

Beyond Ethical Codes: A Call For Critical Thinking In Religious Culture

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Abstract

A salient matter feeding many longstanding world conflicts along religious fault lines is the mistaken idea that what is right (or wrong) may be found in a code of values. Religious groups aspiring to promote their respective notions of what is right (or wrong) have historically made one of their foremost concerns the promotion of a code of ethics. And such a code of ethics supposedly guides choices and actions and determines the purpose and course of the believer's life. Unfortunately, this may engender conflict because what is right (or wrong) depends on the individual who does it (usually manifesting a passion or commitment born out of doctrinal certainty) and where it is done, and whether or not a certain religious community approves. In all this, the more fundamental concern of misgivings about a code of ethics has been largely ignored. The primary reason for this might be the confused belief that we can actually appeal to a code of ethics. Specifically, given some significant misgivings about codes of ethics and some underlying pitfalls of the ethical (or moral) doctrines of absolutism and relativism, religious culture cannot hope to do *right* things by appealing to ethical codes (although it may merely do things *right*). To hope to do *right* things, we must go beyond ethical codes and think critically about the ethical issues that may confront us.

Introduction

The ancient dilemma of discord among many of the great religions of the world may be exemplified in our times by a resurgent Islam and a rising evangelical Christianity. In this essay, I argue that a salient matter feeding many such longstanding world conflicts along religious fault lines is the mistaken idea that what is right (or wrong) may be found in a formal (or an informal) code of values. To be sure, religious groups aspiring to promote their respective notions of what is right (or wrong) have historically made one of their foremost concerns the promotion of a code of ethics. Accordingly, virtually every great religion of the world has a code of ethics. And such a code of ethics supposedly guides choices and actions and determines the purpose and course of the believer's life. Unfortunately, this may engender conflict because what is right (or wrong) depends on the individual who does it (usually manifesting a passion or commitment born out of doctrinal certainty) and where it is done, and whether or not a certain religious community approves. But although many in the religious world have traditionally made one of their foremost concerns promoting a written (or unwritten) code to govern a follower's ethical behavior, the more fundamental concern of misgivings about a code of ethics has been largely ignored.

The primary reason for this might be the confused belief that we can actually appeal to a code of ethics, since many objections might be lessened or removed.¹ To be sure, the goal of a sound code of ethics is to provide a set of fundamental ethical rules (or commands) that help the individual or group do what ought to be done in face of (sometimes problematic) ethical situations. In this essay I will show, however, that given some significant misgivings about codes of ethics and some underlying pitfalls of the ethical (or moral) doctrines of absolutism and relativism,² religious culture cannot hope to do *right* things by appealing to ethical codes (where doing *right* is simply a matter of applying the *right* ethical rule).³ I argue that what is needed is a culture in which *critical thinking*⁴ is fomented. To hope to do *right* things, we must go beyond ethical codes and think critically about the ethical issues that may confront us.

Misgivings about a Code of Ethics

To be sure, misgivings about a code of ethics abound. For instance, a code of ethics may be driven by legalistic demands designed to *keep everyone in line* and help to *get the house in order*. As a result, a code of ethics may be invoked to serve compliance. Accordingly, all things must move toward the code's established rules or instructions for action to be *right*. In this sense, a code of ethics is really about following rules or instructions efficiently (i.e., it is a recipe for merely doing things *right*, not doing *right* things⁵). And, since an unvarying set of rules (or commands) is to be spoon-fed to a captive audience, *convergent* thinking is encouraged. But, if everyone is thinking convergently, then no one is thinking critically very much.

1. Johannesen, Valde, and Whedbee, *Ethics in Human Communication*, Chapter 10.

2. Specifically, I also point out some hidden dangers in a code of ethics grounded on either the doctrine of **ethical (or moral) relativism** or **ethical (or moral) absolutism**. In **ethical (or moral) absolutism**, there is a standard that can be used to *judge* one ethical code *better* than another. The ethical code of a particular community has a special status; it is taken to be the *correct* one among many. Accordingly, **ethical (or moral) absolutists** believe that we should **not** adopt an attitude of tolerance toward the ethical customs or practices of others. In contrast, in **ethical (or moral) relativism** the ethical code of a particular community has no special status; it is merely one among many. Accordingly, it is mere arrogance for us to try to *judge* the conduct of other peoples. **Ethical (or moral) relativists** believe that since there is no *universal truth* in ethics that holds for all peoples at all times, we should adopt an attitude of tolerance toward the ethical customs or practices of others.

3. It is not logical here for us to *judge* that we ought *not* to *judge*. Logic demands, for the sake of consistency, that we not beg the question by using the very thing we are arguing against (See Footnote 39). The Christian fundamentalist may contrast this with Matt. 7:1-5 (New King James Version) where the *proper* way to judge is indicated, although many incorrectly limit the text to the dictate that we ought *not* to *judge*.

