

CHAPTER 32

Ethics

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You are walking down a deserted street. A car speeds by you, loses control, and crashes into a brick wall. Immediately, the car ignites and bursts into flames. You rush to the scene in hopes of providing assistance to the sole person inside the vehicle who you notice is pinned within the wreck. You try to prise open the doors, but to no avail. The fire is rapidly spreading, drawing perilously closer to the anxious driver. Within minutes – if not seconds – the driver will be engulfed in flames. There is absolutely no means by which you would be able to open the doors so as to free the trapped driver. It so happens that you are carrying a loaded pistol. Do you pull out your gun and administer “mercy killing” or do you take no action and watch the injured, yet conscious driver burn to death?

This is the type of case study one might expect when studying the discipline of ethics in theological schools or religion departments. It is designed to help the student wrestle with competing theories to determine what the “correct” ethical response should be. But if the student says that the hypothetical case study actually happened to her or him, then that student’s response would be dismissed as being too subjective. For ethicists of the dominant culture, considering the interpreter’s identity or social location adulterates the intended meaning of the ethical dilemma. They insist that a person’s identity and experiences interfere with the job of ascertaining a so-called “objective” rendering of the case study. In this chapter, I intend to describe briefly and to critique how the dominant culture constructs ethical analysis, proposing instead a more practical approach. To this end, I call for a liberative ethics rooted in the experiences of marginalized communities and peoples.

Ethics in the Dominant Eurocentric Culture

Historically, ethics has emphasized the teaching of theory. The student first learns ethical theories and then applies them to hypothetical case studies designed to elicit a

response void of any subjective influences. The purpose is to test the ability of the student to determine objectively which response is proper based on the multitude of possibilities. The focus is not on the dilemma outlined in the case study, but rather on the methodology employed to arrive at the ethical response. This approach assumes a false dichotomy between ethical theory and practice. Its purpose is not to determine what moral action should be taken when approaching burning cars. Rather it seeks to answer the abstract question of whether killing is ever justified.

Generally speaking, within the dominant Eurocentric culture, ethics has historically been done deductively. The ethicist usually begins with some type of "truth" claim based on some sort of doctrine, biblical passage, church teaching, spiritual revelation, rational analysis, or any combination thereof. From this "truth," an action is determined, usually in the form of an individual act of piety. The emphasis is on possessing the "truth" or having the right doctrine. Knowing what is right supposedly leads to right actions. In other words, the emphasis is on *orthodoxy* (*ortho*, right + *doxy*, doctrine); that is, ethics proceeds from doctrine. Orthodoxy determines how one thinks about, formulates, and/or engages in orthopraxis (*ortho*, right + *praxis*, action).

Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas says it best, "The first task of Christian social ethics, therefore, is not to make the 'world' better or more just, but to help Christian people form their community consistent with their conviction that the story of Christ is a truthful account of our existence" (1981: 112). Here he confuses an unapologetic conviction about the truth of the Christian narrative with a Eurocentric interpretation of what that truth might be, thus converting his truth claims into a facade masking a power that reinforces Eurocentric Christian dominance in ethics as well as in the culture. The community becomes the place where "*praxis*" takes place, understood as behavior or personal piety that emulates the kingdom of God. Impacting the wider secular world is not as important as developing a Christian character. What is missing is a prophetic call that grounds ethical thought in the practical action of dismantling oppressive structures outside the church community. Here lies the underlying problem with Eurocentric ethics. Moral reasoning is done from the realm of abstractions. Ethics ceases to be an expression of practical theology because it is less concerned with "what you do" than "how you think."

Among some Eurocentric Christian ethicists, emphasis is placed on areteological ethics, an approach centered on living a life of virtues based on the presupposition that good actions flow from good character. Virtue, according to ethicist Robin Lovin, is cultivated by a pattern of behavior learned through practice, thereby becoming a way individuals tend to act. Virtue becomes a habit instinctively done without much contemplation. Ethics is produced by virtuous character. While Lovin is conscious that at times virtue can be limited to a particular culture or social location, he still insists that it is plausible to recognize a few universal moral rules or virtues that every single culture would agree are "just right" (2000: 63–67).

