

# "The Difference Between Modern and Traditional Ethical Thinking"

## What is meta-ethics?

"That is not fair!" Spend a little time around a group of children playing and this cry will be heard. Even as children, humans seem to have an innate sense of justice and fairness. What is the origin of this desire for justice? What makes an act or a situation right or wrong? What paths are there to the best human life? How can the good life be discerned? All of these questions flow naturally from the depths of the human heart.

Meta-ethics is the field that examines these issues. Rather than discuss which particular actions are right or wrong, meta-ethical investigation asks questions about the justification of ethical norms. It is one thing to ask if stealing is wrong. This is a discussion of normative ethics. An ethical norm is a concrete prohibition against some specific form of behavior. But one can also ask why stealing is wrong. Meta-ethics also goes beyond the question of the justification for specific ethical norms but it also asks about the justification for all ethical norms. It tries to identify an approach to thinking about why we have moral norms in the first place.

If we look at actual ethical norms, we will find amazing consistency. Most ethical systems look a lot like the Ten Commandments. There are a set of basic prohibitions that seem universal. It is hard to imagine a culture where killing an innocent adult human is generally accepted. What is different is the way these norms are justified and the reasons given to behave morally. If one travels from one culture to another, the actual moral norms do not vary but the thinking behind these norms does vary. Meta-ethics attempts to identify the various ways moral norms are justified.

## Modern and Traditional Ethical Thinking Defined

One important way of characterizing ethical thinking is the distinction between traditional ethical thinking and modern ethical thinking. This distinction roughly corresponds to a chronological distinction between the classical and medieval worldview and the modern worldview. The modern period roughly begins in the 17th Century although modern patterns of thinking begin to emerge as early as the 14th Century. During this time, significant changes in the way humans thought about the basics of human life and existence underwent a radical shift.

One aspect of this shift in thinking is known as the removal of "the sacred canopy." The classical and medieval worldview was a fundamentally religious one and the place of God or the gods was primary. As the modern world emerges, human beings begin to see themselves as more self-sufficient. They begin to look within themselves for the answers to important questions. The authority of God is no longer an adequate answer to the problems which confront the human race. The development of science with its goal of explaining and controlling nature demonstrates this basic shift in perspective.

Traditional ethical thinking assumes that this sacred canopy provides the context for all of human life. God's authority is the ultimate justification for any ethical norms. All things are created by God and have a set place and purpose in the universe. Every being has a nature or an essence that defines its purpose in the grand scheme of things. The ultimate standard of human behavior is to fulfill this purpose. By fulfilling this purpose, each individual human will realize his or her full potential and be the best human that he or she can be.

Behaviors and habits that fulfill this purpose are known as virtues while those that frustrate this purpose are known as vices. For traditional ethics, the idea that a behavior helps a person to be the best they can be and live the good life is the ultimate justification for a moral norm. Traditional ethics tends to be expressed in a series of prohibited activities which "thou shalt not" do and a series of virtues that point a person in the direction of the best possible life.

Modern ethical thinking is free of this sacred canopy. There is no universal context for all human life, nor is there a human nature which points to a best possible human life. Modern ethical thinking eschews all these ideas and attempts to justify the same set of moral norms as traditional thinkers do but it does this by the authority of human reason. If one reasons rightly, then one will see that these universal norms are authoritative. The most basic rule of human activity for a modern person is to maximize personal freedom and limit the harm caused to others by one's actions. Modern people want to be free to pursue their own ends. The limit of this freedom is where another is hurt. Modern ethical thinking tends to reduce ethics to a series of rules and procedures that can be used to prevent the harm of others and to maximize human freedom.

### **Some Examples of Modern and Traditional Ethical Thinking**

We can see an example of how these ways of thinking operate in our attitudes toward smoking. We have banned most public smoking in our modern culture. We now realize that public smoking harms those who inhale the smoke unintentionally. We are concerned that allowing people to smoke freely will cause harm to other people. So we ban smoking in public and designate special areas for smoking. So it is not the smoking that is the problem. People should be free to smoke as long as they take care not to harm others. A more traditional approach might see smoking as harmful to one's health. Smoking is wrong because it limits one's potential to live a good and full life. Modern ethical thinking is not concerned about this as long as no one else is hurt but traditional ethical thinking is also concerned with the individual actor. If an act does not contribute to the overall well being and happiness of the person acting as specified by the divinely ordained nature of the human person then that act is wrong.

Traditional ethics are mainly concerned about what kind of person one is becoming through one's habitual activity. For traditional ethics, the moral task of life is to develop the right kind of habits that will lead to a flourishing life. Modern ethics is only concerned with whether or not an individual act violates a specific ethical norm. For modern ethics, the moral task of life is to conform to a set of ethical rules. We can look at a simple example: eating a slice of cake. There is nothing wrong with this act. It does not violate a moral norm and hurts no one. Looking at this from a traditional perspective, there is nothing wrong with enjoying a slice of cake. In fact, enjoying pleasurable things in moderation is a part of the good life. The problem comes in with multiple acts of cake eating repeated over time. If a habit of excessive cake eating develops this can be harmful to one's health. If a person becomes gluttonous, then this is not a full human life and is wrong. The person has not become a good sort of person. From a modern perspective, the act of eating cake is not wrong and no matter how many times it is repeated it will not be wrong. If a person wants to pursue cake eating as their version of the good life, he or she is free to do so as long as they do not hurt anyone (and they

do not ask the state to pay for their medical expenses when they become unhealthy). So we can see how these different perspectives on ethical thinking play out in our analysis of various ethical issues.

### **Some Mistaken Notions of Modern and Ethical Traditional Thinking**

It would be a mistake to identify this distinction by mere chronology. There are many contemporary people that still live by traditional justifications for ethical norms. We should not say that traditional ethical thinking is old-fashioned. Since modern ideas really achieve cultural dominance in the 17th Century most people over the last three hundred years have been influenced by modern ethics. So while it seems as if ethics may have changed quite a bit over the past 100 years, these changes are not necessarily the result of a different form of ethical thinking but merely taking modern ethical thinking to its logical conclusion.

It would also be a mistake to contrast modern and traditional ethics on the basis of whether emotions or reason are dominant. Traditional ethics is based on our emotional response to the world - ancient authors would have referred to the emotions as passions. However, these passions were to be formed by reason. The task of the ethical life for the ancients was the formation of the passions by reason so that a human being would respond to the right object in the right way at the right time. Traditional ethical theory claims that we can mold our emotional responses through rational standards. Modern ethics tends to be more coldly calculating its approach to ethics. It tends to take the emotions as a given and because they cannot be changed they are an obstacle to ethical action. In other modern ethical systems the emotions are normative for ethics since they cannot be changed. So it is difficult to say that the contrast between emotional and rational is an accurate characterization of this distinction.

### **Conclusion**

Both traditional and modern ethical thinking may be used to justify the same set of ethical norms. However, the differences and justification of these norms has an effect on how we apply these norms and how we view what constitutes a flourishing human life. Further, because modern ethical thinking elevates human reason as the ultimate authority in adjudicating ethical issues, it is more prone to relativism. It lacks the absolute divine authority of traditional ethical thinking.

source: <http://sanctasapientia.hubpages.com/hub/The-Difference-Between-Modern-and-Traditional-Ethical-Thinking>

Use the previous reading to define the following terms IN YOUR OWN WORDS.

**meta-ethics**

**ethical norm**

**sacred canopy**

	<b>Traditional Ethical Thinking</b>	<b>Modern Ethical Thinking</b>
How it lines up with historical chronology		
Worldview(s) that underpins the thinking		
The basic tenets, primary concerns, other details		