

CHAPTER 2

An Ethical Glossary

Definitions are never a matter of life and death. Scripture gives us no directions for defining English words. So two people may use the same term with different meanings, without differing in their actual views. One theologian, for example, may define faith as intellectual assent, while insisting that trust always accompanies it. Another may define it as trust, while insisting that intellectual assent always accompanies it. The differences between these two theologians should not be considered significant at this particular point. We may define terms as we like, as long as our definitions don't confuse people or mislead them on substantive issues.¹

In this chapter, I will define some important terms, indicating how I will use these terms in this particular book. These definitions are not necessarily best for all situations, even for all discussions of ethics.

ETHICS AND THEOLOGY

The first group of definitions will relate ethics to other theological disciplines. The earlier ones review discussions in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*.

1. Compare the discussions in *DKG*, 76–77, 215–41.

KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

I use this phrase to mean a personal, covenantal relationship with God, involving awareness of his self-revelation, an obedient or disobedient response to that revelation, and the divine blessing or curse upon that response.²

This definition connects our knowledge of God to his lordship (see chapter 3) and to ethics, as I define it below.

DOCTRINE

Doctrine is the Word of God in use to create and deepen one's knowledge of God, and to encourage an obedient, rather than disobedient, response to his revelation. Or, more briefly, doctrine is the application of the Word of God to all areas of human life.

This definition is built upon the use of the Greek terms *didaskō*, *didachē*, and *didaskalia*, especially as Paul uses them in the Pastoral Epistles.³ I prefer to define *doctrine*, therefore, not as theological propositions, but as an active process of teaching that leads to spiritual health: as Paul puts it, “sound (*hygiainousē*) doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:10; 2 Tim. 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1).

THEOLOGY

I define *theology* as a synonym of *doctrine*.⁴

So theology, too, is an active process of teaching, not first of all a collection of propositions. I am not opposed to theological propositions; there are quite a few of them in my books. But theological propositions are useful only in the context of teaching that leads to spiritual health.

In that sense, theology is a practical discipline, not merely a theoretical one.⁵ I do not disparage theory; indeed, my own books are more theoretical than practical. But, in my definition, theory is not the only kind of theology there is, nor is it theology par excellence. Theology takes place, not only in technical books, but also in children's Sunday school classes, evangelistic meetings, preaching, and discipleship seminars. Theology is the application of the Word to all areas of life. Academic or theoretical

2. DKG, 11–49.

3. DKG, 81–85.

4. For the “traditional theological programs” of exegetical, biblical, systematic, and practical theology, see DKG, 206–14. For historical theology, see pp. 304–14. All of these are different ways of applying the whole Bible. They do not differ in subject matter, but in the questions we ask of Scripture in each program.

5. See DKG, 84–85, on the relationship between theory and practice.

theology is one kind of theology, not the only kind. And I shall argue later that theory is not more ultimate than practice, nor is it the basis of practice; rather, theory and practice are both applications of God's Word, and they enrich one another when they are biblical.

For that matter, the line between theory and practice is not sharp. Theory is one kind of practice, and *theoretical* and *practical* are relative terms that admit of degrees.

ETHICS

Ethics is theology, viewed as a means of determining which persons, acts, and attitudes receive God's blessing and which do not.

This formulation defines ethics as Christian ethics. Many will find this objectionable. Given this definition, for example, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is not about ethics! Aristotle was not trying to determine what persons, acts, and attitudes are blessed by the God of the Bible. The same could be said of any non-Christian thinker.

It may seem absurd to define ethics in such a way as to exclude all non-Christian writers from the discipline. But, as I said earlier, I don't object to people using a different definition in a different context. If I were to discuss ethics with a disciple of Aristotle, for example, I would agree with him to define the topic as, say, the study of right and wrong.⁶ But I mean my present book to be a distinctively Christian work, and I intend to show that non-Christian ethics is flawed, not only in its conclusions, but also in its initial understanding of its task. For that purpose, my theologically enhanced definition will be most serviceable.

