

ANY ABSOLUTES? ABSOLUTELY!

by Norman L. Geisler

Can a system of ethics be sustained apart from a belief in moral absolutes? And, can a belief in moral absolutes be sustained apart from a biblical world view? Norman L. Geisler provides compelling answers to these questions in this highly readable survey of basic issues and options in Christian ethics.

Summary

Though non-Christians have offered various relativistic definitions of moral "right," all fall short of an adequate basis for making ethical decisions. Christians define "right" in terms of what God wills. What God wills is rooted in His moral nature. And since His moral nature does not change, it follows that moral obligations flowing from His nature are absolute (they are binding everywhere on everyone). When two or more absolutes come into conflict, the Christian is responsible for obeying the greater commandment. The Christian is not held guilty for not following the lesser of two (or more) conflicting commandments.

Once while in Australia for a speaking engagement, I was engaged in dinner conversation with a medical student. "What is the subject of your lecture series?" he asked. "Ethics," I replied. "What is that?" he inquired. I took a moment to recover from my shock. Here was a bright young man about to enter a profession involving some of the major ethical decisions of our time who did not even know what ethics was!

I said softly and gently, so as not to offend him for his ignorance, "Ethics deals with what is right and what is wrong." I confess I felt a bit like the famed football coach Vince Lombardi, who once, after his Green Bay Packers played a particularly inept game, allegedly told the battered team, "This is a football!" Perhaps we cannot get too basic. In view of this, I will begin with some basic definitions.

DEFINING WHAT IS "RIGHT"

Many non-Christian thinkers have offered definitions of moral "right" and "wrong." All fall short of an adequate basis for making ethical decisions. But each offers the occasion for insight into the true nature of ethics.¹

Might Is Right

Thrasymachus, the ancient Greek philosopher, believed that right is found in might. According to this position, "justice is the interest of the stronger party." What is morally right is defined in terms of who has the power. This is often understood as political power, such as Machiavelli believed. However, it could mean physical, psychological, or other kinds of power.

The might-is-right theory contains several fatal flaws, but the most fatal is this: it fails to recognize the difference between power and goodness. It is possible to be powerful without being good, and it is possible to be good without being powerful. Evil tyrants from Nero to Stalin are sufficient evidence to refute the belief that might makes right. History provides ample testimony that "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Morals Are Mores

Another ethical theory suggests that what is morally right is determined by the culture to which one belongs. Ethics is defined in terms of what is ethnically acceptable. What the community says constitutes what is morally right for its members. Cultural practices are ethical commands. Whatever similarity may exist between moral codes in different social groups is simply due to common needs and aspirations, not to any universal moral prescriptions.

The first difficulty with this position is what is called the "is-ought" fallacy. Simply because someone *is* doing something does not mean one *ought* to do so. Otherwise, racism, rape, cruelty, and murder would automatically be morally right. Further, if each individual community's mores are right, then there is no way to adjudicate conflicts between different communities. For unless there are moral principles *above* all communities, there is no moral way to solve conflicts *between* them. Finally, if morals are relative to each social group, then even opposite ethical imperatives can be viewed as right. But contradictory imperatives cannot both be true. Everything cannot be right, certainly not opposites.

Man Is the Measure

The ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras claimed "man is the measure of all things." Understood in the individual sense, this means each person is the standard for right and wrong. The morally right thing to do is what is morally right *for me*. And what is right for me may be wrong for another and vice versa.

This theory is morally unacceptable because it implies that an act can be right for someone even if it is cruel, hateful, or tyrannical. Further, if this theory were put in practice, society would be rendered inoperative. There can be no true community where there is no common core of basic values. If everyone literally

"did his own thing," chaos would result. Finally, this theory does not tell us which aspect of human nature should be taken as the measure of all things. One cannot simply beg the question by taking only the "good aspects." For that implies some standard of good beyond individuals or the race by which one can tell what is good and what is evil in human nature or activity.

The Human Race Is the Basis of Right

In an attempt to avoid the radical individualism and ethical solipsism of the previous position, some posit that the human race as a whole is the standard for good. According to this theory, the *part* does not determine what is right for the *whole*, but the *whole* determines what is right for the *part*. In brief, humankind is the measure of all things.

