

# The Failure of Modern Ethics

*Rick Wade looks at the rejection of the idea that ethics are rooted in reality external to us and the consequences of that rejection for modern ethics.*



*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*

## The Fall of Ethics

When you hear people discussing ethical issues today, do you get the sense they're talking on different levels? I don't mean different intellectual levels; I mean talking as though they are on different planes, in different worlds, even. When we discuss ethical differences, we often find we're so at odds that the discussion quickly grinds to a halt . . . or degenerates into name-calling.

For example, consider the matter of a just war, something that's been a hot topic in recent years. Some say there can be no just war because it's impossible to tell who's the good guy and who's the bad, and no way to predict the outcome. So we ought to all be pacifists. Others say it is just to prepare militarily to meet potential threats, and to make clear that we will go to war to defend ourselves. Still others see justice as applying only to the defense of Third World nations against the exploitation of the Great Powers.[\[1\]](#) Such differences are the result of different fundamental beliefs about what justice *is*.

Because there are competing ideas about ethics, all of which seem to have some truth, the idea has taken root that there is no way to rationally justify ethical beliefs, that they come from within us rather than from some source outside us. The idea that our ethical assertions are rooted in our feelings and desires is called *emotivism*. Traditionally it was believed that ethics were rooted in something external to us, something

objective and permanent. A fundamental reason for the change from the traditional view to contemporary subjective emotivism was that foundational beliefs about the nature of man and the universe were lost.

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre says ethicists today are like scientists trying to piece together a right understanding of science after a catastrophe has destroyed most of the records of scientific thought from the past. They have the jargon of ethics from former times, but they don't understand the fundamental principles underlying it or how it all ties together. Their task is similar to trying to put together a puzzle with pieces missing and no picture on the box to show what the puzzle is supposed to look like when put together.

It's tempting here to simply attribute this to the fact that Christian beliefs no longer have authority in our society. While this is true, it doesn't provide enough detail. For two reasons (at least) we need to have a fuller understanding of why people think the way they do with respect to ethics beyond just attributing their ideas to unbelief. First, understanding how we got where we are will help us see the problems with our view of ethics today. To simply say, "Well, that isn't biblical" means little today—indeed, some might be *pleased* to know their ideas don't accord with Scripture! If we want to bring about change in individuals and in society, it will be helpful to offer a more detailed and nuanced response.

Second, because we ourselves are so profoundly influenced by our society, Christians often think like non-Christians about moral issues. If we can't find it in a list of rules in the Bible, we often rely on our feelings or pragmatic thinking to guide us. Or if challenged about something we do, we might say, "Well, that's between me and the Holy Spirit. Stop being so legalistic!"

So how did we get here? Let's begin with a brief overview of the history of ethics in the West.

# Traditional Ethics

Today people tend to ground their ethical beliefs in their own feelings or desires. Traditionally, however, ethics were grounded in the nature of external reality and the nature of man.

In the days of the ancient Greeks, morality had its foundation in the role into which one was born, or in the nature of the universe. In the tradition of Homer, for example, one's role in life defined one's good. So the king was a good king if he acted as a king should. A carpenter was good if he built well, and a slave was good if he served well.

For Plato, the ground of ethics was the nature of external reality. The standard for goodness, he believed, exists in a world beyond that of our senses—in the world of what he called the *forms*. Forms are abstract entities which allow us to identify a particular thing on earth. So, for example, we know what a dog is because we have an idea of the form “dog.” Forms provide a standard by which particular things in the universe are measured. And the highest form, according to Plato, was “the Good.”

For Aristotle, the universals Plato called “forms” are not off in some abstract, immaterial realm, but are inherent in the universe. Because the forms are in the natural world, Aristotle believed *purpose* was built into the natural world; by nature things are intended to move toward particular goals, to fit the image of the form.

Early Christian thinkers accepted the basic idea of Plato's forms. However, they believed the forms—including the form of the Good—were in the mind of God, not in some abstract realm. Because God created the universe out of His wisdom and knowledge, morality was thus built into the order of the universe.

Aristotle believed that, as part of this purposeful universe, we, too, have purpose; we too move toward a goal or *telos*. The good toward which we move Aristotle called *well-being*. He believed all of us share a nature which requires us to live a certain kind of life in order to find well-being. Fulfillment is achieved by living a life of virtue. By reason we learn what is good for us in keeping with our nature, and we seek to find that end through the virtues.

A millennium later, Thomas Aquinas agreed with Aristotle that the universe has purpose built into it. He believed that this was due to the creative work of God. For Aquinas, the supreme good is higher than the universe. It is God Himself who is the Good that defines all goods. Our lives are to lead upward to God. Although the ultimate fulfillment of the experience of God will only occur in the next life, Aquinas taught we are now to pursue the goodness of God, our well-being, through a virtuous life governed by the law found in Scripture and in nature.

Both Greek and early Christian ethics, then, were grounded in objective realities: the nature of man, the nature of the universe, and, with Christians, the nature and creative work of God. What we *ought* to do was determined by what *is*, by the nature of ultimate realities. But this was all to change.

## **Modern Ethics: The Loss of a *Telos***

About the time Aquinas was formulating his ideas on ethics, some other Christian scholars decided that God's law was *not* grounded in His *mind* but rather in His *will*. What was the significance of this shift? Well, God's law could change (according to His will), rather than being something eternally fixed. Laws were thus not universal and eternal. They could be provisional or have exceptions.

This change eventually resulted in a major shift in ethical thought. If morality wasn't grounded in God's reason and hence

into the order of the universe He created, there was no necessary connection between what *was* and what *ought to be*. Ethics no longer had any ground in the universe itself. Fact and value were separated.<sup>{2}</sup> Without value built into the universe, the idea of a purposeful (or *teleological*) universe was lost.

In modern times, the loss of the idea of an end or *telos* for the universe was extended to mankind. Belief in human nature had been undercut. What are we supposed to be? Alasdair MacIntyre says that previously there were three elements in ethics: man-as-he-is, man-as-he-should-become (referring to man's end or *telos*), and the ethical precepts that would enable him to move from one to the other. Now, because it is no longer known what man really is by nature (or is supposed to be) the second part (man-as-he-should-become) was lost. What was left was man-as-he-is and some ethical principles that were mostly just holdovers from the past. So ethics is no longer about helping us become what we should be, but about helping us do our best as we are now.

In modern times multiple ethical systems have been devised to improve man-as-he-is with no understanding of man-as-he-should-become. Some have looked to psychological impressions as guiding principles (David Hume, for example). Utilitarians believe our greatest good is happiness, and they use a scientific approach to determine what makes for happiness. With Friedrich Nietzsche, in the nineteenth century, the split between fact and value was complete—his ideal man stands alone under no other rules but those of his own making.

One result of all this is that Westerners have ended up with a rule mentality in ethics rather than a character mentality. Because there is no universal law and no *telos* of man, we confine ourselves to what we should *do* rather than what we should *be*. Also, as noted earlier, because there are so many opinions about ethics, some have concluded that reason isn't a reliable source for ethics, that moral assertions are simply

expressions of our own feelings and desires.

## **Emotivism**

Thus, modern ethics has been left with the chore of understanding what makes for the good life for man-as-he-is with no notion of man-as-he-should-become. Different systems have been presented, each of which has a different starting point. While there is often agreement on particular ethical precepts, this is usually because these precepts are held over from traditional ethics albeit without their traditional foundation. It is also because of our God-given basic understanding of the law (Rom. 2:14-15).

How is it that two people can present systems of belief, each of which seems to be logically consistent, yet which are very different? It can be very confusing! Thoughtful people put together systems of ethics they think are objective and consistent, and then don't understand why others don't agree with them. This is because of different starting points. Starting points for ethics are important, for they determine which direction the logical progression of thought will lead. These starting points include ideas about the nature of mankind and the existence of God and whether He has revealed His desires to us. Other ideas grow out of these, such as notions about freedom and obligation. Such starting points are rarely brought into the conversation; they are simply assumed. And I think most people have no clue that, first, they *do* simply make important assumptions like those just noted, and second, that the ethical precepts they espouse are dependent upon these unspoken (and often unrecognized) starting points. Thus they state their moral opinions as if they are settled facts which everyone should recognize, and they are baffled when others don't agree. When people with opposing ethical ideas or systems clash, it is rather like two groups of people deciding to build highway systems, choosing places to start building on the basis of some nonrational reason, and

constructing their highways according to different ideas about how highways are to function in transportation. Would it be any wonder if the two highway systems don't fit together well?

This is one reason ethical debates so often degenerate into name calling. For surely if someone doesn't recognize how clearly true what I'm saying is, it must be because the person is just being stubborn or dogmatic, or (one of the worst charges one can make today) allowing his religious beliefs to inform his moral beliefs!

The perceptive listener who understands the importance of starting points might want to press the individual to clarify his starting points and defend them.<sup>{3}</sup> What one is likely to find, however, is that the person hasn't given such matters any thought. All we know is that we should be free to do what we like. Even the old maxim, "One's freedom goes as far as the next man's nose" doesn't mean too much. He should just move his nose!

One might excuse this on the basis that the average person doesn't have the time or training to probe such philosophical minutia. But even with philosophers, it has been observed they too have simply chosen or accepted their starting points for no rational reason.<sup>{4}</sup> The fact is that, philosophically speaking, the basic principles of each system cannot themselves be proved; they are *nonrational*. (This isn't to say they are *irrational*; just that they are outside the limits of rational proof.) They might be simply assumed or consciously chosen, but they have their basis in something other than reason.

As a result of all this confusion, some have concluded that there really *is* no rational basis for ethics; that all moral statements are in the final analysis just expressions of our own feelings, attitudes, or preferences.<sup>{5}</sup> As noted previously, this is called *emotivism*. But one has to ask: If our feelings and preferences are ultimately personal and

individual, how can we then expect others to hold to the same beliefs? And in a society in which we must function together, how do we get others to agree with us if our beliefs aren't grounded in something external to the individual which can be rationally understood and acknowledged? It is done by swaying people emotionally. Morality isn't considered a factual matter, but an emotional, psychological one.

MacIntyre describes the situation this way:

Moral judgments, being expressions of attitude or feeling, are neither true nor false; and agreement in moral judgment is not to be secured by any rational method, for there are none. It is to be secured, if at all, by producing certain non-rational effects on the emotions or attitudes of those who disagree with one. We use moral judgments not only to express our own feelings and attitudes, but also precisely to produce such effects in others.[\[6\]](#)

In traditional ethics, one could present a law to a person—a law coming from an outside source and presented as factual—along with reasons to believe it, and leave that person to think about it and decide whether it was true or false. But with emotivism, since there are no objective reasons behind a precept, one person must manipulate another to get the other to change his or her mind. C. L. Stevenson, “the single most important exponent of the theory” according to MacIntyre, said “that the sentence This is good’ means roughly the same as I approve of this; do so as well’. . . . Other emotivists,” MacIntyre continues, “suggested that to say This is good’ was to utter a sentence meaning roughly Hurray for this!’” Thus, to say “arson is wrong,” for example, is simply to express one’s own feelings and to try to influence others by producing certain feelings or attitudes in them. It’s like saying, “I disapprove of arson and you should, too.”

Thus, although I might *talk* as though I’m giving you good reasons, I’m really just trying to emotionally manipulate you.

A law isn't the authority; the person making the ethical claim is. When we realize this, we become suspicious, expecting others to try to manipulate us to get us to agree with them.

We see this kind of manipulation routinely in our society. An advertisement selling fast food might say absolutely nothing about the food itself (which may actually be bad for one's health), but instead will seek to evoke feelings of warmth and happiness using images of people having a good time together. Intimidation through name-calling has been used by supporters of abortion rights in saying that pro-lifers are woman haters, vindictive, unconcerned about women's health. Gay rights supporters call proponents of the traditional (and biblical) model of human sexuality "homophobic."

In his excellent study on the rise of secular humanism in our society, James Hitchcock describes three stages of acceptance employed by the mass media that served to bring about a transformation in our moral outlook that had little or nothing to do with reason.[\[7\]](#) The first stage was bringing to light things which were previously unmentionable all in the spirit of a new openness. The second was ridicule, "the single most powerful weapon in any attempt to discredit accepted beliefs." Hitchcock notes that "countless Christians subtly adjusted their beliefs, or at least the way in which they presented those beliefs to the public, in order to avoid ridicule. Negative stereotypes were created, and people who believed in traditional values were kept busy avoiding being trapped in those stereotypes." The third stage was "sympathy for the underdog." Those upholding traditional morality (thinking primarily of the Judeo-Christian tradition) were depicted as bullies.

Such charges work on our emotions. Who wants to be considered a bigot or be charged with being a "fundamentalist" with all the negative baggage that term bears today? On the other hand, shouldn't we support the "rights" of the supposed "oppressed" among us? The "victims" of "repressive" laws?

# The Failure of Emotivism

There are a number of problems with emotivism.<sup>{8}</sup> One problem is the moral divisions it permits in society. There is no single moral “umbrella” which covers all people. If your morality is yours, I cannot correct you; I cannot pull you under the umbrella, so to speak. When someone is accused of moral wrongdoing, the accused will likely say something such as, “Who are *you* to tell *me* I’m wrong? To each his own!” The person who responds this way believes an individual’s morality is his own and not objectively true for everyone. The person is thus offended that another person would try to force *his* preferences on him. The idea that the accusation might be based on objective, universal moral law isn’t even considered. Moral consensus is faltering in our society today largely because of such thinking.