Note also that on this definition ethics is not merely a branch of theology, but is in fact the whole of theology, viewed in a certain way. All theology answers ethical questions. Even the more theoretical kinds of theology, as we saw earlier, are explorations of what we *ought* to believe. That ought is an ethical ought. So, when we ask what we ought to believe about, say, the order of the divine decrees, we are asking an ethical question.⁷

All theology, then, has to do with ethics. It is also true that the subjects we usually treat in ethics, such as murder, stealing, and adultery, can be integrated with the rest of theology more thoroughly than in most theological systems. In a theological curriculum, it would be possible to deal with

6. Of course, at some point I would have to show the Aristotelian that his method of ethics is fundamentally flawed. But I would not insist on making that point at the beginning of a conversation.

7. Compare the argument in *DKG*, 62–64, 73–75, 108–9, 149–51, 247–48, that epistemology can be seen as a branch of ethics.

ethical issues (even those issues we normally think of as ethical) throughout, rather than postponing them to a special course. We could discuss the creation ordinances, the moral laws given to Adam and Eve before the fall, in the course of describing the original condition of the human race. Then we could teach the Decalogue in connection with the Mosaic covenant, ethical methodology in connection with theological prolegomena, and so on. But, in fact, theologians (including myself) have tended to avoid the more practical kinds of ethical questions in the main curriculum of systematic and biblical theology. So seminaries have come to offer courses in ethics as a separate discipline. In fact, however, ethics covers the whole range of human life and all the teaching of Scripture.

In this book, however, I will stick pretty much to the standard subject matter that theologians have called ethics, that is, the subject matter of the Ten Commandments, together with the presuppositions and applications of those commandments.

Finally, in this definition, take note of the triad of persons, acts, and attitudes.⁸ These are the three subjects of ethical predication in the Bible. Only these can be ethically good, bad, right, or wrong. A rock can be good in a nonethical sense (e.g., good for use in construction). But a rock cannot make ethical choices; it cannot seek to bring itself, its actions, and its attitudes into conformity to God's will. So a rock is not a subject of ethical predication. Only rational creatures (God, angels, and human beings) are subjects of ethical predication, together with their actions and attitudes.⁹

METAETHICS

Metaethics is a second-order discipline, a theological reflection on the nature of ethics. Ethics is about good and bad, right and wrong, blessing and curse. Metaethics is about ethics. Metaethics discusses the nature of right and wrong, ethical methods, the presuppositions of ethics, and

8. I'm not sure whether this threefold distinction should be integrated with the other threefold distinctions of my *Theology of Lordship* books. And if it is to be so integrated, I'm not sure exactly how to do it. Both "persons" and "attitudes" are good candidates for the existential perspective. At the moment, I lean toward the following: person, normative; acts, situational; attitudes, existential. Of course, the beautiful thing about these triads is that they are perspectival, so that different arrangements are possible. For readers who are drawing a blank here, I will explain the perspectives in the following chapter.

9. Of course, we can make further distinctions within the categories of persons, actions, and attitudes. Actions, for example, can be divided into thoughts, words, and deeds, a distinction invoked, for example, in *WLC*, 149. These subdivisions are also subjects of ethical predication in Scripture.

so on. But, like Christian ethics, a Christian metaethic must be subject to Scripture and thus must be theological. In that way, metaethics is a part of theology, and therefore, according to my earlier definition, a part of ethics.

MORALITY

I will use the terms *morality* and *ethics* synonymously in this book, although they are often distinguished. Jochem Douma, for example, makes this distinction: “*Morality* consists of the entirety of traditional and dominant customs, while *ethics* is reflection upon those customs.”¹⁰ I think, however, that either term can refer (descriptively) to human customs¹¹ and (normatively) to the evaluation of those customs as right or wrong.

It is, of course, perfectly legitimate to reflect on the customs of human life, and I will be doing that in this book to some extent. But I believe that for Christians the work of ethics is essentially theological. Theology does, of course, reflect on human customs, as do many other disciplines. But theology reflects on those customs specifically for the sake of applying biblical standards to them. The same is true of ethics and morality in the normative sense, as I shall use the terms.

The two terms, also, can equally refer *de facto* to people’s moral standards, or *de jure* to the standards they ought to have. Joe’s ethics (*de facto*) are Joe’s moral standards and/or the ways he applies those standards in his decisions. But from a normative standpoint (*de jure*), Joe’s ethics may be wrong, unethical, or immoral.

