

Ethics for Today

by CHARLES W. FERRIS, C. S. B., of Minneapolis, Minnesota

Member of the Board of Lectureship of The Mother Church, The First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Boston, Massachusetts

©1968 The Christian Science Board of Directors All rights reserved

The lecturer spoke substantially as follows:

We all face difficult choices at times. Even little children do. This was true for Bobby, a precocious three-year-old. One evening his parents had guests, and Bobby was reluctant to go to bed. Since he was just graduating from his crib to a bed, his mother tried to persuade him by asking, "Now, Bobby, would you rather sleep in your crib or your new bed?"

Bobby thought about this. Then he said, "I don't like the choices." How often do we find ourselves in a situation where we don't like the choices?

For instance, the other day I asked an insurance man: "What would you consider your number one problem?"

He said, "My problem is how to compete successfully with insurance salesmen who are following unethical practices."

He doesn't like the choices facing him. He doesn't want to lose business, but he doesn't want to take advantage of his clients either.

Christ Jesus tells the story of a father who also had a difficult choice to make. His son asked for his inheritance because he wanted to leave home. Should the father give him the money and let him go, or should he insist that the son remain at home against his will?

These are just two examples of the difficult ethical decisions that we face daily. Don't we have to answer questions like: "How much freedom shall I give my children?" "How far must I go in conforming to the norms of society when they contradict my own personal and religious standards?" And one we might not immediately think of as being an ethical question, "How can I best care for my health and well-being?"

Many decisions are as simple as the one Bobby had to make or as simple as giving back the extra change a salesperson has handed us. But what about decisions in

which the issue is not so plain because each alternative seems to have equal advantages and disadvantages?

Don't we need guidelines for these more complex questions that we face every day? How do we go about resolving them?

Well, let's look at some of the approaches that people usually take. I'm sure we all make decisions from the standpoint of what is most efficient. Also, many people use traditional moral and religious rules such as the Ten Commandments as guidelines for answering ethical questions. And often we base our decisions on the immediate need.

Basic Approaches to Ethical Questions

Now in this first approach, where we judge from the basis of efficiency, we use a step-by-step process to find the most efficient way to achieve a specific goal.

My insurance friend used this approach. He first determined what his goal was: to sell more insurance. Next he collected all the information he could on selling insurance. Then he applied this information. As a result he became a better salesman and his sales increased.

But in the process of doing this my friend discovered that some successful salesmen used a deceptive trick to influence a client to buy more insurance than he needed. My friend even tried this, but he found he just couldn't go through with it.

This expedient of misrepresentation might have been efficient for selling more insurance. It worked for some men—at least for a while. But it ignored moral values. To my friend, honesty, fairness, consideration for his client were indispensable. The efficiency approach helped him become a more capable salesman. But of itself it couldn't provide guidelines to preserve the moral values important

to him. So approaching the problem simply from the standpoint of efficiency or, in his case, selling more insurance, without considering moral values, wasn't the answer. He still was left with the dilemma of how to preserve his moral values and at the same time compete successfully with other salesmen who were using unethical methods.

The Moral Imperative

If we want to consider moral values, what do we use as a guide? Don't we turn to the Ten Commandments? (See Exodus 20.) Didn't the insurance salesman decide to follow the commandments—"Thou shalt not bear false witness" and "Thou shalt not covet"? As a result he preserved his honesty and he considered his clients.

But how do the commandments, the moral law of Moses, apply in the situation of the father and prodigal son? When this son asked for his future inheritance, which commandments could the father stress in guiding his son's actions? "Honour thy father and thy mother"? or, "Thou shalt not commit adultery"? The son did later behave immorally. Or the commandment, "Thou shalt not covet"? He did desire what still belonged to his father. Any one of these commandments told the father not to give the boy the money. Yet Jesus said that the father agreed to the boy's request. Certainly the father didn't enforce the literal guidelines of the commandments.

But the story doesn't stop here. Jesus explains how the boy later regrets what he has done and wants to return home to work as a hired servant. Should the father honor the boy's request and make him a hired servant? Should he put him on probation? Should he reject him entirely? We're told that the father didn't even listen to the boy's explanation but embraced him and commanded that

he be given the ring and the shoes which were the symbols of sonship. Where was the law of Moses in this?

