have long considered essential for anyone wishing to engage the moral collapse of contemporary culture with biblically grounded truth. The Feinbergs provide a timely and effective resource for dealing with the most crucial issues of our day, and they do it in ways as appealing as they are compelling."

Daniel R. Heimbach, Professor of Christian Ethics, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, Truth, Sex, and Morality

"Since the first edition, changes in the world have only made this book’s title more apt. Again and again, science fiction has become science fact; and with masterful theological discernment, Ethics for a Brave New World helps us to make sense of what is happening. It does a tremendous service by gathering and interpreting an ocean of literature on key issues of our day. Readers will come away informed about the issues, conversant with the multifaceted debates that swirl around these vital challenges, and equipped and inspired to engage them in a way that glorifies God."

John Kilner, Forman Chair of Christian Ethics and Theology, Trinity International University

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In 1993 Crossway published Ethics for a Brave New World. Though that first edition is still in print, for a long time it has needed an update. We knew that, but life got in the way. Three major events have happened to our family in the last twenty-six years, all of which made it virtually impossible even to envision revising this text, let alone actually to do it.

The first event occurred in August of 1995. Our father, Charles Lee Feinberg, went to be with the Lord after many years of declining health. Second, Paul had diabetes, and over the ensuing years the disease began to take its toll. The first major complication was heart problems, and that was followed some years later with kidney problems. Still, Paul “soldiered on” faithfully, teaching a full load at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School as well as traveling and serving the church around the world. But the increasing challenges of his disease made it unthinkable that we could together revise this book. Very sadly and unexpectedly, in February 2004, after Paul had hip surgery, his heart and kidneys gave out and he entered into the presence of our Lord.

Third, my wife Pat’s Huntington’s Disease has continued to develop over the years since we first wrote this book. In the last eight to ten years there have been major complications in her condition as the disease takes its toll. After many years of caring for her needs, it became increasingly clear that I no longer had the physical strength to do everything she needs. With great reluctance, in November 2007 we moved Pat into a skilled nursing home where she is now. Her condition continues to deteriorate; despite advances in research on her disease, there is still no known cure.

However, time and culture move on, and the great ethical challenges of our day haven’t gone away. After Paul’s passing, I decided to shoulder the task of revising this book. I originally underestimated the kind and amount of changes that needed to be reflected in a revision, and I underestimated the sheer volume of literature I needed to read in order to be current on each topic. The result is not just that the task took longer than expected but
that it required much more rewriting and generating of completely new material. Part of the reason is that so much more information is available than when we first wrote. The Internet didn’t exist when we wrote the first edition. Because of data available through the Internet, I have found answers to good questions students have posed over the years. For many years I had no idea of how to find such information.

As is always the case, there is more to say than one can possibly include in a volume like this. Hard choices had to be made, and they included not only material to add but also parts of the first volume that needed to be left out. The chapters are configured a bit differently to make room for new information and to allow the inclusion of a completely new section (in chapter 12) on stem cell technology. As much as possible, I have attempted to maintain Paul’s “voice” in the chapters he originally wrote. To one degree or another I believe I have succeeded. I think Paul would be pleased with the whole book, even if he wouldn’t have made each of the changes I have made.

No one alone can complete a task as involved as revising a text of this sort. I have received help from many different quarters, and at least some should be acknowledged. I have been greatly helped by many able student assistants in the gathering of bibliography, the checking for accuracy of various bibliographical data that appear in endnotes, and even at times offering editorial comments on portions of the manuscript. Most noteworthy is Shawn Bawulski, who also gave much help with “computer matters.” Then, I have been greatly blessed and helped by the comments on various chapters by my colleague Ben Mitchell. I think I have accommodated most, if not all, of his suggestions, and the manuscript is better because of it. Mistakes that still remain, of course, belong to me.

A special word of appreciation is due to the administration of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (TEDS) for granting a sabbatical and leave of absence during which much of the work was done. This coincided with the move of my wife into the nursing home; without the graciousness and support of TEDS I don’t know how either finding her a proper nursing home (and moving her in) or completing much of the revision of this text would have happened. Thanks are also very much due Crossway Books. Without their skillful handling of this book, it wouldn’t still be in print after all these years. They have been very excited and most supportive of this revised edition. Marvin Padgett and Allan Fisher have both greatly encouraged me to do this revised edition. And, a special word of thanks to Bill Deckard for his exceptional skills and care in editing the manuscript.
Preface to Second Edition

I also want to thank family members for their support of this new edition. Before asking Crossway about revising the text, I asked Iris, Paul's wife, if she would be willing for me to do this. She has been unwaveringly positive about the project, as have other family members, and for that I am most appreciative.

Finally, I must thank God for giving me the strength and time to do this work. There have been many challenges along the way, and many of them could have completely derailed this project. That hasn't happened, thanks to God's graciousness! It is my hope and prayer that this edition will accurately reflect him and will allow his voice on matters of morality to be heard clearly at a time when anything remotely close to biblical ethics is increasingly drowned out by the growing immorality of our age. To the extent that this text helps readers to hear God's voice on the great moral issues of our day, give him all the praise!

John S. Feinberg
January 2010
What makes good acts good and evil acts evil? If Nazi soldiers ask if I am hiding Jews in my attic, is it immoral to lie in order to safeguard those I am protecting? How do I know my moral rules are correct? How would I prove that Christian ethics are binding on non-Christians?

At one time or another most of us have wrestled with questions like these. One could easily study such issues for a lifetime, and yet they are only a sample of the many concerns facing moralists as they try to construct a theory of ethics that will guide daily decision making.

In this chapter we want to isolate the major questions that arise in thinking about ethics and note various responses to them. Moreover, we want to set forth the theoretical framework for discussing the practical issues handled in the rest of the book. We turn first to definitions and distinctions used in discussions about decision making.

