

# A

LEVEL

# RELIGIOUS ETHICS

Foundations of Ethics; Medical and Global Ethics

FOR CCEA A LEVEL

**2<sup>nd</sup>**  
EDITION



**COLOURPOINT  
EDUCATIONAL**

**Declan McCay**

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2009, 2017

Print ISBN: 978 1 78073 110 0

eBook ISBN: 978 1 78073 307 4

Second Edition  
First Impression

Layout and design: April Sky Design

Printed by: W&G Baird Ltd, Antrim

Cover picture: iStockphoto

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**COLOURPOINT  
EDUCATIONAL**

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*An imprint of Colourpoint Creative Ltd*

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*For Shirley, Orlaith  
and Odhran.*

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## Author Preface

This text has been written specifically to assist both teachers and students in meeting the requirements of CCEA's GCE Religious Studies AS and A2 courses on Religious Ethics. The first section of the book covers the AS course (Foundations of Ethics with Special Reference to Issues in Medical Ethics) and the second section deals with the A2 course (Global Ethics). Both sections address CCEA's requirement to explore 'other aspects of human experience' and while various suggestions are made throughout the chapters it is recommended that students also investigate additional connections between the taught course and other aspects of human experience.

This book is a collation of a wide range of material available on religious ethics and every effort has been made to acknowledge the sources used in the Bibliography. The Bibliography provides students with references for the many quotations and points of view given throughout the text. An awareness of scholarly views is an important requirement of A level study, in particular at A2 level. However it is best for students to avoid simply listing views of scholars in a response but to use them to support their point or argument. Each Chapter Summary is useful as a revision guide in preparation for examinations.

Sincere thanks to Wesley Johnston at Colourpoint Books for giving me this opportunity. Sincere thanks also to Amber Hamill for her guidance throughout the completion of this book. Your help and many suggestions have been greatly appreciated.

A very special word of thanks to my wife Shirley and my two children Orlaith and Odhran for their support, understanding and patience. I dedicate this book to them.

# 1

## Deontological Approaches to Moral Decision Making



### CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter aims to explore the following topics:

- Ethics, morals and sources of morality
- The deontological approach and moral absolutism
- Christian Scriptures and Christian Ethics
- Natural Moral Law

### ETHICS, MORALS AND DEONTOLOGY

#### What are ethics and morals?

“Ethics, also called moral philosophy, is the discipline concerned with what is morally good and bad, right and wrong. The term is also applied to any system or theory of moral values or principles” (Singer, 2016). Singer’s definition explains that ethics is a branch of philosophy which is concerned with the morality of our actions and whether they are right or wrong. This quotation also highlights how the terms ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ are used in the same context and are quite often used interchangeably. However, at this point it is important to differentiate between the exact meanings of the two words.

The word ‘ethic’ originates from the Greek word *ethikos* from which we derive the word ‘ethos’ meaning ‘custom’ or ‘character’. Vardy and Grosch (1999) comment that ethics refers to “the customary way to behave in society.” In other words, the term ‘ethic’ refers to a set of principles or values which define our morals. That is, ethics help us distinguish between what is considered to be right or wrong behaviour.

The word ‘morality’ comes from the Latin word *moralis*. Morality is concerned with the behaviour or actions of individuals, rather than the character or the values of the person who performs the actions.

Thompson (1999) describes actions as either moral, immoral or amoral.

- An action is described as **moral** if it is considered right or good. For example, giving money to those who suffer from poverty would be considered the right, or moral, thing to do because we are doing something positive in an attempt to relieve human suffering. According to Thompson, if our actions are moral it means that they “conform to a set of ethical norms.”
- An action is described as **immoral** if it is considered wrong or bad. For example, many Christians consider abortion immoral because they consider it to be the destruction of human life and contrary to the commandment “*You shall not murder*” (Exodus 20:13). Thompson says if our actions are immoral, they “go against a professed set of norms.”
- An action is described as **amoral** if it is “not seen as morally significant by the person performing it.” The action is neither good nor bad in terms of morality because it is committed by someone who does not know the difference between right and wrong, for example, an infant or someone who suffers from a severe mental illness will not be aware of what they have done.

### Sources of morality

Philosophers have pondered the source of morality for thousands of years. In Plato’s (428–347 BC) book *Euthyphro* Socrates, having a discussion with Euthyphro, asks “Is what is pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved?” (Bowie, 2004). Socrates is reflecting on the question: “Is conduct right because the gods command it or do the gods command it because it is right?” (Jenkins, 1999).