The closest people get to thinking in objective terms is when they agree that something could be bad because of its practical consequences. But that’s not at all the same as morality grounded in something universal and eternal. The individual is left to weigh the odds: to do the thing in question and suffer such-and-such consequences, or *not* to do it and suffer the loss of whatever he or she is trying to obtain or accomplish. Although it can be helpful to point out the consequences of our actions—there *are* consequences to sin—we can’t base our moral decision making on such things, because we can’t always predict the future. Even if we’re accurate, the other person can still think, “Well, it won’t hurt me,” or, “I can handle that (the particular consequence)” and brush our objection aside.

The flip side of that is that we are often afraid to take a stand on ethical matters ourselves for fear of being accused of pushing our own subjective beliefs on others. We are only heard if we can couch our objection in terms of the other person’s self-interest.

Another obvious problem with emotivism is inconsistency. Although emotivists *claim* to believe that moral precepts are expressions of personal preference, they often speak as though they are making objective moral claims binding on everyone. They exhibit here, I think, the truth of Paul's comment in Romans 2 that we all have the law written on our hearts. We *do* believe there is a difference between right and wrong, and that there are universal moral laws. As C.S. Lewis was fond of pointing out, we all know about fairness, and we expect others to as well. Thus, the emotivist moves back and forth between expressing moral beliefs as though they should hold for everyone, while also meeting challenges to their *own* actions by saying the challenger's beliefs are his own and can't be forced on others. They can tell *you* what *you* should do, but don't dare tell *them* what *they* should do.

Finally, on the philosophical level, emotivists try to mix too different kinds of statements, which results in confusion. They hold that *evaluative* statements—those which are supposed to be making objective evaluations such as “arson is wrong”—express personal *preferences*. Evaluative statements and statements of preference are two different kinds. To substitute one for the other is illegitimate. If a person says arson is wrong, does he mean that arson is really wrong—for everyone? Or is he really just saying that he doesn't like arson? If a person is making an evaluative statement, then I need to consider his case and decide whether to continue my career as an arsonist! However, if he is just expressing his personal preferences, I can smile and say “that's nice” and start flicking my matches. Imagine the difficulty in public discussions of ethical issues under such circumstances.

## Response

How shall we respond? To simply point people back to the Bible as the proper source of morality won't do today. The Bible is seen as just a religious book with rules pertinent only for

those who believe it. That isn't to say we *shouldn't* speak God's Word into our society. The question is *how* we are to do that. When Paul was in Athens and had the chance to address the whole crowd assembled in the marketplace, he didn't quote Scripture. He *did*, however, give people biblical truth (Acts 17: 22-31)—in his own words and addressing their specific need.

Thus, we ought to consider offer more sophisticated arguments which are thoroughly biblical and which address the need of the day. As part of our efforts to convince people of the rightness of a biblical view of ethics, it would be helpful to follow the lead of early champions of traditional morality and reinvigorate the notion of purpose in the universe. We should seek to reestablish the truth that we share certain characteristics simply because we are human, and that a virtuous life makes for a good life because of the way we're made. We can point out specific needs all humans share, such as security, belonging, and physical provision (food, etc.). We also know that certain things are wrong (such as incest), and that certain things are right (such as justice and courage). These kinds of things are universal; we rightly expect others to recognize their value or their evil. They are not matters of individual tastes.

We might not be able to gain the agreement of every individual on all the universals we propose, but if we work at it we can find at least one moral "law" any given individual will agree is universal. Once one is established, we can go for a second and third and so forth, until we think the person is willing to seriously rethink the current belief that ethics is a subjective matter. From there we can explain these realities by the fact that we are created by God.

Some scholars propose a return to the virtue tradition of ethics.[\[9\]](#) As Christians we can easily see the ethical benefit of recognizing that we have a nature given us by God through creation, and that there is an end or *telos* toward which we

are moving which is defined by the character of Christ. This makes ethics a matter of character development rather than just rule following. Perhaps Protestants should reconsider the natural law tradition long championed in Roman Catholic theology. Whether that is the best direction to go is now being considered by reputable evangelical scholars. Whatever we decide about that, we must turn away from emotivism. It is bad for individuals and bad for society.

## Notes

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 6.
2. Cf. Arthur Holmes, *Fact, Value, and God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 77.
3. The late Francis Schaeffer is a very helpful resource for understanding the significance of starting points and learning how to expose them. See his *The God Who is There*, 30th Anniversary Edition (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), especially Section IV.
4. MacIntyre, 19f.
5. Ibid., 11-12.
6. Ibid., 12.
7. James Hitchcock, *What Is Secular Humanism? Why Humanism Became Secular and How It Is Changing Our World* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant Books, 1982), 83f.
8. Those wishing to consider a more philosophically rigorous study are urged to read MacIntyre's *After Virtue*.
9. Recall the popularity of William Bennett's book *The Book of Virtues* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993). Bennett, by the way, is a Roman Catholic who holds a B.A. in philosophy and a

Ph.D. in political philosophy in addition to his law degree.

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# Utilitarianism: The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number

*Utilitarianism is an ethical system that determines morality on the basis of the greatest good for the greatest number. A modern form of utilitarianism is situation ethics. Kerby Anderson examines the problems with this ethical system, and evaluates it from a biblical perspective.*



*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*

You have probably heard a politician say he or she passed a piece of legislation because it did the greatest good for the greatest number of citizens. Perhaps you have heard someone justify their actions because it was for the greater good.

In this article, we are going to talk about the philosophy behind such actions. The philosophy is known as utilitarianism. Although it is a long word, it is in common usage every day. It is the belief that the sole standard of morality is determined by its usefulness.

Philosophers refer to it as a “teleological” system. The Greek word “telos” means end or goal. This means that this ethical system determines morality by the end result. Whereas Christian ethics are based on rules, utilitarianism is based on results.

Utilitarianism began with the philosophies of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). Utilitarianism

gets its name from Bentham's test question, "What is the use of it?" He conceived of the idea when he ran across the words "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" in Joseph Priestly's *Treatise of Government*.

Jeremy Bentham developed his ethical system around the idea of pleasure. He built it on ancient hedonism which pursued physical pleasure and avoided physical pain. According to Bentham, the most moral acts are those which maximize pleasure and minimize pain. This has sometimes been called the "utilitarian calculus." An act would be moral if it brings the greatest amount of pleasure and the least amount of pain.

John Stuart Mill modified this philosophy and developed it apart from Bentham's hedonistic foundation. Mill used the same utilitarian calculus but instead focused on maximizing the general happiness by calculating the greatest good for the greatest number. While Bentham used the calculus in a quantitative sense, Mill used this calculus in a qualitative sense. He believed, for example, that some pleasures were of higher quality than others.

Utilitarianism has been embraced by so many simply because it seems to make a good deal of sense and seems relatively simple to apply. However, when it was first proposed, utilitarianism was a radical philosophy. It attempted to set forth a moral system apart from divine revelation and biblical morality. Utilitarianism focused on results rather than rules. Ultimately the focus on the results demolished the rules.

In other words, utilitarianism provided for a way for people to live moral lives apart from the Bible and its prescriptions. There was no need for an appeal to divine revelation. Reason rather than revelation was sufficient to determine morality.

# Founders of Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham was a leading theorist in Anglo-American philosophy of law and one of the founders of utilitarianism. He developed this idea of a utility and a utilitarian calculus in the *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1781).

In the beginning of that work Bentham wrote: "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it."[\[1\]](#)

Bentham believed that pain and pleasure not only explain our actions but also help us define what is good and moral. He believed that this foundation could provide a basis for social, legal, and moral reform in society.

Key to his ethical system is the principle of utility. That is, what is the greatest good for the greatest number?

Bentham wrote: "By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness."[\[2\]](#)

John Stuart Mill was a brilliant scholar who was subjected to a rigid system of intellectual discipline and shielded from boys his own age. When Mill was a teenager, he read Bentham. Mill said the feeling rushed upon him "that all previous moralists were superseded." He believed that the principle of

utility “gave unity to my conception of things. I now had opinions: a creed, a doctrine, a philosophy; in one among the best senses of the word, a religion; the inculcation and diffusion of what could be made the principle outward purpose of a life.”[\[3\]](#)

Mill modified Bentham’s utilitarianism. Whereas Bentham established an *act* utilitarianism, Mill established a *rule* utilitarianism. According to Mill, one calculates what is right by comparing the consequences of all relevant agents of alternative rules for a particular circumstance. This is done by comparing all relevant similar circumstances or settings at any time.

## Analysis of Utilitarianism

Why did utilitarianism become popular? There are a number of reasons for its appeal.

First, it is a relatively simple ethical system to apply. To determine whether an action is moral you merely have to calculate the good and bad consequences that will result from a particular action. If the good outweighs the bad, then the action is moral.

Second, utilitarianism avoids the need to appeal to divine revelation. Many adherents to this ethical system are looking for a way to live a moral life apart from the Bible and a belief in God. The system replaces revelation with reason. Logic rather than an adherence to biblical principles guides the ethical decision-making of a utilitarian.

Third, most people already use a form of utilitarianism in their daily decisions. We make lots of non-moral decisions every day based upon consequences. At the checkout line, we try to find the shortest line so we can get out the door more quickly. We make most of our financial decisions (writing checks, buying merchandise, etc.) on a utilitarian calculus of

cost and benefits. So making moral decisions using utilitarianism seems like a natural extension of our daily decision-making procedures.

There are also a number of problems with utilitarianism. One problem with utilitarianism is that it leads to an “end justifies the means” mentality. If any worthwhile end can justify the means to attain it, a true ethical foundation is lost. But we all know that the end does *not* justify the means. If that were so, then Hitler could justify the Holocaust because the end was to purify the human race. Stalin could justify his slaughter of millions because he was trying to achieve a communist utopia.

The end never justifies the means. The means must justify themselves. A particular act cannot be judged as good simply because it may lead to a good consequence. The means must be judged by some objective and consistent standard of morality.

Second, utilitarianism cannot protect the rights of minorities if the goal is the greatest good for the greatest number. Americans in the eighteenth century could justify slavery on the basis that it provided a good consequence for a majority of Americans. Certainly the majority benefited from cheap slave labor even though the lives of black slaves were much worse.

A third problem with utilitarianism is predicting the consequences. If morality is based on results, then we would have to have omniscience in order to accurately predict the consequence of any action. But at best we can only guess at the future, and often these educated guesses are wrong.

A fourth problem with utilitarianism is that consequences themselves must be judged. When results occur, we must still ask whether they are good or bad results. Utilitarianism provides no objective and consistent foundation to judge results because results are the mechanism used to judge the

action itself.

## Situation Ethics

A popular form of utilitarianism is *situation ethics* first proposed by Joseph Fletcher in his book by the same name.<sup>{4}</sup> Fletcher acknowledges that situation ethics is essentially utilitarianism, but modifies the pleasure principle and calls it the *agape* (love) principle.

Fletcher developed his ethical system as an alternative to two extremes: legalism and antinomianism. The legalist is like the Pharisees in the time of Jesus who had all sorts of laws and regulations but no heart. They emphasized the law over love. Antinomians are like the libertines in Paul's day who promoted their lawlessness.

The foundation of situation ethics is what Fletcher calls the law of love. Love replaces the law. Fletcher says, "We follow law, if at all, for love's sake."<sup>{5}</sup>

Fletcher even quotes certain biblical passages to make his case. For example, he quotes Romans 13:8 which says, "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the law."

Another passage Fletcher quotes is Matthew 22:37-40. "Christ said, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . . . Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Proponents of situation ethics would argue that these summary verses require only one absolute (the law of love). No other universal laws can be derived from this commandment to love. Even the Ten Commandments are subject to exceptions based upon the law of love.

Situation ethics also accepts the view that the end justifies the means. Only the ends can justify the means; the means cannot justify themselves. Fletcher believes that “no act apart from its foreseeable consequences has any ethical meaning whatsoever.”{6}

Joseph Fletcher tells the story of Lenin who had become weary of being told that he had no ethics. After all, he used a very pragmatic and utilitarian philosophy to force communism on the people. So some of those around him accused him of believing that the end justifies the means. Finally, Lenin shot back, “If the end does not justify the means, then in the name of sanity and justice, *what does?*”{7}

Like utilitarianism, situation ethics attempts to define morality with an “end justifies the means” philosophy. According to Fletcher, the law of love requires the greatest love for the greatest number of people in the long run. But as we will see in the next section, we do not always know how to define love, and we do not always know what will happen in the long run.

## **Analysis of Situation Ethics**

Perhaps the biggest problem with situation ethics is that the law of love is too general. People are going to have different definitions of what love is. What some may believe is a loving act, others might feel is an unloving act.

Moreover, the context of love varies from situation to situation and certainly varies from culture to culture. So it is even difficult to derive moral principles that can be known and applied universally. In other words, it is impossible to say that to follow the law of love is to do such and such in every circumstance. Situations and circumstances change, and so the moral response may change as well.

The admonition to do the loving thing is even less specific

than to do what is the greatest good for the greatest number. It has about as much moral force as to say to do the “good thing” or the “right thing.” Without a specific definition, it is nothing more than a moral platitude.

Second, situation ethics suffers from the same problem of utilitarianism in predicting consequences. In order to judge the morality of an action, we have to know the results of the action we are about to take. Often we cannot know the consequences.

Joseph Fletcher acknowledges that when he says, “We can’t always guess the future, even though we are always being forced to try.”[\[8\]](#) But according to his ethical system, we have to *know* the results in order to make a moral choice. In fact, we should be relatively certain of the consequences, otherwise our action would by definition be immoral.

Situation ethics also assumes that the situation will determine the meaning of love. Yet love is not determined by the particulars of our circumstance but merely conditioned by them. The situation does not determine what is right or wrong. The situation instead helps us determine which biblical command applies in that particular situation.

