

CHRISTIAN ETHICS

A Case Method Approach

FIFTH EDITION

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Introduction

Christian Ethics and the Case Method

The student pensively approached the case teacher after class and finally mustered some words: “That case really hit home. The characters were different, but they could just as well have been my family. Not long ago we went through exactly the same thing.” Another student, waiting for the first to finish, finally edged up and joined in, “And the question that woman in the front row asked about euthanasia, that’s the precise question I wanted to ask but couldn’t find the right words.”

These two statements, often encountered in one form or another by case teachers, reflect something enduring in human behavior: while every individual is unique, ethical problems and questions about what is right or good are persistent if not universal. These recurrences and the dilemmas they represent can be recorded and revisited to help others learn to make better ethical choices. Case studies are one way to capture past occurrences, and case teaching is a method to enable individuals and groups to make better choices.

This book is about making ethical choices and forming Christian character. It contains sixteen cases. Accompanying each case study is a commentary that is intended to aid understanding of the case from a Christian ethical perspective. The purpose of the book is to offer an approach to contemporary social issues and to underscore the importance of the Christian ethical dimension in the issues and in character formation. The authors are enthusiastic about the case approach as one way to prepare individuals and communities to make ethical decisions and form character. Since the method was first developed at the Harvard Law and Business Schools, it has moved far beyond these origins, receiving wide acceptance nationally in business and law schools. During the past four decades it has also been

successfully applied to religious studies. This proven track record and personal experience with the case approach are the bases of the authors' enthusiasm for this teaching and learning approach.

MAKING ETHICAL DECISIONS

Ethical decisions are made on a number of levels. On one level decision-making seems to flow easily. Individuals follow their gut-level intuitions and muddle through situations reactively. This approach may be effective if the individual is caring and the situation is uncomplicated and more or less personal. It is less effective in complex social situations and can be disastrous when the individual is uncaring, ethically immature, or locked into a narrow social world.

On another level, making ethical choices is both difficult and complex. Logical and abstract reasoning comes hard to some. In certain situations the decision-maker is bombarded by a bewildering array of conflicting and complex facts. Finding relevant ethical norms or guidelines from Christian traditions to apply to particular situations is difficult at best and can easily be short-circuited or sidetracked with simplistic appeals to authority.

Once relevant norms are discovered, their application is often tricky. The norms frequently offer conflicting counsel. Indeed, this is the primary reason that ethical decisions are problematic. There is seldom a straight path from a single norm to an easy decision. If there were, no problem would exist. The decision-maker is most often caught between equally attractive or unattractive alternatives. Worse, the path is usually made treacherous by intersecting problems and relationships that complicate situations and suggest exceptions to the rules. Finally, and hardly necessary to point out, relationships themselves present complicating factors. The moral decision-maker possesses limited freedom and is quite capable of being arbitrary in its use.

The case method of instruction recounts real ethical dilemmas in order to assist individuals and groups through complexity to good or at least well-reasoned choices. Cases may help sort out the choices and give the person with the dilemma an opportunity to move down the path from the identification of norms through the maze of intersecting facts, relationships, and exceptions to the selection of the best alternatives.

There are many types of case studies. They range from imagined scenarios, to in-depth histories of organizations, to one-page "verbatim" that report a single incident. The cases in this volume are descriptions of actual situations as seen by a writer, usually through the eyes of a participant involved in the problem. The situations normally entail a decision to be

made that is left sufficiently open to allow students to enter the process of ethical reflection and decision-making.

Such a method is well suited to the study of Christian ethics, for it drives the student to take the insights of tradition and theory, apply them to an actual situation, and then reconsider the adequacy of theory and tradition. Involved in this movement from theory to practice and back to theory are all the elements that go into an ethical decision.

THE ELEMENTS OF AN ETHICAL DECISION

Element I: The Relationship of Faith

A pervasive historical problem for most Christian traditions has been human sin. Sin results from deep-seated anxieties and separation from God, self, others, and nature. It issues forth in specific acts that break relationships. Sin is magnified in groups and hardens in institutions. From another angle, sin is the refusal to accept God's gracious power of love, a refusal that leads to a sense of alienation and judgment.

