

Different Questions, Different Answers

By Henry Haslam

‘It appears that in Ethics, as in all other philosophical studies, the difficulties and disagreements, of which its history is full, are mainly due to a very simple cause: namely to the attempt to answer questions without first discovering precisely what question it is which you desire to answer.’

Thus wrote G E Moore in the Preface to *Principia Ethica*. In this article, I wish to suggest that some of the current disagreements on moral issues within the church are, at least in part, due to a failure to clarify the nature of the question. To ask whether something is or is not sinful is sometimes not enough; we need to look more closely at the assumptions that underlie the questions – assumptions about the role of moral thinking in our lives.

What is morality for? We want to feel that we live moral lives, but why? What is the purpose of morality? What role should it have in our lives? The fundamental point, which determines our whole approach to moral issues, is this: do we regard moral teaching as necessary but unwelcome, or do we welcome it?

Most of us, I suspect, can identify with both these positions. Sometimes we may know what it is that we want to do – and we just hope that unwelcome moral considerations don’t interfere. In other circumstances, we will be seeking moral guidance, open to wherever it may lead, without wanting to pay too much attention to whatever personal desires we may have.

In the former situation, we recognise that moral considerations are necessary and, because we want to lead moral lives, we will try to pay attention to them, but they place restrictions on our freedom to do as we please. They may prevent us from achieving some important goal in our lives (happiness, wealth, relationships, or whatever) and we do not welcome them. Generally, moral teaching and moral principles are a nuisance, and the less there is of them the better.

At other times, however, we may welcome moral guidance. It is only through listening to moral teaching, thinking and praying about it and putting it into practice in our lives that we can achieve our true purpose in life: to do God’s will.

In the first type of situation, we are asking questions like: ‘This is what I want to do. Are there any moral reasons why I shouldn’t?’

In the second, we are seeking moral guidance. Our questions are like: ‘What is the best course of action here? What is God’s will for me?’

I propose to call the first approach ‘the pragmatic way’ and the second ‘the higher calling’. This is an oversimplification (the search for the will of God often involves pragmatic thinking, for example), but it serves to illustrate the point that different kinds of question lead to different kinds of answer.

We all follow both ways at one time or another. When faced, as an observer, with a situation in which there is great suffering, serious illness or death, people would normally ask ‘What can I do for the best?’ rather than ‘What do I want for myself out of this situation?’ When thinking about small everyday commercial decisions, like shopping, people are more likely to adopt the pragmatic approach: ‘This is what I want to do – unless moral considerations suggest otherwise’.

When we seek the higher calling, we do not make personal pleasure or our own immediate likes and dislikes our first priority (‘Father, hear the prayer we offer: Not for ease that prayer

shall be'). There is no expectation that the calling will take us where we want to go ('When you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go'). We ask 'for no other reward save that of knowing that we do thy will'. As soon as we start thinking 'This is what I want to do, and I can't see why I shouldn't' we are moving from the higher calling to the pragmatic way.

With the pragmatic way, the debate may focus on the possible consequences of the courses of action being considered. Moral principle and generalised, abstract moral teaching, even if it is derived from scripture and has been endorsed by Christian tradition, may carry less weight if we cannot see the point of it. We may concentrate on questions like 'Who benefits? Who might get hurt? Who gains? Who loses? Is it what I want?'

The pragmatic way may not always be an easy option. Being more worldly, it may be more complex and more demanding. In weighing one moral consideration against another, it may lead to an uncomfortable decision against one moral principle (truthfulness, for example) because of the greater claims of another.

In the higher calling, the questions are like 'How can I serve God in this situation?' and the answers are found from the traditional sources of prayer, Bible and Christian thinking. Here we may be more likely to heed Biblical teaching and Christian tradition, even if we cannot see the point of it. We may decide not to follow such teaching if we find that it conflicts seriously with some other strong moral principle, but we will not set it aside just because it conflicts with what we want to do.

SCRIPTURAL TEACHING

A central theme of scripture is to inspire us to follow the higher calling: the Sermon on the Mount, for example, and 1 Corinthians 13. Such teaching is not what we are looking for when we just want to get on with our lives with the minimum of interference from moral considerations.

There is nothing pragmatic about Jesus at the time of his trial and crucifixion. If he had followed the way of pragmatism, he would have used his power base of popularity and his undoubted debating skills, coupled with the fact that he was so transparently good, and right, to triumph over his accusers and live to continue his ministry for many more years – to the enormous benefit of humanity and the Kingdom, it could be argued. But that was not his calling.

In Psalm 119, the psalmist does not regard God's laws as unwelcome, preventing him from doing what he would like to do. Quite the opposite. He seeks the higher calling, and knows that he cannot find his way unless he is taught God's law.