From the biblical perspective, the problem with utilitarianism and situation ethics is that they ultimately provide no consistent moral framework. Situation ethics also permits us to do evil to achieve good. This is totally contrary to the Bible.

For example, Proverbs 14:12 says that “There is a way *which seems* right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” The road to destruction is paved with good intentions. This is a fundamental flaw with an “ends justifies the means” ethical system.

In Romans 6:1 Paul asks, “Are we to continue sinning so that grace may increase?” His response is “May it never be!”

Utilitarianism attempts to provide a moral system apart from God's revelation in the Bible, but in the end, it does not succeed.

## Notes

1. Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, printed in 1781 and published in 1789 (Batoche Books: Kitchener, ON Canada, 2000), 14.
2. Ibid.
3. John Stuart Mill, "Last Stage of Education and First of Self-Education," *Autobiography*, 1873 (New York: P.F. Collier & Sons, 1909-14).
4. Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966).
5. Ibid., 70.
6. Ibid., 120.
7. Ibid., 121.
8. Ibid., 136.

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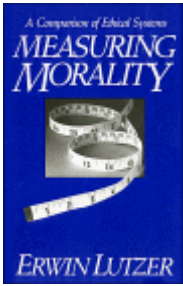
# Cultural Relativism

*Kerby Anderson presents the basics of cultural relativism and evaluates it from a Christian worldview perspective. Comparing the tenets of cultural relativism to a biblical view of ethics shows how these popular ideas fail the reasonableness test.*

*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*



# John Dewey



Any student in a class on anthropology cannot help but notice the differences between various cultures of the world. Differences in dress, diet, and social norms are readily apparent. Such diversity in terms of ethics and justice are also easily seen and apparently shaped by the culture in which we live.

If there is no transcendent ethical standard, then often culture becomes the ethical norm for determining whether an action is right or wrong. This ethical system is known as *cultural relativism*.<sup>[1]</sup> Cultural relativism is the view that all ethical truth is relative to a specific culture. Whatever a cultural group approves is considered right within that culture. Conversely, whatever a cultural group condemns is wrong.

The key to cultural relativism is that right and wrong can only be judged relative to a specified society. There is no ultimate standard of right and wrong by which to judge culture.

A famous proponent of this view was John Dewey, often considered the father of American education. He taught that moral standards were like language and therefore the result of custom. Language evolved over time and eventually became organized by a set of principles known as grammar. But language also changes over time to adapt to the changing circumstances of its culture.

Likewise, Dewey said, ethics were also the product of an evolutionary process. There are no fixed ethical norms. These

are merely the result of particular cultures attempting to organize a set of moral principles. But these principles can also change over time to adapt to the changing circumstances of the culture.

This would also mean that different forms of morality evolved in different communities. Thus, there are no universal ethical principles. What may be right in one culture would be wrong in another culture, and vice versa.

Although it is hard for us in the modern world to imagine, a primitive culture might value genocide, treachery, deception, even torture. While we may not like these traits, a true follower of cultural relativism could not say these are wrong since they are merely the product of cultural adaptation.

Clifford Gertz argued that culture must be seen as “webs of meaning” within which humans must live.<sup>{2}</sup> Gertz believed that “Humans are shaped exclusively by their culture and therefore there exists no unifying cross-cultural human characteristics.”<sup>{3}</sup>

As we will see, cultural relativism allows us to be tolerant toward other cultures, but it provides no basis to judge or evaluate other cultures and their practices.

## William Graham Sumner

A key figure who expanded on Dewey’s ideas was William Graham Sumner of Yale University. He argued that what our conscience tells us depends solely upon our social group. The moral values we hold are not part of our moral nature, according to Sumner. They are part of our training and upbringing.

Sumner argued in his book, *Folkways*: “World philosophy, life policy, right, rights, and morality are all products of the folkways.”<sup>{4}</sup> In other words, what we perceive as conscience is merely the product of culture upon our minds through childhood training and cultural influence. There are no

universal ethical principles, merely different cultural conditioning.

Sumner studied all sorts of societies (primitive and advanced), and was able to document numerous examples of cultural relativism. Although many cultures promoted the idea, for example, that a man could have many wives, Sumner discovered that in Tibet a woman was encouraged to have many husbands. He also described how some Eskimo tribes allowed deformed babies to die by being exposed to the elements. In the Fiji Islands, aged parents were killed.

Sumner believed that this diversity of moral values clearly demonstrated that culture is the sole determinant of our ethical standards. In essence, culture determines what is right and wrong. And different cultures come to different ethical conclusions.

Proponents of cultural relativism believe this cultural diversity proves that culture alone is responsible for our morality. There is no soul or spirit or mind or conscience. Moral relativists say that what we perceive as moral convictions or conscience are the byproducts of culture.

The strength of cultural relativism is that it allows us to withhold moral judgments about the social practices of another culture. In fact, proponents of cultural relativism would say that to pass judgment on another culture would be ethnocentric.

This strength, however, is also a major weakness. Cultural relativism excuses us from judging the moral practices of another culture. Yet we all feel compelled to condemn such actions as the Holocaust or ethnic cleansing. Cultural relativism as an ethical system, however, provides no foundation for doing so.

# Melville Herskovits

Melville J. Herskovits wrote in *Cultural Relativism*: “Judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation.”<sup>{5}</sup> In other words, a person’s judgment about what is right and wrong is determined by their cultural experiences. This would include everything from childhood training to cultural pressures to conform to the majority views of the group. Herskovits went on to argue that even the definition of what is normal and abnormal is relative to culture.

He believed that cultures were flexible, and so ethical norms change over time. The standard of ethical conduct may change over time to meet new cultural pressures and demands. When populations are unstable and infant mortality is high, cultures value life and develop ethical systems to protect it. When a culture is facing overpopulation, a culture redefines ethical systems and even the value of life. Life is valuable and sacred in the first society. Mercy killing might become normal and acceptable in the second society.

Polygamy might be a socially acceptable standard for society. But later, that society might change its perspective and believe that it is wrong for a man to have more than one wife. Herskovits believed that whatever a society accepted or rejected became the standard of morality for the individuals in that society.

He believed that “the need for a cultural relativistic point of view has become apparent because of the realization that there is no way to play this game of making judgment across cultures except with loaded dice.”<sup>{6}</sup> Ultimately, he believed, culture determines our moral standards and attempting to compare or contrast cultural norms is futile.

In a sense, the idea of cultural relativism has helped

encourage such concepts as multiculturalism and postmodernism. After all, if truth is created not discovered, then all truths created by a particular culture are equally true. This would mean that cultural norms and institutions should be considered equally valid if they are useful to a particular group of people within a culture.

And this is one of the major problems with a view of cultural relativism: you cannot judge the morality of another culture. If there is no objective standard, then someone in one culture does not have a right to evaluate the actions or morality of another culture. Yet in our hearts we know that certain things like racism, discrimination, and exploitation are wrong.

## **Evolutionary Ethics**

Foundational to the view of cultural relativism is the theory of evolution. Since social groups experience cultural change with the passage of time, changing customs and morality evolve differently in different places and times.

Anthony Flew, author of *Evolutionary Ethics*, states his perspective this way: "All morals, ideas and ideals have been originated in the world; and that, having thus in the past been subject to change, they will presumably in the future too, for better or worse, continue to evolve."[\[7\]](#) He denies the existence of God and therefore an objective, absolute moral authority. But he also believes in the authority of a value system.

His theory is problematic because it does not adequately account for the origin, nature, and basis of morals. Flew suggests that morals somehow originated in this world and are constantly evolving.

Even if we concede his premise, we must still ask, Where and when did the first moral value originate? Essentially, Flew is arguing that a value came from a non-value. In rejecting the

biblical idea of a Creator whose character establishes a moral standard for values, Flew is forced to attempt to derive an *ought* from an *is*.

Evolutionary ethics rests upon the assumption that values are by nature constantly changing or evolving. It claims that it is of value that values are changing. But is *this* value changing?

If the answer to this question is no, then that would mean that moral values don't have to always change. And if that is the case, then there could be unchanging values (known as absolute standards). However, if the value that values change is itself unchanging, then the view is self-contradictory.

Another form of evolutionary ethics is *sociobiology*. E. O. Wilson of Harvard University is a major advocate of sociobiology, and claims that scientific materialism will eventually replace traditional religion and other ideologies.[\[8\]](#)

According to sociobiology, human social systems have been shaped by an evolutionary process. Human societies exist and survive because they work and because they have worked in the past.

A key principle is the reproductive imperative.[\[9\]](#) The ultimate goal of any organism is to survive and reproduce. Moral systems exist because they ultimately promote human survival and reproduction.

Another principle is that all behavior is selfish at the most basic level. We love our children, according to this view, because love is an effective means of raising effective reproducers.

At the very least, sociobiology is a very cynical view of human nature and human societies. Are we really to believe that all behavior is selfish? Is there no altruism?

The Bible and human experience seem to strongly contradict this. Ray Bohlin's [article](#) on the Probe Web site provides a detailed refutation of this form of evolutionary ethics.<sup>{10}</sup>

## Evaluating Cultural Relativism

In attempting to evaluate cultural relativism, we should acknowledge that we could indeed learn many things from other cultures. We should never fall into the belief that our culture has all the answers. No culture has a complete monopoly on the truth. Likewise, Christians must guard against the assumption that their Christian perspective on their cultural experiences should be normative for every other culture.

However, as we have already seen, the central weakness of cultural relativism is its unwillingness to evaluate another culture. This may seem satisfactory when we talk about language, customs, even forms of worship. But this non-judgmental mindset breaks down when confronted by real evils such as slavery or genocide. The Holocaust, for example, cannot be merely explained away as an appropriate cultural response for Nazi Germany.

Cultural relativism faces other philosophical problems. For example, it is insufficient to say that morals originated in the world and that they are constantly changing. Cultural relativists need to answer how value originated out of non-value. How did the first value arise?

Fundamental to cultural relativism is a belief that values change. But if the value that values change is itself unchanging, then this theory claims an unchanging value that all values change and evolve. The position is self-contradictory.

Another important concern is conflict. If there are no absolute values that exist trans-culturally or externally to

the group, how are different cultures to get along when values collide? How are we to handle these conflicts?

Moreover, is there ever a place for courageous individuals to challenge the cultural norm and fight against social evil? Cultural relativism seems to leave no place for social reformers. The abolition movement, the suffrage movement, and the civil rights movement are all examples of social movements that ran counter to the social circumstances of the culture. Abolishing slavery and providing rights to citizens are good things even if they were opposed by many people within society.

The Bible provides a true standard by which to judge attitudes and actions. Biblical standards can be used to judge individual sin as well as corporate sin institutionalized within a culture.

By contrast, culture cannot be used to judge right and wrong. A changing culture cannot provide a fixed standard for morality. Only God's character, revealed in the Bible provides a reliable measure for morality.

## Notes

1. The general outline for this material can be found in chapter two of *Measuring Morality* (Richardson, Tx.: Probe Books, 1989).
2. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
3. E. M. Zechenter, "Cultural Relativism and the Abuse of the Individual, *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 1997, 53:323.
4. William Graham Sumner, *Folkways* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1906), 76.
5. Melville J. Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism* (New York:

Random House, 1973), 15.

6. Ibid., 56.

7. Anthony Flew, *Evolutionary Ethics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968), 55.

8. E. O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975).

9. Robert Wallace, *The Genesis Factor* (New York: Morrow and Co., 1979).

10. Dr. Ray Bohlin, "[Sociobiology: Evolution, Genes and Morality](#)"

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# Homosexuality: Questions and Answers from a Biblical Perspective

*Sue Bohlin provides distinctly biblical answers to your questions about homosexuality. As a Christian, it is important to understand what the Bible says and to be able to communicate this message of compassion.*

**Q. Some people say homosexuality is natural and moral; others say it is unnatural and immoral. How do we know?**

**A.** Our standard can only be what God says. In Romans 1 we read,

God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women

exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion (Romans 1:26-27).

So even though homosexual desires *feel* natural, they are actually *unnatural*, because God says they are. He also calls all sexual involvement outside of marriage immoral. (There are 44 references to fornication—sexual immorality—in the Bible.) Therefore, any form of homosexual activity, whether a one-night stand or a long-term monogamous relationship, is by definition immoral—just as any abuse of heterosexuality outside of marriage is immoral.

**Q. Is homosexuality an orientation God intended for some people, or is it a perversion of normal sexuality?**

A. If God had intended homosexuality to be a viable sexual alternative for some people, He would not have condemned it as an abomination. It is never mentioned in Scripture in anything but negative terms, and nowhere does the Bible even hint at approving or giving instruction for homosexual relationships. Some theologians have argued that David and Jonathan's relationship was a homosexual one, but this claim has no basis in Scripture. David and Jonathan's deep friendship was not sexual; it was one of godly emotional intimacy that truly glorified the Lord.

Homosexuality is a manifestation of the sin nature that all people share. At the fall of man (Genesis 3), God's perfect creation was spoiled, and the taint of sin affected us physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually—and sexually. Homosexuality is a perversion of heterosexuality, which is God's plan for His creation. The Lord Jesus said,

In the beginning the Creator made them male and female.

For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh (Matthew 19:4, 5).

Homosexual activity and pre-marital or extra-marital heterosexual activity are all sinful attempts to find sexual and emotional expression in ways God never intended. God's desire for the person caught in the trap of homosexuality is the same as for every other person caught in the trap of the sin nature; that we submit every area of our lives to Him and be transformed from the inside out by the renewing of our minds and the purifying of our hearts.

