Unit: Ethics and morality

Contents
Introduction
Values
Moral values
Ethical frameworks
Moral codes
New Testament moral codes
Civil and legal frameworks
Conscience
Catholic moral decision making
Contemporary theology on sin and social sin
See Judge Act- an ethical framework for ethical decision making.

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Introduction

“Ethics refers to the broader philosophical and academic study of the good, of right situations, motives, and actions upon which to base good and appropriate human decisions. “Morality” while often informed by philosophy and ethics, refers to what is actually lived as shaped by a particular religious tradition, creed, or theological background. The terms are often used interchangeably without necessarily assuming that a person’s actions are influenced by a particular faith tradition. Judith Caron, 1995 Christian Ethics: Shaping values, vision, decisions. Mystic, CT: Twenty Third Publications.

It will be very important throughout the course of this unit that students abide by the rules for the inquiry process of philosophical discussion and dialogue. These rules are to:

- Work towards being open in mind, body and spirit, to listen and show respect for others; their positions, assumptions and beliefs.
- Learn to attentively acknowledge and build on the good ideas of others
- Critique respectfully and creatively
- Remember that there may be no single, right answer to the ethical questions posed.

It will also be important for teachers to allow the respectful dialogue to take place without leading the discussion or emphasising their own personal point of view.

Ethics, whether philosophical or ethical, must be specific about what good is and where it can be found. The basic convictions of the people of Christian faith are that the Triune God is good. Jesus Christ is the fixed point of Christian morality. The convictions of philosophers about the good have long influenced moral action. For Aristotle, the good is happiness; for hedonists, it is pleasure; and for utilitarians, the good is in what is most useful. For Catholic Christians, there is an identity between “good” and a being’s own perfection. That is, the nature of the good for the human person is to recognise one’s dignity and worth, and the dignity and worth of others, as sons and daughters of God; to become fully human; the best you can be by living
the beliefs and values espoused by Jesus; a life enriched with the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Values

Many moral issues arise from conflicting or unclear moral values. To understand moral issues, we need to begin by looking at those values. We hold many values. We value fairness, trustworthiness, the well-being of others and the world and many other things. These we consider moral values. We also value good neighbours, good music, daily exercise, our children’s laughter, meeting new people and many other things that are not moral values (not immoral values either, simply non-moral values). Truth, equality, cleanliness; “life liberty and the pursuit of happiness”; faith, hope and charity; random acts of kindness and the senseless acts of beauty”; peace and quiet; enthusiasm; good sportsmanship – all of these are “values” in the broad sense but they do not tell us what values, of themselves, are. There is a difference between life goals or desires and values. For example, wealth may be a goal or a desire, but it is not in itself a value. One may value the benefits or way of life that wealth brings. A philosopher will ask, “What do they have in common that makes them all examples of “values”?

Our values are those things we care about, that matter to us; those goals and ideals we aspire to and by which we measure ourselves, or others, or our society.

Values are the silent forces behind many of our actions and decisions. “Bad” or questionable values count too. To understand values and their impact on life, individuals can engage in processes of discernment. Reflection upon an action or response and seeking out the underpinning values that may have driven that action or response, is a process of discernment that can assist personal development, maturity and well-being. Discernment processes promote deeper understanding of the human condition and reveal through reflection the silent forces behind human action. Discernment also develops an individual’s authenticity and moral integrity.
One process of discerning values incorporates the application of the concepts of life-giving or life-defying qualities to the values being considered. During such a process individuals can explore whether the values that are driving them are life-giving or life-defying i.e. they are promoting health, authenticity and integrity or they are promoting ill health, unauthenticity or a lack of integrity. It is important that individuals develop processes of discernment and self-reflection to critique their values. Such critique can affirm existing values and ways of being, or facilitate new or changed life paths and values. An individual’s or group’s values can change or at least be acted out differently in different times and contexts. Therefore it is essential that individuals and groups engage in familiar and evolving discerning processes. This is particularly important during challenging and changing circumstances and contexts.

An important development in the mid twentieth century occurred when nations joined to declare a united, political and moral stand for basic human values in the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights”. These rights were not only considered to be fundamental for the personal, social and economic welfare of all peoples but also essential for the political stability of the world. Although this declaration of rights can change as nations progress to a deeper understanding of those values necessary to human life and development, among the values supported by the UNDHR, there are three enduring values that echo the writings and teachings of the Judeo-Christian tradition: the dignity of the human person, stewardship and the common good.

