



RECLAIMING THE
CHRISTIAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

ETHICS AND MORAL REASONING

A STUDENT'S GUIDE

C. Ben Mitchell

Series Editor: David S. Dockery

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“C. Ben Mitchell has written a concise, surefooted guide to ethics and moral reasoning from an evangelical perspective that takes both the Scriptures and the history of ethical discussion seriously. The text is written with admirable clarity and scholarly competence. For Mitchell, the triune God’s divine design for human life is our flourishing as persons who are members of a moral community. This short book contributes to that flourishing, and I commend it enthusiastically.”

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Carl E. Zylstra, President, Dordt College

Ethics and Moral Reasoning: A Student's Guide

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SERIES PREFACE

RECLAIMING THE CHRISTIAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

The Reclaiming the Christian Intellectual Tradition series is designed to provide an overview of the distinctive way the church has read the Bible, formulated doctrine, provided education, and engaged the culture. The contributors to this series all agree that personal faith and genuine Christian piety are essential for the life of Christ followers and for the church. These contributors also believe that helping others recognize the importance of serious thinking about God, Scripture, and the world needs a renewed emphasis at this time in order that the truth claims of the Christian faith can be passed along from one generation to the next. The study guides in this series will enable us to see afresh how the Christian faith shapes how we live, how we think, how we write books, how we govern society, and how we relate to one another in our churches and social structures. The richness of the Christian intellectual tradition provides guidance for the complex challenges that believers face in this world.

This series is particularly designed for Christian students and others associated with college and university campuses, including faculty, staff, trustees, and other various constituents. The contributors to the series will explore how the Bible has been interpreted in the history of the church, as well as how theology has been formulated. They will ask: How does the Christian faith influence our understanding of culture, literature, philosophy, government, beauty, art, or work? How does the Christian intellectual tradition help us understand truth? How does the Christian intellectual tradition shape our approach to education? We believe that this series is not only timely but that it meets an important need, because the

secular culture in which we now find ourselves is, at best, indifferent to the Christian faith, and the Christian world—at least in its more popular forms—tends to be confused about the beliefs, heritage, and tradition associated with the Christian faith.

At the heart of this work is the challenge to prepare a generation of Christians to think Christianly, to engage the academy and the culture, and to serve church and society. We believe that both the breadth and the depth of the Christian intellectual tradition need to be reclaimed, revitalized, renewed, and revived for us to carry forward this work. These study guides will seek to provide a framework to help introduce students to the great tradition of Christian thinking, seeking to highlight its importance for understanding the world, its significance for serving both church and society, and its application for Christian thinking and learning. The series is a starting point for exploring important ideas and issues such as truth, meaning, beauty, and justice.

We trust that the series will help introduce readers to the apostles, church fathers, Reformers, philosophers, theologians, historians, and a wide variety of other significant thinkers. In addition to well-known leaders such as Clement, Origen, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and Jonathan Edwards, readers will be pointed to William Wilberforce, G. K. Chesterton, T. S. Eliot, Dorothy Sayers, C. S. Lewis, Johann Sebastian Bach, Isaac Newton, Johannes Kepler, George Washington Carver, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Michael Polanyi, Henry Luke Orombi, and many others. In doing so, we hope to introduce those who throughout history have demonstrated that it is indeed possible to be serious about the life of the mind while simultaneously being deeply committed Christians. These efforts to strengthen serious Christian thinking and scholarship will not be limited to the study of theology, scriptural interpretation, or philosophy, even though these areas provide the framework for understanding the Christian faith for all other areas of exploration. In order for us to reclaim and

advance the Christian intellectual tradition, we must have some understanding of the tradition itself. The volumes in this series will seek to explore this tradition and its application for our twenty-first-century world. Each volume contains a glossary, study questions, and a list of resources for further study, which we trust will provide helpful guidance for our readers.

I am deeply grateful to the series editorial committee: Timothy George, John Woodbridge, Michael Wilkins, Niel Nielson, Philip Ryken, and Hunter Baker. Each of these colleagues joins me in thanking our various contributors for their fine work. We all express our appreciation to Justin Taylor, Jill Carter, Allan Fisher, Lane Dennis, and the Crossway team for their enthusiastic support for the project. We offer the project with the hope that students will be helped, faculty and Christian leaders will be encouraged, institutions will be strengthened, churches will be built up, and, ultimately, that God will be glorified.