When we attempt to base virtues on rights, the rights that receive a preferential option are those that sustain the dominant culture. In this view, not all rights are equal. All may agree that humans have a right to receive a sufficient daily amount of calories to sustain life. Nourishment, especially in the richest country the world has ever known, may be a basic human right. And yet this right is assaulted by other rights

that take precedence. Regardless of hunger, an individual cannot jump a fence to take an apple from a tree, not even an abandoned apple that fell off a tree and is rotting on the ground. To jump the fence and trespass on another's land violates property rights. If the individual is arrested, the circumstance of dire hunger and the basic human right to survive are not a legal argument for violating property rights. When it comes to human rights versus property rights, the latter is privileged. That property rights are given a preferential option, even in the face of threat of human death, demonstrates how "rights" language is used to maintain the law and order that enables the few to continue enriching themselves in spite of the consequences to more disenfranchised communities.

Ethics as a Cultural and Political Construct

No one questions that the language of virtues and rights may lead to desirable behavior or that personal piety is good and should be pursued by all humans. Nevertheless, such language has historically marginalized portions of the population, specifically communities of color. For this reason, an uncritical adaptation of the virtues and rights of the dominant culture is detrimental to marginalized communities specifically because such moral standards are constructed by those who benefit from having marginalized groups adopt them.

Missing from the ethics practiced by the dominant culture is any critique of how the theory upon which ethicists construct their practice is informed by their social location. As we determine ethical actions, we do so from our particular social location. If we are unaware of how social location influences actions, we ignore how our pronouncements justify lifestyles that are at times contradictory to the very essence of what we claim is our faith tradition. What has come to be called *Eurocentric ethics* runs the danger of becoming indistinguishable from middle-class respectability and conformity.

Simply stated, ethics is the construct of a particular culture. Historically, Christian theology has been used to justify such acts as genocide, slavery, war, crusades, colonialism, economic plunder, and gender oppression. Bible verses were quoted, sermons preached from pulpits, and academic theses written in theological centers to justify barbaric acts that were labeled "Christian missionary zeal" or "righteous indignation." Millions have unjustly died and perished in the name of Jesus and by the hands of those who call themselves his followers. How then can we claim the authority of Christian theology or biblical interpretation when those who claim to be obedient to the Christian faith have unleashed so much misery upon humanity in God's name?

Those who benefited from unleashed violence confused actions congruent with their faith tradition with actions that protected their power and privilege. By *social location*, I refer to cultural experiences that influence a person's identity. Basically, being a financially independent white male in the United States is a vastly different experience from being a black impoverished Latina. These experiences define the meaning we give to different symbols in our lives. In other words, we are all born into a society that shapes and forms us. But what happens when the community that bore and nurtured

us has historically advocated Christian ethical acts that cause one group to be oppressed? My Spanish forefathers theologically proved through the biblical text and philosophical reasoning that the indigenous people of the Americas were created to serve as natural slaves. The forefathers of peoples of Eurocentric descent simply dismissed the humanity of Africans. Because Africans were believed to be recipients of Ham's curse, they were conceived as ordained by God to be slaves. Not surprisingly, they were seen as three-fifths human, as spelled out in the US Constitution. How can we rise above the ethics our culture taught us if we are born into a privileged social location?

No ethical paradigm is ever developed in a social or cultural vacuum. Most ethical systems are autobiographical. We ascertain what "objective" ethical action should be taken based on our own conscious and unconscious experiences. All ethical actions reflect the social location of those with authority to make their personal understanding the acceptable societal norm for everyone else. Hence, to claim objectivity masks the subjectivity of the person, groups, or cultures doing the ethical analysis. Ethics can never occur apart from the identity of the one doing the analysis. When we engage in ethical analysis from the location of social privilege, the risk exists that the actions advocated will subconsciously or consciously protect power and privilege. Those who have authority impose their views upon the theoretical foundation of ethics.

Law and Order versus Justice

Even though many Eurocentric ethicists recognize their complicity with the dominant culture, they underestimate its extent. Law and order are to be pursued, even at the price of certain inequalities – a proposition incongruent with any marginalized community committed to justice. Writing during his more progressive younger years, Reinhold Niebuhr made room for these inequalities, a necessity if we wish society to function properly: "No complex society will be able to dispense with certain inequalities of privilege. Some of them are necessary for the proper performance of certain social functions; and others (though this is not so certain) may be needed to prompt energy and diligence in the performance of important functions" (1932: 128). Niebuhr relates ethical principles like justice, liberty, and social order to the Christian concept of love. Although these principles are not necessarily in conflict with each other, he believes they should be prioritized. The global disarray following World War II and the need for a stable world order in a nuclear age led him to make a preferential option for order, even at the cost of certain inequalities.