Socrates was considering this in pre-Christian times, but the question remains today. Take the example of murder. Christians believe murder is immoral because God, in the Ten Commandments, said “*You shall not murder*” (Exodus 20:13). However, some secular philosophers argue that murder is immoral because human life has **intrinsic value**.

This philosophical debate over the source of morality, the **Euthyphro dilemma**, is ongoing.

### The divine command theory

The **divine command theory** asserts that something is good or moral if God commands it and wrong if he has forbidden it. In 1947, the Swiss, Protestant theologian Emil Brunner (1889–1966) commented “The good consists in always doing what God wills at any particular moment” (Bowie, 2004).

Therefore, if we follow Jesus' teaching, it is good to love our neighbour because Jesus commanded it (Luke 10:27). Helm comments "God does issue commands and that these commands are to form the basis of a believer's morality" (Vardy and Grosch, 1999).

Philosophers who critically reflect on the implications of the divine command theory ask 'What if God commanded people to kill?' Consider the command given by God to Abraham in Genesis 22:2 to "*Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.*" Both Jews and Christians accept that in this account God was testing Abraham's faith, however, what if he wasn't? Would his request make the sacrifice of children morally acceptable?

According to Tyler and Reid (2002), the existentialist Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) did not accept the divine command theory. He said "we should not confuse ethics or morality with doing the will of God." Kierkegaard held this opinion because in many cases, God actually commands immoral behaviour. For example, the Old Testament stresses that the death penalty is an adequate punishment for anyone who curses his or her father or mother (Exodus 21:17) and it also permits a man to sell his daughter as a slave (Exodus 21:7).

In contrast to the view held by Kierkegaard, Jenkins (2003) reflects on the position of French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650). Descartes argued that "whatever God has revealed to us must be accepted as more certain than anything else... we must still put our entire faith in divine authority rather than on our own judgement."

### **What is deontology?**

Deontology refers to the study of moral duty and obligation. Messer (2006) says "deontological theories are those that say there are absolute moral duties I simply must obey." For example, in school there are certain rules that can never be broken such as no smoking and not using mobile phones during examinations. Unlike the **teleological** approach, the **deontological** approach does not take the consequences of our actions into consideration, therefore morality does not depend on how much good our actions bring about. As Bowie (2004) puts it "the important thing isn't the result or consequence of the action, but the action itself." Therefore, according to the deontological approach, our actions are intrinsically right or wrong and as a result, this approach is based on following rules which can never be broken under any circumstances.

Consider the following examples which use absolute rules outlined in the

## Ten Commandments:

- Abortion is immoral in all cases because it is contrary to the command, “*You shall not murder.*”
- Telling the truth is considered moral because God commanded, “*You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.*”

As the above examples suggest, the deontological approach to ethics is linked to moral absolutism. Moral absolutism refers to rules which govern our moral behaviour and can never be broken as the end does not justify the means. Thompson (2003) defines moral absolutism as “moral principles that hold true for all people in all situations.” **Natural law** (see p36) and Kantian ethics (see p51) are examples of deontological ethical theories which outline moral absolutes that must be followed under every set of circumstances. If we fail to follow these moral absolutes then it is considered that we fail to act morally. Ethical **Relativism** (see p55), on the other hand, is an approach to ethics that rejects absolute rules. For a relativist, the right decision will vary depending on the circumstances.

**TASK**

Consider the following points of view on the euthanasia debate and discuss the questions that follow.

*Euthanasia is immoral because killing is intrinsically evil. Killing is always wrong, in all circumstances, regardless of the motives or the consequences.*

*Some people may consider euthanasia to be wrong but that doesn't make it wrong for everyone. If a person decides that they no longer wish to suffer then it's their choice whether they live or die.*

Discuss the following questions:

1. In relation to the euthanasia debate, which approach to morality, absolutism or relativism, will have the best outcome for society today?
2. Should we follow moral absolutes surrounding the prohibition of abortion, IVF, contraception and divorce?



## THE DECALOGUE

'**Decalogue**' is a Greek term which literally means 'ten words'. The Decalogue refers to the Ten Commandments given to Moses by *Yahweh* on Mount Sinai. Drane (2000) says "The fact that there are Ten Commandments is certainly not accidental, but is a learning device so that they could be counted off on the fingers of both hands as they were repeated."