FOUNDATIONAL DEFINITIONS AND DISTINCTIONS

*Ethics and Morality*

Terms like “ethics,” “morals,” and “morality” are often used synonymously. The same is true of “ethical” and “moral.” In this chapter (and the book as a whole), we shall frequently do the same. To act ethically or morally means to act in accord with accepted rules of conduct that cover moral (as opposed to non-moral) matters. To have ethics or a morality is to hold a set of beliefs about what is good and evil, commanded and forbidden. To “do” ethics or moral philosophy is to reflect on such issues as the meaning of terms such as “good” and “ought” and the method of justifying ethical rules.

On the other hand, “ethics,” “morality,” etc., are terms that are not always used interchangeably. For example, ethics is often defined as the
A branch of philosophy that reflects on such issues as the source of moral norms and how to justify one's rules for governing action in moral matters. Morals or morality may refer simply to the specific set of norms or rules by which people should live.\(^1\)

Some define ethics as the study of morals, but that does not explain what morality is \textit{per se}. Typically, the concept of morality is understood in one of two ways. For some, the point of morality is to note those things that are good (i.e., valuable or beneficial) and even to define “good” itself. Others maintain that the focus of morality is what is right (moral as opposed to immoral) and what ought to be done (i.e., one’s duty). Each emphasis fits with a certain kind of ethical judgment that may be made. \textit{Judgments of value} are judgments about what is good and bad, desirable or undesirable. \textit{Judgments of obligation} focus on what is right and wrong and on what one must do or forgo.

Taken together, the theory of value and the theory of obligation comprise the whole field of ethics. Some theories of ethics focus more on value than on obligation, though each ethical theory usually addresses both issues at least implicitly.\(^2\) In this book, our focus will be more on matters of obligation than on matters of value. That is, our emphasis will be to answer what one is morally obligated to do or refrain from doing. Of course, as we address that question in regard to each topic, we shall frequently note the values that are upheld by fulfilling moral obligations. In fact, we shall often argue that a certain course of action is obligatory at least in part because it upholds a certain value (e.g., sanctity of life or justice).

\textbf{Normative Ethics and Meta-Ethics}

A second way to divide the field of ethics is to split it between normative ethics and meta-ethics. Normative ethics deals with which actions are morally right and obligatory. Normative theories about what is right and obligatory presuppose some notion about the meaning of concepts such as right and good. Determining their meaning, however, falls within the domain of meta-ethics. Meta-ethics itself can be subdivided as follows: (1) discussions about the meaning of ethical terms and concepts such as right, ought, and good; and (2) considerations of how ethical judgments (whether of value or of obligation) can be justified or established.

In this chapter we discuss both meta-ethical and normative concerns. In the book as a whole, we handle primarily normative questions as we delineate actions that are morally right and wrong in regard to the various topics discussed.
Descriptive vs. Prescriptive Language

Descriptive language tells what is the case and what is done. Prescriptive language commands what ought to be done; it sets forth moral obligation. Prescriptive language includes terms such as “must,” “should,” and “ought.” Prescriptions are often stated in the imperative mood (e.g., “thou shalt not steal”). Descriptive language includes terms such as “is,” “had,” and “happened.” When descriptive language is used, the intent is not normally to make moral judgments or commands.

The two kinds of language can be illustrated as follows: (1) John and Mary engaged in premarital sex; (2) John and Mary should not engage in premarital sex. Sentence (1) reports what John and Mary did. It makes no moral judgments about right or wrong, nor does it encourage or discourage any kind of action. On the other hand, sentence (2) states a moral duty (it prescribes a course of action), but it also implies an evaluation of a particular action. That is, whoever utters the sentence as a command presumably does so (at least in part) because he makes the judgment that premarital sex is not good (morally and/or otherwise).

We raise this distinction because sometimes it is assumed that an act is morally right and even obligatory just because it is being done. On the contrary, merely describing what is done does not in itself set forth moral obligation. In fact, ethicists debate whether it is possible to move from statements of fact to statements of value and vice versa. That is, can one derive statements of *ought* from statements of *is*? A detailed examination of that issue is beyond the scope of this work. However, we raise these issues to remind readers to take seriously the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive language in ethics.

Moral Responsibility and Freedom of Action

Moral philosophers commonly agree that in assessing moral praise or blame for an action, one must consider whether the agent acted freely or not. The principle involved is: no one is morally guilty for failing to do what he could not do or for doing what he could not fail to do. That is, moral responsibility presupposes freedom of action. Moral “oughts” imply that the agent can do his duty. Thus, if someone points a gun at me and says he will shoot me if I do not rob a bank, I am likely to rob the bank. It is my duty not to steal, but presumably there is also a prima facie duty to preserve my life. In this case, I apparently cannot obey both duties. I disobey the duty not to steal, but I do so under constraint, not freely.
In neither law nor morality am I held responsible as I would be if I had robbed the bank without compulsion.4

**Morally Permissible, Morally Obligatory, Morally Supererogatory**

These three concepts are very important in determining what may or may not or should or should not be done in particular situations. These notions are especially helpful when actions are not covered by explicit (or even implicit) moral absolutes. Many of the practical issues covered in this book involve such actions.

To say that an action is *morally permissible* means one may do it or refrain from it without incurring any moral guilt because the action breaks no rule. Obviously, mandated acts are also permitted, and refraining is also allowed if the act is forbidden. However, the notion of morally permissible acts primarily refers to deeds neither mandated nor forbidden.

To say an action is *morally obligatory* means there is a moral command that mandates it or forbids it. The morally obligatory must be done (or avoided), and failure to fulfill moral obligation brings moral censure. While there is debate about which acts are morally required, it is agreed that moral duties may not be ignored without incurring moral rebuke.