Affection and Mercy

Moses' law helped the insurance agent preserve moral values important to him. But in the situation of the prodigal son, the moral law by itself wasn't enough to guide the father's actions. Something more was needed—the quality of affection which may be adapted to the needs of different individuals in different situations. In the Christian Science textbook, "Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures," Mary Baker Eddy refers to this need for adjustment. The Discoverer of Christian Science defines the spiritual significance of Moses as: "The proof that, without the gospel,—the union of justice and affection,—there is something spiritually lacking, since justice demands penalties under the law" (592:12). The father showed that the law without affection and grace wasn't enough.

This needed flexibility is offered by the approach often called situation ethics. In situation ethics one makes his decision according to the immediate needs and he does what seems the most merciful and loving at the time. But what seems the most merciful or loving answer in the short run may not necessarily be the most loving or merciful answer in the long run.

For example, a woman who was new to the study of Christian Science had long been bothered by severe migraine headaches. She was with a friend one day when she had one of these attacks and the friend said, "Why don't you take something?" To the friend this seemed like the most merciful, loving way to relieve the suffering. But the woman answered, "Because I wouldn't be learning more about God." She explained she had found God to be a power she could rely on, and the more she

relied on Him, the more she understood of this divine power that would meet all her needs.

Situation ethics might remove the immediate headache symptoms, while delaying and maybe even precluding the long-range goal. So the situation ethic that considers merely the immediate goal doesn't provide a complete answer to ethical questions.

Morality's Spiritual Basis

I've pointed out the traditional guidelines for resolving ethical dilemmas — efficiency, the moral code, and situation ethics. I'm sure we all use each of these methods. Each is useful, but each *one seems to have limitations*.

Why is this? Because each approach as usually applied, is based on the very thing that causes the dilemmas—on matter, matter which is itself limited and so produces limitation.

If the acceptance of matter with its limitation causes our dilemmas, how can we resolve them? Surely by looking away from the material and taking a spiritual view of existence as our premise or starting point. So let's consider existence from a spiritual point of view and see how such a point of view can be applied to resolving ethical questions.

Christ Jesus laid the foundation for identifying existence as wholly spiritual when he stated unequivocally: "God is a Spirit" (John 4: 24). And he extended this spiritual nature to man when he referred to God as our Father—our creator, our source.

Mrs. Eddy refers to this wholly spiritual nature of existence when she writes in *Science and Health*: "Spirit, God, has created all in and of Himself. Spirit never created matter. There is nothing in Spirit out of which matter could be made, for, as the Bible declares, without the Logos, the Æon or Word of God, 'was not anything made that was made'" (p. 335).

This Spirit, God, is the basis of our real being. Everything that we are, that we do, that we think, of a positive, substantial, enduring nature, springs from this infinite basis—the purposeful intelligence of all things, or divine Mind, God. This Spirit, God, is also known biblically as Love, Life, Truth.

This view of existence as wholly spiritual and as proceeding exclusively from divine Spirit is radically different from the commonly held material view; but it provides the basis for cutting ourselves loose from the limitation of matter and the insoluble dilemmas of matter.

A material view of reality is based on limitation, making us

face choices we don't like. A spiritual view of reality doesn't have limitations—therefore allowing us to rid ourselves of these false dilemmas.

In approaching our ethical problems from the standpoint of this spiritual view of reality, I'd like to discuss three aspects of this reality: that man has unlimited opportunity for useful service; that man is unlimited in his completeness; and that man has unlimited alternatives. Each of these proceeds from the fundamental concept of God, Spirit, as the creator and of creation as entirely spiritual. Now let's see how these three aspects of spiritual reality, in contrast with limited matter, provide guidelines for the full solution of ethical problems.