**Q. What causes a homosexual orientation?**

A. This is a complex issue, and it is unfair to give simplistic answers or explanations. (However, for insight on this issue please consider our articles [Answers to Questions Most Asked by Gay-Identifying Youth](#) and ["Why Doesn't God Answer Prayers to Take Away Gay Feelings?"](#)) Some people start out as heterosexuals, but they rebel against God with such passionate self-indulgence that they end up embracing the gay lifestyle as another form of sexual expression. As one entertainer put it, "I'm not going to go through life with one arm tied behind my back!"

But the majority of those who experience same-sex attraction sense they are "different" or "other than" from very early in life, and at some point they are encouraged to identify this difference as being gay. These people may experience "pre-conditions" that dispose them toward homosexuality, such as a sensitive and gentle temperament in boys, which is not recognized as acceptably masculine in our culture. Another may be poor eye-hand coordination that prevents a boy from doing well at sports, which is a sure way to invite shame and taunting from other boys (and, most unfortunately, from some of their own fathers and family members). Family relationships are usually very important in

the development of homosexuality; the vast majority of those who struggle with same-sex attraction experienced a hurtful relationship with the same-sex parent in childhood. The presence of abuse is a recurring theme in the early lives of many homosexual strugglers. In one study, 91% of lesbian women reported childhood and adolescent abuse, 2/3 of them victims of sexual abuse.[\[1\]](#) There is a huge difference, however, between predispositions that affects gender identity, and the choices we make in how we handle a predisposition. Because we are made in the image of God, we can choose how we respond to the various factors that may contribute to a homosexual orientation.

**Q. Wouldn't the presence of pre-conditions let homosexuals "off the hook," so to speak?**

A. Preconditions make it easier to sin in a particular area. They do not excuse the sin. We can draw a parallel with alcoholism. Alcoholics often experience a genetic or environmental pre-condition, which makes it easier for them to fall into the sin of drunkenness. Is it a sin to want a drink? No. It's a sin to drink to excess.

All of us experience various predispositions that make it easier for us to fall into certain sins. For example, highly intelligent people find it easier to fall into the sin of intellectual pride. People who were physically abused as children may fall into the sins of rage and violence more easily than others.

Current popular thinking says that our behavior is determined by our environment or our genes, or both. But the Bible gives us the dignity and responsibility missing from that mechanistic view of life. God has invested us with free will—the ability to make real, significant choices. We can choose our responses to the influences on our lives, or we can choose to let them control us.

Someone with a predisposition for homosexuality may fall into the sin of the homosexual behavior much more easily than a person without it. But each of us alone is responsible for giving ourselves permission to cross over from temptation into sin.

**Q. What's the difference between homosexual temptation and sin?**

A. Unmasked-for, uncultivated sexual desires for a person of the same sex constitute temptation, not sin. Since the Lord Jesus was "tempted in every way, just as we are (Hebrews 4:15)," He fully knows the intensity and nature of the temptations we face. But He never gave in to them.

The line between sexual temptation and sexual sin is the same for both heterosexuals and homosexuals. It is the point at which our conscious will gets involved. Sin begins with the internal acts of lusting and creating sexual fantasies. Lust is indulging one's sexual desires by deliberately choosing to feed sexual attraction—you might say it is the sinful opposite of meditation. Sexual fantasies are conscious acts of the imagination. It is creating mental pornographic home movies. Just as the Lord said in the Sermon on the Mount, all sexual sin starts in the mind long before it gets to the point of physical expression.

Many homosexuals claim, "I never asked for these feelings. I did not choose them," and this may be true. That is why it is significant to note that the Bible specifically condemns homosexual *practices*, but not undeveloped homosexual feelings (temptation). There is a difference between having sexual feelings and letting them grow into lust. When Martin Luther was talking about impure thoughts, he said, "You can't stop the birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair."

**Q. Isn't it true that "Once gay, always gay?"**

A. It is certainly true that most homosexuals never become heterosexual—some because they don't want to, but most others because their efforts to change were unsuccessful. It takes spiritual submission and much emotional work to repent of sexual sin and achieve a healthy self-concept that glorifies God.

But for the person caught in the trap of homosexual desires who wants sexual and emotional wholeness, there is hope in Christ. In addressing the church at Corinth, the Apostle Paul lists an assortment of deep sins, including homosexual offenses. He says,

And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 6:11).

This means there were former homosexuals in the church at Corinth! The Lord's loving redemption includes eventual freedom for *all* sin that is yielded to Him. Some (rare) people experience no homosexual temptations ever again. But for most others who *are* able to achieve change, homosexual desires are gradually reduced from a major problem to a minor nuisance that no longer dominates their lives. The probability of heterosexual desires returning or emerging depends on a person's sexual history.

But the potential for heterosexuality is present in everyone because God put it there.

See our article "Can Homosexuals Change?" at [www.probe.org/can-homosexuals-change/](http://www.probe.org/can-homosexuals-change/).

**Q. If homosexuality is such an abomination to God, why doesn't it disappear when someone becomes a Christian?**

A. When we are born again, we bring with us all of our emotional needs and all of our old ways of relating. Homosexuality is a relational problem of meeting emotional

needs the wrong way; it is not an isolated problem of mere sexual preference. With the power of the indwelling Spirit, a Christian can cooperate with God to change this unacceptable part of life. Some people—a very few—are miraculously delivered from homosexual struggles. But for the majority, real change is slow. As in dealing with any besetting sin, it is a process, not an event. Sin's power over us is broken at the moment we are born again, but learning to depend on the Holy Spirit to say no to sin and yes to godliness takes time. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says, "We...are being transformed into His likeness from glory to glory." Transformation (*this* side of eternity!) is a process that takes a while. Life in a fallen world is a painful struggle. It is not a pleasant thing to have two oppositional natures at war within us!

Homosexuality is not one problem; it is symptomatic of other, deeper problems involving emotional needs and an unhealthy self-concept. Salvation is only the beginning of emotional health. It allows us to experience human intimacy as God intended us to, finding healing for our damaged emotions. It isn't that faith in Christ isn't enough; faith in Christ is the *beginning*.

**Q. Does the fact that I had an early homosexual experience mean I'm gay?**

A. Sex is strictly meant for adults. The Song of Solomon says three times, "Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires." This is a warning not to raise sexual feelings until the time is right. Early sexual experience can be painful or pleasurable, but either way, it constitutes child abuse. It traumatizes a child or teen. This loss of innocence does need to be addressed and perhaps even grieved through, but *doesn't* mean you're gay.

Sexual experimentation is something many children and teens do as a part of growing up. You may have enjoyed the feelings you experienced, but that is because God created our bodies to

respond to pleasure. It probably made you feel confused and ashamed, which is an appropriate response to an inappropriate behavior. Don't let anyone tell you it means you're gay: it means you're human.

Even apart from the sexual aspect, though, our culture has come to view close friendships with a certain amount of suspicion. If you enjoy emotional intimacy with a friend of the same sex, especially if it is accompanied by the presence of sexual feelings that emerge in adolescence, you can find yourself very confused. But it doesn't mean you're gay.

It is a tragic myth that once a person has a homosexual experience, or even *thinks* about one, that he or she is gay for life.

#### **Q. Are homosexuals condemned to hell?**

A. Homosexuality is not a "heaven or hell" issue. The *only* determining factor is whether a person has been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul says that homosexual offenders and a whole list of other sinners will not inherit the kingdom of God. But then he reminds the Corinthians that they have been washed, sanctified, and justified in Jesus' name. Paul makes a distinction between unchristian behavior and Christian behavior. He's saying, "You're not pagans anymore, you are a holy people belonging to King Jesus. Now *act* like it!"

If homosexuality doesn't send anyone to hell, then can the believer indulge in homosexual behavior, safe in his or her eternal security? As Paul said, "May it never be!" If someone is truly a child of God, he or she cannot continue sinful behavior that offends and grieves the Father without suffering the consequences. God disciplines those He loves (Hebrews 12:6). This means that ultimately, no believer gets away with continued, unrepented sin. The discipline may not come immediately, but it will come.

**Q. How do I respond when someone in my life tells me he or she is gay?**

A. Take your cue from the Lord Jesus. He didn't avoid sinners; He ministered grace and compassion to them—without ever compromising His commitment to holiness. Start by cultivating a humble heart, especially concerning the temptation to react with judgmental condescension. As Billy Graham said, "Never take credit for not falling into a temptation that never tempted you in the first place."

Seek to understand your gay friends' feelings. Are they comfortable with their gayness, or bewildered and resentful of it? Understanding people doesn't mean that you have to agree with them—but it *is* the best way to minister grace and love in a difficult time. Accept the fact that, to this person, these feelings are normal. You can't change their minds or their feelings. Too often, parents will send their gay child to a counselor and say, "Fix him." It just doesn't work that way.

As a Christian, you are a light shining in a dark place. Be a friend with a tender heart and a winsome spirit; the biggest problem of homosexuals is not their sexuality, but their need for Jesus Christ. At the same time, pre-decide what your boundaries will be about what behavior you just cannot condone in your presence. One college student I know excuses herself from a group when the affection becomes physical; she just gets up and leaves. It is all right to be uncomfortable around blatant sin; you do not have to subject yourself—and the Holy Spirit within you—to what grieves Him. Consider how you would be a friend to people who are living promiscuous heterosexual lives. Like the Lord, we need to value and esteem the person without condoning the sin.

## **Note**

1. Anne Paulk, *Restoring Sexual Identity* (Eugene OR: Harvest House, 2003), p. 246.

## For further reading:

- Bergner, Mario. *Setting Love in Order: Hope and Healing for the Homosexual*. Baker, 1995.
- Paulk, Anne. *Restoring Sexual Identity*. Eugene OR: Harvest House, 2003.
- Dallas, Joe. *Desires in Conflict*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1991. (Particularly good!)
- Konrad, Jeff. *You Don't Have to Be Gay*. Pacific Publishing, 1987. (This is directed at young men. I can't recommend this one highly enough.)
- Satinover, Jeffrey. *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth*. Baker, 1996.
- Schmidt, Thomas E. *Straight & Narrow? : Compassion & Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate*. Intervarsity Press, 1995.
- Worthen, Anita and Bob Davies. *Someone I Love is Gay: How Family and Friends Can Respond*. Intervarsity Press, 1996.
- The website of Living Hope Ministries, an outreach in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area. Of particular interest are the online testimonies and especially an excellent online support group, a confidential, free, moderated message board for strugglers, overcomers and those who seek to encourage and uplift. [www.livehope.org](http://www.livehope.org)

# Romantic Hyperbole: A Humorous Look at Honesty in Love

It seemed like a good idea at the time.

It would be a great way to express my enduring affection for my wife. I would find seven romantic birthday cards and give one to Meg each day for a week, starting on her birthday. It would continue a sweet tradition begun before we married.

Each card would have a simple picture that would tenderly convey our feelings for one another. Inside would be an endearing slogan or affirmation to which I would add a personal expression of my love for her.

I didn't foresee that Day Three would bring an ethical dilemma.

I carefully selected the cards and arranged them in an appropriate sequence. Day One showed a cute puppy with a pink rose. Inside: "You're the one I love."

Day Two featured a picture of a little boy and girl in a meadow with their arms over each other's shoulders. The slogan: "Happy Birthday to my favorite playmate."

Day Three depicted a beautiful tropical sunset: bluish pink sky, vast ocean, silhouetted palm trees. You could almost feel the balmy breeze. Inside: "Paradise is anywhere with you", to which I added personal mention of places holding special memories for us: an island vacation spot, a North Carolina hotel, our home.

I completed the remaining cards, dated the envelopes, and planned to bestow one card each morning of her birth week. Then reality happened.

You see, I had agreed to go camping with her for Days One and Two. Camping is something Meg thrives on—outdoor living, clean air, hiking, camp fires. It's in her blood. Camping is something I did in Boy Scouts—dust, mosquitoes, noisy campers, smelly latrines. It ranks just below root canals on my list of favorites.

We camped at a state park only fifteen minutes from our home. On her birthday morning, she liked the fluffy puppy. Day Two, the cute kids made her smile. So far, so good.

Meanwhile, I was tolerating camping, doing my best to keep my attitude positive. The food was OK; the bugs were scarce. After two days, I was ready to go home as planned. Meg wanted to stay an extra day. We each got our wish.

Once home and alone, I pulled out Meg's card for "Day Three," the one with the tropical sunset and the "paradise is anywhere with you" slogan.

Should I give her the card? I had chosen to leave the campground. "But," I reasoned with myself, "the slogan was true lots of the time."

I settled on a compromise, a post-it note on the envelope explaining, "You may find that this card contains just a bit of romantic hyperbole."

Might giving it a clever-sounding label defuse my hypocrisy?

The echoes of her laughter still reverberate through our home. I got off easy.

"Speak the truth to each other," wrote a Jewish sage. "Speak. . . the truth in love," advocated a first-century biblical writer. Wise advice for just about any relationship.

"Romantic hyperbole" has become a humorous gauge of truthfulness in our relationship, a test for honesty. Neither of us enjoys every location on earth. She feels some sporting

events are a waste of time. I can get bored at shopping malls. But as long as we are honest with each other about our feelings, the bond seems to grow stronger.

That's no hyperbole.

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## **“Is It Small-Minded of Me to Base Morality on Scripture?”**

A friend of mine and I were recently discussing different things and two things relating to scripture things came up. The first (what started the argument) Was I asked whether morality could be determined by age; for example, we say that is wrong for a kid but OK for an adult. My view was, if something is wrong should it not be wrong for all? She is a Christian but made some comments I wasn't sure how to respond to. She implied that I “thought small” because after about thirty minutes of debate I realized my morality was based totally on scripture. When I said “moral” I meant biblical. She however was saying the Bible doesn't answer everything and it is up to society to decide, because as she pointed out not every one is Christian and I needed to see the whole picture. This sounds immoral to me and in arguing it (using the Bible) she asked what seems un-biblical, yet I was stumped she said that “If the Old Testament grew into the New Testament then who's to say it isn't still growing?” She almost seemed to be implying that 1) scripture is not a complete canon yet and 2) it should change based on society. This seems very un-biblical and wrong but I wasn't sure how to respond effectively.