4. ...[C]ritical thinking is the general term given to a wide range of cognitive skills and intellectual dispositions needed to effectively identify, analyze, and evaluate arguments and truth claims; to discover and overcome personal prejudices and biases; to formulate and present convincing reasons in support of conclusions; and to make reasonable, intelligent decisions about what to believe and what to do (Bassham et al. 2008, 1).

5. An example of doing a thing *right*, but not doing the *right* thing may be provided when we ask: ***Is lying always the wrong thing to do?*** To be sure, we may be conditioned by the early social and religious training from parents (and/or teachers) to follow the rule or instruction (as a part of a code of ethics) that lying is always wrong. Nevertheless, lying is the *right* thing to do whenever a murderer seeking to inflict great harm enquires about the whereabouts of an innocent victim. Accordingly, we can do a thing *right* (i.e., follow efficiently the dictate of the code that lying is always wrong), but not do the *right* thing (i.e., deliberately lie to save a life or avert harm).

The problem is that a code of ethics focuses on what the individual *must obey* (i.e., it seeks compliance) rather than on the ethical issues that a person needs to *think critically* about. Always in control, such a code denies the individual any real opportunity to *analyze* and *evaluate* the pressing ethical issue at hand, for control comes at the price of *independent or divergent thinking*. This is because requiring that a person do things *right* amounts to a deliberate attempt to change a mixture of belief and emotion that predisposes the individual to respond to the code's way. The individual, overwhelmed into passivity, always acquires someone else's values, on someone else's terms, for someone else's purposes. To do otherwise, is to engage in what seems to be ethically irrelevant activity. For a code of ethics has been selected, packaged, and conveyed by others to force the individual to attend, not to his or her own thoughts and choices, but to the sterile prescriptions and choices of others.⁶

A code of ethics may also present a conflict between *different standards of conduct*, between *social principles* and *legal or regulatory limitations*, or between *one's own ethical convictions* and *the demands of others*. Accordingly, ethical *relativists* have argued that there can be no universal/absolute ethical standards, since different individuals or communities have different social codes and ethical values. Underlying such theoretical misgivings is the notion that what is right (or wrong) depends on the individual who does it and where it is done, and whether or not a certain community approves.⁷ So, we are left with the problem of deciding whose ethics and what values to instill and enforce.

Ethical *absolutists* have argued, on the flipside, that a code of ethics for judging and guiding communal action may be grounded on the notion that it is hard to deny that some moral values exist. As Carol Levine notes,

[a]lthough it is certainly true that moral values are embedded in a social, cultural, and political context, it is also true that certain moral judgments are universal. We think it is wrong, for example, to sell people into slavery—whether or not a certain society approved or even whether or not a person wanted to be a slave. People may not agree about what these universal moral values are or ought to be, but it is hard to deny that some such values exist.⁸

But although ethical relativism or ethical absolutism may each be proposed as a convenient solution to the problem of how to do things *right*, each dispenses with doing *right* things. And, by so doing, both beg the question. For there is little point in studying the details of

6. In the sense that the theology (or religious dogma) does *not* call for critical self-evaluation and skeptical scrutiny of the follower's own ideas and choices, religiously socialized (or indoctrinated) followers are expected not to question or critically examine the (formal or informal) ethical code they have learned. Moreover, for a follower conditioned by social and religious training to claim that he or she really *chose* to obey such a code of ethics begs the question by relying on the very thing that is in question—*choosing not to choose*. This leaves us wondering whether the follower conditioned by social and religious training can really exercise free-will to do otherwise when constrained to follow a code of ethics.

7. Levine, *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Bioethical Issues*, xiv, adapted.

8. *Ibid*, xiv.

ethical dilemmas and making comparative ethical judgments, since circumstances invoking *different* conceptions of right (and wrong) make no difference to the ethical relativist or ethical absolutist. And this is why critical thinking goes out of the window, since all that may matter are prefabricated, all-purpose answers based on a relativist (e.g., *it is all relative*) or absolutist (e.g., *it is my way or the highway*) position. This actually amounts to affirming our position and closing the subject. So, we are caught between a rock and a hard place: **ethical relativism** (as the *plurality* of ethical positions: a *decentralized* approach) and **ethical absolutism** (as the *dogmatism* of ethical positions: a *centralized* approach).⁹ Each purported solution does not allow some way in which it might be wrong and so it loses all chance of being right.¹⁰