First, unlimited service. By service I mean the expression of useful ideas. Ideas and qualities grow through sharing, not withholding. For instance, if I give you this material book, I wouldn't have it any more. In fact, I'd be limited to giving the book to just one of you because I don't have enough copies for all of you. But if I give you an idea, I still have the idea, and so do you. Or if I were to express patience, honesty, or kindness, the individual to whom I expressed it would receive it, but my supply of patience, honesty, kindness wouldn't be depleted in any way.

This hints at how service, spiritually understood, is without limitation. Divine Spirit, which by its very nature is unlimited, is the source of these ideas and qualities. The more we express them, the more we see the unlimited nature of our source. The very substance of our being is the spiritual ideas and qualities we express. These can never be destroyed nor can the extent of their expression ever be limited.

The Spiritual Approach Applied

How does this aspect of spiritual reality as unlimited service help us to resolve ethical questions? The insurance salesman faced one of the big problems in business: how to be efficient, that is, successful and at the same time keep the moral values which give meaning to our lives.

Here's how a young woman I know met this false dilemma through accepting a spiritual rather than a material view of reality. She ran a specialized gift shop and worked hard to present quality merchandise that was tasteful and original. A competitor down the street watched to see these new items. Then he'd obtain these same items, and display them in his store, usually pricing them just a

little bit lower. But this wasn't all. When a firm gave her exclusive representation for a certain line, he'd obtain this line for his store in another town and then promote the line in the store near her as well.

This was clearly a breach of ethical practice and fair business agreement. The young woman spoke to the manufacturers about it but they didn't want to get involved.

Now if we were to consider only the material goal—namely, to sell more merchandise and make the largest profit—the young woman's competitor would probably have the more efficient method. For the young woman, from a material standpoint, there seemed to be no way out of this problem.

But her business hadn't been built on a material basis. It had been built on service, to bring to others useful articles and a greater appreciation of that which is tasteful, beautiful, and gracious. Her basic motive hadn't been to acquire but to express and to serve; a spiritual, not a material, motive. As a Christian Scientist she knew that by building on this spiritual basis, the foundation would be firm and the business would succeed. Now the wisdom of her spiritual approach was challenged. It looked as though her competitor was achieving the same results by using her ideas and exclusive lines and with no apparent penalty.

She told me that at first she was really resentful. But then she recalled that spiritual reality is characterized by unlimited service. She realized that spiritual substance isn't what we acquire or hold but what we express, drawn from the source of all being, from Spirit, God. Her competitor couldn't affect her unity with this source. She saw that the channels of service were infinite and this spiritual substance of service was what she desired. The efforts of the competitor to crowd her out only impelled her to draw deeper on the infinite resources of Spirit: ingenuity, innovation, persistence—and so to render a higher degree of service than she had up to this time.

She didn't stop being efficient in finding new products and ways to serve. But her business continued to progress because she operated from the basis not of limitation, but of no limitation. In other words, business to her wasn't like a big pie where, if she took half, there'd only be half left for her competitor and where she could get more only by taking from him. She saw business as unlimited opportunity for service on the part of them both. Her business did

continue to succeed and is still prospering today.

Through this experience she gained something extremely vital in addition to a successful business. She gained a sense of the unassailable safety of her union with God. She could express the divine Spirit without limit or hindrance. This expression was the substance of her being; it harmed no one; it blessed all. She was even benefiting her competitor because her thought about the unlimited source of ideas and opportunities included him too.

So the first aspect of spiritual reality is that the opportunity for service is unlimited and when we accept this, we see we don't have to take from another in order to progress. And so we resolve the false dilemma between success and morality.

Discovering Spiritual Completeness

We've been talking about how a spiritual view enables us to have both success and morality. You can't *really* have one without the other. Now let's consider the second aspect of spiritual reality, completeness, and see how this applies to resolving our dilemmas.

The Ten Commandments point to this ideal of *individual completeness*. Taken literally, the Ten Commandments are helpful in maintaining order and fairness. But spiritually considered, each one points to the ideal of every individual as complete, regardless of the way it may seem when we look around us. For instance wouldn't the ideal of "Thou shalt not steal" be that we are complete? If you had all the food, all the clothing, all the possessions that you could possibly imagine, would you be tempted to steal? If you had all, what could you steal? This is the way it is with the spiritual ideas that constitute what we really are. God has given them to us *without limit*.

