WHAT ARE THEOLOGICAL ETHICS?

PMM 446 THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

Assigned Readings:

- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Ethics* (Macmillan), 17-54

For Further Reading:

- Allen, Diogenes. *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (John Knox Press);
- Atkinson, David (editor). *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (Intervarsity Press);
- Althaus, Paul. *The Divine Command* (Fortress), *The Ethics of Martin Luther* (Fortress);
- Bayer, Oswald (editor). *Worship and Ethics* (De Gruyter);
- Benne, Robert. *Ordinary Christians: An Introduction to the Christian Life* (Fortress);
- Billing, Einar. *Our Calling* (Fortress);
- Burtner, James H. *Consequences: Morality, Ethics, and the Future* (Fortress);
- Bloomquist, Karen (editor). *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics* (Fortress);
- Elert, Werner. *Law and Gospel* (Fortress); *The Christian Ethos* (Fortress), *The Structure of Lutheranism* (CPH);
- Fletcher, Joseph. *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Westminster);
- Forde, Gerhard. *The Law-Gospel Debate* (Augburg);
- Forell, George. *Ethics of Decision: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Fortress);
- Guroian, Vigen. *Ethics After Christendom: Toward an Ecclesial Christian Ethic* (Eerdmans);
- Hauerwas, Stanley and Willimon, William. *Resident Aliens* (Abingdon);
- Huetter, Reinhard (editor). *Ecumenical Ventures in Ethics* (Eerdmans);
- Jersild, Paul. *Spirit Ethics: Scripture and the Moral Life* (Fortress);
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue* (Notre Dame Press);
- Nygren, Anders. *Agape and Eros* (Harper and Row);
- Odeberg, Hugo. *Pharisaoism and Christianity* (CPH);
- Outka, Gene. *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (Yale University Press);
- Plantinga, Cornelius. *Not the Way it is Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Eerdmans);
- Ramsey, Paul. *Basic Christian Ethics* (University of Chicago Press);
- Sedgwick, Timothy. *The Christian Moral Life: Practices of Piety* (Eerdmans);
- Thielicke, Helmut. *Theological Ethics: Foundations* (Fortress Press);
- Willimon, William. *The Service of God: How Worship and Ethics are Related* (Abingdon);
- Wingren, Gustaf. *Luther on Vocation* (Ballast Press).

Introduction:
The English word *ethic* comes from the Greek word *ethos* which means "custom, habit, usage." A philosophical treatment of ethics might proceed to examine ethics from either a descriptive or prescriptive perspective. Theological ethics, on the other hand, begins *coram Deo*. That is to say theological ethics is not interested first of all in acts or behavior but with being. Werner Elert notes "The Christian ethos conceives of itself as the divine judgment of the human quality" (*The Christian Ethos*, 7). In a similar vein, Bonhoeffer begins his *Ethics* by deconstructing the aim of ethical reflection as arriving at the knowledge of good and evil: "The knowledge of good and evil seems to be the aim of all ethical reflection. The first task of Christian ethics is to invalidate this knowledge. In launching this attack on the underlying assumptions of all other ethics, Christian ethics stands so completely alone that it becomes questionable whether there is any purpose in speaking of Christian ethics at all" (*Ethics*, 17).

In order to understand the distinctiveness of Christian ethics we examine major movements and shifts in philosophical ethics.

Richard Eyer provides an overview of ethics in three epochs:

I. Classical Ethics: Plato and Aristotle

   A. Plato (427-347 BC)

      - Student of Socrates (d.399 BC) who initially followed his mentor's exploration of the definition and nature of virtues.
      - All items are intelligible only insofar as we understand their teleology-what they are aiming to be good at.
      - "Forms" or "ideas" that give intelligibility to our world are in fact to be found in another, non-material world. For example, in *The Republic*, Plato argues that the existence of an ideal city is predicated on the reality of the universal form in a higher level.
      - The virtues of the soul correspond to the virtues of the city so that the soul is seen as a miniature city (productive functions=bodily needs and desires; protectors of the state=that middle part of the soul which is the discipline that resists the inordinate demands of the appetites; the rulers=the knowledge that guides the soul). A proper education functions to develop each part of the soul to perform its natural function within the individual.

   B. Aristotle (d.322 BC)

      - Reality is seen in the categories of "substance" and "accidents."
      - Sciences are of two types: (1) theoretical -the purpose of which is to obtain the knowledge of truth and (2) productive- whose purpose is to make things useful and beautiful. Logic is a preparation to the study of these sciences. Logic teaches one how to reason rightly so as to gain knowledge.
      - The general or universal can be apprehended only in the clearly known particular.
      - Ethics for Aristotle is not a theoretical discipline but a discipline that is concerned with practice, that is, the conduct of the good human life. Given what we are, some practices are good for us; they enable us to fulfill our nature.
Right is defined in terms of those actions that are means to a good end.
The task of ethics is to order the many things that may good for us in relationship to the highest good, happiness.
Moral virtue involves the formation of character. Virtue is to be practiced. One becomes an excellent or virtuous person by doing virtuous things.
No virtue can exist without the virtue of prudence—the ability to make right and reasonable choices that avoid both excess and defect.

