

An ethical framework for making choices in life

Helpful Bible Readings

- Exodus 20:1-17
- Ephesians 5:1-20
- Matthew 5:1-12

Introduction

Consider these common questions people may face from time to time:

Should I purchase the cheaper item from India or the more expensive one from Australia?

Should I date this girl or that guy?

How should I deal with my noisy next-door neighbour?

Which political party should I vote for?

Should I say something about what I saw or should I keep quiet?

The Bible gives us clear guidance on some big issues in life (e.g. do not murder, do not commit adultery, etc.), but what about all the day to day, week to week, year to year decisions that don't get a specific reference by chapter and verse? What about the big issues that the people of the ancient world might never have addressed, like medically induced abortion, euthanasia, nuclear energy, space exploration, greenhouse gases, etc.?

"The right to swing my fist ends where the other man's nose begins."

*Chief Justice
Oliver
Wendell
Holmes*

This is the concern of normative ethics; it involves the common question, "What makes something right or wrong?"

We know, of course that in many choices of life, we choose between degrees of good. Some things are a choice between something good and something very good (such as when being offered two jobs after going for interviews). But what about when we have to make decisions about what's right and what's wrong? What framework or guidelines might we use to make a decision?

Suspensions about morality abound today. The legal profession has become the butt of jokes about our penchant for relativity and our inability to hold any decent ethical standards in society. Perhaps you've heard the story of two partners in a law firm having lunch when suddenly one of them jumped up and said, "I have to go back to the office - I forgot to lock the safe!" The other partner replied, "What are you worried about? We're both here."

Fear not! There is a framework of thinking that can assist us. Let's bring together the reasoning of ethical theories and the teaching of the bible.

Ethical Frameworks and the Bible

Professional ethicists commonly identify **three basic paths for deciding what is right and wrong**.

1. Consequentialist Ethics: The first path of thinking would argue that x is wrong because it produces harm to someone; or more subtly, it produces more harm overall than benefit. If this is your most common way of determining the answer to ethical questions, then you are what the ethicists may call a **consequentialist**.

This normative theory of ethics says that:

An action is right if and only if it promotes good consequences. The most prevalent social and political expression of this theory is utilitarianism, which specifies that **an action is right if it promotes preferred consequences.**

Q. Can you think of an example of a utilitarian choice in daily life? (e.g. I will choose to take my car to work rather than the tram today because it is raining, and I don't want my hair-do ruined.)

Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mil are two prominent ethicists in this area, as is Peter Singer. Another way of thinking about this is as a **harms/benefits analysis**. This seems to make "sense" in many situations, but it sometimes produces odd results, or conclusions which run counter to some of our deepest moral intuitions.

"Relativity applies to physics, not ethics."

Albert Einstein



What is being claimed here is that **no action is right or wrong in itself**, but is only made so by the consequences it promotes. So, in unusual circumstances, murder, lying, theft, torture, may not only be permissible but preferred (e.g. Guantanamo Bay detention centre and the indefinite incarceration and torture of alleged terrorists). There can be no such thing as individual "rights" in the purity of this theory because only the overall benefit counts. It's simply a matter of doing the sums and maximizing the consequences.

Some in the 1960's (e.g. Fletcher) suggested that the Bible encourages us to ask a simple question, "what is the loving thing to do?" So-called "Situational ethic theory" that is love-impelled seems to have a ring of truth to it. We'll return to critique this biblically later.

So our first "C" for our choices framework is **Consequences**.

2. Command Ethics: Running somewhat counter to consequentialist ethics are the non-consequentialist normative ethical theories which claim that there are some actions which should **never** be done, no matter what good consequences they promote. A classic example is the almost universal rule that **punishment of an innocent person** is wrong.

In consequentialist theory, the only ethical justification for “punishment” and the only way to determine what form it should take is the consequences- no other rule applies. If prevention/deterrence of future crimes is the best outcome achieved by the punishment of, or even execution of an innocent person, then this theory may render such actions entirely justifiable. Similarly, torture can be justified on the basis of prevention of very bad consequences!