Soli Deo Gloria
David S. Dockery
Series Editor

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

WHY ETHICS MATTERS

Few people need to be convinced of the importance of ethics. We live in a tragically flawed world where we are confronted daily with moral failures. People lie, commit adultery, steal from their employers, and pollute the environment. At the same time, we all know people whose lives reflect personal integrity, sacrificial love, and unimpeachable virtue. We know that ethics is important at all levels of society. Whether presidents or members of Congress, CEOs or their employees, doctors or nurses, teachers or pupils, or parents or children, we all believe it is important to make good moral decisions, to be ethical people.

What might take some convincing is the notion that we could ever come to common conclusions about ethics. There is deep skepticism in our culture about moral agreement. In his study of the religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults ages eighteen to twenty-three years old, Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith found that

emerging adults have been raised in a world involving certain outlooks and assumptions that they have clearly absorbed and that they in turn largely affirm and reinforce. Stated in philosophical terms, their world has undergone a significant epistemic and axiological breakdown. It is difficult if not impossible in this world that has come to be to actually know anything objectively real or true that can be rationally maintained in a way that might require people actually to change their minds or lives. Emerging adults know quite well how they personally were raised in their families, and they know fairly well how they generally “feel” about things. But they are also aware that all knowledge and value are historically conditioned and culturally relative. And

they have not, in our view, been equipped with the intellectual and moral tools to know what to do with that fact. So most simply choose to believe and live by whatever subjectively feels “right” to them, and to try not to seriously assess, much less criticize, anything else that anyone else has chosen to believe, feel, or do. Whether or not they use these words to say it, for most emerging adults, in the end, it’s all relative. One thought or opinion isn’t more defensible than any other. One way of life cannot claim to be better than others. Some moral beliefs may personally *feel* right, but no moral belief can rationally claim to be really true, because that implies criticizing or discounting other moral beliefs. And that would be rude, presumptuous, intolerant, and unfeeling. This is what we mean when we use the terms *crisis* and *breakdown*. . . .

Many know there must be something more, and they want it. Many are uncomfortable with their inability to make trust statements and moral claims without killing them with the death of a thousand qualifications. But they do not know what to do about that, given the crisis of truth and values that has destabilized their culture. And so they simply carry on as best they can, as sovereign, autonomous, empowered individuals who lack a reliable basis for any particular conviction or direction by which to guide their lives.¹

This state of affairs sounds dire because it is. This is the world many of my students inhabit. And, in most cases, it’s not their fault. They have inherited this worldview from social media, schoolmates, pop culture, and sometimes even from their parents. They intuit that this is not the way it’s supposed to be, but it’s the only way they know. When they look to my own Boomer generation, they do not see many attractive alternatives.

Because the culture is largely relativistic, we also often trade ethics for legal compliance. If someone asks, “Is it ethical to do X?,” it is likely that someone will respond, “The policy [or the law] says do X.” Ethical right and wrong are confused with legal right

¹ Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 292–93, 294.

and wrong. But to comply with law and/or policy is not necessarily to act ethically. The law or policy could be wrong. Just because what Hitler did was legal in Nazi Germany does not mean it was right. Just because chattel slavery was legal in the South in the 1860s did not make it right to own slaves. Sometimes it is right to disobey the law. Sometimes we are morally obligated to quit a job or blow the whistle over immoral policies.

These are some of the issues we will explore in this volume. The terrain is not always easy to traverse, but perseverance has its rewards. As a great Catholic thinker, A. G. Sertillanges, once said, "Truth serves only its slaves."²

THE LANGUAGE OF ETHICS

Before we go further, I should point out that like every other discipline, ethics and moral reasoning have their own language. Ethics and moral reasoning fit in the category called "axiology." The big three questions of philosophy include metaphysics (What is?), epistemology (How do you know?), and axiology (What is value? and What is valuable?).

Axiological questions may apply to economics if we ask how we determine value monetarily. Axiology may also apply to art if we explore aesthetic value. Axiology applies to ethics when we think about moral value. So if metaphysics asks, "What is truth?," axiology asks, "What is beauty?" and "What is good?" The true, the good, and the beautiful are important subjects indeed.

