Ethical Perspectives
from
Biblical Texts

Ralph C. Ennis

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Belief in the Bible is not a requirement for examining ethical reasoning within this book "… written over a period of roughly 2,000 years by 40 different authors from three continents, who wrote in three different languages."[1] You may be one of the over two billion people who look to the Bible for spiritual guidance, or you look elsewhere for meta-meanings of our life-to-death experience and for guidance regarding ethical reasoning in order to live a good life. This article, written for both groups, will look at the Bible for examples of ethical reasoning which parallel the ethical DNA posited elsewhere (Ennis, 2015)[2].

The Biblical texts are filled with statements of ethical perspectives. They point us to reason and build a world that is filled with goodness rather than evil. In this paper I will summarize some of those perspectives. This will not be a list of do's and don'ts but rather a collection of perspectives—ways of thinking that will lead us into a life that is ethically good from Biblical perspectives.

LOGIC OF INTELLECT OF ETHICAL REASONING

1. Concepts of *verbal and non-verbal truth* telling with consistency as determined by behavior conformity over time. A sense of consistency in language and behavior is an ethical construct. And contradictory statements and hypocritical behaviors are usually judged to be ethically wrong.

    > *You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. Exodus 20:16*

    > *The Lord detests dishonest scales, but accurate weights find favor with him. Proverbs 11:1*

2. Concepts of *power with authority* as determined by beliefs, organizational practices, relationships and change dynamics. Power among many wrapped in the authority of a few provides a context for ethical breaches by non-conformist behavior.

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[1] https://answersingenesis.org/the-word-of-god/3-unity-of-the-bible/

[2] Ennis, R. (2015). Meta-Language for Ethical Reasoning.
http://www.ralphennis.com/support-papers-for--living-with-super-intelligent-agents-.html

All the people were amazed and said to each other, "What words these are! With authority and power he gives orders to impure spirits and they come out!" Luke 4:36

This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the flesh and despise authority. 2 Peter 2:10

3. Concept of *protection of innocents* as suggested by the play of powerful and powerlessness. A foundational construct of ethical perspectives is a need to protect the innocents within a society. Without this intact within society, the foundations of future generations are at risk—babies.

    People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." Luke 18:15-17

4. Concept of *law* (permission, restriction, innocence, guilt, condemnation and mercy) as determined by rules of behavior previously agreed upon by a group. The letter of the law serves to enforce the spirit of the law. To violate a lettered law is ethically wrong as the letter protects the spirit of the law.

    Exodus 20 (Ten Commandments)
    Matthew 5-7 (Sermon in the Mount)

5. Concept of *spatial ownership* (physical and mental spaces) as determined by individual and group agreements (Exodus 20:15; Ephesians 4: 28). Taking that which is owned by another individual or group is perceived to be a wrongful act.

    You shall not steal. Exodus 20:15

    Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need. Ephesians 4: 28

6. Concepts of *emptiness and fullness* as determined by spatial reality (Luke 17:33; Mark 8:34). To be full or empty can both be ethically right. But to be empty when a desire for fullness exists in that arena is usually judged as wrong.

    Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Mark 8:34

Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it. Luke 17:33

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. John 10:10

LOGIC OF EMOTION OF ETHICAL REASONING

1. Concept of *trust and fear* as established through trustworthy and untrustworthy sources (e.g. people, governments, codes).

   Abraham replied, "I said to myself, 'There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.' Genesis 20:11

   This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone. Titus 3:8

2. Concept of *freedom and bondage* established by relational bonding and loyalty at appropriate ages and by in-group relational dynamics.

   It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Galatians 5:1

3. Concepts of *honor and shame* as determined by a hierarchical system (of people and/or codes) established by society or religious revelation. To shame a person without cause is ethically wrong. To shame them with cause is to invoke a dynamic to better ensure future conformity to that which is deemed honorable.

   Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. Luke 9:26

   You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.'" Luke 18:20

4. Concepts of *jealousy* as determined by in-group relations and dynamics. A break of a jealous bond is seen as a moral wrong. Thus the marriage commitment is sealed with jealousy and threats to this jealous are confronted by ethical judgments.