**Moral values**

The Catholic Church and individual Christians discern what the Gospel demands in a particular situation by the application of values.

Catholic moral theology teaches that values are of two kinds: premoral and moral. **Premoral values** are those concrete good things that ought to be done, as far as possible. They have to do with the real world of such things as life and death, knowledge and ignorance, health and sickness, friendship and alienation, beauty and ugliness, wealth and poverty. **Moral values** are those things that are essential to
human living. They are things we must possess if we are to be fully human. Moral values include such virtues as honesty, justice, chastity, fortitude and temperance.

**What influences your values?**

Living life in line with one’s values is important for a sense of well-being, self-respect and self-esteem. Living a life which violates one’s values can lead to confusion, frustration and depression. People who value a family but work long hours resulting in spending little quality time with partners and/or children, would be acting in contradiction of their values. Valuing one’s health but taking no exercise or care in what one eats is in conflict with the value. We can confuse other people’s values with our own. We may have been “handed down” values through our family or religion but if we examine them closely we may realise that they are not truly owned by us. Values may also change with circumstances and priorities. They are often influenced by external forces such as media, governments, economic circumstances and one’s social group. They are also influenced by internal factors such as our personality, our upbringing, our enculturation and our relationships. Values are often culturally and even gender specific. Some social commentators believe that Western society has moved to an age of individualism and even into a moral vacuum where nations and whole communities no longer share common values. However, it is interesting to see how even so called individuals, and societies in a moral vacuum, are soon regulated by individuals or society when they have become amoral or immoral.

**Ethics and ethical frameworks**

As a person develops, the family, community, and society inculcate in her or him a sense of right and wrong. This socialization process blends with the person’s own experiences, and gradually develops into the person’s moral code. These groups and processes provide a person with an ethical framework or a set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that constitutes a way the person views reality.
However a person is more than an individual, and alongside a person’s spiritual, physical, psychological and moral development is an emerging awareness that to be human is to be social, and in relationship with others.

**The establishment of moral codes**

A responsible moral attitude involves a consideration of a human action and whether it sustains or disrupts human good, welfare, and relationships. Usually, individual and communal behaviours are measured against a set of moral norms or an ethical framework based on a variety of values, principles and rules that flow from the overall moral vision adopted in any given historical time. However some principles, such as the value of human life, are universal and have underpinned moral codes over the centuries.

Freed from slavery, Moses and the Israelites spent many years in the desert while moving toward their promised land. It was this that led to the establishment of the Ten Commandments. This code of ten action principles state the covenantal attitudes and behaviours expected from Israel. The first three deal with the Divine and human relations and the last seven indicate the covenant between God and the individual and how it affects the relationship between individuals. Because the religious and civil aspects of life were one in Israel, the Ten Commandments became the foundations for future moral and civil norms that act as principles for the personal and the communal moral actions for Israel.

**New Testament moral code**

Not only did Jesus affirm the Ten Commandments, but in Luke 10:25-28, he summarises them into what he called the two greatest commandments: love of God and love of neighbour. Jesus’ life and teachings reveal love as the first essential covenantal attitude and responsibility. In Matthew 5, *the Sermon on the Mount* defines love not as emotional affection but rather as an active and abiding respect that considers all of humankind as worthwhile and valuable. Christians therefore are called to model a love for others that embraces and forgives even an enemy and to
work for peace, mercy and justice even in the face of persecution. Service is the second essential attitude of Jesus’ covenantal ethics as expressed in Luke 4:18-19. Through love and service, Christians are called to liberate themselves and others from situations of injustice and oppression. Jesus’ new vision was not just for the good of the individual or group but for the promotion of the Reign of God. He challenged existing moral codes and frameworks and continues to challenge today. Jesus’ powerful new vision remains fresh and relevant to believers today as they go about discerning the value of new, evolving moral codes in a rapidly changing world.

Civil and moral law

As a community or society develops, the twin forces of law and ethics work to fashion a system for the orderly maintenance of the group. Ethics should provide the basis upon which the rightness or wrongness of a law is judged by the individual and society. Despite the common goal of community law and order, differences exist between a society’s civil and moral codes.

1. Human views of right and wrong change over time according to a shift in the needs of the civilization from basic survival needs to what positively and negatively affects relationships. For example, bigamy.

2. The potential difference between moral and legal norms depending on the separation of church and state. The more separate they are, the more differences there may be between civil and moral laws. For example, capital punishment. There is also the conflict of the two different spheres of crime and punishment (law/state) and sin and forgiveness (morality/church).

