

How Do We Know What Is Right?

There have been various attempts to justify ethical principles, most of which depend on particular definitions of the right. We will first examine inadequacies in the prominent views and then offer a more adequate justification from a Christian point of view.

Justifying What Is Meant by Right

The differences in what is meant by *right* (see chap. 23) will of course affect the justifications of ethical points of view.

Justification by Results

William James unabashedly suggested that something was right if it “worked.” The good is the expedient, he claimed; acts or intentions are not good as such, but they become good if they bring good results. The tightness or wrongness of actions is judged not by their roots, but by their fruits. To use James’s term, the “cash-value” of the term *right* is its results. What brings desirable consequences is good and what does not is bad.

One of the most pointed criticisms of James’s pragmatism was given by Josiah Royce, a colleague at Harvard, who wondered whether James would be satisfied “to put a witness on the stand in court and have him swear to tell ‘the expedient, the whole expedient, and nothing but the expedient, so help him future experience.’ “ Furthermore, one could ask, “Results desired by whom?” For obviously, results desirable to some are undesirable to others. In addition, even desired consequences do not prove something right. Lying, cheating, and even killing sometimes bring desired consequences, but this does not make them right. Finally, even when the consequences are clear, one can still ask, “Are they good or bad?” If the question of right or wrong is not answered by results, then results cannot be the sole justification for what is meant by right actions. Bad motives (for example, being generous to be praised by men, not out of concern for the poor) can bring good results, and vice versa.

Justification by the Self-Destructive Nature of the Contrary

Immanuel Kant insisted that there is a universal “categorical imperative” binding on all men. Duty demands that we treat others always as ends and never as a means to an end. They should be treated as persons, never as things. This categorical imperative demands that we never lie to another or murder another person. In short, one should never do anything that he cannot will as a universal law for all men. The justification of this position, Kant argued, is that it is self-destructive to will the opposite of what duty demands. That is, the opposite of a categorical duty cannot be universally applied. For instance, if one were to will lying (the opposite of truth-telling) as a universal law, then there would be no more truth to lie about, since all would be false. Likewise, if one were

to will killing universally, then there would be no more people to kill. In short, the self-destructive nature of the opposite is a kind of justification for right actions.

There are several lines of attack on Kant's position. First of all, it is not self-destructive to will lying in some cases, or even killing in some cases. One could will as a universal law, for example, that one never kill, except in self-defense. Second, some existentialists ask why the criterion for what is right be universalizable (rather than particularizable). They believe Kant begs the question to insist that the rule must be universal before it can qualify as an ethical duty. Third, some say Kant's justification is really only pragmatic.

Justification by Intuition

Many ethicists have insisted that what is good is known only by intuition. G. E. Moore argued that since the good is not definable in terms of anything other than itself, it follows that one must know it intuitively. Good is good, and we know that only as a whole. It cannot be analyzed, or broken down into parts.

There have been many others who have argued for an intuitive *source* for knowing the good, but not all would use intuition as a *justification* for knowing what is right. It is this latter sense which involves serious problems.

First, not everyone intuits the same meaning of the term *right*. Intuitions are often quite different and obviously colored by culture and environment. Second, using intuition as a grounds for ethical belief confuses the *source* of belief and *substantiation* of that belief. One may derive beliefs—ethical or otherwise—from any source he wishes (dreams, intuitions, and so on), but the question here is how one *justifies* holding one belief over opposing beliefs. Finally, at best the justification would not be the intuition itself, but the self-evidence of the principle being intuited (such as, good = good).

Justification by Self-Evidence

Some ethicists argue that basic ethical norms are self-evident. Thomas Aquinas contended that there are *first principles* for all knowledge, such as the law of non-contradiction in epistemology, and the law of benevolence in ethics. All first principles, he insisted, are self-evident. However, not all principles are immediately self-evident. Some are only self-evident upon *inspection*. Take the principle of benevolence as an example: "Be good to every person." This is not immediately self-evident, but is clear on inspection of the terms. For "person" is one who has intrinsic worth or good, and "good" is what should be desired for its own sake (what has intrinsic worth). Therefore, the benevolence principle simply means, "treat persons as persons," or "do good to that which deserves good."

There are two basic problems with this view. First, not everyone defines the terms of statements in the same way, in which case they would not be self-evident, even on inspection. Second, to some, self-evident principles are void of content, or at least are so

general as to be unhelpful for practical application. Some would ask. What is the value of telling someone to be “good” if we cannot spell out precisely what is meant by “good”?