It should be noted, however, that even the whole race could be wrong. Whole communities, like Jonestown, have committed mass suicide. What if the majority of the human race decided that suicide was the best "solution" to the world's problems? Should dissenters be forced to conform? Further, the human race is changing, as are its ethical practices. Child sacrifice was once commonly approved, as was slavery. Today we like to think the race has a better moral standard. But *better* implies a *best* or an objective standard outside the race by which the progress can be measured. The fact is, we cannot gauge the moral level of the human race unless there is a perfect standard outside it by which it can be measured.

Right Is Moderation

The famous Greek philosopher Aristotle believed morality is found in moderation. The right course of action is the "golden mean" or moderate course of action between two extremes. Temperance, for example, is the mean between indulgence and insensibility. Pride is the moderate course between vanity and humility. Courage is the ideal between fear and aggression.²

Certainly moderation is often the wisest course. Even the Bible says, "Let your moderation be known to all men" (Phil. 4:5). The question is not whether moderation is often the proper *expression* of morality but whether it is the proper *definition* (or essence) of morality.

Several reasons suggest strongly that moderation is not the essence of what is good. First, many times the right thing is the extreme thing to do. Emergencies, actions taken in self-defense, and wars against aggression are cases in point. In these situations moderate actions are not always the best ones. As well, some virtues obviously should not be expressed in moderate amounts. One should not love only moderately. Neither should one be moderately grateful, truthful, or

generous. Further, there is no universal agreement on what is moderate. Aristotle, for example, considered humility a vice (an extreme); Christians believe it is a virtue. Moderation is at best only a general guide for action, not a universal ethical rule.

Right Is What Brings Pleasure

Although Epicurus himself was more moderate, some Epicureans (4th century B.C. and following) were hedonists who claimed that what brings pleasure is morally right, and what brings pain is morally wrong. Since few things are all pleasure or all pain, however, the formula for determining what is good is more complicated. The good, they claim, is what brings the most pleasure and least pain to the greatest number of people.

Among the difficulties with this theory is that not all pleasures are good (e.g., sadism), and not all pain is bad (e.g., warning pains). Then, too, this theory does not specify what kind of pleasure should be used as the basis of the test. (There are physical, psychological, spiritual, and other kinds of pleasure.) Further, are we to use immediate pleasure (in this life) or ultimate pleasure (in the next life) as the test? Finally, should our gauge be pleasure for the individual, the group, or the race? In short, this theory raises more questions than it answers.

Right Is the Greatest Good for the Greatest Number

In view of the problems just mentioned, utilitarians define moral rightness in terms of what brings the greatest good in the long run. Some have understood the meaning of good quantitatively — that is, the greatest *amount* of pleasure. Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) fits into this category.³ Others, such as John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), viewed it qualitatively — that is, the greatest *kind* of pleasure for the greatest number.⁴

One problem with the utilitarian view relates to deciding how "good" should be understood (e.g., quantitatively or qualitatively). Moreover, it begs the question to say that moral right is what brings the greatest good. For then we must ask what is "good"? Either right and good are defined in terms of each other, which is circular reasoning, or they must be defined according to some standard beyond the utilitarian process.

Further, no one can accurately predict what will happen in the long run. Hence, for all practical purposes, a utilitarian definition of good is useless. We must still fall back on something else to determine what is good *now*, in the short run.

Right Is What Is Desirable for Its Own Sake

Some ethicists have defined good as that which is desirable for its own sake, in and of itself.⁵ Moral value is viewed as an end, not a means. It is never to be desired for the sake of anything else. For example, no one should desire virtue as a means of getting something else (such as riches or honor). Virtue should be desired for its own sake.

This view has obvious merit, but it raises several questions. First, it does not really define the content of a morally good act but simply designates the direction one finds good (namely, in ends). Moreover, it is easy to confuse what is *desired* and what is *desirable* (i.e., what ought to be desired). This leads to another criticism. Good cannot simply be that which is desired (as opposed to what is really desirable), since we often desire what is evil. Finally, what appears to be good in itself is not always really good. Suicide seems to be good to someone in distress but really is not good. It does not solve any problem; it is the final cop-out from solving the problem.