This book is a guide to thinking about the good. We can think about the good in several ways. First, we may *describe* good behavior, decisions, or attitudes. Descriptive ethics attempts merely to describe a certain moral state of affairs. For instance, "Dr. Jack Kevorkian ended the life of at least 130 patients through physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia." This statement merely de-

²A. G. Sertillanges, *The Intellectual Life: Its Spirit, Conditions, Methods* (1934; repr. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1987), 4.

scribes Dr. Kevorkian's behavior without making a judgment about whether it was good or bad, right or wrong.

Prescriptive or normative ethics takes us into the realm of words such as *right*, *wrong*, *good*, *bad*, *ought*, *ought not*, *should*, *should not*, *obligated*, and *nonobligated*. This is the language of moral assessment. If I say, "Dr. Jack Kevorkian should not have ended the life of his patients," I am rendering a moral judgment about his behavior. I am saying he was wrong to do so. I am *prescribing* what his moral behavior *should* have been and implying that it should be normative for other physicians, too.

Applied ethics is simply bringing the tools of prescriptive ethics to bear on issues or disciplines such that we talk about the ethics of abortion, capital punishment, war, the environment, or genetic engineering. Similarly, we can *apply* normative concepts to a variety of disciplines and discuss business ethics, medical ethics, legal ethics, nursing ethics, pharmacy ethics, military ethics, and so on.

Lastly, metaethics considers what we mean when we use words such as *good*. How do we define the word *good*?

In sum, every area of ethics is ultimately concerned with moral goodness as a way of determining right conduct, attitudes, and character.

Because I am a Christian, I am concerned about how conduct, attitudes, and character should be oriented toward the triune God through Jesus Christ by the power of the indwelling Spirit. At the same time I must ask myself, in light of that relationship, how I am to behave toward others. These three moral relationships—to God, to others, and to self—define the ethical territory.

This is exactly how the ancient Jews and Christians understood their ethical duties. When a lawyer came to Jesus and asked him which commandment was the most important, Jesus replied:

The most important is, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all

your strength.” The second is this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these. (Mark 12:29–31)

Jesus described a trinity of moral relationships—to God, to others, and to self. These three relationships were to be ordered by the virtue of love. Importantly, when one of these relationships becomes disordered, the others are affected. If one’s relationship with God is broken or distorted, one’s relationship with others will be negatively impacted, and one’s relationship with oneself will also be affected. Similarly, if one’s relationship with others is disordered, one’s relationship with God and self will be negatively impacted. Jesus alluded to this reality in the Sermon on the Mount when he taught about anger:

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Matt. 5:23–24)

Before God can be worshiped rightly, our strained relationships with others must be made right. Once our relationship with our brother or sister is reordered and reconciliation takes place, our relationship with God is reordered so that worship is unhindered. Rightly ordered loves not only mark the moral life of the faithful believer but also are the means of human flourishing, of having a right relationship with the God who is the personification of the true, the good, and the beautiful.

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THE CHALLENGES OF A RELATIVIST WORLD

“Well, that might be right for you, but not for me.”

“You can’t judge one culture by another.”

“Who’s to say what’s right or wrong?”

Most of us have heard comments like those while talking with someone over coffee or at a dinner party. The idea that morality is personal, subjective, and relative is in the air we breathe. It’s part of the *Zeitgeist* (the spirit of the times). In a widely used introductory ethics text, J. L. Mackie confidently exclaimed, “There are no objective values.”¹ Notably, the subtitle of Mackie’s volume is “Inventing Right and Wrong.” According to Mackie, moral values are human inventions. This is a remarkable claim indeed, but one that seems a commonplace today.

Similarly, in her often reprinted essay “In Defense of Moral Relativism,” American anthropologist Ruth Benedict wrote,

We recognize that morality differs in every society, and it is a convenient term for socially approved habits. Mankind has always preferred to say, “It is morally good,” rather than “It is habitual,” and the fact of this preference is enough for a critical science of ethics. But historically the two phrases are synonymous.²

¹J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right from Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977).

²Ruth Benedict, “A Defense of Ethical Relativism,” in *Knowledge, Nature, and Norms: An Introduction to Philosophy*, ed. Mark Timmons and David Shoemaker (New York: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2008), 329.