Justification by Appeal to Human Authority

The question, “How do we know what is right?” could be answered, as Thomas Hobbes did, “The King said so!” That is, one can appeal to some sovereign authority, whether it be some government or other leader. This authority could be an individual or a group, either present or past. Since many things cannot be *directly* known, either epistemologically or ethically, much of our belief and action must be based on the testimony of others. So, it is argued, what is right and wrong should be accepted on the authority of another.

This view has numerous problems. First, what evidence is there that the authority is worthy? If there is none, the authority should not be accepted. If there is evidence that the authority is worthy, then this *evidence* becomes the justification for what is “right,” rather than the fact that an authority said it is. Second, authorities have often been wrong. And any authority that can be wrong is obviously not the final authority for what is right, since it too must be judged by a norm beyond itself for what is right. Further, even if the authority is right, it would not be final, since it would always be possible to ask why one should accept it. Finally, if we answer, “How do we know this is right?” by, “The authority told us so,” then one can still ask, “Who told him?” Until one finally reaches the “Ultimate Authority” who nobody told what is right but who simply “knows,” he has not reached the real ground for what is right. But once one reaches this “Ultimate Authority” who just “knows,” then he has arrived at God. This leads to the next justification.

Justification by Appeal to Divine Authority

Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and other religions often answer the question, “How do I know this is right?” by affirming, “God said so!” This position avoids some obvious difficulties. First, it is a final appeal to the Ultimate beyond which there is no appeal. Also, it avoids the problem of defining the good in terms of something else. God is good, and that settles that. What He says is final.

The problems with the appeal to divine authority are these. First, is the authority based simply in God’s will (voluntarism)? If so, how do we know it is a “good” will? Unless the authority for good is based in God’s goodness, that is, His nature (essentialism), then this authority cannot be an authority for what is good. Simply because God is powerful would not make Him an authority for good—might does not make right. It is goodness in God that makes Him an Ultimate Authority on what is good. Second, even if goodness is based in God’s good nature, the question still remains concerning how we can know the nature of God. It will not suffice to reply: “He has revealed it in His Word,” because one can still ask, “Which Word is that? The Koran, the Bible, or the Book of Mormon?” All these, and others, claim to be God’s Word. The thinking believer is still faced with the Socratic dictum (restated): “The unexamined revelation is not worth believing.” Further,

if what is meant by “good” depends on belief in God and the Bible, then is there any basis for good conduct available to an atheist or one that does not believe the Bible is God’s Word?

A Christian Justification of the Right

Not all Christians go about justifying what is right in the same way. We will describe briefly several different Christian approaches and then try to spell out what seems to be an adequate method of justification of the Christian belief in what is right or good.

Most Christians fall into two general classes on this issue: (1) those who attempt to justify both a supernatural and a natural revelation, and (2) those who give justification only for a supernatural revelation. (In addition, there are some who call themselves Christians who deny all supernatural revelation, but their view is not distinctively Christian.) First, let us turn our attention to the supernatural revelation.

Appeal to Faith Alone

Some Christians have been content to give no justification whatsoever for their belief in the Bible. They simply believe the Bible is God’s Word, and that is final. This view is called *fideism*.

Fideism. The heart of fideism is that no evidence or argumentation can bear upon a religious belief in God or in His Word. If God’s Word is Ultimate, then there is nothing more ultimate in terms of which it can be justified. For since God “had no one greater by whom to swear. He swore by Himself” (Heb. 6:13). That is, if God is Ultimate, then the only criteria to which we can appeal to discover whether He is God is Himself. For if appeal is made to a rational argument, then the argument is considered more ultimate than God. “Lions do not need to be defended; they need only to be let loose,” such Christians say. Likewise, the fideist believes that God does not need to be defended; we need only to listen to His authoritative Word, the Bible. Does not the Bible say, “Without faith it is impossible to please him [God]” (Heb. 11:6)? Some fideists would say that doubting Thomas was rebuked for demanding empirical evidence of the resurrected Christ—for Jesus replied, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe” (John 20:29).

In short, for a fideist the only grounds for believing in God is God Himself. Anyone who believes in God *because* of any evidence or reasoning process has exalted human reason above God. Christian fideists object that others make God subject to rules of reason such as the law of non-contradiction. Should we not rather do as the apostle Paul exhorted us, and “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (II Cor. 10:5)? Did not God say through the prophet, “for my thoughts are not your thoughts ... says the Lord” (Isa. 55:8)?

Evaluation of fideism. Since fideism has already been evaluated (see chap. 17), we will only discuss it briefly here.