While sin runs deep and is universal, it does not necessarily paralyze the moral life. In his person and work Jesus Christ reveals resources for living with integrity in the midst of sin. Jesus identifies God, the source of these resources, as a power who creates inner wholeness and the possibility of right relationships.

Primary to most Christian traditions is the affirmation of God's power as love. Love redeems humans from sin and reunites them with others without violating human freedom. Love is a free gift, never a possession, and cannot be obtained by an effort of the will alone. The continuing presence of love in all situations is called the work of the Holy Spirit.

The starting point for Christian ethics is being in love. This is not something the self can do alone, however. It is something that God does in cooperation with the self, although the self is constantly tempted to think otherwise and take control, thus furthering sin and alienation. Being in love is first a matter of receiving love and letting it work in the self to produce inner wholeness and transformation. Action follows being in love. This is more or less the central message of most Christian traditions, although there is considerable variation in particulars. Thus, Christian ethics has its foundation in being or life in the Spirit. Faith is a matter of relationship, of being in love first with God and then responsively with self, others, and nature.

The word *spirituality* is often used to identify the core relationship to God. God's power is experienced in quite different ways, the common

element being the integrated and transformed self that emerges. Most Christians readily recognize the customary religious ways of experiencing God: worship, prayer, singing, participation in the sacraments, and the preached word. God is not limited to these religious ways, but rather, according to most traditions, God is free to be present in a variety of ways consistent with love.

Spirituality, alternatively being in love or being in the Spirit, inspires acts of justice in society and nature and also leads the loving self intuitively to specific acts in particular situations. In coming to decisions, however, other things are needed, because inspiration and intuition by themselves are not always accurate guides for doing what is right or good. This is especially true in complex social situations. The doing of good acts requires thought as well as heart, knowledge as well as inspiration and intuition. The Christian doer, while inspired and empowered, is also sensitive to relationships in specific situations and deeply interested in the facts and theories that give order to situations as well as the traditions that provide ethical norms for human actions.

Sensitivity to relationships involves a strong element of good intentions. It also involves a sense of the Spirit already at work in a situation, of the character of the human actors, and of the needs of plants and animals. Sensitivity to relationships is constantly in tune with feelings and the subtle changes that make certain situations exceptional. It is aware of the self, its state of being, and its tendencies to sin, both in one's own self and in the selves of others.

Interest in the facts and norms that guide decisions are more a matter of knowledge than heart. They require the thoughtful analysis and assessment of a situation, the next two elements in making an ethical decision.

Element II: Analysis

Good ethical decisions and actions depend on good information, and getting good information depends on hard work and a certain amount of savvy. There are several components to consider in analyzing a situation or case study, not all of which apply in any given situation or case. First is to consider how *personal experience* shapes the way the self perceives a situation. One way to do this is for students to ask themselves what they personally have at stake, what personal history—for example, race, class, gender, habits, and attitudes—they bring to the situation.

The second component is *power dynamics*. Who are the key players, and how is power distributed among them? Whose voices are heard? Whose are ignored?

A third component is *factual information*. Are there historical roots to the problem? What are the key facts? Are there facts in dispute? Are the theories that give coherence to the facts in conflict?

Fourth is the larger *context* of the situation. Most cases are seen through the eyes of a single person and involve personal relationships. The decision-maker must go beyond the close confines of his or her own personal life to see how society and nature affect and in turn are affected by the actions of the people in the case. As the old adage goes: Don't lose the forest for the trees.

Fifth is attention to the *complicating factors* in a situation. Is this an exceptional case? Is crucial information missing? Are there things that are hard to grasp?

Sixth is a careful delineation of *relationships*. Sometimes relational factors produce a situation that is not normal and to which traditional ethical guidelines do not apply. Decision-makers must ask if there are relational or character issues that complicate choices.

Seventh is to identify the primary and secondary *ethical issues* in the situation. Case studies almost always involve multiple issues, and students must select among them in order to focus.