We need then to consider the two types of non-consequentialist normative ethical theories: the first is often called **deontological ethics** and brings into view commands, rules and laws in our decision making about what is right or wrong.

So the second of three theories to study is what’s called **Deontological** theory (from the Greek word *deon*, meaning obligation or duty). It says that: **An action is right if it is in accordance with a moral rule or principle.** Such moral rules or principles may be derived from the Laws in the Bible or a religious text, natural law, or reason.



For example, one very important contemporary version of deontological theory is associated with **human rights movements**. To proclaim a right, such as the right to life, or free speech, or the right to die with dignity and so on, is to invoke a moral rule, to claim that there is a duty to provide, or at least not to interfere with such things.

Rights language is very strong moral language and is inherently incompatible with utilitarianism. You must not violate such and such a right, no matter what the consequences. So, for example if a right to not be taken into slavery is established, but a whole town’s economy may collapse if slavery is abolished, one must follow the rule and the town would be called upon to suffer the consequences.

In Australia, powerful rights language coexists with a strong emphasis on utilitarianism, which may explain some of our national ethical confusion.

With the dilution of biblical knowledge and any respect for it, there are very few if any “general moral principles” which ethicists agree on. This has led to what some call the **moral bankruptcy** of Western liberal secular societies.

However, for Christians, the consideration of commands from God is important to include in our decision making in at least two important dimensions.

- Apart from the fact that the Bible has direct commands to bring to bear on big issues (e.g. read the commandments listed in Exodus 20) we can also suggest that many actions are intrinsically right or wrong by virtue of their **harmony or disharmony with the realities of the world as God has made it and intends for it to be**. For example, some Christians believe the current environmental crises could have been avoided if people lived more simple and eco-friendly lives as a sign of trust in God’s providence.
- Secondly, more important than merely seeking the best outcome for oneself or other people, Christians have a **God-determined set of decrees and preferences** to consider. No assessment of the consequences is sufficient without consideration of its impact upon God’s glory and evaluation of all consequences from an **eternal** perspective. By focusing on God, people **do** abandon preferred results as their primary goal. However, by faith they are assured of far better outcomes (eventually) than could even be imagined apart from God (e.g. consider the martyr Stephen who spoke out about God’s plans in public despite the consequences as recorded in Acts 7).

As you might expect, the bible has a bit to say in argument against a purely consequentialist ethic. The Bible more often pits God-centred wisdom against a self-centred wisdom. For example, in Romans, the Apostle Paul argues that God has a healthy mistrust of human-centered ethics. With Adam all fell—human sinfulness means, among other things, that people cannot always know and do what is right (Rom. 3:10–11; 5:17–19). By nature people are slaves to sin (Rom. 6:17–20). Part of the problem is that the mind has become distorted. It is blinded by the “god of this age” (II Cor. 4:4) and warped by one’s own sinful nature (Rom. 8:5–8). The mind is said to be depraved and actually prone to approve “what ought not to be done” (Rom. 1:28). It needs not merely a one-time regeneration but a continual renewing transition (Rom. 12:2). The Old Testament concurs strongly; an example being Proverbs 3:5-6.

... on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

Jesus of Nazareth

So this is the second C in our informed choices: **Commands or rules or rights** have an impact on our decisions.

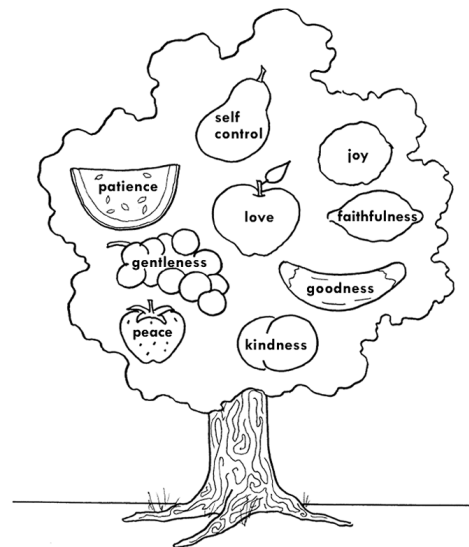
3. Character or Virtue Ethics: this is one other non-consequentialist ethical theory that deserves consideration. **Virtue theory** says that: **An action is right if it is what an agent with a virtuous character would do in the circumstances.**

