

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

ETHICS QUESTIONS

E T H I C S 3 . 1

- 1. Why are Christian ethics and theology inseparable? What did Francis Schaeffer mean when he said that not all things are the same to God?**

Christian ethics is inseparable from theology because Christian ethics is grounded in the character of God.

Francis Schaeffer meant that some things conform to the character of God and some things do not. In other words, some thoughts and actions are appropriate and reflect the holiness of God, while others deviate from God's character toward sin and rebellion.

- 2. What did Schaeffer conclude about a society without moral absolutes? Do we see this in society?**

"If there is no absolute beyond man's ideas, then there is no final appeal to judge between individuals and groups whose moral judgments conflict. We are merely left with conflicting opinions."

- 3. On what authority do Christians base their belief in moral absolutes? How specific is this authority?**

Absolutes are revealed to us in the Bible. While it is impossible to address every moral situation and dilemma, the Bible does contain enough specific values and guidelines to construct a basic foundation of morality. These principles can be applied more broadly to every specific situation across time and culture.

- 4. Ethically speaking, what are Christians called to do?**

Christians are called to love God with all our hearts, souls, strengths, and minds and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Luke 10:27). This command, like all of the other commands in the Bible, implies that Christians have moral responsibilities.

- 5. What did Dietrich Bonhoeffer mean by the question, "Where are the responsible people?"**

By "responsible" Bonhoeffer means individuals who try to make their whole life an answer to the question and call of God. He was not meaning those whose final standard is reason, principles, conscience, freedom, or virtue, but those who are ready to sacrifice all things and swear exclusive allegiance to God.

E T H I C S 3 . 2

6. Why do Muslims view Muhammad as morally exemplary even though the Hadith does not paint a flattering portrait of his life?

Muslims view the acts of Muhammad as empowered, guided, and approved by Allah. Thus, everything that Muhammad did was, by definition, good—Muhammad's actions were not guided by morality, but rather his actions redefine morality.

7. How do Christianity and Islam differ in relation to their beliefs about ethical absolutes?

The Bible grounds morality in God's essential character, but the Qur'an teaches that God ultimately cannot be known. For Muslims, certain actions are good not because they stem from God's character, but because God chooses to call them good. God could have decreed a different set of moral principles. Therefore, Muslims know moral goodness by God's decree alone.

8. In what two ways is the term *jihad* used?

Muslims use the term *jihad* in two ways. First, to describe the battle against temptation and sin for the sake of self-control and the development of virtue. Second, to define the battle against any and all who oppose Islam—the most self-sacrificing action a Muslim may undertake.

9. What motivates Muslims to behave ethically?

- The development of personal virtue and spirituality
- The betterment of the state of others
- The strengthening of relationships
- The expectation of coming judgment

10. Which motivation is the strongest?

Fear of the Day of Judgment

E T H I C S 3 . 3

11. What is the ultimate ethical question for a Secular Humanist? What questions did Morris B. Storer outline in his book *Humanist Ethics*?

The ultimate ethical question for atheistic humanists is which code of ethics to embrace.

Morris B. Storer listed the following difficult questions that Secular Humanist ethics must somehow answer:

- Is personal advantage the measure of right and wrong, or the advantage of all affected?
- Is there truth in ethics?
- Are ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ expressions of heart or head?
- Do people have free wills?
- Do you measure morality by results or by principles?
- Do people have duties as well as rights?

12. Why are there such diverse views and conflicts regarding humanistic ethics?

There is great disagreement over the foundation of morality in a world without God.

13. Who proposed the “no-truth thesis” and what does it state?

Kai Nielsen proposed the “no-truth thesis,” which states that there is no truth or falsity in moral values.

14. How do most humanists attempt to dodge the “no-truth thesis?” How does Corliss Lamont address this issue?

Rather than looking to God for moral precepts, humanists rely on experience and reason in the context of ethical relativism. Lamont specifically elevates pleasure as the ultimate good, purporting that as long as humanity pursues activities that are healthy, socially useful, and in accordance with reason, pleasure and happiness will generally follow.