So in the ideal, the command "Thou shalt not steal" means that we lack nothing, that we have no necessity, temptation, or even possibility to steal because we can't have more than all—because we're complete. Looked at this way, the Commandments become more than an admonition. They point to what we really are.

Take the commandment "Thou shalt not kill." Wouldn't the ideal of this be that we each have enough prestige, appreciation, possessions that we don't need to kill to gain something or to regain what another has taken? With the commandment "Thou shalt not commit adultery," wouldn't the ideal be that, being complete, we don't have to break faith in order

to gain satisfaction? And the same goes for the commandments "Thou shalt not bear false witness" and "Thou shalt not covet." Why would we want to misrepresent or why would we desire that which another has when, truly and spiritually understood, we already have all there is to have?

The First Commandment highlights the ideal of completeness, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." Mrs. Eddy writes of the First Commandment, "This *me* is Spirit. Therefore the command means this: Thou shalt have no intelligence, no life, no substance, no truth, no love, but that which is spiritual" (Science and Health, p. 467). When our concept of intelligence, of life, of substance, of truth, of love is wholly spiritual, it's unlimited. Therefore, it's lacking nothing. *It's complete.*

A Moral Issue Resolved

How does understanding spiritual reality's unlimited completeness resolve the dilemma of morality and flexibility—the difficulty sometimes involved in literally applying the Ten Commandments? Can the spiritual approach give us both the consistency of the moral law and adaptability to extreme situations?

After the Second World War, a group of young people in Germany got together one evening to discuss the problem of world peace. Someone brought up the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" as a good guide to world peace. At this point, a boy said heatedly, "What if you come face to face with one of the enemy? What good is your religion then? Isn't the main thing who can shoot first?"

One of the other young men who had been on the Russian front for a long time in the midst of the severest fighting said: "I know it works because I've experienced it." Then he told how a German sergeant was trying to buy some provisions in an occupied Russian village. He offered the normal items for exchange, but the villagers wanted him to give them his revolver as partial payment. This he couldn't do. As he was leaving, he was shot.

The order was given for fifty people to be rounded up from the village as hostages. This young man received orders that the next morning he would participate in executing these men and women. He couldn't refuse without being shot himself for disobeying orders. He prayed all night, affirming the completeness of man. He realized that in reality there can never be any lack of divine Love or of divine

wisdom; man's completeness insured the presence of right ideas, right qualities, right conduct. And so it was proved humanly. In the morning the execution order was countermanded. A few farms were burned in retaliation, but the hostages were set free with no loss of life. During his two years on the Russian front where he was involved in particularly dangerous activity, not a single man from this young man's company was lost, and he was able to carry out his duties without once being compelled to kill or injure another person.

To the members of the group who viewed the moral law, "Thou shalt not kill," as simply a limitation on actions, there appeared only two alternatives: Obey the commandment and let the enemy kill you or disobey the commandment and kill the enemy so he can't kill you.

But for the young soldier who viewed the command, "Thou shalt not kill," as a description of the ideal complete man, there had to be a way to fulfill this command. His job was to find it. And he did find it.

The moral law, when viewed in the light of man's unlimited completeness, combines consistency with flexibility. It then becomes an assurance of what's possible under even the most demanding circumstances.

A Long-term and a Short-term Goal

In addition to unlimited service and unlimited completeness, spiritual reality is unlimited in its alternatives. We can never run into a blind alley where there's no way out. Science and Health emphasizes this: "Love is impartial and universal in its adaptation and bestowals" (p. 13). Divine Love, which is Spirit, God, is adaptable to every situation. This is because of God's capacity to produce intelligent ideas without limit. Whatever stage we may find ourselves in, divine Love, God, provides an alternative which can lift us higher.

Remember the difficulty encountered in situation ethics that the short-term and the long-term were often incompatible? Let's see how understanding that spiritual reality provides unlimited alternatives can resolve the frequent conflict between short-term and long-term goals.