Virtue theory was a prominent way of doing ethics in the classical Greek era and throughout the medieval period of Catholic ethics. It fell into disrepute with the so called *Enlightenment*, but has enjoyed something of a renaissance since the 1980's largely due to the work of philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre. Put simply, it says that **there is more to the moral life than what a person does or does not do.** The kind of person that **you are** is also relevant. Does this ring a bell?

Perhaps this has been popularized but somewhat trivialized by the Christian wrist bands with WWJD on them (sincere idea, however, the Gospel message we promote is more about what Jesus has already **done** for us more than model to immitate). More substantially, virtue ethics harmonize well with Christianity where those who believe and are baptized can confidently grasp the promises of Christ that the Holy Spirit will transform the hearts and minds of those who trust in Him. A new power over sin and self-centeredness is available and Christ-like character can be formed in the believer (Galatians 5:21-22).

Virtue theory focuses on the development of **good character and the acquisition of virtues** or character traits, which it is claimed will then flow on to right decisions. Does this sound familiar to you? Can you recall things Jesus said about character and action?

The **beatitudes**, for example, in Matthew chapter 5, commend a series of virtues: meekness, hunger for righteousness, mercy, purity of heart. The rest of the so-called "sermon on the mount" makes clear that not only external actions but attitudes of the heart are significant; indeed, words and actions reflect what is in the heart, whether good or evil.



Jesus told the Pharisees, whose behaviour was impeccable, to "Clean the inside first" for "it is from within, from within the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, avarice, deceit etc... all these evil things come from within, and they defile a person" (Mark 7: 21-23)

There are, then, certain universal Christian virtues (we could also think of the fruit of the Spirit in listed in Galatians 5:22,23).

Ethical preferences are emphasized in directions given to husbands and wives in the New Testament where we see specific moral obligations to each other (as with parents and children, masters and slaves). In a similar manner, unique doctor/patient and lawyer/client relationships generate particular obligations today.

In contrast to other theories:

- virtue theory allows that **there is no one right answer for everybody** to an ethical question of what x should do to y?
- Rather, **who x is**, in what role they are acting, and the nature of relationship between x and y is morally relevant.

So we would expect lawyers to come up with different answers to doctors. For example, the Hippocratic Oath did not originally reflect the broad consensus of classical Greek society in general, but the particular convictions of a group of physicians (ironically, it was largely ignored in those times!)

Unfortunately, the great professions (e.g. law, medicine) have had their moral foundations of virtue eroded as secularism and liberalism have impacted on them. In so many ways, modern people leave it up to market forces to influence their decisions and ours and people are increasingly seen as commodities.

Therefore, we might do well to restore to our framework of thinking for making choices this third “C” to our framework for making choices- **Character**.

Conclusion and Exercise

Having surveyed three common ethical theories in brief, we might suggest that all three could be used in good measure to provide a robust system of checks and balances when making decisions about what is right or wrong in a given circumstance. Of course, Christians will argue, the Holy Spirit may give to individuals or groups a strong conviction at any time about what is the right thing to do. Nevertheless, God has given us healthy powers of reason too which can be redeemed for godly purposes. Let’s think then about how the three “C’s” of our framework might be employed in thinking about making good decisions in life. Ephesians chapter 5 is an interesting passage to examine with the 3 C’s of our framework in view. Consider the following analysis of the chapter below purports to show that all three of our “C’s” are present in the ethical directions the Apostle exhorts us with. Consequentialist directions are highlighted in **red**, Commands in **blue** and Character **yellow**. Ephesians 5, verses 1-21 might then look like this:

Ephesians 5:1-20

1 **Be imitators of God**, therefore, as dearly loved children
2 **and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.**

3 **But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.**

4 **Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.**

5 **For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person-- such a man is an idolater-- has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.**

6 **Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient.**

7 **Therefore do not be partners with them.**

8 **For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light**

9 **(for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth)**

10 **and find out what pleases the Lord.**

11 **Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.**

12 **For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret.**

13 **But everything exposed by the light becomes visible,**

14 **for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."**

15 **Be very careful, then, how you live-- not as unwise but as wise,**

16 **making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.**

17 **Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.**

18 **Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.**

19 **Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord,**

20 **always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

Using appendix B attached to this paper which contains some ethical case studies, work in groups to discern how the three "C's" of our framework might assist in working out the best choices to be made in such circumstances.