*Morally supererogatory* deeds are not duties but are praiseworthy, because they produce good that goes beyond what duty demands. The concept may be illustrated as follows: it is a *prima facie* duty to preserve life, and that duty includes preserving one’s own life. If I can save someone else’s endangered life without jeopardizing my life, moral philosophers would usually say it is my duty to do so. On the other hand, if saving another’s life endangers my life or would cause me to lose my life, I am not morally obligated to try to save the other person’s life. If my life is endangered, but I try to rescue another person anyway, my attempt goes above and beyond the call of duty. My act is morally permissible but not morally obligatory. It is also a work of supererogation, an act beyond the call of duty. Suppose, then, that I do not know how to swim, but I see a child drowning in a river. If I try to save her, under those circumstances my act is not my duty but it is an act of supererogation. Even if I fail to rescue her, my attempt still goes beyond the call of duty (a supererogatory work). If I lose my life in the process (regardless of whether I save the drowning child), my sacrifice is supererogatory. What makes an act supererogatory is not whether the person doing it succeeds or fails to do what was intended. It is that the act goes above and beyond what duty demands.5
In recent years, there has been an interesting interchange in the literature over one’s duties to people at a distance (geographically). Am I morally obligated to help people in need who live far from me? That is, if I see a neighbor’s child apparently drowning in a pool, and I know how to swim, ethicists universally would say that I am obligated to help the child. On the other hand, there are people in Africa and Asia who are starving to death. I have resources that could be used to feed many of these people. Several questions arise: is it my duty to give money to feed them, or would my help be an act of supererogation? Regardless of the answer to that question, am I required to continue giving financial help to feed starving people even if doing so means I cannot feed my own family? While some might claim that it is my duty to do this, others, including ourselves, would say that giving financial aid to such people is morally permissible, but not morally obliged, as long as I use enough of those resources to meet the needs of my own family. Caring for my family’s needs is morally obligatory, and a case can be made that giving some help to feed the starving is, too. However, meeting my family’s needs and then using the rest of my resources to help feed the starving is an act of supererogation.

Those who think it is my duty to continue giving financial aid when I cannot meet my own financial needs often appeal to biblical teaching about sacrificing to help and serve others. In no way would we deny that biblical teaching encourages people to sacrifice. However, that doesn’t mean one is required to do every form of sacrifice and every sacrificial act possible. For example, suppose that I could free any prisoner who is scheduled to be executed by offering to take his place. It would be a great sacrifice for me to do so, but am I required to make this sacrifice? It is hard to imagine that either Christian or non-Christian ethicists would say I am obligated to do this. And, even if I were somehow obligated to intervene in this way, I could not be obligated to save more than one prisoner. One cannot be obligated to do what one is not free to do.

Similarly, while there is an obligation to give of our financial means so that starving people in our country and other parts of the world can be fed, the degree of financial sacrifice incumbent on one individual cannot require him or her to liquidate all of his or her financial holdings and give it to help feed the needy. The reason that such a sacrifice isn’t required is that to do it would insure that one couldn’t meet the financial obligations of oneself and one’s family. And, surely we are required to meet our financial obligations. So, if I give away all of my resources to feed the hungry, I won’t have enough to care for my family, but I am obligated to care for my family. Since I cannot
meet both obligations, I can’t be required to make such a sacrifice. However, I can meet my family’s obligations and help some people who are starving, so I should. To do so may require that I have to forego a planned vacation or anticipated purchase. Such a sacrifice seems reasonable to expect. To give so much of my resources that I cannot meet my family’s needs might be judged by some as a work of supererogation. Others, however, would view it as a failure to meet my moral obligations to my family.

The net result is that while Scripture encourages us to sacrifice to help others in need, not every form of sacrifice is enjoined on everyone. This whole discussion should underscore the incredible generosity of Christ in sacrificing his life for everyone so that their sins might be forgiven. That was a total act of supererogation; dying for our sins was in no way Christ’s duty or obligation!

In this book our concern is to discover moral obligation in regard to each topic discussed. In some cases it will be difficult to specify a moral absolute that covers the issue. In those instances our goal will be to present as carefully and clearly as possible the kinds of acts that are morally permissible. In discovering the morally obligatory and permissible, acts that are morally supererogatory become evident.

What Makes an Agent Moral in Doing an Act?

How does one know if he is being moral or immoral in his actions? Without an answer to this question, sinners may think they are saints, and saints may be tormented by doubts about their moral rectitude. The first step in addressing this issue is to distinguish it from the question of what makes an act moral or immoral (an issue for a later section). Even if one knows a particular act is morally good, it is still proper to ask if the one doing the act has acted morally.

Two answers, though often heard, are wrong. First, some answer that an agent is moral if he does an act that is morally good or refrains from doing a morally evil act. This answer does not emphasize motivations or intentions for doing an act, but merely notes that the agent did what the law demanded. If this sounds familiar, it should, for the Lord frequently rebuked the Pharisees for adopting this approach. They were very careful to conform their actions externally to the law, but Jesus was clear that mere external conformity to the law did not gain eternal reward, nor was it morally acceptable. Likewise, in the OT the Lord frequently stressed that he was not interested in mere outward conformity to the law; he wanted a proper
heart attitude (cf. Hos 6:6). Scripture is not alone in rejecting mere external conformity to the law as the prerequisite for acting morally. Traditionally, philosophers and theologians have agreed that something else is required.

A second problematic answer is that one acts morally if good comes from what he does (consequences are the key). This may sound like utilitarianism, but it is not. For some utilitarians it is one’s duty to act so as to maximize the greatest good for the greatest number. So for them the results of an act determine whether the act is morally good or bad. However, even they would admit that what makes the agent moral in acting is not that good was maximized by his action, but that he intended to do his duty (in this case, the duty was to maximize good). Hence, for utilitarians and non-utilitarians alike, consequences are not what make the agent moral in his action.

