

## ETHICS AND MORALS

Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote the classic novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Whatever else might be said of Dostoyevsky, he grasped one of the essential implications of Atheism, Humanism, Romanticism, and Naturalism. At one point, he had Ivan (one of his characters) observe: "If there is no God, everything is permitted."

Ethics and morals have to do with right and wrong conduct and standards for such. The mere mention of ethics and morals implies some sort of standard or standards. Men proffer many "standards," all of which are fathered by personal opinions, advantages, desire for sensual fulfillment, or merely their preferences. All such "rules" are subjective and are as varied as their originators' druthers. When men reject a common, duly constituted authority, they are left to do — and they do — what is "right in their own eyes" (Jud. 17:6). This circumstance well describes the "culture" in our nation to an alarming degree.

Human beings undeniably possess a "sense" of morality and ethics (I do not mean an innate, instinctive moral compass or conscience). Apart from an ultimate objective standard, however, the word *ought* is meaningless and we "ought" to cease using it, for neither "oughtness" nor "non-oughtness" applies to any human behavior. No behavior is innately right/good or wrong/evil if no static standard exists

Men proffer various ethical/moral "standards":

- **Hedonism:** from *hedone*, Greek for *pleasure*; believes that the aim of life is to seek the greatest pleasure and the least pain (but what if one must inflict pain on another to avoid pain for oneself?)
- **Utilitarianism:** seeks the greatest happiness or pleasure ("good," by subjective definition) for the most people (Hitler's atrocities were "good" by this criterion)
- **Nihilism:** from *nihil*, Latin for *nothing*; holds that life has no "objective meaning, purpose, or intrinsic value" and there is no God, thus no such thing as "morality" (cf. Dostoyevsky's Ivan)
- **Romanticism:** rejects reason in favor of intuition, emotion, and imagination; one's subjective feelings about a given behavior trump any suggestion of an objective standard
- **Relativism:** denies the existence of universal moral "truth"; "morality" is culturally determined by the traditions, preferences, or conventions of the people of a region and/or time (but relativists reject the "standard" of a region that respects an absolute standard)
- **Situationalism:** denies moral absolutes; "loving" behavior trumps any moral absolutes, depending on the given situation (of course, each person is allowed to define "loving" behavior in each situation)
- **Determinism:** denies human responsibility, averring that man is a product of social and biological forces he cannot help (thus none should ever be punished for murder or rape)

Is everything permitted? Are some things permitted? Who is to decide? Apart from God and His revelation we are morally adrift on a sinful, selfish, and self-destructive sea. Solomon's words concerning national ethics are eminently true for all ages: "Righteousness exalteth a nation; But sin is a reproach to any people" (Pro. 14:34). His words are no less true of personal ethics. However, without a standard there is no such thing as righteousness or sin: "but where there is no law, neither is there transgression" (Rom. 4:15). By repudiating God and His law, men think they are done with sin. However, God and His Son will have the last word: "For we must all be made manifest before the judgment-seat of Christ; that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he hath done, whether it be good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10).

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