And yet, the Bible also contains examples of the pragmatic approach to moral thinking.

The social prohibitions in the Ten Commandments, with their emphasis on 'Thou shalt not', place boundaries on acceptable behaviour. The implication is that lives are devoted to self, and that such lives need boundaries.

In the book of Daniel, the three Jews – Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – were called to special service and witness by refusing to obey their master, King Nebuchadnezzar, and worship a false god: the higher calling.

Naaman, on the other hand, in very similar circumstances, was granted Elisha's blessing when he sought to follow a more pragmatic way:

‘But may the Lord forgive your servant for this one thing: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and I bow there also – when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the Lord forgive your servant for this.’

‘Go in peace,’ Elisha said.

2 Kings 5:18,19

Naaman recognised that there was a moral issue here and he said, in effect, ‘This is what I want to do – I hope it’s OK?’

Jesus’ teaching about the Sabbath in Matthew 12:1–12 was decidedly pragmatic. When his disciples picked ears of corn to eat as they walked through a cornfield and, later, when he encountered the man with the shrivelled hand, he used common sense and reasoned argument to explain why the Old Testament law need not be interpreted too strictly.

OTHER ILLUSTRATIONS

C S Lewis and ‘Three kinds of men’

C S Lewis wrote the short essay ‘Three kinds of men’ in 1943. Men in the first of these classes live lives that are not influenced by any moral thinking of any kind. Those in the second class pursue their own interests as far as they can, but recognise the boundaries set by moral considerations. The third class say, like St Paul, that for them ‘to live is Christ’.

Although expressed in different words, the second and third of these classes represent the pragmatic way and the higher calling (I differ from Lewis in that I don’t like dividing people into separate categories: most of us are a mixture). People in the third class welcome moral guidance, those in the second do not. Lewis does not proceed to explore any of the implications of the differences between his classes of men, nor does he discuss possible applications. However, he does make the point that people in the second class (and most of us, he says, fall into this class) are inevitably unhappy: in seeking to satisfy the demands of self and the demands of morality, he writes, we either feel guilt because we have not satisfied the demands of morality, or penury because we have.

A parallel with the aesthetic values of the musician

In a very different way, we can suggest a parallel with aesthetic values. A young music student may say, ‘I want to play the piano by thumping the keyboard with my fists. Why shouldn’t I?’ Any advice from the teacher will be unwelcome, and the teacher’s answer is likely to focus on whether there is anyone of a sensitive disposition in earshot. However, if the pupil asks ‘What should I do if I want to become a really good concert pianist?’ the answers are very different. The pupil will welcome advice and will want to listen to all the answers; the way will not be easy, but that is not the point. Different questions receive different answers.

APPLICATIONS TO MODERN LIFE

Poverty and possessions

The higher calling may be to a vow of poverty, and throughout the history of the church there have been some who have chosen this course.

The vast majority of Christians, however, have sought possessions – the pragmatic way. Moral considerations make some restrictions on the manner in which possessions are acquired and in the way in which they are used (and biblical teaching about our responsibilities to the needy and vulnerable may leave us feeling rather uncomfortable), but the ownership of property is a sensible, pragmatic basis for life.

Vocations and jobs

Some people are called to Christian ministry or to some other specific vocation, but many Christian people just have a job – a pragmatic way to contribute to the needs of society in some way and thereby to earn money for themselves and their families. The two approaches need not always be entirely separate: people who are called to ministry may be pragmatic in deciding where to exercise their ministry, for example.

Sexual relationships

Sexual feelings can be very strong, and most moralists attach a lot of importance to sexual behaviour. It is notable, however, that sexual matters have only a very small part in our Lord's moral teaching.

There are some Christians today who hold that the only options for Christians are celibacy or a life-long commitment to marriage. These are the ideals commended by scripture and Christian tradition. There are others who see no reasonable grounds for opposing serial monogamy and same-sex unions, for example, and consider that the theological and other arguments against them do not stand up to scrutiny.

Both points of view are morally and intellectually defensible – but they are irreconcilable, and there is no viable compromise or middle way. The 'different questions, different answers' approach recognises the validity of both and offers a biblical and rational basis for mutual toleration. We can accept the principled stand of those who seek to follow the higher calling and have no wish to question traditional teaching. We can also accept the views of those who feel that this teaching is needlessly restrictive and wish to take a more pragmatic approach to relationships. It is worth noting that the pragmatic way is not necessarily permissive, if it involves asking questions like 'Is anybody likely to be hurt if I do what I want to do?'