For Benedict, ethical behavior is just the habits we call “good.” There are no objective, universal ethical norms; there are only the habits we call our ethics. Those habits are relative; they differ in every society.

Benedict was right about one thing—we live in a morally relativistic world. What does that mean? First, it means that if relativism is true, then the study of ethics and moral reasoning is merely a quaint search for dusty, old ideas that no one really believes any longer, a little like hunting for antiques. If relativism is true, it also means that the search for enduring, universal moral norms is futile. But the fact that we live in a relativistic world also means that if relativism is *not* true, we need to know how to respond to a view that is so pervasive in our culture. And it is not only pervasive; relativism is morally crippling because it relegates ethical discussions to the personal, private, and subjective, and to the realm of mere preference.

What we need to realize is that relativism is not merely an assertion. Oh, some people do assert it, but it is in fact an argument for a particular way of understanding morality. Only by understanding the argument will we be better prepared to respond to the claims relativists make.

The argument for what we might call “normative ethical relativism” has two premises and a conclusion. It is “normative” in that it maintains it is the way things *should* be. It is relativistic because it claims that notions of right and wrong or good and bad should *not* be the same for everyone, everywhere, at all times.

Louis Pojman, the late philosopher who taught for many years at the United States Military Academy, calls the two premises of normative ethical relativism the diversity thesis and the dependency thesis.

THE DIVERSITY THESIS

The diversity thesis is that notions of right and wrong differ from person to person and culture to culture. This premise of the argu-

ment seems patently true if we understand it merely as a description of the diversity of cultural norms and mores. For instance, in most Arabic cultures, displaying the bottom of the foot is disrespectful. In some African cultures, giving a gift with the left hand is an insult. Neither of those practices is insulting in American culture. So it is true that ideas about what is right or wrong differ from one culture to another and sometimes from one person or family to another. As Benedict said, “We recognize that morality differs in every society.” But that is merely a description of the way things are. This premise does not by itself make the moral claim that that is the way it *ought* to be.

THE DEPENDENCY THESIS

The second premise of the argument for normative ethical relativism is the dependency thesis, which holds that morality depends on human nature, the human condition, or specific sociocultural circumstances, or a combination of all three.

The word *depends* here implies that one’s views of right and wrong rest solely on one or more of the contingencies just mentioned. So the claim is, first, that what is right or wrong might depend upon human nature. For instance, some people believe that right and wrong are determined by the ability of human beings and other animals to experience conscious pleasure or pain. This view is known as “ethical hedonism.” The ethical hedonist believes that it is always wrong to cause pain and always right to cause pleasure or at least to minimize pain. One person who holds this view is Peter Singer, an Australian philosopher who teaches at Princeton University. Because Singer holds that it is wrong to do anything that causes pain to conscious beings, he has become an outspoken opponent of capital punishment and outspoken proponent of vegetarianism. Not only is it always wrong, he argues, to cause pain to other human beings, but because he considers animals to be conscious beings, it is also wrong to cause unnecessary pain to

other animals. Because humans do not need to eat animals to survive, causing pain by killing them for food or clothing is immoral. Hence, what is right or wrong for Singer depends on the ability for a creature to experience pleasure or pain.

A relativist might also maintain that what's right and wrong depends upon the human condition, such as that humans are mortal. Much of our behavior as a species does seem to be aimed at survival. Our mortality—the fact that we can and do die—leads us to avoid certain behaviors and even to ban those behaviors by law. If human beings were like some of the characters, say, in Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Terminator* movies, we might not have laws against certain forms of physical harm. What would be the harm, for instance, in blasting off someone's arm with a weapon if the arm would regenerate in a matter of seconds? Or what would be the harm in killing people if they could somehow recombine or reconstitute? Because humans are mortal, we tend to be more or less risk averse. Morality, the relativist might say, is just a response to our risk-averse tendencies.

Or, perhaps, our moral notions are the result of our familial or social upbringing. Maybe our society dictates what we think is right and wrong. We sometimes call this view "cultural relativism," but it is a species of the same argument that we have been discussing. Since each culture has its own moral code, the most we can claim, says the relativist, is that morality depends upon one's social conditioning. As Benedict claimed, "It is habitual," and that is identical to saying, "It is morally good."