Hence, there is no way to convince someone (whether an ethical relativist or ethical absolutist) who does not share our ethical views that our view is *right*. And by itself each purported solution fails to elucidate the *right* view, since we must additionally show how we are to choose between competing ethical views. Furthermore, we are not always sure of, or in agreement about, the credibility of the ethical position, nor on how the position would work in ambiguous or new cases.¹¹ Finally, ethical codes derived from either *ethical relativism* (where the ethical code depends on and is determined by an individual, group, society, or culture) or *ethical absolutism* (where the ethical code is the one dictated by the *correct* authority, group, society, or culture) merely provide ready-made responses to ethical dilemmas. But to merely voice ready-made responses is not to use ethical codes, but to be used by them; not to be guided by ethical rules, but to be controlled by them. It takes critical thinking to analyze and evaluate the comparative ethical judgments at hand. Such critical thinking does not come easily. And when we substitute a ready-made response for analysis and evaluation, critical thinking does not come at all. In the end, then, both ethical relativism and ethical absolutism trivialize the subject of ethics¹² and serve more to block critical thinking than to promote it. This suggests that we may not do *right* things (although we may merely do things *right*) by appealing to ethical codes

9. An example of being caught between **ethical absolutism** and **ethical relativism** may be observed when arguing for a *right* action or practice via an argument that appeals to a passion or commitment born out of doctrinal certainty.

Consider a general form of this argument (Let **S** stand for a subject and **x** be a description of an action or practice).

1) **S** exhibits a passion or commitment born out of doctrinal certainty that **x** is **right**.

2) **Thus, x is right**.

To be sure, a form of ethical absolutism is involved here because the subject's doctrinal certainty is invoked. But, ethical **absolutism** shifts to ethical **relativism** when competing subjects and actions or practices are introduced into the discussion. For by itself, a passion or commitment born out of doctrinal certainty fails to elucidate the *right* action or practice, since subjects must additionally show how we are to choose between competing passions or commitments. All we need to do here is construct a **counterexample** to show that all deductive arguments of the above form are **invalid** arguments. An example that shows this is the substitution instance: let **x** be **selling people into slavery** (consider the transatlantic slave trade that took place across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas from the sixteenth through to the nineteenth centuries). **Invalid** deductive argument forms are problematic because they allow substitution instances (i.e., examples) with true premises and a false conclusion. And we certainly do not want to be guilty of using our reasoning and the information involved to derive something false from something true.

10. Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 74, adapted.

11. Pojman, *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, 4, adapted.

12. Ruggiero, *Thinking Critically About Ethical Issues*, 74-75.

derived from either *ethical* relativism or *ethical* absolutism.

Practical Concerns

Theoretical misgivings aside, there are also the more **practical** concerns about the *ethicality*, *effectiveness*, and *desirability* of a code brought about through agreement by religious ethics committees or councils. As we have learned from professional ethics ([o]ne type of applied ethics that burgeoned in the twentieth century...¹³), there are problems with a code brought about through committees or councils. For example, in the medical profession a hospital code of ethics (...regulating the relationships of professionals to clients and patients.¹⁴) may not be comprehensive, or its statements may be too broad in nature to be interpreted and applied in specific circumstances. Accordingly, Bernard Lo, in *Behind Closed Doors: Promises and Pitfalls of Ethics Committees*, notes the questionable nature of the *groupthink* of hospital ethics committees, which may in fact result in an inadequate consideration of patients' preferences.¹⁵

To be sure, an adequate consideration of an individual's preferences is essential in a *decentralized* community. A decentralized community demands, at the very least, that each member be able to choose to do otherwise and so be ascribed the possibility of alternative ethical action. Furthermore, such a community demands that each member (as a rational and autonomous individual able to make informed, uncoerced decisions) be consulted to bring into play personal responsibility and free choice as a cause of human behavior. It becomes important, then, to consult the wishes of the individual to let the person express whatever preferences he or she really has, for whatever possible alternative ethical actions he or she happens to choose.

But this runs into two problems that are very crucial to ethics and the study of group life—what is *right* for the individual is not always *right* for the community and what is *right* for the community is not always *right* for the individual.

Put in a crude and provocative way, a *decentralized* community appealing to a written (or unwritten) code of ethics to govern members in their social lives is much like a group of individuals trapped in a fire all heading out toward the same exit. Within minutes, the building is in flames: a fireball sweeps inside and smoke comes in the air ducts, quickly filling the rooms with thick, blinding black smoke. As the fire engulfs the building, it quickly spreads roaring down the corridors leading to the only exit—the building's front entrance. As panic ensues, people are pushing toward the exit, shoving and throwing people out of their paths. Some are climbing and stepping over others. But the exit soon becomes a death trap: the rush to exit leaves a pile of trampled people lying on top of each other, trapped in the entrance of the burning building. Human nature being what it is they all tried to go out the same way they came in as the

13. Cathcart and Klein, *Plato and a Platypus Walk Into a Bar: Understanding Philosophy Through Jokes*, 88.

14. *Ibid*, adapted.

15. Mappes and DeGrazia, *Biomedical Ethics*, 180-185, adapted.

flames sprinted through the building. But, the exit soon grew choked in a crush of people pushing through the front door. So, not even rescuers from outside the building could pull people from the front door pile. The community is overcome with black smoke pouring out over their heads and out the side windows. The building finally collapses on most, but a few (if any) survivors.