First of all, Christian fideists seem to be correct *ontologically*. That is, if there is a God, and if He has spoken in the Bible (as Christians believe), then whatever the Bible says should be accepted, no questions asked. For God is Ultimate and His Word is final. As Paul said, “Who are you, a man, to answer back to God?” (Rom. 9:20). God should be believed for no other reason than that He is God. Any grounds for belief in God other than the fact that He is the ultimate, good Authority, are less than the most worthy grounds. We should not believe in God because of rational arguments, but because He is God. For “it is impossible that God should prove false” (Heb. 6:18). We trust in “God who never lies” (Titus 1:2). Therefore, “let God be true though every man be false” (Rom. 3:4). In this Christian fideists seem to be correct.

Second, however, fideists are incorrect *epistemologically*. To be sure, *if* there is a God, and *if* He has spoken in the Bible, then all of the above follows. But those are big “ifs”! The real question is, how do we know God has spoken infallibly in the Bible? This is the epistemological question, and it cannot be answered by a simple appeal to faith, for the following reasons. (1) An appeal to whose faith? Persons of different religions have different faiths. How do we know which is right? (2) Faith in which Book? The Koran, the Bible, the Book of Mormon? Which one? They all claim to be God’s Word and yet their claims contradict one another. (3) Belief statements are not a *justification*; they are simply an affirmation. Beliefs are not knowledge; they must be justified before they can be known to be true.

Third, there is a difference between “belief *that* ” and “belief *in* . ” The fideists appear correct in what they say about “belief *in* ”; it requires no evidence but is simply an act of faith. For instance, one does not love his wife because of any evidence, but because of who she is—a person worthy of love. This is like “belief *in* .” On the other hand, suppose one’s wife has been dead for years, but one continues to talk to her as though she were alive. One would be considered insane if he continued to believe *in* someone if he had no evidence *that* she was alive. In short, “belief *that* ” demands evidence, and it is prior to “belief *in* ” someone. The fideist fails to appreciate that it is necessary for us to have good evidence or reason to believe *that* God is, and *that* the Bible is His Word before we place unconditional faith in God and in His Word.

Fourth, is not the fideist inconsistent when he offers any reason for his position? For if reason does not bear on the question of God—only faith is valid—then how can one offer reasons for accepting fideism as true? The dilemma is this: either a fideist offers some justification for fideism or else he does not. If he does offer justification for his position, then he is no longer a fideist. He should simply believe it. If he does not offer any justification for his position, then it is an unjustified belief which cannot claim to be true. All truth claims must be justified, or else anything and everything *claimed to be true*, is true.

Finally, non-fideists are not necessarily exalting reason above God when they insist on testing truth claims. Even the Bible that Christian fideists accept commands: “Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God” (I John 4:1). And concerning the laws of reason, such as the principles of non-contradiction, the apostle

Paul exhorted: “Avoid ... contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge” (I Tim. 6:20). Peter also commanded that believers give “a reason of the hope that is in [them]” (I Peter 3:15 , KJV). God Himself bids us, “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord” (Isa. 1:18). God is reasonable and He demands that we use our reason, for we are made in His image and likeness (Gen. 1:26). Thus when a Christian tests alleged revelations, avoids contradictions, or thinks reasonably, he is not exalting himself above God; rather, he is obeying the God who is reasonable and who demands that we use our reason.

Appeal to Reason

If faith alone applies to “belief *in* ” but is insufficient as a basis for “belief *that*, ” then the Christian must appeal to some kind of justification for his belief that the Bible is God’s Word, the final authority for what is right and wrong. The intellectual discipline that deals with this is called “Christian Apologetics” or “Christian Evidences.” Since it is beyond the scope of the book to state the case in detail, we will summarize the basic type of argument that can be used.

The theistic God exists. The reasons for this have already been given in chapter 18 .

If God exists then miracles are possible. A miracle is an act of God in the natural world that confirms the message of God through His prophet or apostle (Heb. 2:3–4). Miracles are automatically possible in a theistic world where there is a sovereign God beyond the world in control of its processes and laws. Miracles are not contrary to nature; rather, they go beyond natural events. Natural law is the way God regularly operates in His world; miracles are the way He acts occasionally. Since God is all-powerful. He can do anything that is not a contradiction. Therefore, miracles are possible.