Finally, an ethical relativist might want to argue that our morality—our notions of right and wrong or good and bad—depends on some combination of all three inputs: human nature, the human condition, *and* human culture. Since every culture has its own views of what constitutes right or wrong conduct, since every culture has its own expression of risk aversion, and since every culture has its own social standards and practices, the following conclusion

is warranted, says the relativist: Morality— notions of right and wrong, good and bad, obligation and non-obligation—*should* differ from culture to culture. Note the inclusion of the word that implies moral obligation: *should*. This is the way that it should be. It should be the case that morality differs from person to person and culture to culture. The normative ethical relativist claims that ethical pluralism is the best we can achieve, so that the notion that one's ethical views could be right—everywhere, for everyone, at all times—is mistaken at best and fascist at worst. Moreover, to critique another person's or culture's morality is a lack of hospitality at best and a moral assault at worst.

This is the moral world in which we live today. Sociologist Christian Smith, director of the study of religion and society at Notre Dame University, has spent much of his career analyzing the spiritual lives of teenagers and emerging adults. In his 2011 study, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*, Professor Smith found that 30 percent of the emerging adults he interviewed professed a belief in strong moral relativism, compared with a national survey showing as many as 47 percent of American emerging adults agreeing with this statement: "Morals are relative, there are not definite rights and wrongs for everybody."³

How do we respond to normative ethical relativism? Well, not with a mere assertion. That is, we should not respond by saying only, "No, that's wrong." That would be to respond to an argument with an assertion. Because relativism is an argument, a counter argument is needed. To construct a counter argument, one must either respond to the premises or show that the argument is invalid, or both.

Normative ethical relativism faces some significant challenges. One classic response to normative ethical relativism was offered by John Hospers, who was for many years chair of the department

³Christian Smith, Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson, and Patricia Snell Herzog, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford, 2011), 27.

of philosophy at the University of Southern California.⁴ Hospers suggested that one problem with relativism is its claim that what is right in one group is wrong in another. As it turns out, observed Hospers, we are part of multiple groups. For instance, we share membership in the species *Homo sapiens*; we also are members of families, churches, geographical communities, interest groups (clubs and athletic teams), etc. Which groups form our moral community, the community that shapes our ethics? Why that group and not another? And just because the majority of any particular group thinks something is right does not make it right. It would be very easy to say, “Cannibalism is right in a cannibalistic culture, and if most of the people in the United States became cannibals, then cannibalism would be right for us.” But is there any reason to believe that just because the majority practices cannibalism, it is therefore right? Is the habit of cannibalism the same as approving an ethic of cannibalism? Majorities can be—and historically have been—wrong. Is the relativist really prepared to argue that if a majority of Americans approved of slavery, slavery would be right?

Another problem with the relativist argument is that moral error is not possible if relativism is true. The relativist, at least a consistent one, cannot say that someone made an ethical mistake. The relativist could break a law, commit a mistake of etiquette, or violate community standards, but she could not commit a moral wrong, since right and wrong are in the eyes of the beholder. Is it really possible that having sex with a child is only a violation of community standards? It seems perfectly reasonable, indeed necessary, to say that child sexual abuse is a moral wrong, everywhere and at all times.

A third problem is that there is no place for moral reformers in relativism. If a community holds that apartheid is morally right, then according to the relativist argument, who is Nelson Mandela

⁴John Hospers, *Human Conduct: An Introduction to the Problem of Ethics* (New York: Harcourt, 1961), 37–39.

to claim that racial segregation is wrong? If relativism is true, Abraham Lincoln was wrong to challenge American chattel slavery, and the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. was wrong to call for an end to racial discrimination.

Fourth, relativism suffers from a fundamental philosophical problem. Remember that the relativist argument begins with a descriptive premise claiming that morality differs from person to person and culture to culture. The argument then claims that this is the way it *ought* to be. An “ought” claim cannot be derived from an “is” claim. In other words, just because this is the way things are does not mean this is the way things ought to be. Just because some Brahmans in India practiced suttee—the ritual practice of burning widows to death—does not mean that is how the culture ought to function. Just because some Islamist and African cultures practice female genital mutilation does not thereby make the practice correct or morally defensible.