The analogy is inexact, but the comparison makes clear two things. First, although the preference of each member of the community is to leave quickly to save his or her life, combined individual ethical-preferences produce a collective choice (that may be articulated as a community rule or code of ethical behavior) that leads to tragedy, for what is *right* for the individual is not always *right* for the community. So, prevailing circumstances block a *decentralized* community rule or code of ethical behavior.

Second, and in contrast, it seems that advocating for a *dictator* (where a person or group/committee dictates) that would have the community line up for an orderly escape would not do either, since no *rational* individual would rather be directed to the end of a very long line to be (possibly) sacrificed in a *centralized* community. Moreover, some community members may not fare well in such a scenario if the dictatorship is (as it is often charged) *class-conscious, racist, oppressive, fascist, prejudiced, unjust, or pathological*.¹⁶ Accordingly, what is *right* for the community is not always *right* for the individual.

To be sure, whatever its application to the purely private case, a code of ethics really comes into its own in communal settings. So although we may be tempted to accept the view that a code of ethics of *whatever* stripe may serve as a standard for judging and guiding action, communal action, whether performed by specific individuals or the general community, affects the community besides just the individual. But, what matters as right (or wrong) for the individual would be pointless. For, *[i]f there is to be any such thing as ethics, there must be such a thing as personal responsibility. And if there is to be personal responsibility, then one must maintain the claims of something like free choice as a cause of human behavior*.¹⁷ Hence, if there is to be any such thing as ethics, then we must maintain the claims of something like free choice as a cause of human behavior. But, as our burning building analogy suggests, it is not always possible to maintain claims of something like free choice as a cause of human behavior when we opt for either *ethical* relativism (a *decentralized* approach) or *ethical* absolutism (a

16. The entire community may be doomed to march directly into the fire, however, if the dictatorship believes the end must be accelerated to quickly usher an inevitable outcome. As it applies to our call for critical thinking in religious culture, a total lack of critical thinking feeds world conflict in the promotion of the belief that followers must go willingly to their deaths to *accelerate* the coming of God's kingdom; or, that followers must hasten or speed up the arrival of future events in keeping with the fulfillment of some master plan, prophecy, or sacred text. In contrast, others promote the belief that followers should adopt a *hands-off* policy and not *polish the brass on a sinking ship* (to change the metaphor). Accordingly, believers are asked to stand-by disengaged from the profane world and wait until world peace is finally realized by outside spiritual forces. However, these two diametrically opposed approaches trivialize the subject of ethics and serve more to block critical thinking than to promote it.

17. Ruggiero, *Thinking Critically About Ethical Issues*, 131. Originally from Veatch, *Rational Man: A Modern Interpretation of Aristotelian Ethics*, 160.

centralized approach) as a basis for a code of ethics.

Divine Command Theory

Some may think that a way out of this dilemma is to take ethics and morality to be more tightly bound together so that ethical questions are inseparable from moral ones. This line of thinking may originate in traditional appeals to the Divine Command theory where the right act is one done in obedience to the law (or will) of God¹⁸ (e.g., Ten Commandments of the Old Testament). Ethics and morality are more tightly bound together here because in the Divine Command theory, a *superior* being lays down (or dictates) the original law or rule and the right act is one that conforms to or is done out of observance of that rule.¹⁹ But this leaves us puzzled about how a person could ever have strong ethical convictions and yet, for instance, not be moral in the religious sense. For example, consider an atheist or agnostic who believes that right actions are those that produce the greatest possible balance of happiness over unhappiness (i.e., suppose the atheist or agnostic is a Classical Utilitarian). In this case, the precepts of right (and wrong) are not motivated by religious moral considerations. So, even if we believed that there is no God and morality (or suspended judgment about these notions altogether), there still may be ethics—there still may be a difference between right and wrong. Thus, we may challenge the contention that if there is no God, everything is permitted.²⁰

To be sure, ethics may be allied to morality, but it need not be.²¹ For, there is a very central tradition in Western philosophy that has sought to separate ethical from moral (i.e., what God or the gods wants us to do) questions. This tradition goes all the way back to Plato in the fourth-century B.C. who thought that ethical questions should be addressed independently of assumptions about whether there is a God (or gods) and what God commands (or gods command).²²

An important reason for this is that when religious morality is exclusively grounded in revelation or divine authority, it is founded on faith and not on reason.²³ And when the focus is

18. Frankena, *Ethics*, 28-30.

19. However, what the *superior* being may lay down (or dictate) as *right* may be problematic for the Christian or Jewish fundamentalist, since it may not be *good* and/or violate human *free-will* (See Isa. 45:7; Exod. 4:11; Eccles. 7:14; Amos 3:6; Job 42:11; Job 2:10; Rom. 9: 14-23).