Thanks for your e-mail. The two questions you brought up show

a great deal of insight on your part. I would be honored to help you work through these issues.

First, let's deal with morality. It's great that you base your moral behavior based on biblical principles. Unfortunately, not everyone is so wise. But even biblically speaking, there are some things that may be appropriate for some people that are not so wise for others. For instance, look at marriage. Wouldn't it be safe to say that a grown up married man is morally free to have sexual intimacy with his wife, but an unmarried teenage boy is not morally free to have sex with his girlfriend? Circumstances may determine some of our standards of behavior. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:23-33 that we are free to act the way we think we should (since we have been freed from the Law), but that we must first consider that our actions affect others. Christian morality is not based on a list of rights and wrongs, but on the law of love for one another. Sure, there are some things that are always wrong (such as murder), and some that are always right (such as love), but to say that every wrong is wrong for everyone is going to lead to trouble.

Your friend has a point that not every issue is covered specifically in the Bible. But the Bible's principles can be applied to every issue. So, in fact, to think biblically is to think about the "big picture." Society is actually more interested in keeping order than in encouraging morality. Age, therefore, does make a difference about what a person ought to do; not because morality is relative, but because sources of weakness can be different in people.

The freedom that we Christians have to make decisions is kept in check with our biblically-minded discernment about what is best for others and ourselves.

To answer your second question: yes, the canon of Scripture is closed. The New Testament is not just a highlight in the evolutionary development of the Old Testament. It is the "New

Covenant.” It’s called a covenant because Jesus Christ fulfilled in person the “Old Covenant’s” purpose. Hebrews 1:1-2 points out that God has spoken in these “last days” in the person of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament is the inspired foreshadowing of Jesus. The New Testament is the inspired testimony to His life and works. The first few centuries of Christians had divinely guided criteria for evaluating the worthiness of a letter to be included in the New Testament. (For more on this, see [Don Closson’s article on the Web.](#)) Nothing society or anyone else can come up with since could come close to adding to what Jesus has already done.

Furthermore, Jesus is the Word of God. How can God’s very presence on earth be matched? His ascension into the heavens ended His earthly ministry. In the same way, His ascension also ended any speculation about another testament. (That’s why there can be no new New Testament.) When He spoke the words “It is finished” on the cross, it illustrates that there is nothing else to be revealed. All that is necessary now is the fulfillment of His New Covenant, with the ministry of God’s Spirit (through His church) and Jesus’ glorious return. Our job is not to write more books of the Bible in order to make it apply to society. Instead we need to take what’s already there and interpret it’s vital and timeless message to every new society.

I hope this helps with your questions. If you have any more questions or need some elaborating, please feel free to respond. Awesome questions! He rewards those who seek Him.

Kris Samons  
Probe Ministries

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# Why Dr. Laura is (Usually) Right

## Why Dr. Laura Is Popular

Dr. Laura Schlessinger's call-in radio show is wildly popular in North America. According to her web site, [Dr.Laura.com](http://Dr.Laura.com), the purpose of her program is to dispense morals, values, principles and ethics. Her refusal to coddle people's self-centered behavior and immoral or stupid choices is either highly entertaining or absolutely infuriating, depending on your worldview. She's opinionated and not afraid to fly in the face of the culture. Most of the time I agree with her, but sometimes she misses the boat. In this essay I'll be looking at why Dr. Laura is usually right—not because she agrees with me (I mean, how arrogant is that?), but because her positions are consistent with what God has revealed in the Bible.

Dr. Laura rejects the victim mentality. She says, "Victimization status is the modern promised land of absolution from personal responsibility. Nobody is acknowledged to have free will or responsibility anymore."<sup>{1}</sup> Instead of coddling people because of past difficult experiences, she calls her audience to make right choices. In her book *How Could You Do That?*, she writes, "I don't believe for a minute that everything that happens to you is your doing or your fault. But I do believe the ultimate quality of your life, and your happiness, is determined by your courageous and ethical choices, and your overall attitude."<sup>{2}</sup> This call to assume responsibility for our choices and our behaviors resonates with us because it is consistent with the dignity God endowed us with when He gave us the ability to make significant choices and not be His puppets. Joshua encouraged the Israelites, "Choose ye this day whom ye shall serve: but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24:15).

It was a real choice with real consequences. That's because we live in a cause-and-effect universe where "God is not mocked: a man reaps what he sows" (Gal. 6:7).

There is a most interesting postscript in Dr. Laura's book *How Could You Do That?* She quotes from the Genesis 4 passage where God confronts Cain for his bad attitude after He would not accept Cain's offering. God tells Cain, "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." (Gen. 4:7) She makes the point that God seems to be teaching that there is joy in doing right, and "God also reassures us that we do have the capacity to rise above circumstance and attain mastery over our weaker selves."[\[3\]](#) It's a good observation, and this passage makes a strong statement about what God expects of every person, as a moral creature made in His image. He wants us to do what is right and resist the pull of sin's temptation.

In a culture that gets increasingly secular every day, where we have lost our moral compass, listeners are relieved to hear someone who has a strong commitment to God-given absolutes. Dr. Laura acts like an anchor of common sense for many who find life's choices too confusing and overwhelming in today's postmodern world.

Much of Dr. Laura's "preaching, teaching and nagging" (her words) is directed at helping people decide to make good moral choices. Even if they don't know God, their lives will work better simply because they will be more in line with how God created us to live. (Of course, from a Christian perspective, this has no value in light of eternity if a life that "works better" is lived separated from the life of God through Jesus Christ.)

Dr. Laura's emphasis on honor, integrity and ethics strikes a nerve in eighteen million listeners.[\[4\]](#) No surprise, really: that nerve is common to all of us—the nerve called

morality—because we are made in the image of a moral God.

## Self-Esteem

One reason why Dr. Laura's values and beliefs attract millions of listeners to her daily radio program is her common-sense approach to the whole issue of self-esteem. When a caller complains, "I don't feel very good about myself," Dr. Laura will fire back a great question: "Why *should* you feel good about yourself? What have you done that gives you a reason to feel good about yourself?" In a culture where people want to believe they're wonderful and worthwhile without any basis for such an assessment, Dr. Laura has a completely different approach: self-esteem is earned.

In her books and radio show, she suggests several means of earning the right to enjoy self-respect, and all of them are good ideas from a pragmatic perspective.

Dr. Laura points out that we derive pleasure from having character. We need to choose high moral values and then honor them during times of temptation. She writes, "There is no fast lane to self-esteem. It's won on . . . battlegrounds where immediate gratification comes up against character. When character triumphs, self-esteem heightens."[\[5\]](#)

She also says that choosing personal and professional integrity over moral compromise will make us feel good about ourselves in the long run. So will valuing and honoring our responsibilities, which she calls "the express route" to self-esteem.[\[6\]](#) We build self-respect by choosing loyalty, sacrifice, and self-reliance over short-term self-indulgence.[\[7\]](#)

In her book *Ten Stupid Things Women Do to Mess Up Their Lives*, Dr. Laura astutely demonstrates one of the differences between the sexes: "Women tend to make a relationship their life, their identity, while men make it a part of their lives."[\[8\]](#)

She's absolutely right. The reason a relationship cannot provide true self-esteem for a woman is the same reason a man's job or accomplishments can't do it: it is idolatry to look to relationships or accomplishments for meaning and purpose. God will never honor our false gods.

But self-esteem is only part of the equation for a healthy view of ourselves. Self-esteem is how we *feel* about ourselves; it needs to be built on the foundation of how we *think* about ourselves, which is our sense of self-worth. How valuable am I? What makes me significant? It doesn't matter how good we feel about ourselves if on a purely human level, we're in actuality worthless.

Pastor Don Matzat tells of a woman who came to him complaining, "I feel like I am completely worthless." He blew her away with his response. Gently and slowly, he said, "Maybe you *are* completely worthless." [{9}](#) Are you shocked? This lady was. But it's true. We are only valuable because God made us, not because of anything within ourselves. We are infinitely precious because He made us in His image, able to be indwelt by God Himself. And He proved our value by paying an unimaginable price for us: the lifeblood of His very Son. Apart from God, we *are* completely worthless.

C. S. Lewis put it so well:

*Look for yourself and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.* [{10}](#)

Dr. Laura's right: we earn our self-respect. But our sense of worth is one of God's great gifts to us, because He's the one who determines our value.

# Man as a Moral Creature

If you call Dr. Laura's radio program, the screener will ask, "What is your moral dilemma? What is the issue of right and wrong that you want to discuss?" Zeroing in on moral problems and not psychological ones sets her call-in talk show apart from most others. Dr. Laura sees man as a moral creature, capable of choosing good and evil. This is what she wrote in her book, *How Could You Do That?*:

Why do people do good things?

*In contrast to all other creatures on earth, only humans measure themselves against ideals of motivation and action. We are elevated above all other creatures because we have a moral sense: a notion of right and wrong and a determination to bring significance to our lives beyond mere existence and survival, by actions that are selfless and generous.*[{11}](#)

It's true, we are indeed elevated above all other creatures by our moral sense. We are far, far more than animals. But where does that morality come from?

Human beings are moral creatures because God created us in His image. That means we can choose between good and evil because God chooses between good and evil. We can think on a higher level, contemplating abstracts and ideals like goodness and nobility, because our minds are a reflection of God's unimaginably complex mind. We can choose to love others by serving them sacrificially because that's what God is like, and He made us like Himself. Dr. Laura thinks it's because we're lapsing into our animal natures.[{12}](#) But we are not the product of evolution. We were never animals. People do bad things because we are born as fallen image-bearers. I love the way Larry Crabb described it: "When Adam sinned, he disfigured both himself and all his descendants so severely that we now function far beneath the level at which we were intended.

We're something like an airplane with cracked wings rolling awkwardly down a highway rather than flying through the air. The image has been reduced to something grotesque. It has not been lost, just badly marred." [{13}](#) But our airplanes keep wanting to wander off the runway and go our own way because we let our flesh rule us. That's why we do bad things.

Why do people do bad things?

But although Dr. Laura is right about man being a moral creature, she misses the boat on what it means to be human:

*When Adam and Eve were in the Garden they were not fully human because they made no choices between right and wrong, no value judgments, no issues of ethics or morality. Leaving Eden, though, meant becoming fully human.* [{14}](#)

They certainly did make a moral choice in the Garden. They chose wrong over right and chose disobedience over fellowship with God. Actually, when Adam and Eve were still living in the Garden, they were more fully human than we've ever been since, because God created man sinless, perfect and beautiful. When we look at the Lord Jesus, the Second Adam, we see just how sinless, perfect and beautiful "fully human" is.

Dr. Laura is right to insist that we see ourselves as moral creatures, because a moral God has made us in His image.

## **Dr. Laura's Wisdom**

Dr. Laura's strong positions on certain topics has made some people stand up and applaud her while others fume in frustration at her bluntness.

She makes no bones about the sanctity of marriage and that sex belongs only within a committed relationship sealed with a sacred vow. People living together and having sex without marriage are "shacking up." She's right because God ordained

sex to be contained only in the safe and committed relationship of marriage.

Another of her well-known positions is that abortion is wrong because it's killing a baby. The much better alternative is adoption. She gets particularly frustrated with women who say, "Oh, I could never do that. I could never give up my baby once it was born." Her answer to that is, "You can kill it but you can't wave goodbye?" Here again, she's right because abortion is the deliberate taking of a human life. God's Word clearly commands us not to murder (Ex. 20:13).

Her strong views on abortion continue in her commitment to children, and her disdain for the way so many parents indulge their own whims and agendas at the expense of their kids. In a day when divorce is so prevalent, she makes an impassioned case for doing what's best for the children, with parents remaining active and involved in the raising of their kids. She believes that the family is the cornerstone of civilization, and this is consistent with the biblical view starting right in the first chapter of Genesis.(Gen. 1:28)

Part of the way parents should take care of their children is to make sure they raise them in a religious faith shared by both parents. Dr. Laura warns people not to enter into interfaith marriages because usually the kids end up with no religion at all. Both the Old and New Testaments warn against being unequally yoked; God knows it's a recipe for heartbreak at best and disaster at worst.

She shows practical wisdom in many ways. She makes a distinction between those who are evil and those who are merely weak. In the same way, the book of Proverbs goes into great detail about the difference between the wicked and the fool.

Another evidence of her wisdom is her response to the fact that some people are uncomfortable keeping secrets, believing

it's dishonest to not tell everything you know. Dr. Laura says there is a difference between maintaining privacy and withholding truth. The question to ask is, "Will this benefit the person I tell?" If not, don't tell. The reason this works is that this is how God operates. Everything He tells us in His Word is truth, but it's not exhaustive truth. Plus, God doesn't owe it to us to tell us everything He knows, and He's not being dishonest when He keeps information from us, like the "whys" of our trials and sufferings, or the exact details of how the endtimes will play out.

Finally, Dr. Laura exhorts people to choose "as if" behavior. "What a radical idea: choosing how to behave regardless of how you feel—and discovering that behaving differently seems to change how you feel."[\[15\]](#) In 2 Corinthians 5:7 we are told to "walk by faith, not our senses" (a paraphrase), which is another way of urging us to act *as if* something were already true instead of being limited by our feelings. I do love Dr. Laura's practical wisdom.