VALUE TERMS

MORAL, ETHICAL

In light of the above discussion, I will treat the adjectives *moral* and *ethical*, like the corresponding nouns, synonymously. Both of the terms, however, can be used either descriptively or normatively. Descriptively, they mean “pertaining to the discipline of ethics,” as in the sentence “This is an ethical, not an aesthetic, question.” Normatively, they mean “conforming to ethical norms,” as in the sentence “Senator Ridenhour is an ethical politician.”

10. J. Douma, *Responsible Conduct* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 3.

11. As in the related terms *mores* and *ethos*.

IMMORAL, AMORAL, NONMORAL

The word *moral* can be negated in three different ways. *Immoral* is usually a normative term, used to criticize a person, act, or attitude as ethically bad or wrong. An *amoral* person is someone who is unable or unwilling to bring ethical considerations to bear on his decisions. *Nonmoral* is the opposite of the descriptive meaning of *moral* above, by which we distinguish ethical from nonethical topics of discussion. So the question of whether clam chowder should contain tomatoes is usually considered to be a nonmoral question, except occasionally by partisans on either side.

MORALISTIC

This term is vague, and I will not be using it much in this book. It can mean (a) trite or provincial in ethical attitude, (b) self-righteous, (c) putting too much emphasis on morality, (d) legalistic, putting works in the role that Scripture reserves for grace, or (e) (in preaching) failing to note or sufficiently emphasize the redemptive-historical purpose of a biblical text.¹² Usually the word is used as a term of reproach, but rarely with any precision or clarity. The word has bad connotations, and people seem to use it mainly for the sake of those connotations, to make an opponent look bad, rather than to bring clarity to a discussion. We should generally avoid using words in this way.

VALUE

A value is a quality of worth or merit. There are various kinds of value, including economic, aesthetic, medicinal, recreational, and ethical. So ethics may be regarded as a division of value theory. It is important to make distinctions between ethical values and other kinds of values. Writing a great symphony may be an act of great aesthetic value, but, depending on the composer's motive, it may be of no ethical value or even of negative ethical value.

FACT

Facts are states of affairs. Statements of fact (propositions) claim to assert what is the case. Philosophers commonly distinguish, sometimes very sharply, between facts and values, and those distinctions can be important

12. I have discussed redemptive history (that is, biblical theology) in *DKG*, 207–12, and I will try in chapter 16 in this book to show its role in ethics.

in ethical philosophy, as we shall see. However, it is also important to see the closeness of the relationship between fact and value. If a moral principle (e.g., “Stealing is wrong”) is true, then it is a fact. Further, statements of fact presuppose moral values.¹³ When someone says, “The book is on the table,” he is implying that his hearers *ought* to believe that proposition. And that ought is an ethical ought.

NORM

A norm is a rule or standard that determines the ethical rightness or wrongness, the goodness or badness, of any person, action, or attitude. In biblical ethics, the ultimate norm is God’s revelation.

VIRTUE

Virtues are grounds of praise for someone or something. There are non-moral virtues, such as efficiency, skill, and talent. Moral virtues, like love, kindness, fidelity, and integrity, are elements of a good moral character. Virtue ethics is a kind of ethics that focuses on these inward character traits. This type of ethics is often contrasted with command ethics (focusing on moral rules) and narrative ethics (focusing on a history or story that provides a context for ethical decision making). We shall see that as Christians we need not choose among these; Scripture provides us with divine commands, a narrative basis for moral choice, and a list of virtues, together with God’s gracious means of conferring those virtues upon us.

GOOD

Good is the most general adjective of commendation. We use the term to ascribe any sort of value to anything: aesthetic, economic, etc., as well as ethical. So we should distinguish between moral goodness and nonmoral goodness. The most common form of nonmoral goodness may be described as teleological goodness. To be good in the teleological sense is simply to be useful—good for something, producing a desirable state of affairs. A good hammer is a tool that is useful for pounding nails into surfaces. Pounding nails is its purpose, its telos, its end. The hammer is not morally good, for moral goodness (in accord with our earlier definition of *ethics*) describes a person, action, or attitude that receives

13. See *DKG*, 140–41. See also pp. 71–73, on the relation of facts to interpretations. Note also the texts in *DKG* cited in footnote 7 to show that epistemology is part of ethics.