Right Is Indefinable

Despairing of any hope of specifying what is morally right, some thinkers simply insist that good is indefinable. G. E. Moore (1873–1958), for instance, argued that every attempt to define good commits the "naturalistic fallacy." This fallacy results from assuming that because pleasure can be attributed to good they are identical. Moore contended that all we can say is that "good is good" and nothing more.⁶ Attempting to define good in terms of something else makes that something the intrinsic good.

There is some merit in this view. There can be only one ultimate good, and everything else must be subordinated to it. However, the view as such is inadequate. First, it provides no content for what good means. But if there is no content to what is right or wrong, then there is no way to distinguish a good act from an evil one. Further, just because the good cannot be defined in terms of something more ultimate does not mean it cannot be defined at all. For example, a morally good God could create morally good creatures like Himself. In such a case, even though God is the ultimate moral good, nonetheless, His goodness could be understood from the moral creatures He has willed to be like Himself.

Good Is What God Wills

One final alternative is to define good in terms of what God wills. This view is sometimes called the divine command theory of ethics. Whatever action God specifies as a good action is a good action. Conversely, if God specifies an action to be evil, then it is evil. Thus, moral good is both ultimate and specifiable. It is ultimate because it comes from God. It is specifiable since it can be found in His revelation to humankind.

There are two objections often raised against this view. First, it is alleged that it is a form of authoritarianism. This objection, however, is valid only if the authority is less than ultimate. That is, if any finite creature professed to have this ultimate authority, then we could rightly cry "authoritarianism." However, there is nothing wrong with acknowledging that the Ultimate Authority has ultimate authority. If an absolutely perfect God exists, then by His very nature He is the ultimate standard for what is good and what is not.

The second objection argues that defining good in terms of God's will is arbitrary. This objection applies, however, only to a voluntaristic view of good, not to an essentialistic view. A voluntarist believes that something is good simply because God wills it. An essentialist, on the other hand, holds that God wills something because it is good in accordance with His own nature. This form of the divine command view of ethics escapes these criticisms and forms the basis for a Christian ethic.

CHRISTIAN ETHICS IS ROOTED IN GOD'S UNCHANGING NATURE

The Christian view of right and wrong is neither arbitrary nor groundless. It is not arbitrary because what God wills is in accord with His nature as absolute good. It is not groundless because it is rooted in what never changes, namely, God's immutable essence: "I the Lord change not" (Mal. 3:6); "There is no shadow of change" with God (James 1:17). Even though the universe will change, "You [God] are the same," declared the psalmist (Ps. 102:27). Although God is free to act according to the dictates of His own essential goodness, He is not "free" to act contrary to it. Likewise, His commands will always be rooted in His immutable nature as the ultimate Good.

CHRISTIAN ETHICS IS EXPRESSED BY GOD'S WILL

As just noted, all ethical imperatives given by God are in accord with His unchangeable moral character. That is, God wills what is right in accordance with His own moral attributes. "Be holy because I am holy," the Lord commanded Israel (Lev. 11:45). "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect," Jesus said to His disciples (Matt. 5:46). "It is impossible for God to lie" (Heb. 6:18), so we should not lie either (Col. 3:9). "God is love" (1 John 4:16), and so Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39). In brief, Christian ethics is rooted in God's immutable nature, but it is expressed by God's will.

CHRISTIAN ETHICS IS ABSOLUTE

Since God's moral character does not change, it follows that moral obligations

flowing from His nature are absolute. That is, they are always binding everywhere on everyone. Of course, not everything God wills flows necessarily from His unchanging nature. Some things are merely in accord with His nature but flow freely from His will.

For example, God chose to test Adam and Eve's moral obedience by forbidding them to eat a specific fruit on a tree (Gen. 2:16–17). Although it was morally wrong for Adam and Eve to disobey that command (Rom. 5:12), we are no longer bound by it today. That command was in accord with God's nature, but it did not flow necessarily from it.