## Where Dr. Laura's Wrong

Most of the time, Dr. Laura's views are right on the mark because they are consistent with the laws and values of Scripture. A fairly recent convert to conservative Judaism, she is still developing her own belief system, yet she can be fair and open-minded in considering other viewpoints. But there are some areas where she departs from the Bible's teachings.

For example, Dr. Laura believes that all religions are equally effective for establishing morality. If a young mother calls, looking for a religion in which to raise her children, Dr. Laura doesn't care if it's Hinduism or Islam or Presbyterianism, just as long as there is *a religion*. To her the issue is what works, or what *seems* to work, and most religions are the same to her in the area of shaping behavior. On the other hand, the truthfulness of religious claims is

apparently not as important to her. Yet only one religion offers a personal relationship with God on His terms, by His own definition. Only one religion is God reaching down to man: Christianity, with its roots in Judaism.

Dr. Laura misunderstands biblical Christianity. She rejects the notion that Jews can believe in Christ. Many rabbis teach that to be Jewish is to reject Jesus as Messiah; they teach that Jesus is the God of the Gentiles. Two thousand years of unjust persecution feeds a heartbreaking “anti-Jesus” mentality. But Jesus Christ was a Jew, and almost all of the first believers were Jewish. As one messianic rabbi put it, to believe in the Jewish Messiah is the most Jewish thing someone can do! [\[16\]](#) Dr. Laura is mistaken in her belief here. When a Jew trusts Christ as Savior, he does not stop being Jewish. What he discovers, in an intensely personal way, is that Judaism is the root, and Christianity is the fruit. He feels “completed” in ways many Gentiles never can.

What is the purpose of life? Dr. Laura has told many people who are floundering without personal meaning that they need to find their niche in life to do their job, which is to perfect the world. This sounds noble . . . but there is nothing in Scripture that calls us to perfect an unperfectable world. In fact, God plans on scrapping the whole thing and starting over (Rev. 21:1). Perfecting the world is not our purpose in life: the reason we are here is to bring glory to God (Eph. 1:6,12,14).

One other area where Dr. Laura misses the boat is in dealing with guilt. I remember one caller who was filled with remorse and regret over her abortion, and she asked what to do with her guilt. But since Dr. Laura’s belief system doesn’t offer a way of handling it, she advised the woman to just carry the guilt. This is her usual advice in such circumstances because she believes the person will learn a deep life lesson from the continual pain. I grieve that she has no understanding of the cleansing that comes with Christ’s forgiveness. Jesus paid for

our sins on the cross, and when we come to Him in belief and trust, He not only forgives the sin but cleanses us of the guilt. We don't have to carry guilt that He washed away!

There are a few subjects where Dr. Laura departs from the Scriptures, most notably about Jesus and salvation, and we can't agree with her. But for the most part, as far as her positions and beliefs, Dr. Laura is usually right, and I think she honors God as she proclaims His laws and ways. I just pray she will respond to the light of the WHOLE truth.

### [Addendum on why I left out Dr. Laura's views on homosexuality](#)

#### Notes

1. Laura Schlessinger, *How Could You Do That?* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 8.
2. Ibid., p. 134.
3. [www.drLaura.com/about/](http://www.drLaura.com/about/)
4. "No Whining!," *U.S. News and World Report*, 14 July 1997.
5. *How Could You Do That?*, p. 152.
6. Laura Schlessinger, *Ten Stupid Things Women Do to Mess Up Their Lives* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 171.
7. Ibid., p. 157.
8. Ibid., p. 189.
9. Don Matzat, *Christ Esteem* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House), p. 173.
10. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.
11. *How Could You Do That?*, p. 26.

12. Ibid., p. 187.

13. Larry Crabb, *Understanding People* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1987), p. 87.

14. *How Could You Do That?*, p. 93.

15. Ibid., p. 257.

16. Personal conversation with the staff of Baruch Ha Shem, a messianic congregation in Dallas, Texas.

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## Human Genetic Engineering

*Although much has occurred in this field since this article was written in 2000, the questions addressed by Dr. Bohlin are still timely and relevant. Is manipulating our genetic code simply a tool or does it deal with deeper issues? Dealing with genetic engineering must be done within the context of the broader ethical and theological issues involved. In the article, Dr. Bohlin provides an excellent summary driven from his biblical worldview perspective.*

### **What forms of genetic engineering can be done in human beings?**

Genetic technology harbors the potential to change the human species forever. The soon to be completed Human Genome Project will empower genetic scientists with a human biological instruction book. The genes in all our cells contain the code for proteins that provide the structure and function to all

our tissues and organs. Knowing this complete code will open new horizons for treating and perhaps curing diseases that have remained mysteries for millennia. But along with the commendable and compassionate use of genetic technology comes the specter of both shadowy purposes and malevolent aims.

For some, the potential for misuse is reason enough for closing the door completely—the benefits just aren't worth the risks. In this article, I'd like to explore the application of genetic technology to human beings and apply biblical wisdom to the eventual ethical quagmires that are not very far away. In this section we'll investigate the various ways humans can be engineered.

Since we have introduced foreign genes into the embryos of mice, cows, sheep, and pigs for years, there's no technological reason to suggest that it can't be done in humans too. Currently, there are two ways of pursuing gene transfer. One is simply to attempt to alleviate the symptoms of a genetic disease. This entails gene therapy, attempting to transfer the normal gene into only those tissues most affected by the disease. For instance, bronchial infections are the major cause of early death for patients with cystic fibrosis (CF). The lungs of CF patients produce thick mucus that provides a great growth medium for bacteria and viruses. If the normal gene can be inserted in to the cells of the lungs, perhaps both the quality and quantity of their life can be enhanced. But this is not a complete cure and they will still pass the CF gene on to their children.

In order to cure a genetic illness, the defective gene must be replaced throughout the body. If the genetic defect is detected in an early embryo, it's possible to add the gene at this stage, allowing the normal gene to be present in all tissues including reproductive tissues. This technique has been used to add foreign genes to mice, sheep, pigs, and cows.

However, at present, no laboratory is known to be attempting

this well-developed technology in humans. Princeton molecular biologist Lee Silver offers two reasons.<sup>[1]</sup> First, even in animals, it only works 50% of the time. Second, even when successful, about 5% of the time, the new gene gets placed in the middle of an existing gene, creating a new mutation. Currently these odds are not acceptable to scientists and especially potential clients hoping for genetic engineering of their offspring. But these are only problems of technique. It's reasonable to assume that these difficulties can be overcome with further research.

## **Should genetic engineering be used for curing genetic diseases?**

The primary use for human genetic engineering concerns the curing of genetic disease. But even this should be approached cautiously. Certainly within a Christian worldview, relieving suffering wherever possible is to walk in Jesus' footsteps. But what diseases? How far should our ability to interfere in life be allowed to go? So far gene therapy is primarily tested for debilitating and ultimately fatal diseases such as cystic fibrosis.

The first gene therapy trial in humans corrected a life-threatening immune disorder in a two-year-old girl who, now ten years later, is doing well. The gene therapy required dozens of applications but has saved the family from a \$60,000 per year bill for necessary drug treatment without the gene therapy.<sup>[2]</sup> Recently, sixteen heart disease patients, who were literally waiting for death, received a solution containing copies of a gene that triggers blood vessel growth by injection straight into the heart. By growing new blood vessels around clogged arteries, all sixteen showed improvement and six were completely relieved of pain.

In each of these cases, gene therapy was performed as a last resort for a fatal condition. This seems to easily fall within

the medical boundaries of seeking to cure while at the same time causing no harm. The problem will arise when gene therapy will be sought to alleviate a condition that is less than life-threatening and perhaps considered by some to simply be one of life's inconveniences, such as a gene that may offer resistance to AIDS or may enhance memory. Such genes are known now and many are suggesting that these goals will and should be available for gene therapy.

The most troublesome aspect of gene therapy has been determining the best method of delivering the gene to the right cells and enticing them to incorporate the gene into the cell's chromosomes. Most researchers have used crippled forms of viruses that naturally incorporate their genes into cells. The entire field of gene therapy was dealt a severe setback in September 1999 upon the death of Jesse Gelsinger who had undergone gene therapy for an inherited enzyme deficiency at the University of Pennsylvania.<sup>{3}</sup> Jesse apparently suffered a severe immune reaction and died four days after being injected with the engineered virus.

The same virus vector had been used safely in thousands of other trials, but in this case, after releasing stacks of clinical data and answering questions for two days, the researchers didn't fully understand what had gone wrong.<sup>{4}</sup> Other institutions were also found to have failed to file immediate reports as required of serious adverse events in their trials, prompting a congressional review.<sup>{5}</sup> All this should indicate that the answers to the technical problems of gene therapy have not been answered and progress will be slowed as guidelines and reporting procedures are studied and reevaluated.

## **Will correcting my genetic problem, prevent it in my descendants?**

The simple answer is no, at least for the foreseeable future.

Gene therapy currently targets existing tissue in a existing child or adult. This may alleviate or eliminate symptoms in that individual, but will not affect future children. To accomplish a correction for future generations, gene therapy would need to target the germ cells, the sperm and egg. This poses numerous technical problems at the present time. There is also a very real concern about making genetic decisions for future generations without their consent.

Some would seek to get around these difficulties by performing gene therapy in early embryos before tissue differentiation has taken place. This would allow the new gene to be incorporated into all tissues, including reproductive organs. However, this process does nothing to alleviate the condition of those already suffering from genetic disease. Also, as mentioned earlier this week, this procedure would put embryos at unacceptable risk due to the inherent rate of failure and potential damage to the embryo.

Another way to affect germ line gene therapy would involve a combination of gene therapy and cloning.[\[6\]](#) An embryo, fertilized *in vitro*, from the sperm and egg of a couple at risk for sickle-cell anemia, for example, could be tested for the sickle-cell gene. If the embryo tests positive, cells could be removed from this early embryo and grown in culture. Then the normal hemoglobin gene would be added to these cultured cells.

If the technique for human cloning could be perfected, then one of these cells could be cloned to create a new individual. If the cloning were successful, the resulting baby would be an identical twin of the original embryo, only with the sickle-cell gene replaced with the normal hemoglobin gene. This would result in a normal healthy baby. Unfortunately, the initial embryo was sacrificed to allow the engineering of its identical twin, an ethically unacceptable trade-off.

So what we have seen, is that even human gene therapy is not a

long-term solution, but a temporary and individual one. But even in condoning the use of gene therapy for therapeutic ends, we need to be careful that those for whom gene therapy is unavailable either for ethical or monetary reasons, don't get pushed aside. It would be easy to shun those with uncorrected defects as less than desirable or even less than human. There is, indeed, much to think about.

## **Should genetic engineering be used to produce super-humans?**

The possibility of someone or some government utilizing the new tools of genetic engineering to create a superior race of humans must at least be considered. We need to emphasize, however, that we simply do not know what genetic factors determine popularly desired traits such as athletic ability, intelligence, appearance and personality. For sure, each of these has a significant component that may be available for genetic manipulation, but it's safe to say that our knowledge of each of these traits is in its infancy.

Even as knowledge of these areas grows, other genetic qualities may prevent their engineering. So far, few genes have only a single application in the body. Most genes are found to have multiple effects, sometimes in different tissues. Therefore, to engineer a gene for enhancement of a particular trait—say memory—may inadvertently cause increased susceptibility to drug addiction.

But what if in the next 50 to 100 years, many of these unknowns can be anticipated and engineering for advantageous traits becomes possible. What can we expect? Our concern is that without a redirection of the worldview of the culture, there will be a growing propensity to want to take over the evolution of the human species. The many people see it, we are simply upright, large-brained apes. There is no such thing as an independent mind. Our mind becomes simply a physical

construct of the brain. While the brain is certainly complicated and our level of understanding of its intricate machinery grows daily, some hope that in the future we may comprehend enough to change who and what we are as a species in order to meet the future demands of survival.

Edward O. Wilson, a Harvard entomologist, believes that we will soon be faced with difficult genetic dilemmas. Because of expected advances in gene therapy, we will not only be able to eliminate or at least alleviate genetic disease, we may be able to enhance certain human abilities such as mathematics or verbal ability. He says, "Soon we must look deep within ourselves and decide what we wish to become."[\[7\]](#) As early as 1978, Wilson reflected on our eventual need to "decide how human we wish to remain."[\[8\]](#)

Surprisingly, Wilson predicts that future generations will opt only for repair of disabling disease and stop short of genetic enhancements. His only rationale however, is a question. "Why should a species give up the defining core of its existence, built by millions of years of biological trial and error?"[\[9\]](#) Wilson is naively optimistic. There are loud voices already claiming that man can intentionally engineer our "evolutionary" future better than chance mutations and natural selection. The time to change the course of this slow train to destruction is now, not later.

## **Should I be able to determine the sex of my child?**

Many of the questions surrounding the ethical use of genetic engineering practices are difficult to answer with a simple yes or no. This is one of them. The answer revolves around the method used to determine the sex selection and the timing of the selection itself.

For instance, if the sex of a fetus is determined and deemed undesirable, it can only be rectified by termination of the

embryo or fetus, either in the lab or in the womb by abortion. There is every reason to prohibit this process. First, an innocent life has been sacrificed. The principle of the sanctity of human life demands that a new innocent life not be killed for any reason apart from saving the life of the mother. Second, even in this country where abortion is legal, one would hope that restrictions would be put in place to prevent the taking of a life simply because it's the wrong sex.