God's blessing. The hammer is not a person, so it does not receive God's blessing for the jobs it performs.

We do sometimes describe human beings as good in a teleological sense. A good plumber, for example, is someone who is skilled at fixing pipes. To say that Sid is a good plumber is not the same as saying that he is a good person. He may be skilled at fixing pipes, but otherwise a scoundrel. In such a case, we usually say he is a good plumber, but a bad person. To be sure, there is some overlap between the concepts. If Sid is skilled at fixing pipes, but he overcharges, steals objects from the kitchen, or makes an awful mess without cleaning it up, we probably would not call him a good plumber, for fear of being misunderstood. So there is a point where someone's ethics disqualifies him even from teleological commendations.

And in some cases moral turpitude compromises a person's skills. If skilled concert pianist Karl Konertzstück stays up partying all night and arrives at his recital with a hangover, with the result that he plays his music poorly, people will not recognize him that day as a good pianist. If such behavior becomes a habit, he may entirely lose his reputation, and his skills may also decline. So moral evil can imperil teleological goodness. Still, as a matter of definition, it is possible to speak of teleological goodness without reflecting on moral goodness.

Both teleological goodness and moral goodness are important to ethics. Morally good people seek in their actions to achieve goals that are teleologically good. For many philosophers, the highest goal (*summum bonum*) is happiness, either individual or corporate. Morally good acts, in their view, are acts that promote the happiness of oneself and others. So morally good actions are those that promote teleological goodness.

Scripture describes the highest good theologically: it is the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31), the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33). We shall see that these goals incorporate the happiness of people in various ways. But they are fundamentally theocentric, rather than anthropocentric. These provide the telos, the goal, of the believer's ethical actions: moral goodness seeks teleological goodness. For Christians, the teleological is theological, theistic, and theocentric.

RIGHT

Right is generally synonymous with *moral goodness*: a good act is a right act. Its nuances, however, are somewhat different. *Right* belongs to the legal vocabulary. So when it describes moral goodness, it describes it as conformity to norms, laws, or standards. The corresponding biblical terms *tsaddiq* and *dikaiois* have similar associations, and they can be translated "just" as well as "right."

In the triad mentioned earlier as the subjects of ethical predication, *good* applies equally to persons, acts, and attitudes, while *right* applies to actions and attitudes, but very rarely to persons. We often hear people described as “good guys,” but not “right guys,” though I often heard the latter phrase when I was growing up in the 1940s and 1950s. Scripture and theology, however, often refer to righteousness as a virtue, as conformity to God’s standards.¹⁴

A common meaning of the noun *right* in ethics is “deserved privilege.” We have a right when we have ethical and/or legal permission to do something or to possess something. In this sense, right is correlative with obligation. If Joey has a right to life, society has an obligation to protect his life. If Susanne has the right to an education, someone must provide her with that education. If Jerome has the right to free health care, then someone else has the obligation to provide him with it. Of course, it is possible to give up one’s rights, as Paul does in 1 Corinthians 9:4–6, 12, 15. Rights in this sense are governed by moral and/or legal standards, and the emphasis on those standards is what connects this meaning of *right* with that of the previous paragraph.

OBLIGATION, DUTY, OUGHT

I shall use *obligation* and *duty* synonymously. These refer to actions we are required to do, commanded to do, by an ethical norm. *Ought* is a verbal form of *obligation*. What we *ought* to do is what the norm requires of us.

Some obligations are immediate, requiring us to carry them out right now, at the expense of anything else we may be doing or planning to do. For example, if we are in the midst of committing a sin, we are obligated to stop immediately. Other obligations are more general—things we must do at some time or within a certain time frame, but not necessarily right away. Later we shall discuss obligations that may legitimately be postponed in favor of other duties, such as the obligations to study the Scripture, to pray, to share the gospel with a neighbor, and so forth.

