

Dr. James M. Grier, Th.D

Experience: Distinguished Professor of
Philosophical Theology at Grand Rapids
Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan



Every science should be able to identify its subject matter content, as well as its methodology. In this first lesson of our course, we are going to spend sometime learning how to do that. We will be covering today some introductory material about the nature of ethics as a discipline. The design of the course will also include looking at the major aspects of ethics in a philosophical perspective and then looking at the same aspects from a theological perspective. The theological perspective developed in the course will not be a systematic theological perspective, but rather a Biblical theological perspective.

If one should ask you the question what is ethics? I wonder what kind of answer you would give. It appears that there are three major ideas that belong to the discipline of ethics. The first is ethics always includes some sort of theory of obligation. It is the basis whereby a person determines what he ought to do and what he had ought not to do. This theory of conduct enables a person to make moral judgments in decision-making structures.

Secondly, ethics also includes a theory of value. It has to answer the question what makes something good? What makes something bad? What kind of values are there in the world. How should these values be used? What is the relationship between the values you hold and the decisions you make.

And thirdly, ethics always deals with a theory of motivation. What ought to be the self-conscious thoughts that go through a person's mind as he does his duty, as he applies his values to the alternatives that are his in moral decision making.

Now it's important to understand that if ethics has to do with conduct and decision-making that its primary emphasis falls upon the human will. It is the will that implements our choices, and it would be fair to say to you that ethics primarily as a discipline that deals with conduct under the structure of the action of the

human will. It would be important I think also initially to assert to you, that you can't separate the will of man from the other capacities of man. You can't make the will a lonely sentinel that deals with ethics, in the mind a lowly sentinel that deals with epistemology. Most clearly when it comes to decision-making, there is always a mental aspect to it as well as a volitional aspect to it. In point of fact, the best definition of a choice that I'm aware of is one that would say something like this. The choice is a mental discernment that predisposes us to a certain set of actions and that predisposition ultimately is implemented by an act of our will. So ethics deals with obligation, with values, and with motivation.

Secondly it is important initially once you've identified what belongs to the concept of conduct to talk about what kind of methods are available in deciding what kind of ethic a person ought to hold, and there have been a number of such things available especially in the philosophical literature.

There's a methodology known as authoritarianism. Here all you have to do is decide what authority you will accept. Once you decide to accept an authority, then the next step is simply to check what the authority has to say, and if the authority says do this, you do it and if the authority says don't do it then you don't do it. For instance, very often people find those kinds of things when they join political parties who set their agenda or you join a particular denomination, who has a set of rules that are to govern on your conduct or even perhaps you might be willing to think about the possibility that those who believe the Bible is our ultimate moral guide that we submit to an authority.

The problem with authority as a method of ethics is the question how do you decide which authority to submit to? How do you test, the plethora of authorities that are available today all of whom may claims on us in terms of our conduct. Well there have been a number of criteria that have been used to determine which authority should be trusted.

The first is antiquity, how old is the authority? Behind this is the assumption that the older the authority is, the more apt it is to be right. And the newer the authority is the more prone it is to error. Well, if you took Christianity on this basis and you asked, is Christianity the oldest religion in the world and therefore more apt to have authority than any other religion. Most obviously the answer is no. There are multiple other religions that predate the

day of Pentecost and the formation of the Christian Church.

The second criterion that is used is a criterion of number. How many people hold this authority, and behind this is a typical American notion that the majority is always right. Sad to say at times in the Church of Jesus Christ we live with that say notion. All you have to have in order to determine the will of God is a 50% plus one vote of the congregation and you know what you ought to do. The problem with number is a very simple problem. Has everyone who accepts this authority carefully analyzed it? Have they evaluated other authorities and therefore their number lends weight to careful analytical evaluation or are they just part of a bandwagon. And again if you used Christianity as an ethical authority the question is, do most people in the world accept Biblical ethics as the standard for conduct? And of course the answer to that question is no as well.