However, procedures do exist that can separate sperm that carry the Y chromosome from those that carry the X chromosome. Eggs fertilized by sperm carrying the Y will be male, and eggs fertilized by sperm carrying the X will be female. If the sperm sample used to fertilize an egg has been selected for the Y chromosome, you simply increase the odds of having a boy (~90%) over a girl. So long as the couple is willing to accept either a boy or girl and will not discard the embryo or abort the baby if it's the wrong sex, it's difficult to say that such a procedure should be prohibited.

One reason to utilize this procedure is to reduce the risk of a sex-linked genetic disease. Color-blindness, hemophilia, and fragile X syndrome can be due to mutations on the X chromosome. Therefore, males (with only one X chromosome) are much more likely to suffer from these traits when either the mother is a carrier or the father is affected. (In females, the second X chromosome will usually carry the normal gene, masking the mutated gene on the other X chromosome.) Selecting for a girl by sperm selection greatly reduces the possibility of having a child with either of these genetic diseases. Again, it's difficult to argue against the desire to reduce suffering when a life has not been forfeited.

But we must ask, is sex determination by sperm selection *wise*? A couple that already has a boy and simply wants a girl to balance their family, seems innocent enough. But why is this important? What fuels this desire? It's dangerous to take more

and more control over our lives and leave the sovereignty of God far behind. This isn't a situation of life and death or even reducing suffering.

But while it may be difficult to find anything seriously wrong with sex selection, it's also difficult to find anything good about it. Even when the purpose may be to avoid a sex-linked disease, we run the risk of communicating to others affected by these diseases that because they *could* have been avoided, their life is somehow less valuable. So while it may not be prudent to prohibit such practices, it certainly should not be approached casually either.

## Notes

1. Lee Silver, *Remaking Eden: Cloning and Beyond in a Brave New World*, New York, NY: Avon Books, p. 230-231.
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# Rights and Wrongs

*Probe's founder, Jimmy Williams, discusses the true source of ethics.*



*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*

During a recent meeting of college educators at Harvard University, Cornell President Frank Rhodes rose to address the issue of reforms, suggesting that it was time for universities to pay “real and sustained attention to students’ intellectual and moral well-being.” Immediately there were gasps, even catcalls. One indignant student stood to demand of Rhodes, “Who is going to do the instructing? Whose morality are we going to follow?” The audience applauded thunderously, believing that the young man had settled the issue by posing an unanswerable question. Rhodes sat down, unable or unwilling to respond.

This interchange between university president and college student hits at the most basic question in formulating any and every system of ethics, namely that of identifying the *basis* for determining the standards we humans designate as “right” or “wrong.”

## **What is ethics?**

*Ethics* comes from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning, “what ought to be,” or, “a place of refuge,” such as a cave, solid and absolute. The dictionary defines ethics as

- (1) the study of standards of conduct and moral judgment, or
- (2) the system or code of morals of a particular philosopher, religion, group, etc.

Dr. Albert Schweitzer defined ethics as “the name we give for our concern for good behavior.”

## Human Ethical Universality

No human lives without the ethical dimension. Statements like, “That’s not fair,” or “You promised,” reveal the common ethical assumptions humans have come to expect of one another. This is not to say that each human always acts responsibly toward his fellows. In every culture we find individuals who choose to ignore the commonly held standards; they choose to rape, to steal, to kill. Breaking established standards is therefore a *relative* issue; that is, some do, and some don’t. But an *absolute* is also involved: no one likes to be raped, robbed, or murdered.

## OPTIONS FOR VALUES

One can say that every ethical value involves some standard of behavior, and every standard is defined in a *prescriptive* manner. Ethical standards are expressed in terms of “ought” and “should,” or “ought not” and “should not.” They transcend the language of *description*, speaking not only of “what is,” but rather “what should be.” Where do we find such standards? What kinds of foundational possibilities are available to us upon which to build an ethical system? The options are as follows:

### The Natural Ethic (Nature)

“All nature is but art, unknown to thee;  
All chance, direction which thou canst not see;  
All discord, harmony not understood;  
All partial evil, universal good;  
And, spite of pride, in erring reason’s spite,  
One truth is clear, *whatever is, is right.*”

Alexander Pope

**Definition:** "Oughts" are derived from what "is."

Mortimer Adler called this an attempt "to get conclusions in the imperative mood from premises entirely in the indicative mood." This view presupposes the origination of value is found in the facts, the observation of nature.

"What is ethically right is related *in some way* to what is materially true" (G. G. Simpson). Example: A man runs a red light. He cannot draw a conclusion of whether or not to run the red light without having an earlier presupposition or standard in place concerning that ethical choice: "One shouldn't run red lights."

### **Implications:**

To have true moral values, people must get them from somewhere other than the actual world of description.

This view destroys the very concepts of good and evil, because "what is" contains both. To speak of good and evil becomes nonsensical. Charles Manson said, "If God is one, what is bad?" Baudelaire lamented, "If God exists he is the Devil."

This view does not answer the question of predatorial/survival life in nature. All that we call "human" would be destroyed if people practiced this natural ethic consistently and universally.

Not many hold this view seriously. T. H. Huxley admitted that though evolution is "true," it leads to bad ethics. Even evolutionists choose not to live in such a world. Instead, they philosophically smuggle Christian ethics arbitrarily into their system and hold it *romantically* upon their naturalistic base.

If we are to have ethics, we must find them outside the natural realm.

# The Consensus Ethic (Majority Rule)

**Definition:** Whatever a cultural group approves of is deemed right; whatever the group disapproves of is wrong. In America, we find the most popular expression of cultural relativism demonstrated in the opinion poll (e.g., the Clinton Scandal).

## Implications:

The grand result of the Kinsey Report on American sexual ethics in the 1950's was that people bought the idea that if a *majority* of citizens accepted something as right or wrong, it was.

Cultural relativism claims to be based on a scientific view of morals. Admittedly, statistical analysis of human behavior is the true and proper task of sociologists. But within the discipline, unfortunately, there is, by design, or by inference, a strong tendency to make value judgments about the results of research. Sociology exists *only* to tell us *what* people are doing, not what they *should* be doing. True values must be found somewhere else.

Ethics by majority may actually have little to do with morality. A society can become corrupt. In New Guinea, for example, the tribe of Papuans have a 100 per cent majority in their view on the virtue of cannibalism. Does their unanimous consent on this issue make it moral? By such reasoning, if 51% of the German people assented to the extermination of Jewry by Hitler and his henchmen, then their actions were "right," and other cultures should have withheld any criticism of German sovereignty in their own internal affairs.

Cultural relativism is really "status-quoism," providing no strong motive for social change. It is also capricious over time. For example, in 1859, slavery in the United States was socially acceptable and abortion was illegal. Today, the reverse is true.

Those who prefer this ethical foundation must face one very dangerous fact: **If there is no standard by which society can be judged and held accountable, then society becomes the judge.** When that happens, no one is safe—minorities, the unborn, the elderly, the handicapped, and perhaps even the blond-headed or the left-handed!

## **The Arbitrary Ethic (Power)**

A teenager complains to her mother, “Why can’t I go out tonight?” Mom replies, “Because I say so!” No reason is given, other than that of the mother imposing her will on her daughter. This is the arbitrary, *de facto* use of power: “Might makes right.”

**Definition:** An individual or elitist group sets itself up as arbiter of values and uses the necessary force to maintain these values. Democratic consensus rules from below; arbitrary absolutists rule from above.

### **Critique:**

The arbiter can be a dictator, a parliament, a supreme court, a political party, or any elite configuration which has the wherewithal to impose its will upon the populace.

What is enforced is based solely upon what the arbiter decides will be enforced. Emperor worship of the Roman Caesars brought persecution to Jews and Christians who refused to practice it. Plato’s Republic would be governed by its philosopher kings. The Catholic Inquisitors summarily tortured and executed unrepentant heretics. B. F. Skinner’s *Walden Two* utopia would be carefully managed by beneficent planners through total environmental control and behavior modification. Soviet Russia was ruthlessly governed by an all-powerful Central Committee and its KGB enforcers.

It is important to remember that such arbiters can make something *legal* but not *moral*. The 1972 *Roe v. Wade* decision

legalizing abortion is the most pertinent contemporary example. The judges, choosing to ignore medical, legal, and religious precedents on the true humanity of the unborn, made an arbitrary, pragmatic decision. This ruling was legal, but not necessarily moral.

The great flaw in this approach is that it presupposes great trust in those who govern. History has not confirmed the wisdom of placing such confidence in those who wield absolute power. The balancing of power in the U.S. Constitution between the various branches of government reflects the wariness of its Framers to give undue authority to any sole federal entity.

“Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” It leads to despotism, tyranny, and bondage.

## **The True Absolute (Transcendence)**

“There are two ways in which the human machine goes wrong. One is when human individuals drift apart from one another, or else collide with one another and do one another damage, by cheating or bullying. The other is when things go wrong inside the individual when the different parts of him (his different faculties and desires and so on) either drift apart or interfere with one another. You can get the idea . . . if you think of us as 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. “But there is one thing we have not yet taken into account. We have not asked where the fleet is trying to get to. . . . 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 harmonizing the thing inside each individual. Thirdly, with the general purpose of human life as a whole: what man was made for? What course the whole fleet ought to be on? . . .”  
(C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*)

**Definition:** C. S. Lewis has here identified the “three parts of morality,” the first two of which humans are well acquainted with: internal moral deficiencies and conflict with others through ethical choices. It is the *third* part for which all humans desperately need and long, namely, some *objective* standard to which all humans must adhere. Such a standard necessarily *transcends* the world of description. It presupposes that God exists and has spoken, or *revealed* such standards. The true absolute contends that the Creator of man AND nature has given such values that are commensurate with the way He made us and appropriate to people’s problems and aspirations.

**Example:** The Ten Commandments provide the boundaries for the definition of humanness; any act contrary to this true absolute is a violation of our humanity. Further, these standards are not merely *external* principles, but rather the very essence of the nature and character of God.

### **Implications:**

Some things are **right**; some are **wrong**, and objectively so. This ethical system is based on *normative* principles rather than subjective, *utilitarian* ones.

It also provides a basis for conviction: what was right yesterday will be right today. The individual is protected against the *whole* of society—wicked kings, pragmatic judges,

corrupt politicians, and decadent populace.

There is also a true and legitimate motive for fighting evil, an objective basis for social change.

# ETHICAL SYSTEMS BUILT ON THE ABOVE

## Natural Ethic

### 1. Behaviorism

All of our actions are the result of either our genetic make-up (see Probe articles [“Human Nature”](#) and [“Sociobiology: Evolution, Genes and Morality”](#)) or our environment.

#### Premises:

This system presupposes that nothing exists beyond the material realm.

What is called **mind** is reduced to physical and chemical reactions.

We cannot act upon the world; rather, the world acts upon us.

#### Critique:

There can be no human responsibility for actions.

And yet, behaviorists themselves appeal to a standard of justice when wronged.

Contrary to the contention of the behaviorists, there *are* both philosophical reasons and scientific evidence to support the belief that we do possess an immaterial substance.

### 2. Darwinism

### 3. Marxism

# Humanistic Systems

1. **Cultural Relativism**, consensus (See above)

2. **Arbitrary Absolute** (See Above)

3. **Situation Ethics**

This system seeks to use the rules whenever they are useful, but it discards them if they happen to conflict with love. Joseph Fletcher is the chief proponent.

## **Premises:**

The sole arbiter of morality in any situation is love; it is the *only* absolute, according to Fletcher.

Love should be defined in utilitarian terms. William James said, "What works is right." Actions should be judged by whether or not they contribute to the greatest good for the greatest number (lifeboat ethics).

The end justifies the means.

## **Critique:**

Everyone may have a different opinion of what is loving or unloving in a given situation. If "love" is an absolute, humanity has a very difficult time in applying it to real life. Thus, morality is reduced to a matter of personal preference: "It all depends upon your point of view."

If morality is based on the consequences, we have to be able to predict with accuracy these consequences if we want to know whether or not we are acting morally. In short, one would have to BE God in order to always do the loving thing ahead of time.

4. **Emotive Ethics**

In this view nothing is literally right or wrong; these terms

are simply expressions of personal emotion and as such are neither true nor false.

### **Premises:**

When we speak of good or evil, these remain simply expressions of our own subjective feelings about what we have encountered or experienced.

We can **describe**, but we cannot **prescribe**.

Thus, all actions are morally neutral.

### **Critique:**

The most an emotivist can say is, "I don't *like* other ethical theories. I *like* my own opinion on this issue."

Emotivists cannot verify their assumption that the only meaningful utterances are statements of factual or personal observation and preference. Some other meaningful system for true moral acts may exist beyond their experience and myopic world view.

## **5. Hedonism**

Hedonists, like emotivists, are individually directed along the lines of their personal choices and desires. The hedonist (or Epicurean), however has a goal in mind: the pursuit of pleasure. Epicurus (341-270 B.C.) believed that there were two primary choices in life—to experience either pain or pleasure. His philosophy is based on avoiding the former at all costs and relentlessly pursuing the latter with no consideration given to the consequences upon others. This, "If it feels good, do it," mentality fits well today in a society which stresses that the individual (me) is most important.

## **6. Pantheism**

The ethical system which flows out of pantheism and new age

thinking is similar to both emotivism and hedonism, and is really more *humanistic* than *theistic*. While Christian theism is God-centered, and naturalism is man-centered, pantheism is world-centered. But the focus is still upon man, and the world becomes god. In pantheism, man and nature become one, and together become the only "god" which exists. Man thus becomes his own god; he *is* god, or at least a part of god. Ethics becomes, then, those choices which keep one in harmony with the "cosmic oneness," and salvation comes from looking *within* to maintain that harmony. This process, like all Eastern Mysticism, tends to blur reality and the ethical distinctions of "right" and "wrong."