A college girl who had just started her student teaching found that, through a swelling or growth, her neck had become about half again its normal size. She faced two problems. Her short-term goal was to succeed in student teaching. This meant she had to take care

of the disfigurement immediately. But, her long-term goal was to progress in her understanding of God.

This girl was a student of Christian Science. She had been taught that God, perfect Spirit, expresses Himself in the perfect spiritual ideas which make up man's being. Among these are health and normality. She'd also been taught that any abnormality is a result of some misunderstanding of God and of His perfect spiritual creation. Only when this misunderstanding is corrected is the problem really solved. Resorting to surgery or drugs wouldn't help her to correct this misunderstanding.

In analyzing the situation she saw she had to overcome the fear that the physical disfigurement would interfere with her student teaching. She overcame this fear by realizing that her effectiveness in teaching wasn't determined by physical factors; instead it was determined by her expression of spiritual qualities such as love, and intelligence. And these she always had because they were drawn from God.

In telling me about this experience later she said that almost no one had mentioned this disfigurement during her entire student teaching. This may sound incredible but it was due to her constant effort to keep her thought spiritually pure. Love had provided an alternative, a way for her to continue unhindered by this apparent physical disorder.

After her student teaching was finished, the problem seemed to flare up worse than ever. She went to see the practitioner who had been helping her during this time. As a result of this talk and the spiritual effort she'd been making she felt deeply comforted and she saw herself as God's perfect creation more clearly than she ever had before. On the way home she could feel her neck draining and a sensation of clearing up. The healing occurred right then, and there has been no return of the problem.

Most important of all to her was the spiritual progress she made. By trusting the infinite alternatives of God to meet her need, whatever it was, she united the short-term and long-term goals. She succeeded in her student teaching and she progressed in her understanding of God.

We must approach ethical problems from a spiritual rather than a material point of view. The material viewpoint stems from a belief of limitation—that there aren't sufficient good things for everyone. The spiritual viewpoint, on the other hand, is based upon abun-

dance—unlimited service, unlimited completeness, and unlimited alternatives. It was the spiritual approach that allowed the shopkeeper, the soldier, and the college girl to resolve their dilemmas, and it's the spiritual approach that allows all of us to do the same.

Bridging the Demonstrability Gap

In order to resolve these dilemmas—efficiency versus morality, moral consistency versus adaptability, and short-range versus long-range goals—we've got to act from a spiritual rather than a material base. And this brings up the important question: How can we act spiritually as long as we're living in the world as we see it around us?

We do this by keeping the spiritual ideal always in mind even while recognizing that there may be a gap between what we accomplish and the ideal we aim at. This we can perhaps call the demonstrability gap.

The person who succeeded in closing the demonstrability gap better than anyone else was Christ Jesus. He did this by holding thought and action to a wholly spiritual concept of reality.

It was apparent that Jesus held to the ideal of unlimited service when one day his disciples were arguing about who should be the greatest among them. Jesus answered, "He that is greatest among you shall be your servant" (Matt. 23:11). This was the ultimate of being—service, or expression of divine ideas. Jesus didn't allow the poverty, disease, hatred, and death that presented themselves to him to deflect him from his ideal. Instead he succeeded in narrowing the gap through overcoming every one of these.

Jesus also held to the ideal of unlimited completeness as a characteristic of spiritual reality. In the Sermon on the Mount, he said: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Perfect means lacking nothing good—in other words, complete. Jesus told his disciples and the people that there's no aspect of God that they couldn't express. And he continually promoted this ideal.

Unlimited alternatives were also an ideal which Jesus held to. This came out in his private remarks to his disciples when he said: "With God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26). He'd been talking with a rich young man who wanted to progress spiritually. Jesus told him that, in addition to his obedience to the moral laws, he needed to change his viewpoint from one of great possessions (materiality) to one of unselfish service (spiritual-

ity). Jesus pointed out to the disciples how hard it was for those who trusted in material possessions to approach the spiritual ideal. The rich young man rejected this ideal and turned back to his former ways. But Jesus' statement that "with God all things are possible" gave the assurance that no matter what particular problem, what particular human need we face, divine Love, God, supplies unlimited alternatives.