Is it true that consequences are not the key for determining the morality of the agent? We think so. Our reasoning is best illustrated as follows. Suppose someone sees a child drowning in a swimming pool and tries to rescue him just because he needs help and because it is right to help. Suppose as well the attempt fails, and the child drowns. On this theory of what it means to be moral, the would-be rescuer did not act morally, because the child died. Surely that conclusion is unacceptable. Likewise, suppose someone robs a bank, and isn’t apprehended. Because of the attempted robbery, the bank installs a better security system. As a result, everyone who comes to the bank will be safer, and money deposited in the bank will be better protected. On this theory of what it means to be moral when acting, the thief did a harmful act, but he cannot be considered immoral, since good ultimately came from this incident. Examples like these should convince readers that what makes agents moral when they act is not the results of their action.

What, then, does make an agent moral in doing an act? We believe a combination of three factors is involved in assessing moral praise or blame. First, the agent must have acted freely, as already argued. If someone conforms to the moral law under compulsion, he is not considered moral. Likewise, if he disobeys the moral law, but is forced to do so, he should not be assessed moral blame. Moral responsibility involves freedom of action, so whether someone acts morally or immorally can be determined only when he acts freely.

Second, moral praise or blame depends heavily on the agent’s motives for doing what he did. There are many possible motivations for action, but we follow Immanuel Kant’s understanding of this matter. According to Kant, one may act from a desire to do one’s duty, or one may act to further
one's own interests. Acting from a sense of duty (i.e., solely because the act is right to do and is one's obligation) is acting morally. Acting from self-interest is acting prudentially (wisely), but not morally. Consider the store owner who charges everyone the same price and does not overcharge an inexperienced customer. He may refrain from overcharging because it is right to do, but he might do so because it is to his own advantage in the long run to be fair in his dealings. If he is not fair, word will get around that he takes advantage of unwitting customers, and business will suffer. According to Kant, the merchant who charges fair prices out of a sense of duty acts morally. The one who has fair prices to achieve some further personal benefit acts prudentially (wisely), but not morally.

Motivation, then, is crucial in determining whether someone acts morally, but finally, for an agent to act morally, he must do an act that is morally right to do. It is not enough to act from a sense of duty if one misjudges what his duty is. Even if an agent freely acts solely motivated by duty, he doesn’t act morally if he does an immoral act. Depending on one’s normative ethical theory, some acts will be prescribed as right and others forbidden as wrong. The list of right and wrong acts, obligatory and forbidden acts, may vary from theory to theory. Whatever deeds one’s theory stipulates as right and wrong, the agent can act morally only if he does an act that is right to do.

In sum, an agent acts morally if he acts freely, does an act that is right to do, and does it with the sole motivation of doing his duty.

SURVEY OF ETHICAL SYSTEMS

Though ethical theories generally agree about the matters already discussed, nothing said so far presents any actual system. In this section we survey the basic kinds of theories available. Ethicists often like to group individual theories into broad categories. This can help understanding, but it can also be very frustrating. Frustration arises because authors categorize theories differently. Confusion begins to lift, however, once one recognizes that each category scheme is structured to respond to some critical question in ethics.

To illustrate this point, Edward Long (A Survey of Christian Ethics), William Frankena (Ethics), and Norman Geisler (Ethics: Alternatives and Issues) each discuss and classify a variety of theories. Each scheme differs, and that can be confusing. However, each scheme responds to a specific ethical question. Long’s category scheme emphasizes answers to the question “What is the
source of ethical norms?” Frankena’s organization addresses more the issue of what makes good actions good and evil actions evil. Geisler’s schema centers on how many ethical norms there are and how they relate. All three questions are very important, but they are not identical.10

Our desire is to discuss theories from the perspectives of the three questions mentioned. However, we must first note several other distinctions that form the bases for classifying ethical theories. The distinctions are between naturalistic and non-naturalistic theories and between cognitivist and non-cognitivist theories. Both distinctions relate to questions about meaning and justification of ethical terms and judgments.

**Naturalism and Non-naturalism**

Naturalistic ethical theories claim that ethical terms can be defined in terms of non-ethical ones and that ethical claims can be translated into factual ones. Thus, naturalistic theories hold that ethical sentences assert some fact (e.g., empirical or metaphysical) and that the terms in them can be defined in non-ethical terms. For example, one theory may define “good” as “being conducive to harmonious happiness,” while another understands “good” as referring to whatever God commands.11 Thus, “murder is evil” may simply be a veiled assertion (for a divine command theory) that “God commands us not to commit murder” or (on a different definition of “good”) that “murder is not conducive to harmonious happiness.” The claim about happiness is open to verification or falsification through empirical means, whereas the assertion about God’s commands is open to justification through what might be called metaphysical reasoning. As to justifying ethical claims, according to naturalistic theories, one should be able to justify them the same way one justifies any other statement of fact (by empirical investigation or by a priori reasoning).

Non-naturalists think ethical terms such as “good” and “ought” are not definable in non-ethical terms. In fact, they hold that some of these terms are indefinable or simple and unanalyzable, just as yellowness or pleasantness are. G. E. Moore thought this about “good”; Henry Sidgwick thought it about “ought.”12 In addition, for non-naturalists, ethical and value judgments are true or false, but they are not justified as such by empirical observation or metaphysical reasoning. Typically, non-naturalists say that basic judgments are self-evident and can be known only by intuition. Non-naturalists, then, are often intuitionists.
Cognitivism and Non-cognitivism

The distinction between cognitivism and non-cognitivism in ethics concerns the meaning of ethical terms and judgments, but beyond that it emphasizes the difference between theories that claim moral judgments are matters of knowledge and those that say they are not. Cognitivists think ethical judgments state facts that may be verified or falsified. Hence, ethical judgments are items of knowledge. Since cognitivists believe this about purported facts that are natural or non-natural, both ethical naturalism and ethical non-naturalism are cognitivist theories.