3. Laws are culturally and historically bound and reflect the legislator’s perceptions of right and wrong at a given time. For example, slavery.

What happens when law and ethics conflict? What are the individual’s and the collective group’s responsibilities when faced with a law that they consider unjust or
immoral? Blind obedience to authority in no way replaces the individual person’s responsibilities to weigh all actions against basic ethical codes of right action. This is repeated in a variety of religious traditions. A Christian is not morally bound to obey an unjust or immoral law. When such a conflict arises some moral traditions dictate that the individual and society as a whole are bound to consider more than external rules; each person is bound to follow an inner code for ethical living, called conscience.

**Conscience**

**What conscience is NOT:**

Conscience is not a feeling, whether good or bad. One can feel guilty about a whole range of things which have nothing to do with conscience. Similarly, the fact that one does not feel guilty about an issue does not make it right. Feelings are not indicative of moral rectitude or deficiency. It is also not making up one’s mind by oneself about what ought be done. (Gula, 1989)

**What conscience IS:**

Conscience is the radical experience of ourselves as moral agents. Only when one decides to do, or not to do, something, is one acting out of conscience. Conscience is the experience of being called to radical authenticity and acting in the name of Christ, as a disciple, to further the kingdom of God.

But, as noted above, we can never know ourselves completely and so decisions of conscience are necessarily incomplete and partial. And because our own circumstances are always historically, socially and culturally defined, decisions of conscience can be but not necessarily fallible and subject to correction and change.

Conscience is not infallible. Doing something in “good conscience” is not an absolute sign that we are actually “doing good.”

Conscience is the act of moral judgement. (Aquinas)

Conscience is what summons us to love good and avoid evil. (Vatican II)

Gula describes three senses of Conscience:
1. Capacity: an innate sense of the fundamental characteristic of being human which makes it possible to know and do good.

2. Process: searching for what is right through accurate perception and analysis making use of sources of moral wisdom wherever they may be found.


The primacy of the individual conscience is strongly rooted in Catholic theology and is now taken for granted. Catholics are bound to follow their conscience in all activities and one should not be prevented from following even an erroneous conscience. (Vatican II)

Ultimately conscience is the person’s commitment to values and the judgement one must make in light of a commitment to apply those values. Natural Law operates as a dynamic reality that helps us understand what it means to be human. Faith shapes our reason; human reason shapes our faith. According to the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, we discover the natural law in the depths of our conscience. It is a law, which we do not impose on ourselves, yet it holds us to obedience for our own well-being and the well-being of the human family. It summons us to love the good and avoid what is evil. It is written in the human heart by God.

**Catholic moral decision making**

The greatest assistance for one’s conscience is the gift of discernment. It presupposes the following qualities:

- Knowledge of moral principles (to know what is “right”)
- Experience and the ability to profit from it (consequences)
- An ability to learn from others (humility and openness)
- An ability to make rational inferences (to see connections and recognise interdependence)
- Inventiveness and creativity, vision and foresight (imagination)
- An ability to see and weigh circumstances (discernment)
- An ability to anticipate and weigh circumstances (persistence)
- An ability to anticipate obstacles and plan to surmount them (resilience)
- An ability to decide in the light of the preceding. (strength and courage)

**Contemporary theology regarding sin**

Richard M. Gula, American Franciscan theologian describes a new look at the moral life informed by the biblical renewal in the Catholic Church and by some philosophical shifts within the Church and society. For example, the biblical renewal has placed covenant, heart and conversion — not law — as primary moral concepts. Responsibility has replaced obligation as the primary characteristic of the moral life. Shifts in philosophy have emphasized the dignity of persons and the value of sharing life in society. Together these shifts in theology and philosophy support a *relational* model of the moral life. The relational model emphasizes personal responsibility for protecting the bonds of peace and justice that sustain human relationships.

Far from doing away with sin, contemporary theology admits that sin is very much with us and touches us more deeply than we realise. Greed, violence, corruption, poverty, hunger, sexism and oppression are too prevalent to ignore. *Sin* is just as basic a term in Christian vocabulary today as it has been in the past. Its root sense means to be disconnected from God through the failure to love. In sin, we simply don't bother about anyone outside ourselves. Sin is first a matter of a selfish heart — a refusal to care — before it shows itself in actions.