20. Addressed by Ivan Karamazov in the early chapters of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1990).

21. Ethics need not be allied to morality and we can certainly speak of ethics and morality as *different* subjects. Consider, for instance, Browne's account (1990, 395-412) that marks the differences between a fundamental part of the Greek conception of ethics (about character suitable for virtue or qualities of human excellence) and a fundamental part of the modern conception of morality (about what morally ought to be done).

22. This section and the previous paragraph were adapted (Sober 2009, 379).

23. Whether based on religious, spiritual, sacred, or mystical experience, faith is sometimes alleged to be a source of knowledge. A standard definition of *faith* (contrast Heb. 11:1), however, notes that it is [*b*]elief that does not rest on logical proof or material evidence... (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, New College ed.). Further, we may add that [*t*]o believe something on faith is to believe it in spite of, or even because of, the fact that we have insufficient evidence for it (Schick and Vaughn 2008, 78). And, we may note, [*s*]ince believing

on faith and not reason, there is little point in thinking about rival ethical theories (each expounding a different conception of right and wrong). There is little point in studying the details of ethical dilemmas and making comparative ethical judgments, since circumstances invoking different principles of conduct and values make no difference. Here, all that may matter are prefabricated, all-purpose answers based on faith or moral authority. And this actually amounts to affirming our faith or religion and closing the subject.²⁴ As a result, we are caught between a rock and a hard place: *moral relativism* (in the plurality of faiths or moral authorities) and *moral absolutism* (in the dogmatism of faiths or moral authorities).²⁵ Each position does not allow some way in which it might be wrong and so it loses all chance of being right.²⁶

something on faith doesn't help us determine the plausibility of a proposition, faith can't be a source of knowledge (Ibid, 80).

24. The skeptic (or person refusing to conform to **reason**) cannot, on pain of contradiction, sidestep all this by **reasoning** here that different disciplines require different **methods** of analysis or evaluation—suggesting that the progress sought in this discussion cannot be achieved by appealing to **reason** because religion or theology governs its own separate **domain** by faith and is, in this sense, immune from rational **analysis** or **evaluation**. Moreover, a person refusing to conform to **logic** cannot, on pain of contradiction, sidestep all this because **method** itself implies a **logically** ordered way of accomplishing something—as the detailed procedures and techniques that suggest order characteristic of a particular discipline or field. Finally, in the sense that religion or theology is an attempt to try to argue for *what is* via metaphor or analogy (i.e., use analogical **reasoning**), there is the need to analyze or evaluate its arguments by crossing the different domains so that reason may prevail.

25. An example of being caught between **moral absolutism** and **moral relativism** may be observed when arguing for what is *right* via **religious (or moral) testimonials**. When we generalize from one or more specific examples in support of a sweeping statement (or generalization) we obtain a type of **inductive argument** called an **Argument by Example**. **Religious testimonials** are **Arguments by Example** because they provide, for instance, specific examples in support of a conclusion that a particular religion (or moral system) **X** is *right*. To be sure, a form of moral absolutism is involved here because the believer's dogmatism is invoked. **But**, moral **absolutism** shifts to moral **relativism** when other religions (**Y**, **Z**, etc.) are introduced into the discussion. For by themselves, testimonials fail to elucidate the *right* view, since believers must additionally show how we are to choose between competing religions or moral systems. Consider a basic form of the **religious testimonials argument**:

1) Believer₁ in religion **X** **testifies** to being in the *right* religion.

2) Believer₂ in religion **X** **testifies** to being in the *right* religion.

3) Believer₃ in religion **X** **testifies** to being in the *right* religion.

l) ...Etc.

n) Believer_n in religion **X** **testifies** to being in the *right* religion.

n+1) Thus, all believers in religion **X** are in the *right* religion. (Note: this is a generalization.)

But, even if each premise of the sequence of statements used to demonstrate the sweeping statement (or generalization) is **true**, the conclusion can still be **false**. So the generalization may have to be revised, limited, or given up. Consider a **counterexample** that clearly shows that there is a serious problem with (the foregoing basic argument *form* of) religious testimonials:

1) Swan₁ **testifies** it is white.

2) Swan₂ **testifies** it is white.

3) Swan₃ **testifies** it is white.

l) ...Etc.

n) Swan_n **testifies** that it is white.

n+1) Thus, all swans are white. (Note: there are black swans.)

26. Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 74, adapted.