On the other hand, God's command not to murder applied before the Law was given to Moses (Gen. 9:6), under the Law of Moses (Exod. 20:13), and also since the time of Moses (Rom. 13:9). Murder, then, is wrong at all times and all places and for all people. This is true because humans are created in the "image and likeness of God" (Gen. 1:27; 9:6). This includes a moral likeness to God (Col. 3:10; James 3:9). And whatever is traceable to God's unchanging moral character is a moral absolute. This includes moral obligations such as holiness, justice, love, truthfulness, and mercy.

Other commands flowing from God's *will*, but not necessarily from His *nature*, are equally binding, but they are not absolute. That is, they must be obeyed because God prescribed them, but He did not prescribe them for all people, times, and places.

CHRISTIAN ETHICS IS BASED ON GOD'S REVELATION

Ethical obligations for the Christian are an expression of God's moral nature. God has not limited moral expressions of Himself to His revelation in Scripture. God has given general revelation in nature (Ps. 19:1–6; Rom. 1:19–20), as well as special revelation in Scripture (Rom. 2:18; 3:2; 2 Tim. 3:16–17). Since God's moral character does not change, it should be expected that there will be similarities and overlaps between God's natural and supernatural revelations. General revelation contains God's commands for all people. Special revelation declares His will for believers. But in either case, the basis of human ethical responsibility is divine revelation. Our focus here, however, is not God's natural law for all people, but His divine law for believers.

Failure to recognize God as the source of moral duty does not exonerate anyone from his or her moral duty, even an atheist. For "when Gentiles, who do not have the law [of Moses], do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show the requirements of the law written in their hearts..." (Rom. 2:14–15). That is, even if unbelievers do not have the moral law on their *minds*, they still have it written on their *hearts*. Even if they do not know it by way of *cognition*, they show it by

way of *inclination*. Paul declared that even sodomites manifest that their actions are "contrary to nature" (Rom. 1:26 KJV).

CHRISTIAN ETHICS IS PRESCRIPTIVE

Since moral rightness is prescribed by a moral God, it is prescriptive. For there is no moral law without a Moral Lawgiver; there is no moral legislation without a Moral Legislator. So, Christian ethics is, by its very nature, prescriptive, not descriptive. That is to say, ethics deals with what *ought* to be, not with what *is*. Christians do not find their ethical duties in the standard *of* Christians but in the standard *for* Christians (the Bible).

From a Christian point of view, a purely descriptive ethic is no ethic at all. Describing human behavior is sociology; prescribing human behavior is the province of morality. The attempt to derive morals from mores is, as we have already noted, the "is-ought" fallacy. What people *actually* do is not the basis for what they morally *ought* to do. If it were, then people ought to lie, cheat, steal, and murder, since these things are done all the time.

CHRISTIAN ETHICS IS DUTY-CENTERED

Ethical systems can be broadly placed into two categories: deontological (*duty-centered*)⁷ and teleological (*end-centered*). Christian ethics is deontological. Utilitarianism is an example of a teleological ethic. The nature of a deontological ethic can be seen more clearly by contrast with a teleological view. The following chart summarizes these differences.

DEONTOLOGICAL ETHICS	TELEOLOGICAL ETHICS
The rule determines the results.	Results determine the rules.
The rule is the basis of the act.	Results are the basis of acts.
The rule is good regardless of results.	The rule is good because of results.
Results are always calculated within rules.	Results are sometimes used to break rules.

The differences can be illustrated as follows: If one attempts to rescue a

not a good act because it did not have good results. Since the results determine the goodness of the act, and the results were not good, then it follows that the attempted rescue was not a good act. A more sophisticated form of the teleological (utilitarian) ethic might argue that the attempt was good, even though it failed, because it had a good effect on society. People heard about it and were encouraged to help rescue others in the future. But even here the attempted act of rescue that failed was not good *in itself*. Rather, it is good if and only if it brings some good results, either for the drowning person or someone else.

By contrast, the Christian ethic is deontological. It insists that even some acts that fail are good. It believes, for example, that it is better to have loved and lost than not to have loved at all. Christians believe that the Cross was not a failure simply because only some will be saved. It was sufficient for all, even if it is only efficient for those who believe. The Christian ethic insists that it is good to work against bigotry and racism, even if one fails. This is so because moral actions that reflect God's nature are good in themselves whether they are successful or not.