Because loving God and loving our neighbour are all tied together, sin will always be expressed in and through our relationships. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms that, just as the least of our acts done in charity has some benefit for all, so every sin causes some harm. The *Catechism* quotes Scripture to make this point: "None of us lives for oneself, and none of us dies for oneself" (Rom 14:7); "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor 12:26-27);
"Charity does not insist on its own way" (1 Cor 13:5; see 10:24). In this solidarity with all people, says the Catechism, "living or dead, which is founded on the communion of saints, the least of our acts done in charity redounds to the profit of all. Every sin harms this communion" (#953).

One of the most obvious changes in a contemporary approach to sin is the emphasis given to how sin affects the quality of life and love in our relationships.

*Sin is any action or omission that hinders, violates or breaks right relationships with God, ourselves and others by diminishing human dignity and well-being.*

**Social sin**

Gula describes the occurrence of social sin as human-made structures that offend human dignity by causing people to suffer oppression, exploitation or marginalization. These include educational systems, housing policies, tax structures, immigration policies, health-care systems, employment policies, and could even include smaller institutions such as clubs, schools and families. Once established, social structures and customs seem to take on a life of their own. New members of the group fall in line with current policies and practices. For example, ongoing ‘initiation’ cultures in the defence forces.

We learn to live in a world with these structures. We presume that the social customs which they hold in place are good, traditional customs. That is what makes social sin so difficult to recognize and to change. Yet the evil of sinful social structures abounds in all forms of discrimination; processing policies of refugees; in the illiteracy and homelessness of the poor; in unequal access to health care; in the manipulation of consumers by the manufacturing practices; in abuse of the natural environment; in physical and emotional abuse and in many other practices which we continue to support more out of ignorance than meanness. Gula asks: Why does social sin prevail? Largely because we fail to name social evils and seek to correct them.
“Sin” and “structures of sin” are categories which are seldom applied to the situation of the contemporary world. However, one cannot easily gain a profound understanding of the reality that confronts us unless we give a name to the root of the evils which afflict us. John Paul II Sollicitudo rei socialis 36.3

When we become aware of structural evils, we should not be paralysed by the guilt of self-condemnation, but moved to conversion. Conversion from social sin involves, at one level, changing our own lifestyle in ways that will help reform society. We cannot do everything to end the structures which support sexism, for example, but we can do some things; for instance, curbing our use of exclusive and insensitive language. We can influence others’ attitudes through the ways we talk to and about one another. At another level, conversion from social sin involves examining existing regulations and practices, reforming those that offend human dignity.

Most of this commentary on social sin is paraphrased from Richard M. Gula, 1989, Reason Informed by Faith, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.

A model for ethical decision making for complex issues

There are many models for making ethical decisions. The See, Judge, Act model of Catholic social teaching is one that can be applied to complex ethical questions where time is not a major pressure. For example, issues of bio-ethics, dealing with refugees, issues of land rights and self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, when to call Royal Commissions of inquiry and so forth. The table on the following page shows a comparison between the See, Judge, Act Model and a five step model as outlined in Caron, J. (1995). Christian Ethics: Shaping values, vision, decisions. Mystic, CT, Twenty Third Publications.
A comparison of the See, Judge, Act model with the Five Step Model for ethical decision making as outlined in Caron, 1995.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step One: See</th>
<th>Step One: Acquisition of Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Possible questions:</td>
<td>Name the ethical problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What’s going on?</td>
<td>Gather facts: spiritual, psychological, emotional, medical, legal, family views.</td>
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<tr>
<td>What do you see/observe?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What facts do you know about the issue?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What did you learn?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How do you feel about the issue or experience?</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step Two: Judge</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Social Analysis</td>
<td>Determine motives, prioritise values, principles, prima facie duties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why does the situation exist?</td>
<td>Consider the various courses of action, risks and benefits, short and long term consequences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic factors: Who owns/controls?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political factors: who decides? Who are they deciding for?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do decisions get made? Who is left out of the decision making?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social factors: Who is left out? Who is included? Why?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical factors: What past events influence the situation today?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural factors: What values are evident? What do people believe in? Who influences what they believe?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Theological Reflection</td>
<td></td>
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<td>What scriptural passages can help to interpret this? What does Catholic social teaching say about the issue?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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<tr>
<th>Information + analysis + theological reflection = Step Three: Action</th>
<th>Step Four: Arrival at a decision</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What needs to be done to change and address root causes in light of human rights, theology and facts? How would you transform current structures/practices/relationships? How would you develop responses/actions with the people at the centre of the injustice? How could you act to empower the disadvantaged? How will you evaluate your action?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Step Five: Implementation of the decision</th>
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