For non-cognitivists, ethical statements do not assert any kind of fact. They are meaningful, but not as raising items of knowledge. According to non-cognitivists, ethical judgments may be used in one of several ways. Emotivists hold that moral utterances merely vent an emotion or express an attitude. Thus, to say murder is wrong is to express a negative attitude toward it (“I don’t like murder”), but in so doing one is not asserting anything about whether murder really is or is not good or bad. Prescriptivists think ethical judgments do more than express emotions, but they do not regard them as statements of fact. Instead, they interpret them as expressing a command. Thus, “murder is wrong” means something like “you must not commit murder.” Of course, this says nothing about justifying this prescription as proper. Prescriptivism doesn’t even suggest whether commands are justifiable. It simply holds that moral utterances should be understood as merely giving a command. Finally, for non-cognitivists ethical claims may be used conatively. To do so “makes the primary use of a moral assertion that of expressing the intention of the utterer to act in a particular sort of way specified in the assertion.”

Source of Ethical Norms

As already noted, ethical category schemes normally address some question in ethics. An initial schema focuses on the source of ethical norms. Both Christian and secular ethics address this issue in one of three ways: (1) reason, (2) prescription, and (3) relationship.

Reason-Based Systems

Here the basic idea is that ethical norms are generated from and discernible by reason. For some theories, reason is also thought to justify the theory. Some Christian systems in this category also hold that revelation plays a role, but even if revelation provides some norms, reason alone could have
generated those norms. In secular ethics one of the most famous reason-based systems is that of Immanuel Kant. Kant derived his categorical imperative ("act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law") from reason alone. Though it is a prescription, it is not a demand that someone makes just because he has power to command others to obey. Rather, by reason Kant thought all should conclude it necessary to act in accord with this imperative.

Undoubtedly, the most significant Christian reason-based system is natural law ethics. Thomas Aquinas is the prime example of a Christian thinker who held this system. Stemming from him, natural law ethics has been especially associated with the Roman Catholic tradition. Though there are different forms of the theory, certain items typify natural law ethics generally. According to natural law theories, the end (the goal toward which it strives) of each thing in the natural order is built into the thing itself. Thus, by observing an object in nature, one can discern easily its intended purpose in the natural order. This end immediately indicates how the thing should act.

In addition, built into the structure of things is a set of laws governing conduct. Those laws will be closely related to each object’s intended end or goal. Natural law theories also hold that such laws of conduct are universally known by reason apart from special revelation. Moreover, since human nature and the natural order do not change, whatever ethical norms are derivable from nature do not change from time to time or place to place.

Finally, natural law theories typically claim that what reason discovers by reflecting on the natural order is consistent with what man intuitively knows through his conscience. As one writer claims, essential to the notion of natural moral law are the "features of universality, unwrittenness and intuitively perceived or rationally discoverable moral knowledge of the divine will apart from special historical Biblical revelation." Proponents of natural law ethics use various Scriptures to support their views, but the central passages are Rom 1:18–32 and 2:14–16. Natural law ethicists think biblical revelation of moral norms is important, but they hold that even without that revelation everyone can know by reason alone the basic principles of right and wrong. Consequently, one need not be a Christian or even a theist to know the moral law.

PRESCRIPTION-BASED SYSTEMS
For these theories, ethical norms originate from an authority figure who mandates them. This does not mean theories based on reason have no
prescriptions, nor that theories based on prescription are irrational. The point is that commands in reason-based systems are determined by reason alone, whereas prescriptions in prescriptive theories come from an authority figure. That person may or may not choose rules on the basis of what seems rational, but that is not the key for prescriptive theories. The key is that someone or some group decides what is to be law and sets that forth.

Prescriptive theories often appeal to God as the prescriber, but not all theories do. For example, Brandt and Firth’s ideal observer theory holds that calling an act right just means that any ideal observer would approve the act (and most likely prescribe it as well). But what defines an ideal observer? Brandt and Firth fill in the background conditions that make an observer an ideal one. Firth emphasizes procedures normally considered rational for decision making. For example, one usually assumes that someone informed about the facts of a particular moral issue (for example, abortion) is better prepared to make a moral decision than someone not so informed. Hence, someone who qualifies as an ideal observer should be fully informed about all relevant facts for moral decision making. Likewise, in moral decision making, qualities such as impartiality are important; an ideal observer should have those qualities, too. By using this procedure, one can specify what would make an observer ideal. Then, one merely asks what moral norms that person would likely prescribe if he had the right to choose ethical rules. Those rules become prescriptive for all.

Undoubtedly, the most influential prescriptive theories claim God as prescriber. Such theories are often labeled divine command theories, and there are varieties of them. The key, of course, is that God’s will determines the norms. The basis of his choice, however, is understood differently depending on the theory. Divine command theories can be roughly divided on this matter in terms of the question raised pointedly in Plato’s *Euthyphro*. That dialogue discusses whether an act is right because God wills it, or whether God wills it because he knows it is right. Divine command theories vary in their answer to Plato’s question, but during the Middle Ages divine command theorists typically chose the former option. A prime example of such a theory from medieval times is William of Ockham’s. According to Ockham, whatever God wills must be done simply because he says so. If God had wanted, he could have ordered men to obey the opposite of the Ten Commandments. Even now he can rescind those laws and will their opposite.

In contemporary ethics there are proponents of the divine command
theory. Some give the impression that God chooses his commands completely arbitrarily; others hold that God’s choices are not purely arbitrary, though they do not always explain God’s rationale for his choices.