The third and last criterion that is used in order to judge any authority is the one entitled prestige. How many important prestigious persons actually hold this authority? Apparently if you have 20 prestigious persons who are well-educated and published and who have worked hard in their disciplines and they hold this particular viewpoint then that ought to enable you to say that their viewpoint has more credibility than another viewpoint, that doesn't have the kind of prestigious authority that this viewpoint has. This is one of the things that exist behind advertising in our world today. Quite frankly, everyone tries to hawk all kinds of products. You get a prestigious person up there endorsing a product. Now obviously Michael Jordan is a prestigious person when it comes to basketball. In his endorsement of Nike Air Jordan basketball shoes may be very legitimate. But very often you find in advertising that Hollywood stars are those who are quoted as giving us good reasons to buy a product, and you know right from the beginning that that person knows absolutely nothing about those products. For you see it's very easy for us to transfer our prestige from one area of competency to an area of in-competency.

Let's again check Christianity, is Christianity the oldest? Does it have the most adherents? And do most prestigious people in history and today hold to it? Well most clearly Christianity doesn't fair well when you use those three criterion to judge whether or not it is an authority we ought to accept. It should appear obvious to you, that if authority is the source of your ethics, you are going to have to struggle with how do you determine which authority

to accept?

A second viewpoint in terms of method in ethics is a viewpoint that fits the scientific method very well. In this kind of system what to do is simply this, you evaluate all ethical theories by applying all of the criteria that belong to the hypothesis structure of inductive inference. In other words, you take Christian ethics and say now let me see if Christian ethics explains adequately the experience base of moral decision making. Where is it weak? Where is it strong? And you do that for every ethical theory and you conclude whichever ethical theory best fits the moral phenomena. That's the ethical theory you ought to choose.

There are normally four criteria for evaluating theories. The first is this; the theory that best explains the phenomena without the use of ad hoc devices is the best theory. In other words, the whole range of experience is explained by this theory. You don't have to make up things to cover those areas that aren't in the theory.

The second criteria is in comparison with rival theories. The best theory is the simpler, the one that is fruitfully related to other theories and the one that does a better job in explaining the phenomena.

The third criterion of evaluating theories is that there are positive reasons in favor of the theory and no diverging lines of evidence for the theory. And finally the theory that should be chosen is the one that can answer adequately serious objections that are raised against it.

Now on any typical textbook in ethics, your high school students, your college students will be exposed to understanding the immorality from that base. They will have placed before them the Existentialistic ethic, the Idealistic ethic, the Utilitarian ethic, the Biblical ethic, the Relativistic ethic of Situationism and they will be asked to evaluate all of these as possible moral theories and to decide for themselves which one is the most appropriate based upon the four full criterion we have just talked about.

The third and final thing that I like to talk about when it comes to method is the whole influence of the analytical tradition to answering the question about which ethical theory ought to be accepted. In analytic philosophy the stress is on the meaning of language and words and therefore the person evaluating ethical theory isn't so much interested in determining its truthfulness or

its suitability. They're little bit more interested in understanding the meaning of the words and whether or not the theory makes sense in terms of the language used.

We have spent a lot of time in the recent past being told that language is a series of games. There is the fact language game that belongs to newspaper reporting and textbooks. In this fact language game there are certain set of rules and everybody knows those rules.

There's also the love language game. In the love language game, the rules are different. You don't say to your wife some piece of cold scientific data like your nose as the symmetry of a piece of marble. If you said that to your wife she wouldn't be very pleased with you. You say things to your wife like, my love for you is like a red red rose. That's obviously not fact language that's another kind of language.

Then there's religious language. When you say God loves me. That's not the fact language of science, and it's not the emotive romantic language of interpersonal relationship. That's religious language and it has a completely different function.

While the analytic Philosophers want to know what kind of language function do ethical assertions have. Are they factual? Are they somehow interpersonal? Are they religious, are they aesthetic? And they're not really going to answer the questions, they're just going to basically say to the students who are in the pursuit of ethics, analyze the significance and the meaning of the words. Don't make the mistake of concluding that all languages of the same character and therefore when you come to a spouse and ethical position understand you may not be espousing something that is exactly like science or like any other kind of truth.

Well, if ethics covers three areas; obligation, value and motivation and there are basically three choices of method to determine what your obligation is, what your values should be, and what kind of motivations you should experience as you act morally and act uprightly; then let's ask a couple of questions about how these has impacted culture?