Finally, the eighth component is the identification of *alternative courses of action* to address the issues and the consequences of each. What seems to be appropriate action may on second glance reveal consequences that make it inappropriate or even harmful.

Element III: Assessment

The main task in assessment is locating norms or ethical guidelines in the traditions of the church that are relevant to a given situation. In ethics, norms refer to broad directives that provide guidance for moral life. Norms help to determine what usually should be done in a particular situation. They reflect the wisdom and experience of past decision-makers as they faced similar situations and generalized about what is good. Their insights are passed down in traditions and usually offer wise counsel as current decision-makers face the same kinds of situations or even new situations.

Norms

Norms come in many forms. A few illustrations will suffice to demonstrate this variety and to identify the most important norms. Three very important norms are love, justice, and peacemaking. The experience of God's love leads to an intention to love one's neighbor. In Christian ethics

justice is a *general principle* and means fairness or equity with a special concern for the poor and those on the margins of society. In the ethic of ecological justice this norm is given further expression in the principles of sustainability, sufficiency, participation, and solidarity (see the case “Sustaining Dover”). Peacemaking as a norm includes understandings of nonviolence and reconciliation and gives foundation to three normative *perspectives*: pacifism, the justifiable war, and the crusade (see the case “American Idol”).

Virtues are norms insofar as they represent patterns of behavior worthy of emulation. The best, but not the only, example in Christian ethics is the person and work of Jesus. The popular but well-worn question “What would Jesus do?” points to how his example is a moral guide for many.

Theological interpretations also guide. Different interpretations of how God is at work in a given situation, for example, are important in cases of life and death. Theological understandings of sin, death, and the work of the Holy Spirit and the church are important to decisions in other cases.

Finally, the most familiar norms are stated as *rules, laws, and commands*. The Ten Commandments are the most obvious. In using laws as guides, care must be taken, however, to avoid legalism, the tendency to follow rules slavishly even if the consequences are unloving. In Christianity, all laws and rules are grounded in and tested by love, the most basic guideline of all.

Sources of Norms

Christians look to a number of sources for ethical guidance. The *Bible* has traditionally been the first and most important source. Gleaning ethical guidance from the Bible is not as easy as it might seem, however. The many books of the Bible were written in different periods and reflect quite a variety of contexts and situations. The biblical writers wrote from their own locations in diverse societies and culture. They saw and understood things differently from one another and certainly from persons of the modern age, who live in a thoroughly changed world. Biblical writers sometimes disagreed with one another, and what they thought was ethically acceptable in their own time—for example, slavery—has changed as culture has evolved. Compounding these differences, and complicating matters immensely, present-day decision-makers must interpret what biblical writers meant and then apply these meanings. The Bible does not interpret itself or make decisions. And while biblical scholars have developed a wide range of tools to do the task of interpretation and ethicists offer their best wisdom on interpretation, their disagreements are commonplace. Indeed, ethical conflicts are sometimes matters of interpretation and use of biblical texts.

In spite of these complications, themes do run through the Bible, and these themes can be identified with a degree of accuracy. The biblical writers experienced the same loving God as modern people and faced many of the same problems. The Bible remains a good source of guidance.

Theology is the second source of norms. Understandings of God's power and human sin have already been identified. The nature of God's power as love inspires and leads decision-makers to love their neighbors and to be sensitive to the work of the Spirit in situations. Different understandings of sin lead to conflicting views, such as on matters of sexuality. Seeing sin as deep and universal leads decision-makers to realistic actions that factor in the human tendency to misuse freedom.

The third source of norms is the *historical traditions* of the church. Christians through the centuries have devoted considerable thought to issues of, for example, violence, sexuality, the poor, and nature. The traditions change and sometimes yield a multiplicity of guidelines, but they also show continuity and reflect a certain amount of practical wisdom. Traditions on justice are critical to this volume.