Finally, relativism fails to distinguish between moral practices and the values that underwrite them. For instance, in one culture, exposing the bottom of one’s feet may well be a serious moral insult. In another culture, it may be considered wrong to make a certain hand gesture while driving if someone cuts you off at an intersection. What both cultures seem to value in calling those behaviors wrong is *respect for others*. It is out of respect for others that one avoids showing the bottom of one’s feet in Arab cultures, and it is out of respect for others that one avoids certain hand gestures while driving. Every culture seems to value respect, even though the reasons for doing so or the persons seen to be deserving of respect may differ.

Likewise, while living on the North Shore of Chicago, I observed that public relations entrepreneurs in that community thought it was proper to retaliate legally if someone stole their brand name or brand logo. At the same time, gang members in the inner city thought it was proper to retaliate violently if a rival gang

killed one of their gang members. In both cases, the underlying value that dictated behavior was a form of justice or fairness. The grounds and objects of justice were different, to be sure, but some notion of fairness informed the attitude and behavior of both the Windy City entrepreneur and the gang member.

In his interesting volume *The Moral Sense*, political scientist James Q. Wilson argued that every culture shares the values of sympathy, fairness, self-control, and duty, among others.⁵ These values reflect the moral intuitions of a common humanity. So, although on the surface moral practices and beliefs may indeed differ, in fact, human beings share an amazingly robust set of ethical ideals across cultures. Therefore, relativism is wrong. The moral sense—those foundational values—does not differ from person to person and culture to culture. Though none of these critiques alone may convince a person that relativism’s foundation is suspect, together they provide substantial evidence that relativism is unsound.⁶ “Most of us have a moral sense,” Wilson maintained, “but some of us have tried to talk ourselves out of it. It is as if a person born to appreciate a golden sunset or lovely song had persuaded himself and others that a greasy smear or clanging gong ought to be enjoyed as much as true beauty.”⁷

Although relativism is unjustifiable morally, that does not answer the questions, What’s right, what’s wrong, and how do you know? Those questions take us back to the beginning.

⁵James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

⁶For additional critiques of relativism see Francis A. Beckwith, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998); Peter Kreeft, *A Refutation of Moral Relativism: Interviews with an Absolutist* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999); and Timothy Mosteller, *Relativism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2008).

⁷Wilson, *The Moral Sense*, ix.

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THE HISTORY OF MORAL REASONING, PART 1

Western civilization is indebted to the Judeo-Christian tradition for its notions of human dignity and human rights, its innovation in science and medicine, its habits of humanitarian charity and universal education, and its rich contribution to the arts. “Religion has written much of the history of the West,” observes Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner.¹ Roger Scruton, the British polymath, has put it this way:

Throughout its most flourishing periods, Western civilization has produced a culture which happily absorbs and adapts the cultures of other places, other faiths, and other times. Its basic fund of stories, its moral precepts, and its religious imagery come from the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament.²

Even the notorious atheist Christopher Hitchens agreed that Western culture makes little sense without attending to the contribution of biblical religion: “You are not educated,” he maintained, “if you don’t know the Bible. You can’t read Shakespeare or Milton without it.”³ So it is right and good to begin at the beginning with the Old Testament.

¹ Jacob Neusner, ed., *Religious Foundations of Western Civilization: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), xi.

² Roger Scruton, *Culture Counts: Faith and Feeling in a World Besieged* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007), 3.

³ Quoted in Mindy Belz, “The World According to Hitch,” *WORLD* magazine, June 2, 2006, <http://www.worldmag.com/articles/11908> (accessed March 20, 2008).

OLD TESTAMENT ETHICS

We are barely into the biblical text before the vocabulary of value is used:

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was *good*. And God separated the light from the darkness. (Gen. 1:3–4)

The refrain “God saw that it was good” is repeated in verses 10, 12, 18, 21, and 25, and in verse 31 we read, “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was *very good*.” The meaning of the Hebrew word for good (*tobh*) is quite fluid in the Old Testament. According to Old Testament professor Kenneth Matthews the word can mean “happy, beneficial, aesthetically beautiful, morally righteous, preferable, of superior quality, or of ultimate value.”⁴

Notice the chain of divine agency: the holy God said, “Let there be . . .” And it was so. And it was good. “Good” in this case seems to point to conformity to the will and purpose of God, in whom we see the true, the good, and the beautiful. “It is good” was not a statement made relative to any other created thing. God’s only comparison was with his own purpose and will. God is good, and all that he made is good.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