So the second major thing I'd like to talk to you about is the moral dilemma that has developed here in the 20th century. In the past, let's say before 1940, ethics wasn't very much at the heart of our culture. People who talked about ethics were looked at as being

old and dull academicians who hung around in ivy halls talking about theoretical things. Today, ethics has taken on a new stance, today we have AIDS, we have abortion, we have assisted suicide, we have fertilization in Petri dishes. We have such developed technologies that AIDS and all of these things have forced us to bring ethics up to the level of the cutting edge that sustains life.

It seems to be a requisite for survival and in the midst of this growing concern and in the midst of this growing technology what we have found is that our culture has turned constantly away from any kind of universal moral binding principles, and has turned to relativistic kinds of principles. Moral earnestness today seems to halt indecisively at the Christian pagan crossroad. In this Christian pagan crossroad isn't just one that belongs to people outside of the church because it seems apparent that many people within the church are baptizing the ethics of the pagans and the values of the pagans and bringing them into the life of the Church.

Twenty-five years ago, who would ever have imagined that we would be struggling over things called alternative lifestyles and allowing same-sex marriage and condoning that for tax breaks and for civil rights and for other things. As difficult as it is to make this assertion it does appear that the habituate of Sodom and Gomorrah are no longer in the Third World, but they have entered the civilized world, and that has brought the ethical debate right up to the forefront of our thinking. It seems as if in the 20th century theological sanctions, cultural sanctions and personal sanctions that enforced moral behavior have eroded from every aspect of life. The only sanction that man seeks today is individual approval for his own behavior; for doing his own thing. Ethical imperatives have evaporated from one segment of life after another. 20th century man in Western culture no longer feeds on durable ethical norms but he's content with ethical leftovers.

What's utterly amazing is that as Western culture has allowed man more and more freedom in ethical decision-making, the value of human life has declined. Man has said if we could only get away from all of the inhibitions and constrictions of religion in society and become educated and have mandatory education and give us freedom that life would have better meaning and men would respect each other.

But alas what has happened is in the midst of the growing ethical

relativity human life has lost its value. All you have to do is contemplate the amount of abortions that are performed every hour in our country. All you have to do is read about gang violence, domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse in the home and in the church to understand that human value has declined as our culture has moved to ethical relativism.

What we hated in the brutal state compulsion of the Soviet totalitarianism and the Nazi concentration camps; now is even beginning to penetrate our culture. The only thing that seemingly scares us is the power of destruction. If someone has the power to blow us away, this is that which may force us to act in a particular way.

The loss of moral restraint has also reached the individual composition of society. It has emptied life of meaning. It has destroyed a sense of destiny. There's been a loss of personal conviction. And this has produced a deep sense of futility. Relativistic ethics is now the improved cultural philosophy. We have experienced premeditated moral revolt indifference to conscience, and it has produced a wave of iniquity. A shock conscience is a minority phenomena, this kind of conscience is seen as being unenviable, uneducated, naive and laughable.

In living color in our homes every night on TV, we can laugh at humor that is smutty, we can watch the destruction of the image of God in shows that are just dominated by violence, we can somehow find humor in insult and innuendo and call it entertainment. It's not only true in the culture, sad to say it's true in the church as well. Our age, not only approves the iniquities that go on, but somehow the people who perpetrate these iniquities have become our hero.

I think the obvious question when you reflect upon the premeditated moral revolt in Western culture is this, how did this happen? What has caused it? In answering a question like that there is great need for caution. But I do wish to at least reflect with you on the causal antecedents to the moral revolt that has come in Western culture. Causality is not a simple notion. Too often we think there is one sufficient cause that has produced. If we could only change that cause we would get rid of where we are now and we could go back to what we used to be.

I think I detect some of that in the Christian church today in relationship to abortion. I think there are a lot of believers who

think that if the Supreme Court would overturn the previous Roe vs. Wade decision and abortion became illegal in our country, that the country would turn around morally and go back to what it used to be. I'd like to say to you. I don't believe that's possible. Very often, it appears that we are kind of waiting for the culture to get back to what it used to be so that we can get the work of God done. It seems to me friends of what we need to do is face the reality of the present culture and get the work of God done in the midst of it.