The fourth source of norms is the *church* in its many forms. The three previous sources all grew in church ground. The church ranges from the church catholic or universal, to specific church organizations such as the Roman Catholic Church and specific Protestant denominations, to associations of churches, to the local brick and mortar church, to what in the Bible is referred to as "where two or three are gathered together." Likewise, the ethical guidelines range from traditional historical perspectives, to comprehensive church studies and pronouncements, to rules of church organizations, and to the wisdom and guidance of a good friend.

The final source is the broad category of *secular ethical traditions and other religions*. Christian and secular philosophical traditions in the West have had a close and mutually edifying relationship for centuries. Native American traditions are rich in their sensitivity to nature. Taoism is likewise rich in its search for balance. Buddhism holds to the interrelation of all beings and talks about attachment or desire as the chief problem. Christians are free to appropriate the insights of other traditions, to enter into dialogue with adherents of these traditions, and to join in common actions.

Using these five sources to establish norms that relate to a given case is complex and requires practice. The situation or case itself offers an obvious starting point. So, for example, if the situation involves violent conflict, norms dealing with violence and nonviolence apply.

Many aids are available to help in locating relevant norms. Concordances help to locate specific words in the Bible and texts containing these words. The critical commentaries that follow each case in this volume identify

norms and help with interpretation. Dictionaries of Christian ethics are widely available and provide short summaries for those whose time is limited. Scholars have studied most ethical issues, and their publications usually develop norms. Most major denominations have well-established positions on major ethical issues. If cases are discussed in a classroom setting, teachers may provide background in lectures. Also, decision-makers may turn to the local church, where communities of believers frequently work through ethical issues, often guided by competent leaders.

Conflicting Norms

Once decision-makers have identified the relevant norms and reflected on their meaning for a specific situation, they must jump at least one more hurdle. Ethical problems are frequently encountered because two or more norms conflict. For example, in matters related to the use of violence, non-violence is an obvious norm. So is justice. The conflict between the two in certain cases has led some Christians to elect the normative perspective of the justifiable war as their guide. So, if a large measure of justice can be won for a small measure of violence, violence may be justifiable if certain conditions are met. Another frequent conflict is between human economic benefit and care for other species and ecosystems.

What should the decision-maker do when conflicting norms make for a close call? There is no one right answer to this question. Prayer helps, but finally choices must be made. Martin Luther's famous dictum, "sin bravely," applies in some cases.

Method

Method is the process of pulling intuitions and norms together and applying them to analysis. No single method of relating norms, facts, theories, contexts, and relationships to one another and to specific situations can be called distinctively Christian. There are a number of methods, each with advantages and disadvantages. The authors have not tried to impose a particular method in their approach either to the cases or to the commentaries that follow them. They are convinced that method is important, however, and that an adequate method seeks to touch base with the elements relevant to making a particular ethical decision.

The case approach is conducive to the teaching of method. A specific case can even be used to focus on method. Over the course of a semester or study series the teacher can use and ask participants to use a single method so that they will acquire skill in employing that particular methodology. Alternatively, the teacher can employ several methods and request that

students experiment with and evaluate each. Or finally, consciousness of method may be left to emerge from the process of doing ethical reflection.

The commentaries that follow each case are organized around the elements of making an ethical decision. The commentaries do not spell out how these elements are to be put together to reach a decision. The authors would be remiss, however, if they did not indicate a few typical approaches.

The approach that starts with and stresses norms is called the *deontological* or *normative approach*. The word *deontological* comes from the Greek word *deon*, which means “binding,” and refers to the study of duty and moral obligation.

The tendency in this approach is to let norms, rules, principles, standards, and ideals be decisive or binding in making choices. The degree of decisiveness that should be afforded to norms has been a matter of contention in Christian ethics. To call an approach normative means that norms have a fairly high degree of decisiveness. Most of those who take a normative approach, however, are willing to admit some exceptions to norms occasioned by contextual or relational factors and conflicting norms. Used in a flexible way, the normative approach is appropriate. Indeed, the authors are of a common mind that considerable attention should be given to norms in all situations.