In addition, some ethicists hold a modified divine command theory of some sort. Robert M. Adams is a well-known proponent of such a view. He follows divine command theories in that he claims that ethical prescriptions say something about God’s will and commands. On the other hand, Adams says every statement of ethical right and wrong presupposes that “certain conditions for the applicability of the believer's concepts of ethical right and wrong are satisfied.” Among those conditions is that God is love. Thus, Adams’s theory amounts to the following: “x is ethically wrong” means “x is contrary to the commands of a loving God.” For Adams this implies that while it is logically possible for God to command cruelty for its own sake, it is unthinkable that he would do so.

RELATION-BASED SYSTEMS
Here the key idea is that actions are shaped either (1) by the sense of excitement or gratitude one feels as a result of a relationship with some person or group, or (2) by how some crucial principle relates to each new situation. In relation-based systems the emphasis may be responding to a person and/or because of one’s relation to that person (e.g., God or Christ), or the focus may be responding to a situation (e.g., what is the loving thing to do in this situation?), or both (e.g., what would Jesus do in this situation?). This broad category of systems includes such diverse approaches as those set forth in Thomas à Kempis’s *The Imitation of Christ*, Karl Barth’s notion that one must simply obey whatever God commands when God encounters him, and Joseph Fletcher’s situation ethics, which instructs us to calculate the most loving thing to do in any situation and to consider it one’s duty. Each of these systems has a constant rule (do what Christ would do—à Kempis; do what God tells you to do—Barth; do whatever you calculate as the most loving thing to do—Fletcher). Nonetheless, the specific action following from this rule varies from situation to situation.

**Criteria for Good and Bad Actions**
A second category scheme for ethics addresses what makes good acts good and bad acts bad. Traditionally, there have been two main answers to this question and respectively two broad categories of theories. Those
categories are teleological (consequentialist) theories and deontological (non-consequentialist) theories. In more recent years, various ethicists have argued for theories that mix deontological and teleological concerns.

TELEOLOGICAL THEORIES
According to these theories, what is morally good or bad, right or wrong, obligatory or forbidden is determined by the non-moral value produced when the act is done. If the deed generates more non-moral good than evil, the *act* is considered *morally* good. Consequences (results), then, determine which acts are good and which evil. For a teleologist, what is good in the non-moral sense may vary. Many teleologists have been hedonists, identifying good with pleasure and evil with pain. Others have identified good with power, knowledge, self-realization, or other non-moral goods. Despite this variation, whatever non-moral good is the key for a given theory, those acts are *morally* good that produce the greatest amount of that *non-moral* good, and those actions are morally evil that remove or reduce such non-moral good. Teleological theories are generally of two sorts. The first kind focuses on producing the greatest good for oneself (ethical egoism). The second type emphasizes producing the greatest good for the greatest number (ethical universalism).

The most commonly held teleological theories are utilitarian. Utilitarian theories are of two kinds: (1) act utilitarian theories and (2) rule utilitarian theories. For act utilitarianism, an act is morally right and obligatory if it would produce the most utility (the best consequences) under prevailing conditions. Since this means one must calculate the effects of his action in each situation, no general rules such as “telling the truth produces the greatest general good” should be stated. Rule utilitarianism, on the other hand, claims that an act is right if it would be more beneficial to have a code of moral rules permitting that act than one which excluded it. Thus, rule utilitarianism looks for the rules that as a whole produce the greatest utility, and it prescribes them. With a rule utilitarian theory, like situations are handled in like ways, whereas with act utilitarianism, like situations are not necessarily treated in the same way.26

DEONTOLOGICAL THEORIES
Deontologists27 deny that the moral goodness of an act is determined by the non-moral consequences it produces. Other considerations make an
act morally right or wrong, obligatory or forbidden. For example, an act is considered right because it keeps a promise, it is just, or God commands it. The key for deontological theories is that an act is right because it is one's duty to do it, and it is one's duty for some reason other than the consequences stemming from the act. Deontologists do not ignore consequences altogether. They only claim that consequences are not the basis for deciding the moral rightness or wrongness of an action. Examples of deontological theories include prescriptivist theories like divine command theories and reason-based systems like Kant's.

MIXED THEORIES

Some ethicists favor a theory that mixes deontological and teleological concerns. They believe that determining right and wrong must involve consulting rules. However, they are concerned that consulting rules alone might obligate one to do acts that are possibly arbitrarily chosen and may even have detrimental results for human well-being. For example, on a very strict divine command theory, what makes an act right or wrong is God’s command. Nothing about the act itself commends it for prescription or prohibition. Theories like this give the impression that God may arbitrarily choose which norms we must obey. Likewise, depending on what God prescribes, the results could be harmful if those rules are obeyed. Think again of Ockham’s claim that God could demand that we obey the opposite of the Ten Commandments. That would mean that murder, stealing, lying, etc., are morally good and our moral obligation, but obviously, the consequences of such acts could be ruinous for the victims. Concerns like these have led many ethicists to argue that the moral worth of an act must be determined by its ends and consequences at least as much as by deontological considerations.28

William Frankena offers an example of a mixed theory that he calls a mixed deontological theory. He says there are two basic principles of moral obligation: benevolence and justice. From the former stems principles such as the principle of utility, the principle of not injuring anyone, and the principle of not interfering with another's liberty. From justice follows principles such as equality before the law.29 Now, his theory is deontological in that it tells us to decide on right and wrong by consulting rules normally associated with morality. It is teleological in that “it goes on to say that the best way to tell what rules we should live by is to see which rules best fulfill the joint requirements of utility and justice.”30
The Number and Nature of Ethical Norms

How many ethical norms there are and whether those norms ever conflict are crucial concerns for people confronted with concrete decisions. If many norms supposedly have universal application, what should one do if several conflict in a given situation? Norman Geisler classifies theories according to their answers to this question. He finds six answers. The first is antinomianism. According to this theory, there are no norms of any sort, so norms can never conflict. Of course, this theory gives no guidance on what to do in any situation.