Let me suggest to you some of the things that I think are causally behind what the fruit of the moral revolution has produced in our day and age. The first is this there was a philosophical shift that came in the post-Renaissance world. It was a shift that placed its emphasis on two major ideas. The first is the idea of the autonomy of the human will and the second is the idea of the ultimacy of process. If indeed man's will is unconditioned, if it has no antecedents, if there is no standard by which it can be judged, if it is a law to itself, and that seed gets planted and grows in a culture, it obviously leads to moral relativity, into the kind of moral rebellion we have witnessed. Not only does the autonomy of the will, the emphasis of post-Renaissance philosophy, but the concomitant concept, the process is ultimate.

There is nothing fixed, everything is in the midst of change and process. Whether you talk about it in biological evolution, whether you talk about it in sociology or if you talk about it in psychology, we seem to have been committed to the fact that there are no fixed load stars whereby we can evaluate anything that goes on. If everything is in process then clearly there can be no absolute values and no absolute moral commands because if something is absolute by definition, it means it is unchanging, it is applicable in every culture to all people under all circumstances. But if you teach people generation after generation that nothing is fixed and everything is in process it seems very obvious that that leads to moral relativity. I would say that's one of the primary contributory causes to the moral revolution as we know it.

For you see, what I'm suggesting to you is that there is no sufficient cause of it. There is a whole series of contributory causes that have brought us in America and in the Western culture in general to the impasse of moral relativity with all of its moral toxic waste within the framework of life today.

The second contributory cause is what I would call the growth

of philosophical ideas and systems, that very greatly in detail, but they are all committed to ethical relativism. That means that all forms of scientific reductionism, whether we talk about it as dialectical materialism or humanism or scientific materialism, all of those kinds of systems reduce reality to one level. That level is usually viewed to be objects and events in time and space and a series of internal causal laws that govern the system. Now friends very obviously if you reduce everything to the level of objects and events in time and space you are not going to have any ability to have an absolute morality or an absolute values set because values don't take up space and they are not limited by time. They will not be found in scientific research, and as a consequence if they can't be found there then they don't belong to the objective reality they must simply be relativistic subject of opinions about things. And that's exactly what happened.

What amazes me is that in the collapse of the Soviet Union and we could talk about all the different factors that have brought it about, it does seem that the same factors are operative in the American culture. At times I feel very akin to Tom Oden when he says; the American culture is not in decline, it has collapsed. It is over. And it is not yet known what's going to come out of it, but at least at this point, it has lost its whole. Scientific reductionism has surely been a part of that.

A second system of philosophy that varies from it in detail, but yet leads to ethical relativism is the irrationalism of existentialism. And this irrationalism of existentialism although it has lost its cultural dynamic, now that the hippies of the former generation have become the shopkeepers of this generation yet in the music that impacts the kids, this kind of irrationalism, this kind of alienation and loneliness and misunderstanding and conflict and deep need for sexual fulfillment still permeates MTV and other aspects of the media. When irrationalism which includes drug use, obsessive commitment to sexuality and to sexual perversion, commitment to gambling as a way of life, violence against other people, the growth of the occult, the growth of new age, the growth of experiential forms of Christianity that can't be explained rationally, all of these things lead in some degree to the understanding that ethical relativity is the only way to go.

In point of fact it would be fair to say that the consequence of these philosophical systems is that the culture has become a narcissistic form of hedonism. They are out for pleasure they're going to party and party and party. There has been some party crushers in

the recent past. AIDS has crashed the sexual promiscuity party. And, the social fruits of the sexual party has produced loneliness, divorce, sexual experimentation in the place of intimacy, AIDS, and death.

But not only has the culture become hedonistic, but it is also narcissistic that is, it is a culture characterized by self-love, where the individual is the most important. Doesn't matter what's happened in history. Nothing from the past is important. Nobody has the knowledge we have. Nobody has the abilities, the technology. Nobody has been able to produce things like our computers, and to develop the medical technologies of spare parts surgery, bypass surgery and all of these kinds of advancements. Somehow in the midst of our self love, we moderns, think ourselves better than all previous generations and thinkers. And we conclude that nothing before us has value. Only we have value. Well, the growth of these philosophical systems has brought a very strong contributory flow toward ethical relativism in our culture.