II. Modern or Enlightenment Ethics: Immanuel Kant and David Hume

A. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)
- Bases morality on rational principles of duty rather than on the consequences of our actions.
- Existence of God cannot be proved, but must be assumed as a necessary postulate or presupposition for morality.
- For Kant, religion is not defined by dogma or liturgy but by individual obedience to moral duty.
- Kant developed a critical system of philosophy in which the rational, free individual was supreme. Community and canon are rejected in favor of autonomous reason.

B. David Hume (1711-1776)
- Sought to develop a moral philosophy that would be strictly empirical.
- Morality is more properly felt than judged. Perceptions are of two kinds: Ideas and impressions. Impressions are those lively perceptions which occur when we see, hear, feel, love, hate, will or desire. Ideas are copies of impressions (See Hume's *A Treatise on Human Nature*).

III. Postmodern Ethics: Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche

A. Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)
- Existential or religious truths are only properly understood when the individual holding them "becomes" them by actualizing them in his or her own existence.
- Three stages of existence: (1) aesthetic (2) ethical (3) Christian (see *Either/Or*)
- "Teleological suspension of the ethical" (*Fear and Tembling*). Faith in God overrides ethical norms.
- "Subjectivity is truth" (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*).

B. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)
- Proclaimed "death of God" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*).
- Criticized Christianity as a "slave morality." Claimed that there is no longer any room for God as the Creator or for categories of truth and falsity, good and evil—but only naturalistic categories of better and worse, superior and inferior.
Central to Nietzsche's thought is the notion of "the will to power" expressed in a myriad of ways.

Understands human being as sub-rational, instinctual psychological entity.

The Ubermensch alone is able to accept the non-existence of God and live a life of courage embracing the consequences of finitude without despair.

EXCURSUS I: CATEGORIES OF ETHICAL THOUGHT

DENOTOLOGICAL ETHICS. From Greek deon, what which is obligatory. Denotological theories hold that actions are right or wrong to the extend that they are fulfillment of duty. Denotological theories differ as to the grounds of duty, i.e. God, rationality. Simply put the denotological method holds that some things are always and everywhere morally wrong and other things are always and everywhere morally right. Morality is defined in terms of moral obligation (Kant). Good things are not done because they will produce good results but because these things are right in and of themselves. Examples of the denotological approach are Immanuel Kant and Paul Ramsey.

TELEOLOGICAL ETHICS. From telos, the end or the goal. Actions are judged to be morally good if they achieve a good goal or outcome. Teleological ethics are utilitarian in that they seek to arrive at ethical decisions on the basis of a projected outcome that would bring about the most good for the greatest number of people. "...an act is right if and only if it or the rule under which it falls produces, will probably produce, or is intended to produce at least as a great a balance of good over evil as any available alternative" (W.Frankena, Ethics, 14). The teleological approach abandons any claim to moral certainty. An example of teleological ethics is John Stuart Mill.

CONSEQUENTIALISM. A theory of obligation that argues that the rightness or wrongness of an act is determined by the consequences of the act. The action is made right or wrong after its performance. An advocate of consequentialism is James Burtness.

SITUATION ETHICS. Sometimes referred to as "contextualism" or "relational ethics." This approach argues that precepts and lessons from the past (Bible and tradition) be used as guides but set aside if "love" were better served. Love alone becomes the basis for all ethical decisions. The approach is relativistic and pragmatic. The term, "situation ethics" was coined by the primary representative of this approach, Joseph Fletcher.

CHARACTER ETHICS. Morality, according to character ethics, does not find its basis in the action but the actor. The focus is primarily on character, not conduct. Character ethics draw on Aristotle's understanding of the primary virtues: prudence, justice, courage, and temperance. Examples of this approach include Alasdair MacIntyre, Stanley Hauerwas, and Gilbert Meilaender.

See Eyer (154-158) for a description of "Principlism" and "Quandary Ethics" in the context of medical ethics.
EXCURSUS II: CONTEMPORARY LUTHERAN ETHICS

Distinctive features of Lutheran ethics:

- Justification by grace through faith in Christ alone is foundational for ethical task.
- The paradox of the Christian as both sinner and saint (Simul justus et peccator)
- The centrality of the distinction between law and gospel, the two kinds of righteousness, and the two kingdoms (two governments).


Prominent Lutheran theologians who have engaged Barth:

- Paul Althaus (1888-1966). Luther scholar. While rejecting the third use of the law, Althaus introduces the category of "divine command" in addition to law and gospel. According to Althaus, through the gospel, the law is transformed into a living and personal mandate of God for the believer.
- Helmut Thieicke (1908-1986). Sees Lutheran ethics as eschatological ethics lived between the old and the new aeons. Thus ethics deals with "borderline situations."
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945). Influenced by Barth but maintains the Lutheran position regarding the distinction between law and gospel. Sees ethics in light of the radical claims of discipleship.
- Gilbert Meilaender (1946-). Contemporary Lutheran ethicist who is open to Barth. Attempts to combine Lutheran themes with an Aristotelian emphasis on character and virtue. Critical of Elert's rejection of the third use of the law.

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