The Christian ethic does not neglect results. Although results do not determine what is right, they may influence one's ethical decisions. For example, a Christian should calculate which direction a gun is pointing before pulling the trigger. Drivers need to estimate the possible consequence of their speed in relation to other objects. Speakers are responsible to calculate the possible effects of their words on others. (As the U.S. Supreme Court correctly observed, even the freedom of speech does not give one the right to enter a crowded building and cry "Fire!" when there is none.) Christians have a duty to anticipate the results of not being immunized to serious disease, and so on.

There is, however, an important difference between the deontological use of results and a teleological use of them. In Christian ethics these results are all calculated *within* rules or norms. That is, no anticipated result as such can be used as a justification for breaking any God-given moral law. Utilitarians, on the other hand, use anticipated results to *break* moral rules. In fact, they use results to *make* the rules. And existing rules can be broken if the expected results call for it. For example, while Christian ethics allows for inoculation for disease, it does not allow for infanticide to purify the genetic stock of the human race. It does not permit the end (i.e., the result) to determine or justify the use of an evil means (killing an innocent child). In brief, the end may justify the use of *good* means, but it does not justify the use of *any* means, certainly not evil ones.

CONFLICT SITUATIONS

Unfortunately, maintaining moral absolutes involves problems. One problem has to do with what course of action to take when two or more moral principles

come into conflict. There are six major ethical systems, each designated by its answer to the question, "Are there any objective moral laws?" That is, are there any moral laws that are not purely subjective but are binding on all humans at all times? (1) *Antinomianism* says there are no moral laws, absolute or not. (2) *Situationism* affirms there is one absolute law (love). (3) *Generalism* claims there are some general laws but no absolute ones. (4) *Unqualified absolutism* assumes there are many absolute laws that never conflict. (5) *Conflicting absolutism* contends there are many absolute norms that sometimes conflict, and we are obligated to do the lesser evil. (6) *Graded absolutism* holds to many absolute laws that sometimes conflict, and we are responsible for obeying the higher law.⁸ Of the six basic ethical views, two deny all objective absolute moral laws. Of them, antinomianism denies all universal and general moral laws. Generalism, on the other hand, denies only universal moral laws but holds to general ones. That is, there are some objective moral laws that are binding most of the time but not necessarily all the time.

VARIOUS VIEWS ON ETHICAL CONFLICTS

Four of the above ethical systems claim to be some form of absolutism. Of these, situationism accepts only one absolute (love), while the others posit many (two or more) absolutes. The alleged absolute of situationism, however, turns out to be vacuous, having no specifiable content that enables one to know in advance of the situation just what one's obligation is. Unqualified absolutism contends that these absolute moral principles never conflict, while the other two assert they sometimes do conflict. Of the two that claim moral principles sometimes conflict, conflicting absolutism contends that we are responsible to do the lesser evil but are guilty for whichever commandment we break. On the other hand, graded absolutism holds that our responsibility is to obey the greater commandment, and we are not guilty for not following the lesser conflicting commandment.

A TEST CASE: SHOULD WE LIE TO SAVE A LIFE?

Corrie Ten Boom tells how she lied to save Jews from the Nazi death camps. More recently (1987), during U.S. Senate hearings on the Iran-Contra issue, Lieutenant-Colonel Oliver North asserted that in the process of performing his duties he had lied to save innocent lives. North said, "I had to weigh lying and lives." Certainly there are a number of biblical stories in which people lied to save lives. The Hebrew midwives lied to save the baby boys Pharaoh had commanded them to kill (Exod. 1:19). Rahab lied to save the lives of the Jewish spies in Jericho (Josh. 2).

Is it ever right to lie to save a life? This issue will serve to focus the differences between the six basic ethical systems.

(1) Lying is neither right nor wrong: There are no laws. Antinomianism⁹ claims that lying to save lives is neither right nor wrong. It insists that there are no objective moral principles by which the issue can be judged right or wrong. The issue must be decided on subjective, personal, or pragmatic grounds, but not on any objective moral grounds. We are without any moral laws whatsoever to guide us in our decision on this or any other moral issue.