Some obligations are individual and some are corporate. For example, in Genesis 1:28, God tells the human race, represented by Adam, to replenish the earth and subdue it. This is not a command that Adam could have fulfilled by himself. He was to play a role, with others playing other roles, in the fulfillment of this command by the whole human race. Similarly, in the Great Commission in Matthew 28, Jesus commands the church, represented by the apostles, to make disciples of all the nations of the earth. Those eleven men, whether as individuals or as a group, could not carry out that

14. God is righteousness, not only in his character, his conformity to his own ethical standards, but also in his actions to redeem his people, his “righteous deeds.” See *DG*, 451–58. Of course, those actions are righteous because they conform to his standards.

command by themselves. The command was given to the whole church, and each Christian is to fulfill a different role in the accomplishment of it.

Obligations include their applications. For example, if Sharon is obligated to go to a meeting on Wednesday, she is also obligated to find and utilize transportation that will get her to that meeting. So when God commands us to glorify him in all things (1 Cor. 10:31), everything we do ought to be an application of that command. Everything we do is either a fulfillment or a violation of that obligation. In that sense, all our actions are ethical. They are either good or bad, depending on whether they glorify God or not.

This is not to say that every choice is a choice between good and bad. We often make choices between two or more goods, as when choosing one cabbage or another at the grocery store.¹⁵ But even the choice of a cabbage involves a choice to glorify God or not to; in that respect, it is an ethical choice. And of course in making that choice, as in making all choices, we have an obligation to choose the right rather than the wrong. In this situation, there are actually two choices being made at the same time: (1) the choice to glorify God, and (2) the choice of one good cabbage over another. The first is a choice between good and evil; the second is a choice between two goods.

PERMISSION

Ethical norms regularly permit actions that they do not prohibit.¹⁶ Permission, however, is not the same as commandment (1 Cor. 7:6). In my previous example, the ethical norm (God's word) does not command me to choose one cabbage over the other (assuming both are equal in all relevant respects). But since that norm does not forbid me, explicitly or implicitly, to buy that cabbage, it thereby permits that action. Permitted actions are good actions, and so we are inclined to say that some good actions are not obligatory. Obligated actions and permitted (but not obligated) actions form two separate classes of good actions.

In one sense, however, these classes of actions overlap. God does not command me to buy cabbage A rather than cabbage B. But he does command me to glorify him, and one way to apply that command is to supply nutritious food to my family. So my action is an application of a command, and, as we saw earlier, commands include their applications. In that sense, when I buy the cabbage I am carrying out a divine command. But making

15. I shall argue later that we are never called to choose between two or more wrongs, without the opportunity to choose a right alternative.

16. A prohibition is, of course, a negative command.

the purchase is not the only possible way to obey that command. I might equally well fulfill the command by buying a different cabbage, or by buying carrots or Brussels sprouts, or by buying nothing and getting food at another time.

GENERAL AND SPECIFIC OBLIGATIONS

We should distinguish between general and specific obligations. God's commands in Scripture are always to some extent general. For example, he says, "Honor your father and your mother" (Ex. 20:12). In that passage, he does not specify precisely how we are to honor them. Other divine commands supplement this general command by requiring more specific duties, such as providing for aged relatives (1 Tim. 5:3–8). But even those are not completely specific commands, for they must be applied to our own experience. For example, suppose that Jim must find a way to take care of his mother, who is blind and deaf. He could fulfill that obligation in several ways. Jim could take his mother into his own home. Or he could arrange for his sister to take their mother into her home, with Jim rendering financial assistance. Or he could arrange for some sort of institutional care. Any of these options, and others, might be a godly response to the situation.¹⁷

So there are different levels of generality and specificity in moral norms. As we apply the general norms, we usually find that there are a number of permissible ways to carry them out. But an obligation must be carried out in some way, not neglected altogether. So although any specific application may not be obligatory, we are still obligated to choose one or more of the permitted alternatives.

JUSTICE

The word *justice* brings us back to the legal vocabulary, which I mentioned in connection with the word *right*. In general, justice is that which is morally right. But the word tends to be used mostly in social contexts with the predominant meaning of "fairness" or "equity." More specifically, justice is the integrity of society's legal system. That includes especially the fairness of the courts, as they render verdicts and determine penalties.

People disagree, of course, on what constitutes justice or fairness. In today's political dialogue about economics, conservatives argue that justice is equality of opportunity, while liberals argue that justice is not achieved until there is also some level of equality of wealth.

17. I don't have the space here to argue my ethical evaluation of these alternatives.