Introduction

Ethical theories don’t exist in isolation from other areas of knowledge. Possible connections include, theology, pastoral care, public policy, science, sociology, political theory, anthropology and so on.

Ethics and Theology

“Theological ethics is ethics that takes God seriously”. (Ford, 1999: p54). Whatever ethical theories we use, God is crucial. But what kind of God do we believe in? Do we believe in a God:

- who creates humans with a conscience and reason and allows them to make a decision?
- who gives to humans commandments and judges them on whether they keep them or not?
- who participates in human life in order to help people to be good?

“The key question is: what are the moral implications of living before a God who:

- creates and sustains everything;
- is deeply involved in all human history, as seen especially in Jesus Christ; and
- is present to all creation in many ways through the Holy Spirit?” (Ford, 1999: p54)

These are different aspects of the Trinitarian God.

- If we focus on God the creator, we may take more note of those arguing from a non-Christian perspective.
- If we focus on Jesus Christ, we may emphasise his radical teaching and example.
- If we focus on the Holy Spirit, we may centre on God giving discernment.

Taking God seriously might mean we have “to be as intelligent and responsible as possible in taking risk and then taking the consequences.” (Ford, 1999: p63).

Ethics and Pastoral Care

These notes are based upon Neil Messer (2006: p186ff) but with different emphases.

1) Pastoral Care as Counselling. The minister provides a ‘therapeutic relationship’ in which the person can think about their situation and take a responsible decision. This is consistent with the non-directive counselling model according to Carl Rogers.

- It may be consistent with situation ethics.
- It may be consistent with a rule based ethical system which acknowledges that ultimately we do not know God’s will or that God’s will is that we have autonomy.
- It expresses an unconditional acceptance and understanding which is an expression of God’s unconditional love for us.

2) Pastoral Care as Practical Moral Thinking. The minister would help the person grow and develop morally by stating a moral vision which has been shaped by the community of faith. The difficulty is that the wider community of faith rarely has one moral vision.

3) Pastoral Care as Building Communities of Character. The emphasis would be on the life and worship of the church. The role of minister is to build up the Christian community with distinctive character. There would be a challenge to be part of the community. The difficulty would be if the person makes a decision which is counter to this culture.
4) **Pastoral Care as Liberation.** We look at the perspective of those who are marginalized or oppressed. Pastoral care looks towards the transformation of the wider community so that the powerless and oppressed people may be liberated and empowered and all people can flourish.

Theologian, Karen Lebacqz: caring is about preventing the suffering. So, for example, death can sometimes “serve the values of life”. “Active euthanasia can serve evil or it can serve the values of life. When it serves the values of life, it can be morally justified.” Pastoral care may include advocacy of a terminally ill person so that they are not pressurised against their will into either accepting or being denied euthanasia.

**Ethics and Public Policy**

Should a Christian play a part in shaping public policy? Messer suggests different possible approaches:

- Seek a common moral ground, such as *justice*, as specific Christian standpoint will not persuade those who do not share the same convictions.
- Discern the wisdom in the different moral arguments (God is the source of all wisdom).
- Assert what Christianity knows to be good / right and denounce what it knows to be wrong.
- Show an alternative community embodying different values – the church.
- Offer ideas, practices and insights from the well of Christian thought.
- Bring together a ‘think tank’ including theologians and experts in different relevant fields.
- Pay more attention to people’s lives and the relationships in which they live.

**Ethics and Science**

There are many areas of science which raise enormous questions for ethics: genetic modification of crops and animals, prenatal genetic testing to screen for disabilities, enhancing babies by genetic engineering etc. See various ethics books for discussions on these topics, including Neil Messer (p186ff) and Peter Vardy & Paul Grosch. We need to know the science of what is going on.

Science affects ethics in more fundamental areas:

1) The fallacious ‘genes-are-us’ model of humans: my behaviour is all in my genes. But our human nature develops as a result of: our genetic makeup, our upbringing and our own decisions.

2) The relationship between facts and values. Philosopher David Hume: we cannot get an *ought* from an *is* (the naturalistic fallacy). But ethical decision-making depends upon facts. Alasdair MacIntyre argues that facts are not objective and value free; our values (goodness, beauty, truth) have some objective status.

**The Importance of Ethics**

Our Christian biblical tradition tells us on that salvation comes from our belief in Jesus as the Son of God. But it also tells us that salvation comes from our actions: feeding the hungry, visiting those in prison, healing the sick – matters of ethics.

Ethical actions point us to the meaning of life. The purposes and meaning of life may be to worship God, but God despises our worship if we don’t care for one another. There is common ground between us and those of other faiths and none in believing that caring for one another and the environment is about what it is to be human and where we find our fulfilment and meaning in life.

**Bibliography**