Jesus held to the ideal that reality is spiritual until he had completely closed the gap between his own human experience and this divine ideal. This divine ideal we understand to be the Christ. Because Jesus knew and demonstrated so completely his unity with the absolute ideal, we identify him as Christ Jesus. He's the example by which each of us can progress toward closing the demonstrability gap.

Holding to the Spiritual Ideal

Now if there ever was anyone who should have been discouraged by this gap, the apparent distance between the human appearance and the ideal of spiritual reality, it was the Founder of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy. Her life included some of the severest trials. She had poor health from childhood. Her husband passed away one year after their marriage. Her small son, who was born shortly after her husband's passing, was taken from her. She married again, but the marriage ended when the man she married proved persistently unfaithful. She struggled with a constant sense of financial

lack. And all this was in spite of her effort to live a devout, kind, good life.

In her autobiography she says, "The trend of human life was too eventful to leave me undisturbed in the illusion that this so-called life could be a real and abiding rest" (Retrospection and Introspection, p. 23). She saw that something higher than her present human effort was needed. She discovered the answer in the spiritual ideal we've been talking about, reality consisting of infinite Spirit, God, and His spiritual expression.

Mrs. Eddy's own life exemplified the results of clinging to this spiritual ideal. She gained good health, was blessed with a sense of home, and her financial lack was changed to abundance.

But she didn't stop with just improving her own human experience and spiritual understanding. She searched and worked to find the rules that would enable all of us to bring our present experience closer to this absolute ideal. These rules are presented in *Science and Health*. Here she writes: "The divine demand, 'Be ye therefore perfect,' is scientific, and the human footsteps leading to perfection are indispensable" (p. 253).

Spiritual Reality Present Now

One particularly encouraging aspect of using the spiritual ideal as our guide in resolving human problems is that we can be aware of spiritual reality even while the human experience still seems less than ideal and we still seem to have a long way to go.

I can remember the exact point

where this awareness first took place with me. I had been raised in Christian Science, loved it, and had received many healing benefits from it. I found that by mentally affirming these points of spiritual reality, my various problems were resolved. But in spite of the effectiveness of these affirmations, I found a challenge to my conviction that reality is spiritual. This challenge was the material picture I saw around me—the physical bodies, buildings, cars. It seemed pretty hard to pass these off as no part of reality.

Then one morning when I was to return to my army post after a furlough, I awakened with chicken pox. I asked a Christian Science practitioner to help me pray about this problem, and by noon the disease was gone, and I caught the train as scheduled.

During the six-hour train ride, I studied *The Christian Science Journal*, a monthly publication which contains articles and testimonies of healing. My thought became so uplifted that I felt the substantiality of Spirit. The train, the buildings, the landscape didn't disappear, but I was no longer concerned with material appearances. Spiritual reality had gained dominance in my thought.

At that point, the balance shifted so that Spirit really became more significant to me than matter. I became so aware of Spirit's substantiality that the suggestions of matter never troubled me to the same degree again. As I looked to Spirit instead of matter, I became aware that there's *no real demonstrability gap*. Isn't the apparent

gap simply a failure to accept the spiritual ideal? Spiritual reality is here now—God's spiritual universe, solid and beautiful and good—whether we know it or not.

Isn't our need to reject the suggestion that reality is material? This rejection can be immediate, but often it comes in stages. Point by point, we hold to the spiritual ideal until we're finally able to demonstrate it entirely. In this way we close this demonstrability gap.

An Ethical Problem Resolved

The father in the story of the prodigal son pointed the way for all of us. He made his decisions concerning his son from a spiritual basis. In letting him leave home he trusted the unlimited alternatives of God to supply exactly what was needed for his son's progress and well-being at each point along the way.

When he allowed him to return, his motive was to bless all and to exclude no one. He was realizing the unlimited nature of service.

Finally, when he accepted him back as his son rather than as a hired servant, he was acknowledging the spiritual perfection or unlimited completeness of identity for both his son and himself rather than settling for merely an incomplete material relationship.

When the spiritual ideal inspires our actions, all our ethical problems will be rightly resolved. Jesus assured us of this in his well-known saying: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33).