Niebuhr is not the only Eurocentric ethicist who is willing to accept inequalities for the good of society. Other ethicists, from his era to today, also advanced the dominant culture's hold by advocating order. For example, while Lutheran ethicist Paul Ramsey called for equitable race relations, he critiqued lunch counter sit-ins conducted by blacks as an improper social Christian action because it disrupted society's law and order (1961: 48–49). American philosopher John Rawls encouraged the establishment of justice as long as it remained constrained within the limits of a well-ordered society (1971: 453–457). Even theological ethicist James Gustafson was fine with the pursuit

of justice as long as it did not upset "a necessary equilibrium in society" (1975: 119–120). The ethics of the majority of Euro-American scholars exists to preserve the established order not just of their society but of their place within that society. Whenever ethics is reduced to maintaining law and order, justice is sacrificed.

However, what is missing is a thorough analysis of how power relationships construct, interpret, and define what is considered ethical. When ethics are constructed on the myth of theological or theoretical objectivity, social injustices are masked through their legitimization and normalization. What may be deemed ethical for the dominant culture can easily be detrimental to disenfranchised groups. As illustration, take slaves and slave masters. While slave masters during the Antebellum preached against the vice of laziness and encouraged the virtues of hard work, the slave understood that sloth was an act of resistance against the injustices upon which society was based. Hence the slave had a moral obligation to do the least amount of work possible as a means of preserving her or his life and the lives of the rest of the slave community, even at the risk of being stereotyped as lazy.

Ultimately, Eurocentric ethicists and those who uncritically subscribe to the dominant cultural worldview fail to locate themselves within the prevailing power structures. Their complicity with these structures relieves them of any responsibility of actually establishing a justice that is liberating for marginalized communities. Eurocentric ethics is a product of power – power held by those who benefit by making their ethics normative. As such, Eurocentric ethics is not a practical exercise of establishing justice, but rather a justification for activating power. The Euro-American ethical discourse becomes a strategy of reconciling some type of moral reasoning with the existing structures that remain detrimental to disenfranchised communities, without sacrificing the privilege amassed by the prevailing ethics of the dominant culture.

Practical Theology and the Case for a Liberative Ethics

The problem with Eurocentric ethics is that it falls short of practical theology. It emphasizes personal piety rather than praxis and action. My main concern with how Eurocentric ethics operates by ignoring action is best illustrated by Stanley Hauerwas. While he agrees about the importance of justice, he fails to make it the underlying characteristic of Christian faith. He writes: "the current emphasis on justice and rights as the primary norms guiding the social witness of Christians is in fact a mistake" (1991: 45). Elsewhere he writes, "Christian social ethics is not first of all principles or policies for social action, but rather the story of God's calling of Israel and the life of Jesus" (1985: 181–182). The primary task of the church "is not to *make* the world the kingdom, but to be faithful to the kingdom by showing to the world what it means to be a community of peace" (1983: 103). His recovery of virtue ethics displays an antipathy toward establishing justice-based principles upon which to foster praxis. For him, any attempt to establish social justice is more a response to the Enlightenment project than it is to the gospel. For Christians to participate in such justice-based praxis is to become complicit with the hegemonic liberalism of the world (1997: 190–191, 195).

Thus, to be a moral agent is more a process of learning how to see reality through a Eurocentric Christian lens than enunciating praxis that challenges, subverts, or undermines the oppressive structures reinforced by the very same Eurocentric Christian lens he wants everyone to adopt. In short, for Hauerwas, the Christian must remain aloof to "political change and justice," as well as "progressive forces" (1985: 185). In the final analysis, the social ethics advocated by Hauerwas is but a gesture (1985: 186). While gestures may be meaningful for the privileged, they are unfortunately meaningless for those hungry, thirsty, naked, alienated, incarcerated, or ill.