## **Inadequate Absolutes: The Moral Dilemma**

In summary, there are two reasons why man, acting autonomously, cannot establish a valid and satisfying moral theory on either naturalistic or humanistic moral theory.

*The scientific method is limited.*

Science can collect facts, but these pieces of information cannot tell us what we *ought* to do. It ignores the very real possibility that something real exists beyond the natural world, and it is thus doomed to look *within* its own self-defined "closed system" for an adequate ethical base. Unfortunately, none honestly exists, philosophically, except the natural law of nature, "red in tooth and claw."

*Relativism is always self-contradictory.*

Although relativism disclaims the existence of absolutes, it must assume the existence of an absolute by which other theories can be judged. The problem today is that society has abandoned belief in a transcendent, absolute truth, a morally binding source of authority that is above our rights as individuals. To modern man, then, there is no absolute other than perhaps the belief that "there are no absolutes," which

is itself a contradiction.

It assumes there are no intrinsic values, yet it must assume that intrinsic values exist whenever it gives guidance in making moral decisions.

If ends and means are relative, regardless of the ethical system preferred, ones own point of reference must also be in flux.

## FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIAN ETHICAL ABSOLUTES

1. It is based on an authority higher than man (Creator God) and *revelation*, rather than human experience, both individually or collectively.

2. The absolute standard for morality is God Himself, and every moral action must be judged in the light of His nature.

3. Man is not simply an animal, but a unique, moral being created in the image of God.

4. God's moral revelation has intrinsic value; it is *normative* rather than *utilitarian*. If the above is true, a homeless person possesses the same God-given worth as the president of the United States.

5. Scripture is accepted as morally authoritative, the Word of God, being derived from God.

6. In the Scriptures, law and love are harmonized, and obedience to God's laws is not legalism.

7. God's moral revelation was given for the benefit of humankind.

8. These moral principles are timeless, having historical continuity, and humans—individually or collectively—experience

the common grace of God whenever and wherever they are adhered to.

9. True Christian morality deals with intentions, as well as actions, seeks the glory of God instead of pleasure and self-gratification, and encourages service to others, rather than serving self.

God alone knows all the goals, determines all morality, and allows us to “play the game.” But he does not allow us to make the rules. Modern and postmodern man, seemingly loosed from such transcendent restrictions, has chosen to make up his own. The folly of such a reference point for life is everywhere apparent.

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# **Genetic Engineering – A Christian Scientist’s Perspective**

*Dr. Ray Bohlin examines the rapidly moving world of genetic engineering from a Christian worldview perspective. He explains that most genetic engineering attempts to make more efficient changes similar to those previously done through selective breeding and other conventional techniques. However, those working in the field need to be aware of the ethical and religious issues that arise in this area of science.*

# What Is Genetic Engineering?

Our culture teeters on the edge of a steep and dangerous precipice. New technologies will soon allow us to change, radically and permanently, the world in which we live. Indeed, we will hold in our hands the capability of directly and purposefully changing who we are as human beings. The technology I am speaking of is genetic engineering.<sup>[1]</sup> Ethical and technical questions swirl around discussions of genetic engineering like the wall clouds of the eye of a hurricane. Many in society seem to be bracing themselves for the disappearance of the calm of the eye and the coming of the full force of a powerful and destructive combination of new plants and animals unleashed on an unsuspecting environment, with new and improved humans designed to succeed.

Before your alarm buttons go on overload, let me say that I hope to lend a reassuring voice with a dose of sober realism. Genetic technology will undoubtedly unleash great power to change our world forever, but should it, and will it? In this article I want to explore just a few of the technical and ethical questions we face as a society. The time to discuss these issues is now, while we still have time to think without simply reacting.

The phrase *genetic engineering*, unfortunately, often conjures up images of macabre experiments resulting in Frankenstein-like monsters and the cold-hearted use of genetic information to create new social classes depending on our genes, as in the 1997 film *Gattaca*.<sup>[2]</sup> However, genetic engineering can simply be defined as the manipulation or alteration of the genetic structure of a single cell or organism.

Sometimes the manipulation of an organism's genome, the totality of all its genes, can simply refer to the project of identifying its complete DNA sequence in order to gain information for future study and potential alteration. The Human Genome Project is therefore, in a sense, a form of

genetic engineering because the human genome must be broken up and manipulated in order to gain the desired information.

Ordinarily, genetic engineering refers to the direct addition, deletion, or intentional mutation of an organism's DNA sequence to produce a desired effect. Knockout experiments in mice seek to determine the effects of eliminating a particular gene from the mouse genome. Recombinant DNA experiments usually take a gene found in one organism and place the gene into another organism. These animals can be of the same or different species.

Sometimes researchers will simply change the DNA sequence in a gene to study what effect the specific change has on the gene or its protein product. All of these alterations fall under the umbrella of genetic engineering. In this broad definition, genetic engineering is neither good nor evil. The nature of the experiments themselves will determine if they are moral or immoral.

## **Why Are There Genetic Illnesses?**

The initial thrust of genetic research is the treatment and potential cure of genetic illnesses. Therefore, we must explore why genetic illnesses occur at all. "Why questions" within science usually occur on two levels and are notoriously difficult. The first level and usually the easier of the two are the scientific. The "why" is best changed to "how." For our purposes this means, How do genetic illnesses arise? The second, more difficult question asks on a moral basis, Why do genetic illnesses occur?

The answer to the first question, How do genetic illnesses arise?, is simply, mutations. Mutations are mistakes in the DNA sequence. Sometimes a mutation is simply the substitution of one nucleotide for another.

Mutations can also result from a piece of DNA being deleted.

This may cause one or more codons to disappear. In cystic fibrosis (CF), codon 508 out of 1,480 is missing, causing one amino acid to be removed from the resulting protein. This causes the severe respiratory and digestive problems of CF patients that are usually lethal before their 30th birthday.

So far, genes for more than 1,200 human disorders have been identified, which are found over all twenty-three pairs of human chromosomes. Some estimate that there may be as many as 3,000 to 4,000 human genetic disorders that are due to defects in a single gene. Most disorders, however, will be due to mutations in a host of genes.

The moral question is perhaps not so difficult in its answer, but in our acceptance of the answer. Mutations exist as a result of the Fall. We know the serpent was cursed, Eve was cursed, and Adam was cursed (Gen. 3:14-19). But Romans 8:18-22 also tells us that all creation was subjected to futility, groans and suffers, and eagerly awaits the revealing of the sons of God so it may be set free from its slavery to corruption. This world is not as God intended.

Asking why someone suffers from a genetic disease is no different than asking why someone was killed in a traffic accident when others walked away. We know our suffering is temporary. We know that God will somehow work it all out for good (Rom. 8:28). But in 2 Corinthians Paul tells us we suffer so we can comfort those who suffer after us (1:4), so other sufferers will know they are not alone (1:6), and, principally, we suffer so we will trust in God and not ourselves (1:9).

Part of the Christian mission has always been to alleviate suffering where possible. While Jesus' miracles clearly were part of fulfilled prophecy, they were also about relief from suffering. Genetic engineering, while possessing a power that can be used for evil, which we will discuss, also at least has the potential to relieve the suffering from, if not even cure,

genetic disease.

## **Could Changing Genetic Material Produce a Dangerous Superbug?**

One concern that many people have about genetic engineering is the possibility of unintentionally creating a superbug or a damaging plant or animal whose destructive nature is only discovered after the fact. After all, our knowledge of the workings of genes and proteins is still growing. We hear constantly how complex everything is. What makes us think we can tinker with this incredible biological reservoir of information without making some incredible blunder from which there is no turning back?

When genetic engineering in bacteria was first discovered and introduced (Recombinant DNA technology), many scientists had this very fear. This was partially the reason for the self-imposed moratorium and four levels of containment in the early 1970s. But geneticists and molecular biologists found that dangerous, unintentional consequences were virtually nonexistent. Enforcement of the guidelines eventually relaxed and soon became outdated and ignored. What this means is that researchers were quite convinced that transferring DNA of known sequence and function into bacterial chromosomes and plasmids did not result in unforeseen consequences. The procedure became routine and straightforward.

This does not mean that someone, somewhere, won't use biotechnology to produce a superbug intentionally. Certainly this technology can be used to produce even more powerful and resistant agents of biological warfare. Some even speculated that HIV (human immunodeficiency virus), the virus that causes AIDS, was intentionally produced. Though this hypothesis has been successfully refuted, the prospect remains that DNA recombinant technology has opened up a new field that can be used for evil.

However, we must be clear that this is not the fault of the technology itself. It is entirely human to shrink with fear away from things that we don't understand. The first predictable reaction of tribal societies when faced with modern technology was to cower in fear. Something dreadful was about to descend upon them. Usually this didn't happen and, with some education and familiarity, fear dissipated. But only human agents alone can make evil choices. Fire will heat our homes and cook our food, but it can also kill indiscriminately in the hands of an arsonist. But fire itself is not evil.

What should concern us more than the advent of biotechnology is the growing popularity of a totally secular and naturalistic worldview. Naturalism contends that humans are just complicated animals. The end result of this assumption is that ethics becomes an exercise in simply determining what works, not what is right.

Biotechnology is powerful, indeed, but we cannot put the genie back in the bottle. Therefore we must engage the discussion as to how this technology can be used to cure disease and not become another snare to degrade and dehumanize people's lives.

## **Are We Playing God by Creating Organisms That Never Existed Before?**

Unfortunately, the concept of playing God means different things to different people.[\[3\]](#) For some it may have nothing to do with God at all. They are simply expressing awe and wonder at the power that humans can wield over nature.

For some Christians, however, the notion of playing God carries a pietistic view of God's realm of activity versus that of the human race. In this context, playing God means performing tasks that are reserved for God and God alone. If this is what genetic technology does, then the concerns about playing God are justified. But what is often being reflected in this perspective is that God acts where we are ignorant and

it should stay that way.

What is really at stake is fear, fear of what we may learn, fear of what new responsibility this new knowledge will put on our shoulders, and fear that this new knowledge will be used to harm us and not for the common good. The point was made that technology itself is not evil. Any technology can be used to further God's purposes or hinder them. People make those decisions, not technology.

By the very fact that we are called to be stewards of God's creation (Gen. 1:26-28), we need to expand our knowledge of what God has made in order to better rule over His creation. Part of being made in God's image is our creativity. In this sense we "play God" by imitating Him. Our works of art, buildings, management of natural parks, and care for the poor, sick, and disadvantaged all imitate God for the good of His creation.

But we are still creating new creatures that did not exist before. Isn't God the only Creator in that sense? We seldom realize that we are hard-pressed to find in nature today the ancestors of nearly all the plants and animals we use for food or service. Our current varieties of corn, wheat, flowers, cattle, dogs, horses, etc., bear little resemblance to the original stock in nature. That is because we have selected and manipulated them over the millennia for our own purposes. We have already created animals and plants that never existed before. Genetic technology has greatly increased the specificity and power of our abilities, but the nature of what we can do is the same as before.

If we are to play God in the sense of imitating Him as we apply the truth of being created in His image and in exercising our appointment as stewards over all He has made, then we need to do so with humility and compassion. Our creative abilities should be used to enhance the condition of men and women as we struggle in a fallen world. Genetic

technologies can and should be used to help alleviate or even cure the effects of genetic disease.

## **Is It Wrong to Combine Genes from Different Species?**

Have you ever wondered if we should be transferring genes from one species to another at all? Does this in itself violate some ethical principle? One gene does not define a species. Bacteria are composed of thousands of genes and it is estimated that humans possess as many as 100,000 genes. Therefore, transferring one gene from one organism to another does not create a hybrid in the traditional sense. Genes, remember, are composed of DNA. DNA is a molecule; it is not living in and of itself.

If the idea of adding something foreign to an organism is troublesome, just realize that we do this all the time when we take antibiotics, over the counter pain medications, and other synthetic medications. Our bodies would never come across most of these substances in nature.

What is different is that with genetic engineering, we have added something to a cell or organism that will change the composition of that cell or organism, possibly for as long as it lives, and is potentially passed on to future generations. It is reasonable to ask if we have the wisdom even to try to make these kinds of changes. No doubt, genetic technology provides a power never before possessed by human beings: to design intentionally or create a new variety of organism by altering its genetic structure.

Once again, the issues are, Which genes are actually being transferred? and, For what purpose? These questions, asked case by case, should rule our choices, not the inherent legitimacy of genetic engineering itself. Creating crops internally resistant to disease, particularly to help developing countries better feed their people, is a goal

worthy of God's image-bearers.

However, intentionally manipulating the gene of a known pathogenic and deadly bacterium with the expressed intent of creating a biological weapon that is untreatable and incurable is a hideous evil. Kerby Anderson also warns that we need to consider the extent that genetic manipulation may cross over barriers God instituted in the created kinds.<sup>{4}</sup> If God felt it important to create boundaries of reproduction that his creatures were to stay within, we ought not cross over them ourselves (Gen. 1:11, 12, 21, 24, 25).

It is certainly possible for genetically modified organisms created for agricultural and medical purposes to develop in ways not planned or foreseen. Therefore, it is necessary that proper and extensive tests be performed to assure, as much as possible, that no unnecessary harm will come to the environment or to humans. As vague as this prescription is, it only serves to reinforce the necessity of further education on the part of everyone to ensure that this powerful technology is used responsibly. We simply cannot afford to be ignorant of genetic issues and technologies and expect to contribute to the necessary discussion that lies ahead.

## Notes

1. An excellent resource for Christians on this topic is *Genetic Engineering: A Christian Response*, Timothy J. Demy and Gary P. Stewart, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1999)
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