Rev. Steve Webster Feb. 2010

Appendix A- 3 “C’s” for deciding right from wrong

Common ways of deciding what’s right or wrong

1. X is wrong because it produces harm to someone
Consequences
2. X is right because it’s of a moral principle
Commands
3. X is right because of virtuous character demands
Character

Appendix B- Case Studies

Case Studies for deciding what's right or wrong

In this paper, you have been introduced to 3 C's that impact on deciding on what's right and what's wrong in life. C is for Command, C for Consequences and C for Character. Choose any or all of the following case studies and see how the three C's impact on your consideration of the decisions that could be or should be made. You can go further by thinking of what Bible passages might aid in your consideration of the cases.

Case Study #1 – County Court

Recently Mr. Glen Meyer, a 62-year-old farmer, was convicted of having bashed another farmer in the face with a truck fuel pump during an argument. Mr. Meyer could have been sentenced to 2 to 10 years in prison. Instead the judge, taking into account that Mr. Meyer had an elderly mother at home with him, gave him a suspended sentence, but confined him to his home for a year, allowing him only to keep doctors appointments and to attend certain necessary events. In addition, Mr. Meyer had to pay a \$7,500 fine and the victim's medical bills, amounting to nearly \$10,000. Finally, Mr. Meyer was required by the judge to post for thirty months a large sign at the end of his driveway, visible to drivers along the road into town, which reads, "Warning: A Violent Felon Lives Here. Travel at Your Own Risk." Mr. Meyer has challenged the imposition of the sign in court.

Q. Is the judge's requirement that Mr. Meyer post the sign morally justifiable? If so, why? If not, why not? How would you use the bible to impact on your decision if you had been the judge? What role do the 3 C's play in your responses?

Case Study #2 – Love thy neighbour?

Walking down the street Mr. Jones sees a flowerpot fall out of a window, threatening another pedestrian. Jones could save the man by simply shouting a warning but he keeps silent. Under prevailing law in the United States, in cases of this kind, Jones is not liable for failing to warn the pedestrian.

Q. Should the law be changed so as to impose liability upon a bystander such as Jones in the preceding situation? If so, why? If not, why not? How would you use the bible to justify your response? What role do the 3 C's play in your answers?

Case Study #3 – To loan or not to loan

Sean and Kevin, two young men in their mid-twenties, have been close friends since they met during their school years. They share numerous similar interests and greatly enjoy each other's company. Kevin gratefully acknowledges to himself that Sean has been a fine friend in every respect that counts. Sean has always been there when Kevin needed encouragement. He has provided assistance unselfishly in large and small matters - e.g. lending Kevin his car when Kevin's broke down, several times helping Kevin move his belongings from one apartment to another, and putting up Kevin's relatives from out of town when Kevin didn't have room for them at this apartment. Kevin has provided similar kinds of support, encouragement, and assistance to Sean over the years. Sean, who has written a number of short stories and poems, has been working on his first novel for the past two years. Kevin is well aware of Sean's first major literary project and fully supports it, in the sense of considering it a highly worthwhile thing for Sean to do. Several weeks ago Sean learned about a small apartment in a quiet area. He believes the flat would provide an ideal working environment for him. Recently Sean has asked Kevin to loan him \$1,000 for the bond and the first month's rent. The request takes Kevin by surprise. Over the years of their friendship neither Kevin nor Sean has asked the other for a loan until now. Monetary affairs have not played a significant role in their relationship as friends, either directly or indirectly. Kevin and Sean both grew up in families where discussion of personal financial issues outside of the family was disapproved of strongly. For this reason, both Kevin and Sean seldom, if ever, discuss their personal finances with each other. Kevin, who works as a project manager for a large engineering firm, can afford to loan the money to Sean. He (Kevin) is not sure, however, exactly how Sean plans to repay the loan on casual wage in retail part-time. Kevin feels acutely uncomfortable raising issues with Sean such as how he plans to repay the loan.