The second possibility is generalism. According to this view, there are no universal norms but only general ones. Thus, ethical norms take the following form: “it is usually morally right (obligatory) to tell the truth.” Such general norms allow exceptions. The exceptions provide a way to resolve conflicts between moral duties.

A third theory is situationism. It says there is only one norm, and it applies universally. Typically, that rule states the basic duty in each situation (e.g., do the loving thing, or do what brings the greatest good to the greatest number), but it does not predict which act will fulfill the duty in any specific situation. The individual must decide that as he evaluates each situation. Obviously, with only one norm ethical rules can never conflict, but that does not mean one will always perform the same action even in similar situations. It only means that whatever one chooses to do will be governed by the one overarching principle.

Geisler labels a fourth approach non-conflicting absolutism. This view says there are many ethical norms that are all universal in nature. Though one might think those norms would frequently conflict, this theory claims otherwise. The norms never produce moral conflicts.

A fifth view is ideal absolutism. According to this theory, there are many ethical norms, they are universal, and they do conflict. Consequently, ethical dilemmas will arise where one must disobey one rule in order to obey another. Despite being put in situations where one is forced to break a rule, this theory says it is always wrong to break an ethical norm. One should be encouraged to act, however, for though there will be times when one must disobey a norm, there is forgiveness through Christ's blood.

A final theory is hierarchicalism. Geisler personally espouses this view, which claims there are many norms that are all universal. Those norms are hierarchically ordered on the basis of their significance. When norms conflict (and they will), one must determine which is the higher rule and obey
it. If one does this, he commits no sin by breaking the lower norm. Thus, if the rule to preserve life is higher than the rule to tell the truth, on this theory the one who lies about hiding Jews when asked by the Nazi soldiers does what is morally right, and has no sin to repent of.\(^3^2\)

**AUTHORS’ POSITION**

It is only fair to state our views on these various theories. We take our ethical norms from Scripture. Since we believe Scripture is God’s Word, we hold a form of the divine command theory. Contrary to some divine command theories, we think God’s commands are neither arbitrary nor irrational, because we think they stem from and reflect his nature. Thus, because God is just, for example, he knows which acts are just and prescribes them; unjust acts are forbidden. On our view, certain acts are inherently right and others inherently wrong. They are so because they either reflect or do not reflect the character of the God who made the world and all that is in it. In sum, our view is a modified form of the divine command theory and comes closest to what Frankena calls metaphysical moralism.\(^3^3\) Because we take our norms from Scripture and hold that Scripture is God’s revealed Word, the source of our norms is revelation, not reason. However, given our view that norms reflect God’s character and that there are inherently right and wrong acts, we also hold that by reflecting on God’s attributes and the world he made, reason can see the reasonableness of what God has prescribed. For the same reasons, we think reason on its own can reach some perception of what should and should not be done. At this point, we find some kinship with natural law theories.

Given this description, it should be clear that our theory is deontological. It is not that we think God is disinterested in consequences. In fact, we think his nature inclines him to act in his creatures’ best interests. Moreover, we hold that if his commands are followed, the creatures’ best interests will be served. While some may think this makes us mixed deontologists, we think not. Being concerned about matters of benevolence and justice (to invoke Frankena’s principles) does not mean our ultimate judgment of whether an act is right or wrong rests on those principles. We believe that assessment of the act rests on whether God has prescribed or forbidden it. Let us illustrate.

Christians are commanded to love their neighbors. In fulfilling that obligation one will undoubtedly consider whether a specific act in a particular situation is just and benevolent to the neighbor—to do so seems
necessary in view of what it means to love someone. But what makes the loving act **morally good** is not that it is benevolent or just, but that God commanded it. To summarize: what makes an act an act of love is at least in part that it exemplifies benevolence and justice. What makes such a loving act **moral** is that it obeys God's command to love. We believe this approach to ethics is deontological, for it bases judgments of the morality of an act not on consequences, but on whether the act is governed by a rule (and in this case a rule prescribed by God). Obviously, however, this does not rule out concern over results of actions.\(^3^4\)

Some may wonder why we don't espouse some form of virtue ethics. Though we believe, for example, that the fruits of the Spirit are virtues that everyone should pursue, our theory about what makes an act **morally good** or bad is not that of virtue ethics. There are two main reasons for this. First, virtue ethics focus more on the moral character of the **agent** than on the moral nature of the **act**, so they don't seem to offer an answer that actually addresses the question of the morality of an act. A second concern is that we wonder how virtue ethicists know what the virtues are. Proponents of virtue ethics may answer that one knows what the virtues are when one sees them in action. But here the problem is still that one wants to know what it is about those acts that makes them virtuous. If the answer is that they are virtuous because they are done by virtuous people, it should be clear that this line of response is running in a circle of explanations that in the end explain very little. If what makes virtuous acts virtuous isn't that they are done by virtuous people, what answers could there be other than pointing to consequences of the actions or some item other than consequences—e.g., the act is commanded by God—which makes the act a morally good one? If one answers this question either in terms of the act's results or the origin of the act (God's command), then one is not answering the question about the morality of the act as a virtue ethicist would, but as either a consequentialist or a non-consequentialist would. But then appeal to virtue ethics becomes unnecessary to explain what makes an **action** moral or immoral.

As to moral conflicts, we think some form of hierarchicalism handles matters best. As W. D. Ross held, there are certain **prima facie** duties that we all have. A **prima facie** duty is a duty that arises out of a particular situation and obligates one to act in a certain way. For example, if one makes a promise, he obligates himself to keep the promise. When others help someone, the person helped is obliged to express gratitude. When one can help others, he is required to do so (a **prima facie** duty of beneficence).\(^3^5\) When all things are equal, **prima facie** duties turn out to be actual duties.
However, sometimes all things are not equal. When, for example, *prima facie* duties conflict, one cannot fulfill both. Failure to do both does not make one morally guilty.\(^{36}\)

In this respect, Ross’s position is like hierarchicalism. As to which duty becomes one’s actual duty, Ross held that one must use moral judgment. Sometimes the answer will be easy. For example, suppose someone promises to meet someone else at 10 AM. However, while on his way he sees someone in danger whom he can help. If he stops to help, he cannot keep his promise to arrive at 10 AM. Ross suggests that in such a case the duty to render aid is paramount, and the duty not to break a promise appears trivial. The right course of action becomes obvious.\(^{37}\) In other cases, the actual duty will be harder to discern, but one must do so anyway.