Jesus claimed to be God in human form. There is more than sufficient historical evidence that Jesus lived and that the New Testament documents are a reliable record of what He actually taught.¹ But the New Testament tells us that Jesus claimed to be God (John 5:23f .; 8:58 ; 10:30f .; Mark 2:7f .; 14:61f .). Furthermore, Jesus miraculously fulfilled dozens of prophecies about the coming Messiah-God (Ps. 45:7 ; 110:1 ; Isa. 9:6), including where He would be born (Mic. 5:2), when He would die (Dan. 9:24f .), how He would suffer (Isa. 53), how He would die (Ps. 22:15), and even how He would rise from the dead (Pss. 2 , 16). In addition to this, Jesus lived a sinless life (Heb. 4:15 ; I Peter 1:19 ; I John 3:4) filled with miraculous confirmations of who He was, including a virgin birth (Matt. 1 ; Luke 2), and a confirming voice from heaven three times (Matt. 3 , 17 ; John 12). He performed numerous miracles (John 20:30) including raising the dead (John 11), and died a unique death (John 19). Finally, Jesus predicted (John 2 ; Matt. 12 , 17) and accomplished His resurrection from the dead (John 10:1 Of.; Matt. 28). Hence, there was miraculous confirmation from birth to resurrection of who Jesus claimed to be. But a miracle is an act of God confirming the Word of God through the

¹ See F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943).

mouthpiece of God (that is, a prophet). Jesus' claim to be God was divinely confirmed to be true: Jesus is God!

Whatever God says is true. The fact that all of God's statements are true follows from His very nature as an absolutely perfect and omniscient being. If He knows all, then He cannot make a mistake. And if He is morally perfect, then He will not deceive. In the words of Scripture, "It [is] impossible for God to lie" (Heb. 6:18 , KJV).

Jesus taught that the Bible is the Word of God. Jesus affirmed that the Old Testament was God's unbreakable truth (John 10:34–35), even in the tenses of verbs (Matt. 22:32) and the smallest parts of letters (Matt. 5:17 , 18). He proclaimed both its inspiration (Matt. 22:43) and final authority, over Satan (Matt. 4:4 , 7 , 10) and over all human teaching (Matt. 15 : If.). Jesus declared the unity of the Old Testament (Luke 24:27 , 44) as well as its inerrancy (John 17:17 ; Matt. 22:29). He affirmed the truth of the creation story (Matt. 19:35), the world-wide flood in Noah's day (Matt. 24:38–39), and that Jonah was in a great fish for three days (Matt. 12:40–42). In short, Jesus affirmed the divine authority, authenticity, and historicity of the Old Testament. He called it "the Word of God" (John 10:34).

Furthermore, Jesus placed His own words on par with the Old Testament (Matt. 5:18 , cf. Matt. 24:35), and said that the apostles would be guided in remembering (John 14:26 ; 16:13) and teaching everything He had taught them (Matt. 28:18–20 , cf. Acts 1:1 ; 2:42 ; Eph. 2:20). Hence, the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament are on the same level as the Old Testament, as was recognized by Paul (I Tim. 5:18) and Peter (II Peter 3:15–16).

Therefore, the Bible is the Word of God. The whole Bible is the Word of God, in accordance with the teaching of Jesus. Jesus is God, and cannot lie or teach what is false. Jesus taught that the Bible is the Word of God. Therefore, it is true that the Bible is the Word of God.

This, in brief, is an argument that Christians can and have used to justify their claim that the Bible is God's Word, the final authority on what is right and wrong.

The Nature of General Revelation

If Christians have their own "special" revelation from God on which to base their conduct, what about non-Christians who do not accept Scripture? The answer to this is that there is a "general" revelation which is available to all men.

According to Romans 2:12–16, there is a law written on the hearts of unbelievers (v. 15), so that they know "by nature what the law requires" (v. 14). In the first chapter of Romans, pagan sins (including homosexual practices) are said to be "against nature" (v.26, KJV). This revelation of God in human nature is usually called "the natural law." Natural revelation has been available to all men "since the creation of the world," and so men are "without excuse" (v. 20) for not following it. Since this revelation is universal, it

serves as a basis for cooperative ethical action with those who do not accept the Christian God or Scriptures. It means that the Christian's "special" law does not prevent contact, communication, and even cooperation with non-Christians on common social or human goods. Since all men (even fallen man) are made in God's image (Gen. 1:27 ; 9:6 ; James 3:9), and since God "did not leave himself without witness" to any people (Acts 14:17), then there is every reason that Christians and non-Christians can act together on the basis of this general revelation and "do good to all men" (Gal. 6:10).

There are definite advantages in having a written revelation concerning right and wrong. First, it is not so easily distorted. Consciences can be distorted by sin (Rom. 2:15) and even "seared" (I Tim. 4:2) or deadened by constant rejection of the truth. Further, written revelation is more specific. It spells out in more detail the meaning of right thoughts and actions. Finally, a written code is more easily preserved and more accurately transmitted from generation to generation. But, of course, with greater light (from the special revelation in Scriptures) comes greater responsibility.