(2) Lying is generally wrong: There are no universal laws. Generalism¹⁰ claims that lying is generally wrong. In specific cases, however, this general rule can be broken. Since there are no universal moral laws, whether a given lie is right will depend on the results. If the results are good, then the lie is right. Most generalists believe that lying to save a life is right because in this case the end justifies the means.

(3) Lying is sometimes right: There is only one universal law. Situationism,¹¹ such as that held by Joseph Fletcher, claims there is only one absolute moral law — and it is not truth-telling.¹² *Love* is the only absolute, and lying may be the loving thing to do. In fact, lying to save a life *is* the loving thing to do. Hence, lying is sometimes right. Any moral rule except love can and at times should be broken for love's sake. Everything else is relative.

(4) Lying is always wrong: There are many nonconflicting laws. Unqualified absolutism,¹³ such as was taught by St. Augustine, claims there are many absolute moral laws, and none of them should ever be broken.¹⁴ Truth is such a law. Therefore, one must always tell the truth, even if someone dies as a result of it. Truth is absolute, and absolutes cannot be broken. Therefore, there are no exceptions to telling the truth. Results are never used to break rules, even if the results are very desirable.

(5) Lying is forgivable: There are many conflicting laws. Conflicting absolutism¹⁵ recognizes that we live in an evil world where absolute moral laws sometimes run into inevitable conflict. The German theologian Helmut Thielicke espoused this view.¹⁶ The conflicting absolutist insists that in unavoidable conflicts it is our moral duty to do the lesser evil. That is, we must break the lesser law and plead mercy. For instance, we should lie to save a life and then ask for forgiveness for breaking God's absolute moral law. Our moral dilemmas are sometimes unavoidable, but we are culpable anyway. God cannot change His absolute moral prescriptions because of our moral predicaments.

(6) Lying is sometimes right: There are higher laws. Graded absolutism,¹⁷ such as this author holds, insists there are many moral absolutes and they sometimes conflict. However, some laws are higher than others, so when there is an unavoidable conflict it is our duty to follow the higher moral law. God does not blame us for what we could not avoid. Thus He exempts us from responsibility to follow the lower law in view of the overriding obligation to obey the higher law.

Many graded absolutists believe that mercy to the innocent is a greater moral duty than telling truth to the guilty. Hence, they are convinced it is right to lie in order to save a life. However, even those who believe truth takes precedence over showing mercy are still graded absolutists. They simply have a different hierarchy of values. Most Christians agree, however, to a basic gradation of values which places God over other persons and persons over things. According to this hierarchy, whenever there is a conflict between two of these, the higher takes precedence over the lower. Hence, we should love God more than humans. And we should love people over things, not the reverse.

These six views may be summarized in the following way. Antinomianism sets forth its view to the *exclusion* of all objective moral laws. Generalism claims there are *exceptions* to moral laws. Situationism holds one moral absolute (love) to the *exclusion* of all others. Unqualified absolutism insists there is always an *escape* from the apparent conflict in absolute moral laws. Conflicting absolutism contends that when moral laws conflict, doing the lesser evil is *excusable*. Graded absolutism holds that when moral laws conflict, God grants an *exemption* to the lower in view of our duty to obey the higher.

All this raises the crucial question as to how an ethical system can be considered a form of absolutism when it admits there are sometimes exemptions for a universal duty. Graded absolutists point to three senses in which it is still legitimate to call such a view absolute. First, the moral laws are absolute as to their *source* (God). Second, each moral law is absolute in its *sphere*. For example, lying is always wrong *as such*. When it conflicts with life-saving, however, one is exempt from truth-telling, even though the duty remains in force. Just as a magnet overpowers the pull of gravity without gravity ceasing its pull, even so the duty to love God overpowers the duty to love human beings. Third, each moral law is absolute in its *hierarchy*. That is to say, for a Christian the hierarchy of values is set up by God in accordance with His nature and is therefore absolute. God has established that He is first, persons are next, and things are last. Likewise, the same God who instructs us to obey our parents also tells us not to worship idols. Hence, if a parent should command his or her child to worship an idol, the child's higher moral obligation is not to do so.