Accordingly, there is no way to convince a true believer (or defender of the faith²⁷) who does not share our *moral* views that our view is *right*. And by itself morality fails to elucidate the *right* view, since the believer must additionally show how we are to choose between competing religious moral systems or authorities.²⁸ Besides, ...*we are not always sure of or in agreement about the credentials of the authority nor on how the authority would rule in ambiguous or new cases.*²⁹

Consequently, ethical codes **derived from** either *moral* relativism (where the ethical code depends on and is determined by a faith or moral authority) or *moral* absolutism (where the ethical code is the one dictated by the *correct* faith or moral authority) merely provide ready-made responses to ethical dilemmas. But to merely voice ready-made responses is not to use ethical codes, but to be used by them; not to be guided by ethical rules, but to be controlled by them. It takes critical thinking to analyze and evaluate the comparative ethical judgments at hand. Such critical thinking does not come easily. And when we substitute a ready-made response for analysis and evaluation, critical thinking does not come at all. All of this trivializes the subject of ethics and serves more to block ethical analysis and evaluation than to promote it. So, although *moral* relativism and *moral* absolutism may appear to be two equally convenient solutions for the foregoing dilemma, both dispense with doing *right* things. This suggests that we may not do *right* things (although we may merely do things *right*) by appealing to ethical codes derived from either *moral* relativism or *moral* absolutism.

Finally, those who take ethics and morality to be more tightly bound together so that ethical questions are inseparable from moral ones may take the terms *ethics* and *morality* to be used synonymously to suggest the same or similar meaning. This is because the term *ethics* comes from the Greek (*ethos*) and the term *moral* comes from the Latin (*mores*) and the meaning of both terms derives from the shared notion of *custom* or *tradition* (returning us to the problem of deciding whose ethical customs and what traditional values to instill and enforce). Nevertheless, the term *ethics* can refer to the *philosophical analysis of right*. In this sense, *moral* right is a subset of ethics—this side of ethics is seen as ...*the systematic endeavor to understand moral concepts and justify moral principles and theories*³⁰ and is part of what philosophers call *metaethics*.

27. Defenders of the faith may *reason* that the progress sought in this discussion cannot be achieved by appealing to *reason* because **reason does not trump faith**. But this is problematic, since we would be using reason to defeat reason—thus begging the question. Moreover, if the claim that **reason does not trump faith** is itself derived by reason, then we are using the very thing we are arguing against. On the other hand, if the claim is itself derived by faith, then we are engaged in circular reasoning—where faith (which is itself in question) somehow establishes faith. Since either result is unacceptable, we can thus reject the claim that **reason does not trump faith**.

28. Religious authorities espousing competing moral codes differ among themselves on what is right and what is the conduct that is required by God's will. This not only often leads religious people of good will to opposite positions on moral matters, but undercuts claims that religion provides a *secure, certain, universal, and stable* guide to ethics (Wenz 2007, 41, adapted).

29. Pojman, *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, 4.

30. *Ibid*, 1, adapted.

Another side of ethics, however, is called *normative ethics*, which is about securing and setting norms or principles of conduct that can be instrumental in guiding human actions. In this sense, a code of ethics is a subset of normative ethics. But, even if we supposed that norms or principles of *right* (or *wrong*) conduct can be secured and set in terms of an ethical code, we may ask—Is conduct *right* because the ethical code commands it, or does the ethical code command it because it is *right*?³¹ If conduct is *right* because the ethical code commands it, then the only *reason* to follow the code is because the ethical code simply requires it—not because it is *right*. But this means that the ethical code is arbitrary, since the code could have just as easily given a *different* command requiring that we do something else. In contrast, if the ethical code commands *right* conduct because it is *right*, then the code is superfluous—we are admitting that there is some standard of *right* that is independent of ethical codes.³² This implies that *right* (or *wrong*) cannot be secured and set in terms of an ethical code. On the whole, therefore, religious culture cannot hope to do *right* things by appealing to ethical codes (or sets of moral rules).

Critical Thinking

For some, this suggests that being moral is a **practical** affair rather than an **abstract** matter. So becoming moral is mostly a matter of receiving the *right* education or upbringing (usually following the *right* role models). We should concentrate, then, on the *right* feelings, *right* personal relationships, *right* character, and *right* values, rather than on the abstract rules of a code of ethics. However, this begs the question by relying on the very thing not yet established (i.e., the *right*).

Furthermore, this virtue approach in contemporary ethics (typically Aristotelian³³) cannot discount moral rules, since these still play an important part in moral education to develop the proper habits for a person to become ethically virtuous. As the Aristotelian analogy between matters of conduct and the art of navigation suggests, not following moral rules is like trying to learn how to become a navigator of a ship without initially relying on rigid rules in order to navigate the ship from one seaport to another.³⁴

But, if religious culture cannot hope to do *right* things by appealing to ethical codes (or sets of moral rules), how can we ever hope to do right things? To be sure, we may grant that most evils are due to moral defects of character or upbringing quite as much as to lack of critical thinking, but the great religions of the world have not up till now discovered any method of eradicating moral defects. Critical thinking, on the contrary, is easily improved by methods known to every competent philosopher. Therefore, until some method of teaching *right* action has been discovered, progress will have to be sought by improvement of critical thinking rather

31. Here I adapt Socrates' argument found in Plato's *Euthyphro* (1989, 10a - 11a).

32. Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 47-50, adapted.