Q. What might be a reasonable repayment schedule, and so forth? How would you use the bible to impact on this matter? What role do the 3 C's play in your answers?

Case Study #4 – Can you keep a secret?

Tony, Claire, and Beth were the best of friends through high school. Tony and Beth attended the same uni and began dating each other in their second year. After graduation they announced their engagement and Beth asked Claire to be her bridesmaid. About six months before the wedding, Beth's mother became ill. Since Beth was unemployed, her father asked her if she could stay home and take care of her mother. Because her mother needed her constantly, Beth found little time to spend with Tony. Although Tony became quite lonely, he was very understanding and tried to be as supportive as he could. Two months passed and Beth's mother's condition worsened. Given the circumstance, Claire offered to help Beth to call off the wedding. However Beth explained that the wedding was now even more important to her mother than it was before and that she had no intention of calling it off. Claire understood and continued to be a supportive friend both to Beth and Tony. Knowing Beth's fragile emotional condition and Tony's feelings of loneliness, Claire made a point of spending time with both of them. One evening Claire met Tony for dinner, and noticed while dining that he was very quiet. She asked him if there was something bothering him, other than the obvious circumstance with Beth and her mother. Tony paused for a moment and asked Claire if she could keep a secret. Claire warmly assured Tony that he could tell her anything. He proceeded to confess that he had had a brief affair shortly after Beth's mother became ill. After his confession, Tony told Claire how grateful he was to have gotten all of that off his chest and thanked Claire for being such a good friend. Still, Claire was speechless. The following week, Beth called Claire and asked her to help her pick out a restaurant for the rehearsal dinner. Beth and Claire spent the afternoon driving around visiting restaurants. In the car Beth mentioned that she thought that Tony seemed a little preoccupied for the past month, but also added that the last few times they were together he seemed like his old self again. She then asked Claire for her opinion about whether "something was going on with Tony".

Q. What should Claire do? Why? How would you use the bible to impact on this matter? What role do the 3 C's play in your answers?

Case Study #5 – Playing God Dilemma

Most of us know families where all the children are of the same sex, either boys or girls. In at least some of these cases, the parents often wish for at least one more child of the other sex. They desire this, not because they do not like or appreciate the children they already have, but because their hopes and dreams of parenthood often involve having a child of the other sex. A father may dream of teaching a son sports or being the father of the bride, a mother may look forward to sharing in her daughter's journey into womanhood or her son's carrying on of the family name. Until recently, these desires would remain unfulfilled unless they were lucky. Now physicians have available a technique called PGD (Pre-implantation Genetic Diagnosis), which allows physicians to screen embryos for a wide range of possible diseases as well as for gender. Suitable embryos can then be implanted, while the future parents may decide not to implant other embryos. These other embryos, depending on the reasons why they were rejected, may be destroyed or given to other infertile couples, where they will be implanted in the woman and (hopefully) brought to term.

Q. What moral considerations should prospective parents consider in regard to their use of PDG? How would you use the bible to impact on this matter? What role do the 3 C's play in your answers?

Case Study #6 – I do

Elmer donated blood that his wife Doris needed during a medical operation. Elmer and Doris were subsequently divorced some time later. Several years after the divorce Elmer, was in an accident and needed a pint of blood. His new wife, Cora, was of a different blood type, and thus could not contribute blood to Elmer. Doris still lived in the same area as Elmer, and there were no health-related reasons that would have prevented her from donating blood.

Q. Was Doris morally obligated to donate blood to Elmer; "Yes," "No," or "It depends"? Whatever your response explain the reasoning behind it. How would you use the bible to impact on this matter? What role do the 3 C's play in your answers?