To counter Eurocentric ethics, those from society's margins participate in what we will call "liberative ethics," a form of practical theology that challenges the dominant culture's claim to objective and thus superior ethical analysis. *Liberative ethics* is a type of practical theology even though not all practical theologies are liberative. It is important to note that I am making a distinction between *liberationist* ethics and *liberative* ethics. *Liberationist ethics* is based on the tenets of what has come to be known as liberation theology, a very Christian-centric approach to doing ethics. By contrast, *liberative ethics* is not necessarily Christian-based. While it can be based on liberation theology, it provides room for traditions that do not subscribe to liberation theology and for perspectives from other religious traditions, such as Muslim, Hindu, and Santero/a, or from no religious tradition whatsoever, such as humanist ethics. Liberative ethics has, nonetheless, ethical and moral paradigms based on overturning structures of oppressions.

One is hard pressed to find a liberative ethical approach among the normative writings of Euro-American ethicists. However, a rich discourse is taking place within marginalized communities, specifically communities of color. Some of the significant literature in liberative ethics and practical theology includes works by African Americans (e.g., Townes 1997; Floyd-Thomas 2006), Asian Americans (e.g., Park 1996; Kwok 2005), Hispanic Americans (e.g., De La Torre 2010), Native American (e.g., Tinker 2004), and scholarship on behalf of the economically disenfranchised (e.g., Brubaker et al. 2006) and the queer community (e.g., Ellison 1996).

Eurocentric ethics based on orthodoxy or correct doctrine is highly individualistic. Relegating action to the individual fosters an inability to transform the overall power structures. Liberative moral reasoning also repudiates the dominant culture's proposition that right doctrine, orthodoxy, takes precedence over right practice, orthopraxis. To do liberative ethics is to move away from an intellectual exercise toward concrete actions that respond to the human condition – a response that is reflective and marked by ethical living. Hence, rather than designing case studies about burning cars, we look to the daily existence of the world's wretched to wrestle with the ethical actions that should be taken in the messiness of life. Rejecting the Eurocentric approach and purpose in creating case studies, liberative ethics challenges the assumption that ethical deliberation can be understood apart from what the interpreter brings to the analysis. While the academy at times considers self-disclosure to be unscholarly, ethicists from the margins maintain that consistently employing such a strategy collapses the dichotomy between theory and praxis. For case studies to be relevant, they must be contextualized in the everyday experience of marginalized people, the subject and source for all ethical reflection.

The Practice of Liberative Ethics

How liberative ethical analysis is conducted might best be understood via a case study that I recently wrote.

Rukkibai, and her husband Lakshman Ratohre are among the wretched of the earth. They live in Omla Naik, India, where he toils in someone else's fields for \$1.00 to \$1.50 a day. His wife, who works by his side doing the same work, earns 60 cents a day. When Rukkibai gave birth to their fifth daughter, she sold the baby for roughly \$20. Chances are the child was eventually sold into the sex trade or to an orphanage that would offer the child for adoption, most likely by Westerners. Rukkibai is again pregnant. If she has a son, they will keep him, for he will be able to work the fields with his father; if she has a daughter, more likely than not they will again sell the child (Bonner 2001). What are the ethical implications of selling one's children so that the whole family can survive? If the child is adopted by Westerners, she will have a more secure financial future. What importance does this have? It is possible that the daughter may be raised to be a prostitute. Is it still worth taking a chance that she might be adopted by Westerners? Some argue that poor women should be sterilized to prevent these dilemmas. How ethically valid is this solution? Why? Do Western nations have any obligations toward Rukkibai's family? If so, what kind of obligations? If not, why not? (De La Torre 2004: 94)

As this case demonstrates, determining moral actions based on correct doctrine is much more complicated when the case is incarnated in real dilemmas faced by the marginalized. The task of wrestling with cases that require practical action and not just good thinking assumes that praxis is not separate from theory. While Eurocentric ethics creates a false dichotomy between thinking and theorizing about what the common good is and between what proper virtue is and the implementation of actions leading to justice, liberative ethics collapses such conventional divisions between faith and works, doctrine and practice. It becomes a practical theology based on flesh and blood, not just abstract deliberations. In grounding case studies in everyday reality, the margins are brought to the center, challenging those within academic circles who are accustomed to set the parameters of ethical discourse more narrowly, who seldom hear the voices of those forced to make a way within a structurally oppressive society that provides no way for them.

