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# Ethics as Relational

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## IV. Ethics and Justice in Relational Perspective

### *Ethics as Relational*

By Kevin Twain Lowery

I often ask my students whether action or motive is more important to ethics. They typically conclude that although action may be the overriding concern when the stakes are high enough, we generally regard motive as central to ethics. For instance, although the doctor's competence is what we value most when faced with a life-threatening illness or operation, we believe that the doctors with the highest ethical standards are those who genuinely care about being competent. Physicians' personal ethical standards reflect their motives.

I press my students further, asking them why we consider motives to be such an important part of ethics. Some reply, "It's more difficult to change motive than action. That's why we value it more." Indeed, whereas actions quite often can be changed quickly (even through pressure), motives are typically shaped over time. Other students answer, "A person with a good motive is more likely to do the right thing consistently." Yes, motive is the foundation of action, and this gives it a certain priority over action.

Nevertheless, we still have not reached the heart of the matter. I continue, "So, if I buy my wife roses every Valentine's Day, do you think that my consistency is what makes my motives moral?" At this point, it all starts to click for them. "No, what makes it moral is love!"

There it is. Love is at the heart of ethics. In I Corinthians 13, Paul tells us that the value of ethical action is shallow and superficial without the motive of love. People can "do the right thing" out of self-interest alone. However, this kind of action is only ethical in the sense of being beneficial to others. Besides, selfish people only "do the right thing" for what they get out of it. The "right thing" is merely a means to the end of pleasing oneself. In contrast, the end (i.e., goal) of love is the well-being and happiness of the other.

Thomas Aquinas defined love as the desire to be in union with the other, and this expresses an important truth about love. Love aims at relationship. We want to be in relationship with those we love, and we want to be loved by them in return. The goal of ethics

is thus to develop and promote relationship, namely, our relationship with God and our relationship with others. This is why Christ indicates that the love commandments (i.e., loving God wholeheartedly and loving one's neighbor as oneself) encapsulate the rest of God's commandments. It is also why the pursuit of holiness is interconnected with the pursuit of peace with all people, both far and near (Heb. 12:14). As John Wesley said, there is no holiness but social holiness.

Not only is ethics ultimately about our relationship with God, it is unhealthy to view them as conflicted. Essentially, ethics and spirituality are two aspects of the same thing. Remember Jesus's words, "Whatever you have done unto the least of these brothers of mine, you have done it unto me." (Mt. 25:40) Yes, our service to God is more than just being nice to others, but serving God never entails disobeying the command that Christ has given us to love one another. God does not command us to love and then contradict himself by commanding us to act in ways that are unloving.

Some people make the mistake of separating ethics into two categories: natural (day-to-day) ethics and religious ("true") ethics. Others claim that something is right simply because God has commanded it. It should be obvious how this line of thinking can lead to some pretty dangerous conclusions. History is strewn with atrocities that have been committed in God's name. Many problems arise when people fail to recognize the relational nature of ethics. It is even worse when they use God's name to justify immoral acts, because they become too self-assured and refuse to listen to reason.

No matter how we describe and systematize ethics (rules, goals, virtues, natural law, etc.), it always aims at relationship. Ethics is not a set of abstract standards we must uphold. Rather, God's commands are for our good and for the good of others. In fact, they are for the good of all creation. Theologically speaking, ethics is relational, because God is relational.

Ethics recognizes the connection between our relationship with God and our relationship with one another. Scripture addresses this numerous times, especially the gospels and I John. Love for God and love for neighbor go hand in hand. Granted, God has preeminence over all. However, when we recognize the universality of God's love, it becomes evident why love for God always includes love for others.

In a nutshell, ethics seeks to promote the well-being and happiness of others. And this is what God wants us to do. This sounds rather simple, but understanding how to accomplish this can be difficult.

Human beings are complex creatures, so our “well-being” and “happiness” can likewise be quite complex and intricate. It’s hard to know what is in one’s own best interest, let alone know the best interest of others.

In addition, we live with the expectations of others. Many people have trouble distinguishing ethical matters from societal norms. Many things considered wrong are simply social taboos. The only supposed “harm” they cause is the offense that they bring. The reason that people are offended is that the group tells them that they are supposed to be offended.

We must work to discern what truly affects well-being and happiness, because these are the truly ethical matters. Nevertheless, the relational aspect of ethics does not allow us casually to disregard the feelings of others, even when those feelings are not grounded in sound judgment. This is exactly what Paul has in mind when he discusses private conscience in Romans 14.

Of course, each person is unique. This means that each person’s well-being and happiness are likewise unique in some way. Similarly, relationships differ. We do not relate to everyone in the same way, neither do we have the same level of intimacy in all of our relationships. Our responsibilities to others vary, and we have greater responsibility to some than to others.

In general, each relationship entails a degree of love and a level of responsibility. These degrees and levels correspond with the nature of each relationship. As world citizens, for example, we have responsibilities to the people and creatures that share this world with us. That includes responsibility to the environment and the resources on which we all depend. All of earths’ citizens share these responsibilities. We also have personal relationships that are more intimate and carry a greater weight of responsibility. For instance, I have a unique relationship with my wife and children. I am the only person who can fulfill the responsibilities associated with those relationships.

In some ways, humans are all the same. Relationships also share common characteristics. To the extent that humans and circumstances are the same, ethics is the same. On the other hand, people and relationships are unique, as we just noted. This implies that ethics is also flexible and contextual.

Consider the following example. What does it mean to be a good parent (in an ethical sense)? Some aspects of parenting are generally relevant for all parents. For instance, children have the same basic physiological and psychological needs, and ethical parenting requires these needs to be met. Nevertheless, each child is different, so parenting is not a “one size fits all” affair.

The key thing to remember is that ethics is relational, so our task is to promote relationships. This requires us to promote the well-being and happiness of those with whom we have some relationship. In the final analysis, that includes everyone. In a very real and deep sense, we are all related to one another.