The extreme of the normative approach, legalism, presents difficulties, however. Following rules to the exclusion of contextual and relational factors is a problem for Christians because of its rigidity, frequent heartlessness, and the obvious polemic against it in the sayings of Jesus and the epistles of Paul.

The second approach is called *teleological* from the Greek *telos*, which means “end” or “goal.” Those who take a teleological approach are interested in achieving an end or maximizing a goal as much as possible. Another way to put this is to say they seek good consequences or results. Hence this approach is also called the *consequentialist approach*, a common example of which is utilitarianism, generally defended by secular ethicists like Peter Singer. People differ, however, about the goals they seek and the ends they pursue. Some may wish simply to amass wealth and power in life, while others may seek to maximize the welfare of others, including other species. Not all ends or goals are morally desirable, however. For Christians, norms derived from the five sources and especially fundamental norms like love and justice guide evaluation of these ends or goals. Teleologists weigh the costs and benefits of various alternatives as they figure out how to maximize the good they seek to achieve. For teleologists, the ends sometimes justify the means, even morally questionable means in some cases. A weakness here is that teleological thinking can run roughshod over others as it makes ethical concessions in order to maximize the good. So,

ends do not justify all means. A strength of this approach is that it takes consequences seriously.

The third approach is called the *areteological approach* or sometimes *virtue ethics* or the *ethics of conscience*. The word comes from the Greek *arete* and refers to excellence of moral character. Those who take this approach think that good ethical decisions will be made by good people. The first task, therefore, is to cultivate excellence of character through education, training, and spiritual formation, that is to say, through the internalization of norms so that they become intuitive. One of the products of this moral formation is the conscience that exists within an individual or community. Those who employ this approach often appeal to their consciences as the basis of their perception of an ethical problem or as a justification for the particular solution they prefer. Ends and means are evaluated in terms of how consistent they are with one's moral character and conscience.

An advantage of this approach is that life is complicated and often requires ethical decisions that have to be made quickly. In situations where norms are not clear or there is insufficient time to calculate costs and benefits, recourse to one's conscience and moral intuition can be a very effective way to exercise ethical judgment. One of the problems, however, is that a sound conscience depends on a well-formed moral character. Many who perpetrate great evils sleep all too well at night. In addition, intuitive appeals to conscience can be very subjective. Ultimately, good ethics requires that reasons be given to justify decisions. Vague appeals to conscience can be a way to dodge this responsibility.

Few teachers have consciously used the case approach to form character. Case discussions are a good resource for character formation, however, and in the process of repeatedly making moral judgments, moral maturity may be expected to increase, or at least that has been the experience of case teachers. Character development may therefore be an unintended positive side effect of the case method. Many teachers may prefer leaving it that way, but there is no reason why character development cannot be made more explicit.

So which of these approaches is the best? All three are good and may be used effectively alone or in combination. The authors suggest a combination, although combinations will not be effective in all cases. Decision-makers should be self-conscious, however, about which approach they are using.

Ethical Assessment

The last step of assessment is actually to do it. Having done the analysis, identified relevant norms, and selected one or more of the methods,

decision-makers should evaluate alternative courses of action, strategies, and tactics as well as their viability and consequences. No magic formula or foolproof way exists. The process is dialogical. Norms, methods, and the factors of analysis should be massaged together to find what is appropriate or fitting.

The decision follows. It is sometimes difficult to make because alternative courses of action are equally satisfactory or equally unsatisfactory, but the relationship of faith calls the decision-maker to decide. Cases do, of course, allow the luxury of “fence sitting,” but the ethical dilemmas of life do not. Also, not to decide may be a wise course of action in some cases, but it is a decision nonetheless.

Once a decision has been made and a course of action chosen, these conclusions need to be justified to others. Ethics should normally be a community enterprise. Reasons supporting the decision should be consistent with analysis, appeal to relevant moral norms, use an appropriate method, and carry a sense of proportionality. A well-justified ethical decision will also explain why this is the best choice given the circumstances of the case. In addition, a well-crafted decision will also anticipate and respond to the most significant counterarguments others may raise.