God said it was very good that he made humanity, male and female, in his own image and likeness, to multiply and steward the earth and its plants and animals. From the beginning, humans were created to procreate. And we are told in Genesis 2:23–24 that they were to exercise their procreative gifts in the context of a “one flesh” kind of relationship—marriage. One-flesh unity includes the sexual, procreative aspect and much more. Through married procreation, offspring are born as a token of God’s blessing. So the

⁴Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1996), 146.

psalmist declared, “Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward” (Ps. 127:3).

The Genesis texts are the origin of a tradition that has served humanity well for millennia. Indeed, it was not until the mid-twentieth century that the following axioms came under serious challenge:

- One should refrain from sexual activity until marriage (i.e., the wedding).
- An essential and normative (though not the only) purpose of marriage is to produce children.
- One should choose a spouse from the opposite sex.
- One should refrain from sexual activity with anyone but one’s spouse.
- The marital estate is intended to be a permanent relationship of covenantal love until death.

Because of a half-century of assault, many people think these maxims seem quaint, if not completely antiquated. Make no mistake about it, however; these have been among the great pillars of Western civilization. Their rejection will result not only in personal trauma but in cultural chaos. Cohabitation, adultery, divorce, and same-sex relationships wreak havoc in people’s lives and slowly erode the ballast that keeps the culture stable.

LABOR AND VOCATION

Innovation and development have been other trademarks of the West. Rooted in the mandate to “be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth” (Gen. 1:28 NJPS), the Judeo-Christian tradition provides rich impetus for the stewardship of invention.

God put primordial humans in a garden “to till it and tend it” (Gen. 2:15 NJPS), to classify the natural order (Gen. 2:20), and to sustain them and the garden. It is important to notice that the

dignity of work was evident before the curse was pronounced on human rebellion. It was not until after the fall that labor became toilsome and bread had to be earned by the sweat of the brow (Gen. 3:17).

The first humans made tools (Gen. 4:22), planted vineyards (Gen. 9:20), made weapons (Gen. 10:9), and built great cities (Gen. 10:10). *Homo sapiens* (human knowers) were by their very nature *Homo faber* (human fabricators). Inventiveness and innovation were characteristics of the ancients, as it is today.

Among Jews and Christians, honest labor has been an important validation of human dignity. Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) honored both work and the worker when he said, “Just as the employer is warned not to steal the wages of the poor and not to delay them, so is the poor person warned not to steal the work of the employer by idling a little here and a little there, until he passes the whole day in deceit. Rather, he must be scrupulous with himself regarding time.”⁵ Likewise early Christians valued work highly. Jesus, after all, grew up in a carpenter’s home, most of the disciples were bi-vocational, and the apostle Paul admonished Christians to avoid “any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. . . . If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat” (2 Thess. 3:6, 10). Paul also enjoined the faithful “to do their work quietly and to earn their own living” (2 Thess. 3:12).

Against the medieval tendency to dichotomize work as either sacred or secular, the Reformers saw all work as sacred vocation (*vocatio*). Martin Luther famously argued that all (morally virtuous) work is God’s work and is to be done so as to glorify God and serve others. This was the origin of the so-called Protestant work ethic that was analyzed and critiqued by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (first English translation in 1930).

⁵ Moses Maimonides, *A Maimonides Reader*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Springfield, NJ: Behrman, 1972), 182.

SANCTITY AND DIGNITY OF HUMAN LIFE

Another hallmark of the West emerging from the Genesis account is the sanctity of every human life. According to the Hebrew Bible, all human beings owe their ancestry to a set of common parents, Adam and Eve, who were made in the image and likeness of their creator (Gen. 1:27). All their progeny bear the *imago Dei* (image of God) as well (Gen. 5:1–32). From these beginnings we have inherited the concept of human exceptionalism—the affirmation that human beings are unique among the created order and possessors of inalienable rights and ought to exercise managerial stewardship over nature. The doctrine of the sanctity of human life brought with it a number of significant implications. Infanticide, abortion, and brutality were rejected as inconsistent with the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. Moreover, belief in human dignity became the foundation of gender and racial equality in the West.