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 parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, Exodus 20: 5

For jealousy arouses a husband's fury, and he will show no mercy when he takes revenge. Proverbs 6:34

IMAGINED OUTCOMES OF ETHICAL REASONING

1. Concept of *goal achievement* (thriving) as determined by goals and value of achievement. When goals are declared as non-negotiable, then the play of ethical reasoning is fully engaged. It becomes unacceptable and wrong to not meet those goals.

    Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." Luke 12:15

2. Concept of *necessity* (surviving) as determined by physical and psychological needs. To not allow self or others to survive is deemed morally wrong.

    His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 2 Peter 1:3

3. Concept of *identity preservation* as determined by desired and undesired identities. Ownership of identity begins with our birth name and is layered with family, cultural and national identities, etc. To violate an identity is to desecrate all others of common identity.

    For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Luke 14:11

4. Concepts of *belief and symbolic meanings* as determined by religious beliefs, cultural values and symbols regarding perceived reality. The Bible is filled with symbols that establish and reinforce beliefs. Adherence to these beliefs can be viewed ethically by accepting that violation of a belief will be evil.

    The entire Bible represents a view of reality.

5. Concept of *harmony* as determined by system equilibrium. Any ethical reasoning seeks to bring harmony into a system that is in some jeopardy of destabilizing. Thus disharmony is often but not necessarily seen as wrong.

    Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." Luke 5:31-32

DYNAMICS OF ETHICAL REASONING

1. Concept of *intent* as determined by judging motivation. Behavior is interpreted by intent. Without intent to harm, a harmful behavior is judged more moderately.

   > *Matthew 5:20-7:28 (Sermon on the Mount)*
   >
   > *Then the Lord said to him, "Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? Luke 11:39-40*
   >
   > *He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God's sight. Luke 16:15*

2. Concepts of *integrity* as determined by individual emotions values, group emotional patterns and belief systems. Maintaining a sense of emotional wholeness or integrity with non-contradiction is a high value among some cultures. To disturb one's psychological peace within is an ethical conflict.

   > *The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity. Proverbs 11:3*
   >
   > *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Galatians 5:22-23*

3. Concept of *paradoxes* as suggested by belief systems. Consistency must be moderated by paradox. All of life is not consistent and much of life is paradoxical, thus beliefs and behaviors that are not consistent are not necessary wrong.

   > *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16*
   >
   > *Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness." 2 Timothy 2:19*

4. Concept of *continuums* as suggested by relative degrees of morality. End points of ethical perspectives are often best understood along a continuum of reasoning.

   > *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom*

and instruction. Proverbs 1:7

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. 1 John 4:18

5. Concept of *probabilistic cause and effect* as determined by experience over varying timeframes. Ethics must address the question of effects. How do specific actions play out over time?

   Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Galatians 6:7

META-CONSTRUCTS OF ETHICAL REASONING

6. Concepts of *fairness* as determined by judging others' behavior toward oneself. This fairness doesn't require equality but rather a deeper sense that accounts that accounts for distribution of products and services and motivates that are appropriate to circumstances.

   "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' Matthew 5:38

7. Concept of *justice with mercy* as a perspective for extending forgiveness. Without mercy the demand of justice will implicate all humans to condemnation for all have violated ethical code—even if it is of their own making.

   Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Matthew 18:21-22

   ... because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment. James 2:13

8. Concept of *love* as determined by the heart, mind and soul of individuals and societies. Love as a motivate can be seen as the highest construct of ethical reasoning. To violate love is judged wronged.

   Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." Matthew 22:34-40

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. Romans 13:8-10

9. Concepts of *beauty* as determined by creative harmony of jealous space. Beauty as opposed to ugliness is a goal of ethically reasoning. We seek a system of relationship among humans and the ecosystem that bring a beauty to our souls. To bring ugliness can bring with it a judgment of wrongness.

    Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. 1 Peter 3:3-4

Conclusion

The above perspectives are not to be seen as exhaustive but rather to explore the nuances of ethical perspectives from Biblical text. And ethical maturity is acquired through the exercise of ethical reasoning.

But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. Hebrews 5:14

Thus, the ethical DNA model (Ennis, 2004, 2015) has utility for examining Biblical texts. This utility can be projected across all religious text. These texts do not necessarily agree on ethical rules, but they can be perceived as emerging from the same ethical DNA reasoning while preferring different continuums of the logics of intellect and emotion and imagined outcomes.

References

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