33. See Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1941).

34. Rauhut, *Ultimate Questions: Thinking About Philosophy*, 229, adapted.

than of morals.³⁵

The assurance that critical thinking is basic to religion comes from application of the logical principle of non-contradiction,³⁶ which states...*that when two ethical judgments are diametrically opposed, one must be mistaken.*³⁷ There is also the assurance that comes from logic being uncompromising in ethical matters, for it does not allow the luxury of ignoring the implications of our ethical judgments. Rather, it demands that we analyze ethical judgments by their implications.³⁸

Moreover, on the basis of the intellectual standard of logic (as the study of arguments),³⁹ critical thinking (as a purposeful mental activity that takes an argument apart, via *analysis*, and *evaluates* it) empowers us...*to consider the possibility that a different [ethical] choice might be better.*⁴⁰ As Alfred Tarski notes, *...logic, by perfecting and by sharpening the tools of thought, makes men and women more critical—and thus makes less likely their being misled by all the pseudo-reasonings to which they are incessantly exposed in various parts of the world today.*⁴¹

Lastly, the assurance that critical thinking is basic to religion comes from the realization that there is a crucial difference between showing *why* something is the case and showing *how* something is the case. A *how* question asks (on the surface for the sake of mere compliance, for instance)—*how do you do things right?* An answer, of course, is to just blindly obey a rule (or command) usually found in some ethical code. In contrast, critical thinking asks us to show *why*

35. Here I adapt the argument in Bertrand Russell's *Sceptical Essays* (1977, 19).

36. To argue against the truth or correctness of the logical principle of non-contradiction amounts to adopting a position that makes reasoning theoretically impossible. But this is, on the most basic level, appealing to reason while disowning it. The logical principle of non-contradiction is in place not just to help us avoid false statements with a particular type of inconsistency. It is also a central principle of thought and communication without which we could not distinguish one thought or statement from another. Since, we could not think and communicate because our thoughts and statements would not be consistently about one thing rather than the other. Moreover, every claim would be equally true (false), since the specific content of each statement would not be consistently true (false) about one thing rather than the other. Thus, without the principle of non-contradiction, thinking and communicating would be impossible. And if thinking and communicating were impossible, we could not reason.

37. Ruggiero, *Thinking Critically About Ethical Issues*, 73, adapted.

38. *Ibid.*, 32, adapted.

39. It is important to note that *... the laws of logic are embedded in our thinking and our language ...* (Bassham et al, 4). So, for instance, the skeptic (or person refusing to conform to logic) cannot, on pain of contradiction, hope to persuade by presenting the argument (possibly critiquing logic as a blatantly absolutist enterprise) that *all rules are oppressive, logic is a set of rules, so logic is oppressive* (*ibid.*)—that is, one cannot use logic to reject (or defeat) logic. Likewise, the skeptic cannot sidestep all this by *arguing* here that *arguments* by themselves do not persuade—suggesting that the progress sought in this discussion by logic cannot be achieved by appealing to *valid* arguments. For, the skeptic cannot, on pain of contradiction, hope to persuade by presenting the argument that arguments do not persuade. Additionally, the skeptic cannot sidestep all this by *stating* here that no one can ever be perfectly sure about any *statement* made—suggesting that the *truth* sought by logic cannot be attained by appealing to *statements* like those found in *sound* arguments. Since, one cannot, on pain of contradiction, be *perfectly* sure that there is no such thing as *perfection*, nor *state* that no one can ever be perfectly sure about any *statement* made. In short, logic would demand, for the sake of consistency, that we not beg the question by relying on the very thing we are disallowing or arguing against.

40. Ruggiero, *Thinking Critically About Ethical Issues*, 45, adapted.

41. *Introduction to Logic and to the Methodology of Deductive Sciences*, xiii-xiv.

(or why not) an ethical argument's conclusion is the case, which allows the individual to connect-the-dots.⁴² In short, the aim is to analyze and evaluate the *underlying* reasoning and information involved to hope to *do right things*.⁴³ And in this sense, there certainly is more to ethics than simply showing the individual *how* to follow recipes for merely doing things *right* (i.e., following rules or instructions efficiently).

Conclusion

In view of this, our foremost concern must be to create an environment in religious culture in which we can think critically and independently so that we may be able to show *why* something is right,⁴⁴ not merely clarify *what* is right—not simply state what our values are (i.e., what *seems*, *feels*, *appears*, or is *believed* to be right)⁴⁵ and *how* we are going to act on or implement them. All this requires a meeting of *independent* minds, a process through which individuals draw from within themselves a response to the ethical issues that may confront them. Moreover, all this also requires ethical analysis and evaluation, which demand active participation—immersing ourselves in the ethical issue at hand, judging, and offering active responses (often thinking

42. For instance, we may show *why* (or why not) the conclusion logically follows from the premises. This may concern the *validity* of a *deductive* argument (and, when coupled with validity, we may ask *why* the premises are true (or false), which has to do with the *soundness* of the argument); or, it may concern the *strength* of an *inductive* argument (and, when coupled with *strength*, we may ask *why* the premises are true (or false), which has to do with the *cogency* of the argument).