15. What did Arthur E. Gravatt, Joseph Fletcher, Herbert W. Schneider, and Paul Kurtz have to say about ethics?

- **Arthur E. Gravatt**—viewed morality and immorality as behavior changing from situation to situation. He reasoned that behavior is to be judged either moral or immoral based on the context and individual. In other words, some behavior might be moral for one person and not another or moral at one time and not another.
- **Joseph Fletcher**—saw rights and wrongs as things determined by various situations in which moral agents have to decide the most beneficial course.
- **Herbert W. Schneider**—calls morality an “experimental art” saying that it is merely required for living well with others. Moral right and wrong must therefore be conceived in terms of moral standards generated by society.
- **Paul Kurtz**—desires that moral principles be treated as “hypotheses”—tested and judged by their practical worth and outcomes.

16. How did Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels view the issue of morality?

Marx and Engels denied that morals were central in human life; rather, they believed that biological and social evolution dictate and determine morality. What is moral or what is right or wrong is determined by evolution. If the bourgeois class hinders either biological or social evolution, then nature dictates the removal of that class.

17. What is the Marxist-Leninist morality of the future? How will it be determined?

Marxism trusts that the future classless utopia will deliver a new morality determined by its perception of the dialectic. In other words morality is constantly evolving with the progression of time.

18. What is the Marxist-Leninist view of “old morality?”

Marxist-Leninists wholeheartedly reject moral codes with foundations in religious beliefs, including traditional universal moral ideals. They reject such ideals as “old morality,” as products of the bourgeoisie invented and used to oppress the propertyless proletariat.

19. What is the Marxist code of ethics according to the book *Scientific Communism*?

Scientific Communism defines ethics as follows: “Devotion to the cause of the working class, collectivism, mutual aid, comradely solidarity, hatred toward the bourgeoisie and toward traitors to the common cause, internationalism, and stoicism in struggle are traits which not only define the content of proletarian ethics, but also characterize the moral image of the typical representatives of the working class.”

20. What means have Marxists historically believed would bring about a society without class distinctions? What have been the results of such an ethical system?

Marxists believe that revolution is unavoidable in order to overthrow the immoral bourgeoisie and lift up the proletariat. This forcible overthrow is perceived as morally just—it destroys the hindrances to a communist society. Put into practice, British journalist D.G. Stewart-Smith estimates that international communism has been responsible for 83 million deaths between 1917 and 1964.

21. What is the foundation for Cosmic Humanism's ethical system?

Cosmic Humanists approach ethics from their theological foundation of pantheism—they believe they are ultimately god. And since they are god; they get to write the moral rules. Thus, for the New Ager, there are no external moral precepts.

22. According to Cosmic Humanist ethics, can anyone judge another's actions?

Cosmic Humanist ethics dictates that no one may decide whether another's actions are right or wrong.

23. How is the word “tolerance” used by Cosmic Humanists?

Tolerance is used to denote *acceptance* of differing moral views. However, tolerance has traditionally meant a respectful attitude towards those with whom one disagrees.

24. How is the line between good and evil blurred in Cosmic Humanist ethics?

Ethical relativism, as you would expect, has led Cosmic Humanists to a point where the distinction between good and evil has become hopelessly blurred. No absolute right or wrong exists; only what is right or wrong according to each individual's truth. If everything is one, it is difficult to distinguish between good and evil. What may appear evil in this life could be the reverse in a reincarnated existence.

25. In what system of justice do Cosmic Humanists believe?

Cosmic Humanists believe karma is the universal system of judgment.

26. What is the foundation of Postmodern ethics?

Most Postmodernists embrace an ethical system, but do not base it on unchanging universal principles or obedience to a non-human authority.

27. According to Postmodernists, how does a community create its own ethical standards?

Lyotard claimed to be content with “little narratives.” By this he means that philosophical and moral truth (small “t”) reside in the local community. This could be referred to as cultural or communal moral relativism.

28. Why are Postmodernists hesitant to use the term relativism?

Rorty defines cultural relativism as believing all moral claims are equal. Thus, Rorty claims that he is not a “cultural relativist” because he firmly believes that some moral views (namely his) are better than others. However, since Rorty also contends that there is no objective or universal moral standard for humanity to appeal to, he is forced to admit that he has no basis to prove his moral system is any better than that of the Nazis. In the end it all comes down to preferences or as Rorty puts it, “idiosyncrasies.”

29. According to Richard Rorty, how do ethics develop within a Postmodern community? Do all Postmodernists agree with his assessment?

For Postmodernists, moral standards are decided by both coercion and consensus. Since there is no absolute standard, every culture develops its own set of moral standards arising from various influences within each particular group. These standards are not stagnant; they change, adapt, and are constantly evolving according to the dictates of the group.