Geisler’s hierarchicalism has similarities to Ross’s views. As with Ross, Geisler holds that when norms conflict, one is not guilty for failing to do both. Whereas Ross claims one must use moral judgment to discern actual duty, Geisler’s position, though similar, argues that there is a set hierarchy of duties and one must obey the higher duty. Ross does not give the impression that one can construct such an absolute hierarchy.

As to our own view, we agree that there are *prima facie* duties and that sometimes they conflict. We agree with both Ross and Geisler that obeying one and disobeying or neglecting the other is not sin. One reason for holding this stems from an earlier point about being morally accountable only when one acts freely. If two duties mutually exclude one another, one cannot obey both. No one is free to do the impossible. But if one cannot obey both duties, he cannot be held guilty for leaving one of them undone, for no one can be guilty for failing to do what he could not do.

Our belief that one is not guilty for failing to obey both conflicting duties also stems from an appeal to the example of Christ. As Geisler argues, it is unthinkable that while on earth Christ never confronted a situation where two duties conflicted so as to make it impossible to do both. In fact, Scripture says he was tempted in all points as we are (Heb 4:15), and since we face such situations, he must have, too. However, the same verse says he was without sin; if that is so, it must be possible to confront such decisions, obey one duty, and not sin by neglecting or disobeying the other.\(^{38}\)

The major point remaining is how to decide which duty has priority. Here we tend to follow Ross more than Geisler, for we are not sure it is possible to discover from Scripture or elsewhere an answer to how duties relate to one another in a preset hierarchy. Nor are we certain that if one did construct a hierarchy, it would be applicable to every situation, regardless
of the factors involved in each case. Hence, we hold that one must evaluate each situation separately. In a given situation, one duty may clearly have priority. In that case, one must obey it. In other cases, both duties may appear to have equal priority. In those cases, the agent is free to obey either one. So long as it can be shown that the duty chosen either counterbalances or overbalances the duty not chosen, the agent has acted morally. If, however, the duty chosen can be shown to have lesser priority than the one not chosen, the charge of moral impropriety is deserved.39

THE USE OF SCRIPTURE IN ETHICS

This topic raises two fundamental questions. First, can Scripture, written at different times and places from our day, be used at all in contemporary ethics, and if so, how? Second, how is the OT to be used, if at all, in Christian ethics?

The Bible and Ethics

THE PROBLEMS

This issue may appear to concern only non-evangelicals. Typically, they deny that Scripture can be used in ethics, for they see no single ethical system in Scripture, but rather conflicting ethical perspectives from the various authors. Moreover, some say we cannot even be sure about Jesus’ thinking on ethical issues, since we only know Jesus as presented by the various Gospel writers. Those authors had their own purposes for what they presented and how they presented it, and they did not always offer a unified picture of Jesus’ teaching (cf., e.g., Matthew and Mark on Jesus’ teachings on divorce).40

Evangelicals often respond that the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture guarantee unity in its teachings on every topic, despite the obvious diversity of perspectives of individual writers. When properly understood, no contradictions can be found.

Though evangelicals might think this ends the matter, it does not. Even granting an evangelical position on Scripture, can one directly apply every command to modern times? For example, must someone who believes OT law applies today keep OT dietary laws (Leviticus 11)? Are we required to build a parapet around our roof so no one will fall off and be killed (Deut 22:8)? As one writer aptly notes, one must distinguish between biblical ethics and the use of the Bible in ethics.41 The Bible presents a perspective on ethics, but that does not mean every biblical teaching can be applied
to modern times without any modification. The evangelical must decide which rules as stated in Scripture apply to our own day, and he must know how to decide which apply. The second task is more difficult, but it is foundational to the first.

HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES

Rather than analyze each biblical command in order to discern which apply to today, we prefer to offer several principles for determining which commands pertain to our era. Since this is not a book on hermeneutics, we cannot discuss every principle of interpretation that applies to this issue, but we want to mention several of the major ones. These principles must be used in conjunction with one another.

First, one must distinguish between general principles or commands and specific applications of those commands. “General” and “specific” refer to the nature of the command, not the number of people the command covers. Is it a broad principle capable of covering many kinds of instances, or is it a rule covering a very specific type of occurrence? “Love your neighbor” is a general principle. It does not tell us how to express that love in a specific situation. It merely demands that whatever one does must exemplify love. On the other hand, “build a railing on your roof” commands a specific way to show concern for one’s neighbor in a particular situation.

The key point here is that general principles normally apply to many situations, including those of our own day. Time and culture do not so qualify them as to make them irrelevant. Specific rules, on the other hand, often relate to particular circumstances of a culture different from our own and thus do not directly apply to us.

All of this may be illustrated by two examples. First, the command to love our neighbor is general enough to apply directly to today. A demand to build a railing on the roof is a particular application for a specific culture of the more general command to love one’s neighbor. We should not take the specific command to mean that we must have houses with flat roofs and build a railing around them. However, the specific command rests on an underlying principle that loving one’s neighbor means taking measures for his protection. That underlying, more general principle is applicable to our day. A legitimate application of it today would be to ensure that our friend wears a seat belt while riding in our car (an application totally irrelevant to Moses’ day).

Consider a second illustration. Biblical injunctions about stealing are
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