SUMMING UP

The Judeo-Christian concept of right and wrong, unlike non-Christian alternatives, is the only adequate basis for moral action. The reasons for this are many. First, while other ethical views can postulate good moral principles, only a Judeo-Christian view can *justify* them. This is true for two reasons: (1) Unless ethics is rooted in the unchangeable nature of a morally perfect being (God), there is no basis for believing in moral absolutes. Only an absolute Moral Law-Giver is a sufficient ground for absolute moral laws. (2) If everything is relative, then there is no good reason why anyone ought to refrain from doing anything

he or she wants to do, including rape, murder, and genocide. Of course, humanists and others who deny moral absolutes can believe in general moral principles, many of which are noble.¹⁸ What they cannot do is justify this belief, since according to their system, there is no real ground for such a belief.

Furthermore, only an ethic rooted in a Moral Law-Giver can be truly prescriptive in any objective sense of the word. As noted earlier, a descriptive ethic is no ethic at all. It merely tells us what people are doing, not what they *ought* to do. And people are doing all kinds of evil of which even relativists do not approve. All that is required to demonstrate this is to try insulting, raping, or killing a relativist. His or her reaction will betray his or her true belief that these acts are wrong. This leads to the observation that we cannot always tell what someone really believes to be right by their actions (since we all fail our own ideals). *Reactions* to being impinged upon are a far more accurate gauge of what one believes to be right.

Also, only a Judeo-Christian ethic¹⁹ is universal. That is, it is not only expressed in a particular religious book (the Bible), but it is written on the hearts of all human beings. Hence, no one can rightfully claim the Judeo-Christian concept of ethics is uniquely religious. True, it is held by religions, such as Judaism and Christianity, but the ethic itself is not limited to those religions. It is universally available to all by way of God's general revelation to humankind.

Of course, there are unique elements of a Christian ethic that distinguish it from other, lesser theistic ethics. First, Christians insist that it has been perfectly lived by one person who is the perfect example for us to follow, Jesus Christ. For the very God who demanded perfection became a man and lived perfectly in Jesus Christ (John 1:1, 14; Heb. 4:15). In Christ, principles of goodness that seemed abstract became concrete and personal. What may have seemed like ethical obligations imposed upon us by a remote God, unfamiliar with our particularly human situation, has in Christ become a personal reality for us. In Him, the absolute becomes relevant.

Furthermore, the Christian ethic is not only unique in its *example* but in its *spiritual empowerment*. For God has not only given us a real human example by which to live but a divine ability to do it. As St. Paul said, "What the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh." This He did "that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Rom. 8:2-4).

NOTES

¹See Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), chapters 1-4.

²See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books II-V, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, trans. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 952-1022.

³See Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (New York: Hafner, 1965 reprint).

⁴See John Stuart Mill, "Utilitarianism," in *The Utilitarian's* (Garden City, NY: Dolphin Books, Doubleday, 1961).

⁵Aristotle.

⁶See G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962).

⁷A classic representative of a deontological ethic is Immanuel Kant, "On the Supposed Right to Tell Lies from Benevolent Motives," in *The Critique of Practical Reason*, 6th ed., trans. Thomas Kinsmill Abbott (London: Longmans Green, 1963).

⁸Each of these views is elaborated in Geisler, chapters 2-7.

⁹Ibid., chapter 3.

¹⁰Ibid., chapter 4.

¹¹Ibid., chapter 3.

¹²See Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974).

¹³See Geisler, Chapter 5.

¹⁴See St. Augustine, On Lying, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1956).

¹⁵See Geisler, chapter 6.

¹⁶See Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, vol. 1, ed. William H. Lazareth (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966).

¹⁷See Geisler, chapter 7.

¹⁸See my critique of the ethics of humanist Paul Kurtz in "Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Humanism," *Christian Research Journal* (Fall 1988).

¹⁹Some might wonder why "Judeo-Christian" is not broadened to "Abrahamic," thus including Islam, the third theistic ethic. One reason for the reluctance is that, while it is a "divine-command ethic," nonetheless it is very voluntaristic. Allah sometimes commands what is evil. See Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993).