The Justification of General Revelation

The problems in justifying a natural ethic have already been discussed. If the Christian wishes to maintain that there are grounds for right conduct apart from the Scriptures, then he must offer some justification for his belief in right and wrong. We will not repeat here the reasons for the inadequacies in some attempted justifications (stated in the first part of this chapter). We will simply mention the basic elements in what seems to be an adequate justification of a Christian concept of right.

Intuitional basis. In the final analysis it seems necessary to accept some kind of intuitional *source* for natural "right." For if what is right cannot be understood or defined in terms of something else, then it must be understood intuitionally. This should not seem strange. Bertrand Russell believed that the principle of induction was intuitionally derived. Further, if "ought" is a basic category that cannot be reduced to "is" or anything else, then one must understand it intuitionally, since there is no way to break it down further. As Aristotle said, all reasoning is based on first principles and these cannot be proven. Whatever cannot be known in terms of something else, must be understood in terms of itself. This is what is meant by "intuition."

Self-evidence. Of course, intuitions are not justifications, but only a *source* of what Christians believe about right and wrong. But if there is no way to further break down or reduce what we intuit as right, then perhaps right and wrong are in some sense either self-evident or necessary. Not all Christians agree with Aquinas that one must be able to state the basic good intuited in such a way that the predicate is reducible to the subject. Many do agree, however, that what is known cannot be broken down any further. Its truth is evident in itself. The problem is, however, that if this is correct, then all we know is that "good = good" and "right = right." How can we put *content* into the intuited, self-evident principles of good?

Human expectation. One suggestion of the way particular ethical principles can be discovered is by an examination of human expectations. That is, perhaps what is right is not determined by what is *done* (for the wrong is often done by men), nor by what is *believed* ought to be done (for there are incorrect beliefs about right). Rather, perhaps right is discovered by what persons expect should be done to them. A man's true ethic is discovered not by what he does but by what he expects others to do to him. (This may be why Jesus said in Matthew 7:12, the "Golden Rule," "Whatever you *wish* [desire, expect] that men would do to you, do so to them.") In brief, it may not be a man's actions (in doing to others) but his *reactions* (when others do to him) that reveal his true ethics.

Let us illustrate the point. An ethics professor once received a brilliant, scholarly paper written by a student who defended anti-nomianism, claiming that there are no moral principles. The professor wrote on the paper, "F. I do not like the blue folder you used for your paper." The student protested vociferously, "That's not fair! That's not just! I should have been given the grade I deserved and not an 'F' simply because the folder was blue!" "Oh," replied the professor, "you *do* believe in moral principles after all, such as 'justice' and 'fairness.' In that case I will give you the grade you 'deserve.' Here is an 'A' for a well-written paper." From this illustration it is apparent that what the student *said* he believed, he did not *really* believe. His *reaction* to an injustice done to him proved what he *expected* to be done to him.

Perhaps, then, by an examination of the way humans desire (expect) to be treated, we can put content into what is meant by "do good to all men." Surely, all men, for example, do expect to be treated as an end and not as a means, as a person and not a thing. Surely, all persons feel they have intrinsic value and not merely extrinsic value. If so, then one can begin to provide some content from human experience to disclose the meaning of the moral law.

Conclusion

There have been numerous attempts to justify the concept of *right*. All of those who attempt to justify the right pragmatically, socially, or politically fail because these grounds are often evil. Neither can right be justified by intuition, for intuition is only a source, not a justification, of knowledge. An appeal to authority to justify right will eventually end in the Ultimate Authority (God) beyond which there is no court of appeal. But even here one must have some justification for believing in God. The Christian provides reason both for his belief in God and in the Bible as an authoritative rule for conduct. Christians believe in both a "special" revelation (in the Bible) and a "general" revelation (in human nature) which is available to all men. The latter is known by intuition and justified by human expectation.

Suggested Readings

Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*, vol. 28

Austin, John. *The Province of Jurisprudence Determined*

Brandt, R. "Toward a Credible Form of Utilitarianism," in *Morality and the Language of Conduct*, ed. H. Castenada and George Nikhnikian

Donagan, A. "Is There a Credible Form of Utilitarianism?" in *Contemporary Utilitarianism*, ed. Michael Bayles

Ross, David. *The Right and the Good*

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¹Geisler, N. L., Feinberg, P. D., & Feinberg, P. D. (1980). *Introduction to philosophy : A Christian perspective* (Page 371). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House.