DISCUSSION

If moral teaching is unwelcome, interfering with the way we want to live our lives, we will look for reasons why it does not apply to us – and we may find such reasons. Matthew 5:17–48 contains plenty of teaching that we might not want to interpret too strictly, and there are more examples in Matthew 6:19,31,34; 7:1; 19:21 – just to take a few examples from one gospel.

Many Christians find reasons to believe that traditional teaching on sexual relationships does not really apply to us today. We also find reasons why biblical teaching on possessions and caring for the needy and vulnerable does not have to be interpreted too strictly; these issues seem to be less controversial at the present time, but that does not mean that they are less important. What is significant, perhaps, is not just that that we are able find such reasons but that we should *want* to find them: we do not welcome moral restrictions.

If we do welcome moral teaching, however, we will not be looking for reasons to excuse ourselves from it – unless some teaching or principle conflicts with another moral principle that

we regard as stronger. Our preference will be to follow biblical teaching when we can, not to question it. The writer of Psalm 119 is not looking for reasons to avoid keeping God's commandments.

It follows that, before giving moral advice, we should be clear as to the nature of the question, and the kind of assumptions that lie behind the question. A questioner who is seeking the higher calling will welcome difficult and challenging advice – but such advice may seem unnecessary and pointless to a pragmatic questioner who is hoping for as little moral interference as possible. Conversely, a kindly meant, permissive 'Just do what you like' reply may be just what a pragmatic questioner wants to hear, but a questioner who is earnestly seeking God's will in a difficult situation will feel let down – just as Peter's well-meaning rebuke to his master in Matthew 16:21–23 (“Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”) missed the point.

This poses particular problems in an age when moral issues are discussed in the media. There is a danger that any pronouncement will miss the point for a large number of listeners. We can make no assumptions about whether listeners are keen to listen to moral teaching or not. Some people will be seeking moral guidance for their lives and will welcome a challenging message. Others will take it for granted that moral restrictions are a nuisance; a necessary nuisance that has to be tolerated, perhaps, but still a nuisance. These people will need to be convinced – pragmatically – that any particular moral rule is necessary before they will accept it. Kindly, liberal, permissive preaching will upset those who think that the church should be giving a lead on moral issues, whereas a more challenging message may provide ammunition for those who like to say that the church is out of touch with the times.

Public preaching should not belittle or discourage those who seek the higher calling and welcome challenging moral teaching. As a society, we appreciate and applaud excellence in sport, music and the performing arts generally, and we recognise that excellence is not achieved without effort and sacrifice. However, we are curiously reluctant to look at excellence in living in the same way. As the American writer James Q Wilson wrote in *The Moral Sense*, 'Virtue has acquired a bad name'. Perhaps moral goodness is too often associated in people's minds with a sort of self-satisfied superiority – the Pharisee rather than the tax collector in Luke 18:9–14 – a misconception that needs to be corrected.

Nor should public preaching condemn those who are adopting a more pragmatic approach to morality. When morally upright people expected Jesus to join with them in denouncing someone who they thought was behaving badly in some way, he did not take their side (e.g. Matthew 12:1–8, 26:6–13; Luke 10:38–42 John 8:1–11). This was not because he had a permissive casual approach to moral issues and behaviour (the Sermon on the Mount, for example). It was rather that he made a point of rebuking self-righteous attitudes. As Donald Spoto wrote in *The Hidden Jesus*, 'If one had to isolate a single trait that provoked Jesus, it was what might be called spiritual smugness'.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have explored the idea that the answers we will find to moral questions depend on the questions we ask and on the assumptions that underlie the questions.

But, we may ask, does this argument really stand up? Can there really be two different ways of approaching moral issues, leading to different conclusions? Can they both be valid? If both approaches are valid, can we find some way of integrating them? Are not all Christians called to the higher calling? Is not this where true happiness is to be found? If we remember

Matthew 6:33 ('But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well'), can we really say that there is a difference between the higher calling and seeking our own happiness?

My argument begins with the down-to-earth observation that some of our moral questioning assumes that we regard moral teaching as welcome, and some assumes that we regard it as unwelcome. This is not a matter of opinion or doctrine: it is a simple matter of fact. Can we argue that every Christian should always be seeking what I have described as 'the higher calling'? Should a Christian always welcome moral teaching? Perhaps we should, but we don't. We all (or nearly all) find reasons for not being too strict in our observance of some of moral teaching, especially if we cannot see the point of it. Moreover, we can note that there is some scriptural authority for a rather more easy-going, pragmatic approach to moral issues, at the expense of high moral principle: the story of Naaman and the story of Jesus and his disciples walking through the cornfields on the Sabbath are two examples. I would like to emphasise, therefore, that I am not contrasting a moral approach to life with an amoral one: both are moral.

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