The third major contributory cause of this moral revolution can be seen in the great growth of scientific, psychological, and cultural anthropology. That is we have been able to go back now and learn that man has lived under many conditions, and there is no continuity. Cultural anthropology has shown us civilization after civilization that has different values sets than ours the end product of all of that is the realization that there are no fixed values; there can be no ethical absolutes. Psychology from Freud through Skinner has treated man as nothing but a machinelike animal that you can apply certain technologies too and you can adapt their behavior and cause them to respond in particular ways, and therefore operant conditioning becomes the psychological mode and in that again you find no fixed values. No ability to make absolute moral judgments only relativity. The same has come about in literature, in art, in almost every aspect of our culture.

The fourth contributory cause has common the domain of education. Education was to be our messiah. Compulsory public education was to remove crime, was to bring community, was to produce an educated rational culture who could live together in peace, have confidence and harmony with each other. In order to achieve it, the instrumentalist education espoused by John Dewey divorced two things that have contributed strongly to ethical relativism. That is they divorced values from facts. They basically said that values are subjective and chosen, facts are objective and

exist independent of the subject. That led to the fact that religion wasn't to be taught in public education. That led to the fact that a teacher could teach facts in the classroom without teaching values. And you let the kids basically choose their values, and in choosing their values they are able thus to become normal operating citizens within the framework of society.

Somehow it took us a long time to catch on to this one, that is, that facts and value can't be divorced. If you divorce truth from values then indeed values have no object of referent. They have no reality except in the whim or the will of the subject himself. So that when the person says I hate lying, all he is expressing to us is a particular opinion about his own understanding of people who deceive. Lying can't be ultimately wrong, because if it was ultimately wrong it would have to be absolute.

Somehow it has never crossed our mind that every teacher who walks into every classroom in America applies a value set to the lesson plan and determines what they are going to teach and what they're not going to teach when it comes to the classroom. You see even in this course as you listen to these tapes you are going to be subjected to my value system when it comes to the discipline of ethics. Cause I have made some overt decisions about what I'm going to teach you and what I'm going to leave you ignorant of. Those things are an expression of my values. This very lecture is an expression of my values.

So friends, divorce of fact and value in the instrumentalist education model that the United States of America adopted through the American philosopher John Dewey was another contributory flow in this great stream of changed, that has produced the moral revolt that we have experienced in these last years.

There is one final contributory cause. Probably not as significant as the first four we've talked about. But this one has added to it and has produced a great deal of frustration. And here I have in mind the scientific and technological revolution. The rate of rapid change, in point of fact, technology has come so far that we no longer determine a person to be old or young by whether they have accumulated 'X' amount of years or not extra amount of the years. If you want to know if a person is old, all you do is ask them, are you able to program your VCR? If they answered that question, No, I can't figure out how to program the VCR you can mark them their old, their out of it. Any five year old kid can walk

in and program the VCR.

I think this rapid change technology and this rapid rate of change has caught our culture kind of breathless. There are no stable things anymore; you're not known as a person, the government knows you by your Social Security number, the bank knows you by the coded number that their computers read. We've become impersonal integers. Change comes, change comes, change comes, it's rapid—the technology goes on. Nobody asks ought we to do it. The only question asked is can we do it? And apparently, if we can do it, we're going to do it.

Well, I suggest to you that perhaps these five streams have flowed together to produce the moral revolution. I'm not sure that it's real important to be able to understand that, except to say to you that it is essential to know that the moral revolution has not happened in a vacuum, it had antecedents. These antecedents have produced a kind of cultural change that has left us without fixed values, without moral absolutes. To use a very crass expression it has become a leaky condo, and in the midst of all of this we have the toxic waste of crack babies filling our hospitals, of drug pushing in our streets, of all kinds of sexually transmitted diseases on the growth, of all the possibility of the epidemic of AIDS, of divorce, of child abuse, all of the things that become the constant report of the newspaper day in and day out. They are the fruit of the ideas that have been sown from generations. And now have become productive.

Certainly it's not a fruit that we wanted, but this is the generation in the midst of its moral relativity, who we must address with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Who we must challenge with the Christian ethic to bring them to evaluate their conduct, to evaluate their values, and to evaluate their motivation and to plead with them in the midst of their rebellion to repent and to believe in Jesus and to come to find an ethical system in which human life has value, in which moral absolutes stand as a basis for culture and community.