Left with no universal norms to discover, Rorty advocates the subjective “ethical standards” that he prefers, standards he is personally the most comfortable with. He therefore uses his words as “tools” of persuasion. Others are free to use these same “tools” of persuasion. And in the end, society naturally finds some point of agreement.

Morality and society operate like an unconscious negotiation—everyone in a community is presenting the beliefs they prefer and these ideas are considered, debated, and adapted until consensus emerges—although this consensus is in a constant state of arbitration.

Not all Postmodernists agree with Rorty. For example Adam Phillips insists that “any ethical boundaries are out of bounds.” Thus, for Phillips no system is better than any other.

30. Reflection Question: What are the possible consequences when a community is allowed to sever ethics from an absolute standard and negotiate its own ethical system?

“BIOTECHNOLOGY”

VIDEO QUESTIONS

1. What is biotechnology? What does Scripture say about biotechnology?

The term biotechnology is derived from two words: bio + technology. The prefix “bio” refers to something living and “technology” refers to practical application of knowledge. Biotechnology is the industrial use of living organisms or the application of technique to living organisms. Strictly speaking, cars and elevators are biotechnology, just as are artificial hearts and artificial forms of intelligence.

An important Christian principle is this: the Bible may not directly speak to a certain issue, but it most likely has something to say about every relevant issue. The Bible is a work that was compiled a long time ago, by cultures different than our own, written in a different language, a long way from here, to address issues relevant at a particular time. However, the Bible contains timeless truths and principles put forth by God to mankind. Although the Bible may not directly speak to abortion or stem cell research, it still has something to say about these subjects.

2. What are stem cells? Why is research being done on stem cells?

Stem cells are cells that can 1) self-replicate indefinitely, and 2) can develop into other types of cells (e.g. red blood cells, white blood cells, platelets, etc).

Medical researchers believe stem cells have the potential to cure diseases by repairing tissues or growing organs. Stem cell research is expected to make advancements in conditions such as Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, diabetes, spinal cord injury, heart disease, stroke, arthritis, and cancer.

3. What are the differences between embryonic and non-embryonic stem cells? Which type of stem cells has produced scientific achievement?

Stem cells are often divided into two types: embryonic and non-embryonic (or adult) stem cells.

Embryonic stem cells are the most controversial since the harvesting of these cells necessitates the killing of the embryo. In fact, some researchers have already manufactured embryos for the explicit purpose of extracting stem cells. If life truly does begin at conception, then innocent unborn human beings are being sacrificed in the hope of extending the lives of others. Beyond this, to date, embryonic stem cell research has not produced any scientific achievements to date.

Non-embryonic (or adult) stem cells are far less controversial since these cells are harvested from such things as bone marrow or placentas and do not result in the extermination of human beings. Adult stem cell research has produced much scientific advancement.

4. What are some different areas of biotechnology? What are some promises that these areas hold? What are some concerns?

- **Xenotransplantation**—Use of animal tissues, organs, or cells transplanted to or used for contact

with human subjects

- **Transgenics**—Insertion of DNA of one species into the genetic code of another species
- **Nanotechnology**—Engineering and manufacturing at the molecular level
- **Artificial Intelligence**—An artificial mechanism that can mimic human thinking
- **Cybernetics**—Integration of man and machine
- **Medical Technology**—Antibiotics, medicines, organ transplants, alternative medicines, etc.
- **Life Issues**—Birth control, abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, etc.

5. What is bioethics? What are some of the ethical challenges of biotechnology? What makes human beings valuable?

Bioethics is right conduct in the area of biotechnology. Many believe that this area is around thirty years behind biotechnology in general, because we have only recently begun considering the moral implications of this field. The major challenge is that of worldview. More specifically, we need to examine which worldview provides our culture with its ethics and view of humanity?

Currently, we live in a society that views human beings as mere machines devoid of souls or real autonomy. This view of man stems from naturalism, a philosophical position which purports that all of reality is matter.

Our culture is also a context of idolatry in which *stuff* is idolized and coveted. In fact, we even view human beings as stuff with varying degrees of *extrinsic* value based on abilities and image. The biblical view, on the other hand, teaches that human beings are *intrinsically* valuable based on the fact that God has made them in his image. All of humanity is to be cared for, regardless of age, condition, looks, or abilities.

When people are valued by what they can do, euthanasia becomes a viable option for the infirm, mentally retarded, or elderly. When people are valued by what they can do, abortion seems to make sense because an unborn baby lacks *extrinsic* value.