INFANTICIDE AND ABORTION

European historian W. E. H. Lecky called infanticide “one of the deepest stains of the ancient civilisation.” Judaism consistently prohibited it because the practice violated the image of God. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus wrote, “The law orders all the offspring to be brought up, and forbids women either to cause abortion or to make away with the fetus.” The Hebrew origins of the sanctity of human life provided the moral framework for early Christian condemnation of infanticide against the bleak backdrop of the barbarism of Roman culture. For instance, an early Christian handbook, the *Didache* (c. 85–110), sometimes called “The Teachings of the Twelve Apostles,” commanded: “Thou shalt not murder a child by abortion nor kill them when born.”

Some biblical scholars have argued that the New Testament’s silence on abortion per se is due to the fact that it was simply beyond the pale of early Christian practice. Because of Christians’ affirmation of Hebrew understandings of the sanctity of human

life, they could not countenance abortion. But they did not just condemn abortion and infanticide; Christian communities were at the forefront of providing alternatives, including adopting children who were destined to be abandoned by their parents. Callistus (died c. 223) provided refuge to abandoned children by placing them in Christian homes. Benignus of Dijon (third century) offered nourishment and protection to abandoned children, including some with disabilities caused by failed abortions.

GLADIATORIAL BRUTALITY

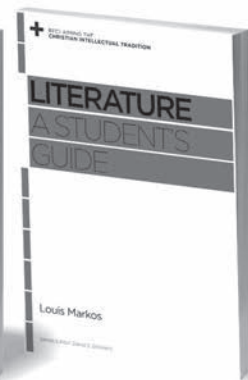
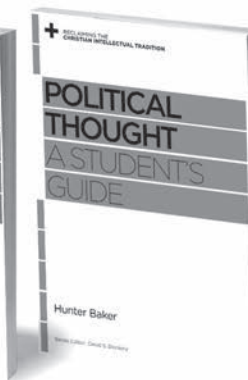
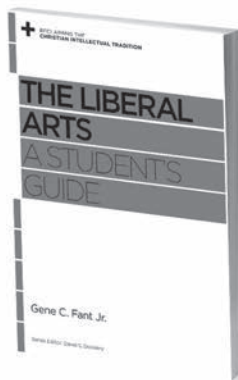
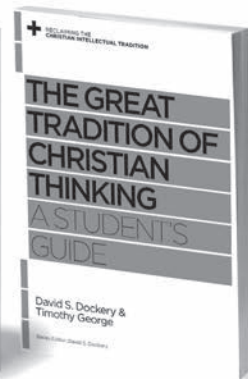
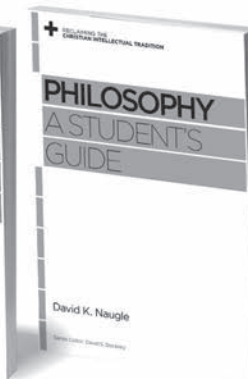
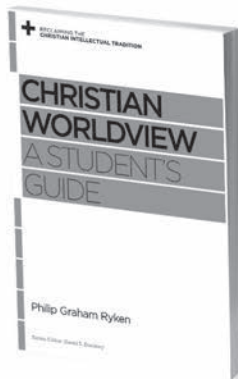
In addition to repudiating infanticide, child abandonment, and abortion, Jews and early Christians denounced human sacrifices, suicide, and the gladiatorial games. Because of their conviction of the special dignity of every human being, they found the games detestable. Since the gladiators were usually criminals, prisoners of war, or slaves, in the eyes of the Romans their lives were expendable. But in the eyes of church leaders the practice was barbaric, and they called on Christians to boycott the “games.”

GENDER EQUALITY

In both Judaism and Christianity, women and men are viewed as equal in nature—both being made in the image and likeness of God. Hence, in biblical times women held positions of high honor. The Ten Commandments require obedience to both father and mother. Deborah, a prophetess, was a judge in Israel; and seven of the fifty-five biblical prophets were women, according to Jewish teaching.

Among the Greeks, however, women were treated very differently. For instance, Homer had his character Agamemnon exclaim, “One cannot trust women.” This terrible attitude toward women meant that female infanticide was morally permissible in Greece, since having a son was much more desirable than having a daughter. And Roman women were treated no better.

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