Before we consider the individual commandments and the moral significance of each, it is important to note that Christians today do not structure the Ten Commandments in the same way. The Reformed Churches generally follow one method of dividing the Commandments, while Catholics and Lutherans follow another. Consider the following table which indicate the differences in how the commandments are numbered:

Division of Decalogue by Reformed Churches	Division of Decalogue by Catholic and Lutheran Churches	God's Command
1st Commandment 20:2-3	1st Commandment 20:2-6	<i>I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.</i>
2nd Commandment 20:4-6		<i>You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.</i>
3rd Commandment 20:7	2nd Commandment 20:7	<i>You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.</i>

4th Commandment 20:8–11	3rd Commandment 20:8–11	<i>Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.</i>
5th Commandment 20:12	4th Commandment 20:12	<i>Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.</i>
6th Commandment 20:13	5th Commandment 20:13	<i>You shall not murder.</i>
7th Commandment 20:14	6th Commandment 20:14	<i>You shall not commit adultery.</i>
8th Commandment 20:15	7th Commandment 20:15	<i>You shall not steal.</i>
9th Commandment 20:16	8th Commandment 20:16	<i>You shall not bear false testimony against your neighbour.</i>
10th Commandment 20:17	9th Commandment 20:17 (a) 10th Commandment 20:17 (b)	<i>You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your (a) neighbour's wife, or (b) his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.</i>

When the Decalogue was given by *Yahweh* to the Israelites, it was considered to be part of the **covenant**, or agreement, between God and the Jews which set the Jews apart from other nations. A covenant was a binding contract and in this covenant God agreed to treat the Israelites as his favoured nation, if they agreed to love him and follow his commandments. According to Barton (1992):

“God promised to keep his side of the bargain, to continue the blessings which he had begun... whilst Israel, for its part, was under an obligation to maintain the contract by loyalty to God, exclusive worship of him, and obedience to his commandments.”

Alexander (1995) comments that the Decalogue “sets out how the people must live in order to be a holy nation” or a nation that was morally and spiritually perfect. The Decalogue, if followed, would allow the Jews to have a unique relationship with God, for example, Exodus 19:5 informs us “*Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.*”

Obedience was a very important aspect of the covenant. In the relationship between *Yahweh* and the Israelites, God is the dominant party who “establishes the terms of the covenant relationship” while the Israelites are the submissive party who must “be obedient to those terms” (Tyler, 2000) The Israelites however, are free to accept or to reject the terms of the covenant. They accept and agree to obey the laws given by *Yahweh*, saying “*We will do everything the Lord has said*” (Exodus 19:8).

The importance of this covenant in comparison to previous agreements made with Noah (Genesis 6:18) and Abraham (Genesis 15) is that this one, which is referred to as the Sinai Covenant, is not with one person as was the case in the previous two, but with a whole nation. The permanence of the commandments which form part of this covenant is illustrated by the fact that “*the finger of God*” (Exodus 31:18) has scribed them on stone tablets.

In Exodus 20:2–17 the commandments appear to be presented in order of importance and if this is the case then the laws dealing with the Israelites’ relationship with God are the priority. According to Tyler (2000), this order is important because “if man’s relationship with God is right then his relationship with others will be right.”

The Book of Exodus informs us that before God delivered the Ten Commandments, the Israelites stood waiting at the foot of Mount Sinai and “*there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led*

*the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain” (Exodus 19:16–17) and then God “spoke these words” (Exodus 20:1).*

### **The moral significance of the commandments**

What follows is a brief discussion of the moral significance of the commandments, which according to Allsop (2000), are “identified by Christians as containing the central moral principles which God wants human beings to observe.”

The Ten Commandments are **apodictic** in form, following the pattern “You shall not...” Punishments for breaking the Commandments are not listed as actual words of God because at the time they were given it was not even considered that these commands would be broken under any circumstances. However, punishments for breaking some of the commandments were developed at a later stage in the Pentateuch and have been included here as part of this discussion.

#### ***“I am the lord your god, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me”***

According to Alexander (1995), this first commandment stresses that “sole allegiance to the Lord lies at the very heart of the covenant relationship.” The fact that the Israelites were requested to be monotheistic highlights that the Decalogue aims to set them apart from other polytheistic nations. Huesman (1970) comments that belief in and worship of “one God was intended to distinguish Israel from her neighbours, who all boasted a host of heavenly deities.” The Shema, found in Deuteronomy 6:4–5, illustrates the extent to which the Israelites must love God in return for the love he has shown them “*Hear, O Israel. The Lord our God is one Lord. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength.*”

If this commandment was not adhered to then the punishment for such disobedience was death, according to Numbers 25:1–18 and Deuteronomy 13:1–18. The punishments were so severe because the Israelites were expected to remain faithful to *Yahweh* to show appreciation for his love and his intervention which enabled them to escape from slavery in Egypt.

#### ***“You shall not make for yourself an idol... you shall not bow down to them or worship them”***

In order to set the Israelites apart from other nations, it was also important that they did not have images of false gods. In Exodus 32, we are informed that this commandment was broken when the Israelites worshipped the golden calf.