To do liberative ethics becomes an attempt to work out truth and theory through reflection and action in solidarity with one's marginalized community. In this sense, praxis is not guided by theory. That is, liberative ethics is not deductive, beginning with some universal truth and determining the appropriate response. The disenfranchised and dispossessed tend to be suspicious of such universal claims that have a history of oppression. Unlike Eurocentric moral reasoning, theories about a just world and the actions to bring about the transformation of the present unjust world are united.

In an earlier book, *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins* (2004), I argue that the manner in which many Euro-American Christian ethicists conduct moral reasoning falls short because they argue over abstract moral frameworks rather than *doing* ethics.

Many Christians respond in words to the inhuman conditions forced upon the dispossessed when it is much more important to respond in deeds, actions, and praxis. When a moral Christian life is reduced to individual piety or virtue, it often fails to result in Christian action.

Liberative ethics is action that leads to salvation and liberation for both the oppressed and their oppressors. Because ethics is fallible, not universal, a “roadmap” leading to action (in my case Christian action) is needed. I base this roadmap on the Catholic social teaching model commonly used in practical theology of *seeing – judging – acting* (as per the encyclicals *Gaudium et Spes* and *Octogesima Adveniens*). Using this model as a foundation for my own moral reasoning, I expanded it to five basic steps that form a hermeneutical circle.

The circle begins with *observation*, or an attempt to understand why the present moral dilemma exists. To observe is to consider seriously the historical situation responsible for the present oppressive circumstances forced upon the disenfranchised. Understanding the social location of the marginalized requires exploring why, how, and when the present structures were created, maintained, normalized, and legitimized. To observe is to consciously seek the voices of the dispossessed who normally do not inhabit history, voices that are silenced or relegated to the margins. It is an attempt to “see” through the eyes of those who are made poor, victimized, and made to suffer. To observe is to recover their voices so as to provide a critique to the prevailing powers (De La Torre 2004: 58–61).

The second step is *reflection*, or an attempt to understand how social structures contribute to and maintain oppression. Society cannot be transformed apart from first doing social analysis. The social sciences provide a methodology by which to discern raw data that can elucidate the reality faced by the disenfranchised. To point out how social mechanisms maintain institutionalized oppression is to point out the sin of the dominant culture. No adequate response to oppressive structures can be made if the marginalized fail to understand fully how society creates and preserves their economic, social, and political subjugation (62–63).

Prayer, or an attempt to understand the responsibility of communities of faith, is the third step. Prayer is not limited to holding a private conversation with the creator of the universe; it also encompasses a communal act by which the members of a faith community accompany each other and stand in solidarity during their trials and tribulations. Prayer establishes *koinonia* or communion where the stories of the marginalized are heard and where a commitment to work in solidarity for spiritual and physical liberation takes place. For Christians, to pray is to discern God’s will through a critical application of the biblical text to the moral dilemmas faced by the dispossessed. Of course, other faiths or belief systems conduct the prayer step by using different sacred texts or traditions (63–66).

The fourth step is *action* or a response to what the community claims to believe. Regardless of how sincere and noble Euro-Americans may appear, theorizing about justice changes nothing. To do liberative ethics is to do, not simply to theorize. The required praxis moves beyond paternalistic “charity” to actions geared toward dismantling the presiding social structures that are detrimental to marginalized communities that are more often than not communities of color (66–68).

Reassessment, or an attempt to ensure that the action taken is faithful to the message of liberation and salvation, is the final step. It asks whether the implementation of praxis brought a greater share of abundant life to the marginalized community. If so, what additional praxis is required? If not, what should be done to replace the previous praxis with new and more effective action? It is through assessing the effectiveness of action that the creation of an ethical system occurs.

Reflecting upon praxis can lead to a more correct doctrine, *orthodoxy* (68–69). Hence, the Eurocentric model is placed on its head. The deductive methodology where the moral agent begins with some truth claim and then moves toward the application of that truth is repudiated, thus shattering the subordination of ethics to dogma. It is praxis that forms doctrine, informs the interpretation of scripture, determines reliable theology, and shapes the overall system of ethics.

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