43. Some may argue, however, that there is no logical way to get from factual knowledge (knowing what *is*) to ethical knowledge (knowing what *ought* to be)—referring to David Hume's *Fact-Value* (or *Is-Ought*) distinction (1978, Book III, Part I). We cannot get *value* from *facts* because the conclusion describes something that is not contained in the premises. The premises say nothing about what ought to be the case. Since factual premises cannot establish any value judgment, the principles and rules of logic are not applicable to ethical reasoning. So, reason cannot tell us what is right. But, reason *can* tell us what is right if the conclusion expresses a value related to some value expressed by the premise or premises of the argument. The premise or premises, then, would say something about being right (or wrong), and, correspondingly, could help establish a conclusion about being right (or wrong). Accordingly, we can take care of the *Fact-Value* problem by adding an explicit value-premise (since it is implied, concealed, or unavailable). For instance (premise no. 3 is added in the following argument),

- 1) Chief executive officers (CEOs) receive generous salaries. <FACT>
- 2) Some CEOs are using their positions to make a quick buck in the form of a bribe. <FACT>
- 3) Offering or accepting a bribe is *wrong*. <VALUE>
- 4) Thus, it is *wrong* for a bribe to be offered or accepted in this case. <VALUE>

44. The skeptic (or person refusing to conform to logic) cannot, on pain of contradiction, hold that the *right* thing here is to realize that since we cannot ever determine what the *right* thing is, we cannot show *why* something is right. Logic demands, for the sake of consistency, that we not beg the question by using the very thing we are arguing against.

45. It is important to note here that we cannot always get at **what is right** on the basis that we are somehow always filtering what is *right* (so that there simply and literally *is* no right beyond what *seems*, *feels*, *appears*, or is *believed* to be right). For, if we let **x** be a description of an action (or practice), the general form of such arguments concluding *what is right* from *what seems*, *feels*, *appears*, or is *believed* to be *right* is the following.

- 1) **x** seems (feels, appears, or is **believed** to be) right.
- 2) Thus, **x** is right.

But, this is an **invalid** argument form. Again, an example that shows this is the substitution instance: let **x** be *selling people into slavery* (consider the transatlantic slave trade that took place across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas from the sixteenth through to the nineteenth centuries).

outside the box). In this sense, critical thinking opens the door, but we must enter by ourselves. And this is vital because *...without the ability to think critically and independently, citizens are easy prey to dogmatists, flimflam artists, and purveyors of simple solutions to complex problems.*⁴⁶

As I have argued, the significant misgivings about codes of ethics and the underlying pitfalls of the ethical (or moral) doctrines of absolutism and relativism create the need for critical thinking. Critical thinking seeks reasons, rather than *centralized* or *decentralized* authority, to justify its principles. So rather than appeal to a code of ethics, sound and intelligent decisions about what to believe and what to do demand...*the reasonableness of the person's argument and the quality and weight of the evidence that supports it...*⁴⁷ Under this conception, critical thinking is, at the very least, *an exercise in reason*—the effort to guide our beliefs and conduct by reason so that...*the ideas that should come out on top are the ones that have the best reasons on their sides.*⁴⁸

To be sure, critical thinking may not be sufficient to guarantee ethical behavior, but it can be a contributor to that goal—filling a long-standing and vital gap in religious upbringing (or indoctrination) that sometimes not only fails to improve the moral character of the believer, but it weakens it. So, a call for critical thinking to go beyond ethical codes not only differs from the failed and crippling approaches to religious education and training, but it is an approach that challenges religious culture (from the bottom-up) to assess...*where the weight of reason rests.*⁴⁹

Given all the foregoing, we can conclude that there certainly is more to ethics than simply giving-out instructions or recipes—maintaining that what is right (or wrong) may be found in a code of values—to guide choices and actions and determine the purpose and course of religious life. For ethics plunges us into the most important activity known to humans, since it has to do with *how* we are to live and *why*. As the philosopher Socrates notes,...*it is no ordinary matter that we are discussing, but the right conduct of life.*⁵⁰ However, since ancient times religious culture has been too concerned with the *how* (enter the need for ethical codes) and has dispensed with the *why* (enter the need for critical thinking). What we need today, therefore, in a world full of conflicts along religious fault lines, is a religious culture in which critical thinking is fomented—since it does not really make sense to follow recipes for merely doing things *right* (i.e., following rules or instructions efficiently) when what we want to do are *right* things.

46. Rutherford and Ahlgren, *Science For All Americans*, Introduction.

47. Ruggiero, *Thinking Critically About Ethical Issues*, 7-8, adapted.

48. Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, xii, adapted.

49. Ibid.

50. In Plato's *Republic* (1989, Book 1:352d).

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