Element IV: Action

Cases in this volume end with decisions to be made. They are open-ended. Discussions of cases usually end at the point of decision, but in life situations this will not be the case. In this final stage decision-makers are called not only to decide but also to act on their decisions.

Reflection should then follow action so that decision-makers will learn from successes and failures. Finally, there is even a tiny bit of reward. When decisions and actions are done well, decision-makers may bask in the glow and enjoy the inner peace that follows. And even when things do not turn out all right and mistakes are made, and wrong choices selected, with repentance there are resources of forgiveness. Guilt may be a mark of sin, but it is never the last word in Christian ethics. The Good News is the last word. You are forgiven.

FLEXIBILITY

Cases can be used to form character, to analyze problems, to teach method, to understand human relationships, and to employ a method. The case approach is flexible, and this flexibility makes the goals of the teacher in using the method of great importance. Cases lend themselves to one

purpose or a multiplicity of purposes, and teachers need to be clear about what they are trying to accomplish. Purpose should govern the selection of cases, how they are taught, and the outcome. This cannot be emphasized enough. Purpose governs use.

What the authors have not done, and in fact cannot do, is set the purpose for participants and facilitators. We suggest a range of options, for example, introducing students to complex social issues, using cases as an entry into the tradition, the teaching of method, and the development of character, but application must remain with the user. This also means that cases can be misused for the purpose of indoctrination and manipulation. Teachers and students should be aware of this, although misuse of method is not peculiar to the use of cases.

Flexibility has still another dimension. The case method is appropriate to a variety of learning situations such as the classroom, church groups, and the informal discussions found in coffee shops, dorms, and living rooms. Those who use the method regularly find that it stimulates discussion, breaks up the one-way flow of lectures, and eliminates the silence that often permeates abstract discussions. The method is dialogical and thus meets the needs of instructors and learners who prefer more engaged pedagogy. But discussion is only the most frequent way cases are used, and discussion can be more or less structured by teachers depending on their goals.

The method also has internal flexibility. Role plays, small groups, voting, and mini-lectures, a fuller description of which can be found in the Appendix, are only a few of the ways cases can be engaged. Cases are not particularly good for presenting normative material and scientific theories. Experienced case teachers have found that lectures and outside reading are more appropriate for introducing this kind of material. Thus, where significant background information is required for intelligent choices, the authors recommend using cases for the purposes of opening discussions of complex problems, of applying theory and the insights of traditions, of bringing closure and decision, and of encouraging the development of a critical consciousness.

ISSUES AND COMMENTARIES

The issues that the cases raise were given careful thought. A characteristic of a good case, however, is that it raises more than one issue. Some cases raise numerous issues, and beyond these are what might be called connecting components. There is no case, for example, that is explicitly about women or men, yet several address changing relationships of contemporary women and men, including nonbinary relationships. Racism

is a central issue in at least two cases and a related one in several others. Teachers may want to use these connecting components to structure their courses so that themes are addressed consistently.

Each case is followed by a commentary that is provided because past experience shows that interpretive reflections help decision-makers by providing leads into avenues of analysis and assessment. These commentaries are not definitive interpretations. They are the observations of individuals trained in Christian theology, ethics, and the case method. They are not out of the same mold, although they do attempt to use the elements that go into an ethical decision as their starting point. There are stylistic differences and variations in emphasis resulting from their multiple authorship. They are intended as aids and not as substitutes for creative thinking, analysis, and decision-making.

As mentioned before, the content of the interpretive reflections is not arbitrary. It is organized around the elements that go into making an ethical decision; however, for the sake of variety and flexibility the authors decided that each commentary did not necessarily have to discuss all of the elements or to do so in the same order. The commentaries are designed to touch base with these elements, although for a given case each element may not be covered with the same thoroughness. Brevity has also governed design. In some of the cases, analysis of one or more of the components does not add significant insight. No doubt in these commentaries there are things omitted that teachers will want to add and points made that facilitators will disagree with and want to comment upon critically.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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