

# How Should I Live in This World?

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**R. C. SPROUL**



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# How Should I Live in This World?

R. C. SPROUL

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## Contents

	Preface . . . . .	vii
<b>One</b>	Ethics and Morals. . . . .	1
<b>Two</b>	Revealed Ethics . . . . .	19
<b>Three</b>	Legalism and Antinomianism . . . . .	29
<b>Four</b>	The Ethics of Materialism . . . . .	53
<b>Five</b>	The Ethics of Capital Punishment and War. . . . .	73
<b>Six</b>	The Ethics of Abortion . . . . .	87
<b>Seven</b>	Ethics and the Conscience . . . . .	101



## Preface

Almost every major discussion of ethics these days begins with an analysis of the chaotic situation of modern culture. Even secular writers and thinkers are calling for some sort of basic agreement on ethical behavior. Humanity's "margin of error," they say, is shrinking with each new day. Our survival is at stake.

These "prophets of doom" point out that man's destructive capability increased from 1945 to 1960 by the same ratio as it did from the primitive weapons of the Stone Age to the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The thawing of the Cold War provided little comfort. Numerous nations have nuclear arms now or are close to having them. What, besides ethics, will keep them from using these weapons?

This stark reality is compounded by the profusion of social injustice in many areas, the rise of international

terrorism, and the general decline of personal and social values. Who is to say what's right and wrong? One technical volume, Thomas E. Hill's *Contemporary Ethical Theories*, lists more than eighty theories of ethics competing for acceptance in our modern world. It is not just a matter of "doing the right thing" but of figuring out what the right thing is. This proliferation of options generates confusion in our world and, for many, a sense of despair. Will we ever reach a cultural consensus that will stabilize the shifting sands of pluralism?

All this talk of "theories of ethics" may leave you cold. However, ethical decisions enter into every aspect of our lives. No field or career is immune from ethical judgments. In politics, in psychology, and in medicine, ethical decisions are made regularly. Legislative action, economic policy, academic curricula, psychiatric advice—all involve ethical considerations. Every vote cast in the ballot box marks an ethical decision.

On what basis should we make these decisions? That's where the "ethical theories" come in. The Christian may say, "I simply obey God's Word." However, what about those issues where the Bible has no specific "thou shalt"? Can we find ethical principles in Scripture, and in the very

## Preface

nature of God, that will guide us through this difficult terrain? How can we communicate these principles to others? How does God's Word stand up against the eighty-some other standards?

Let us start by looking deeper into the field of ethics to consider how society deals with such questions. Then we will see how God's Word fits in, and we will seek to apply biblical teaching to several modern dilemmas.



## Chapter One

# Ethics and Morals

In present word usage, the term *ethics* is often used interchangeably with the word *morality*. That the two have become virtual synonyms is a sign of the confusion that permeates the modern ethical scene. Historically, the two words had quite distinctive meanings. *Ethics* comes from the Greek *ethos*, which is derived from a root word meaning “stall,” a place for horses. It conveyed the sense of a dwelling place, a place of stability and permanence. On the

## How Should I Live in This World?

other hand, *morality* comes from the word *mores*, which describes the behavioral patterns of a given society.

*Ethics* is a normative science, searching for the principal foundations that prescribe obligations or “oughtness.” It is concerned primarily with the imperative and with the philosophical premises on which imperatives are based. *Morality* is a descriptive science, concerned with “isness” and the indicative. Ethics define what people ought to do; morals describe what people actually do. The difference between them is between the normal and the descriptive.

ETHICS	MORALS
1. normative	1. descriptive
2. imperative	2. indicative
3. oughtness	3. isness
4. absolute	4. relative

When morality is identified with ethics, the descriptive becomes the normative and the imperative is swallowed by the status quo. This creates a kind of “statistical morality.” In this schema, the good is determined by the normal and the normal is determined by the statistical average. The

“norm” is discovered by an analysis of the normal, or by counting noses. Conformity to that norm then becomes the ethical obligation. It works like this:

*Step 1.* We compile an analysis of statistical behavior patterns, such as those integral to the groundbreaking Kinsey Reports in the twentieth century. If we discover that most people are participating in premarital sexual intercourse, then we declare such activity “normal.”

*Step 2.* We move quickly from the normal to a description of what is authentically “human.” Humanness is defined by what human beings do. Hence, if the normal human being engages in premarital sexual intercourse, we conclude that such activity is normal and therefore “good.”

*Step 3.* The third step is to declare patterns that deviate from the normal to be abnormal, inhuman, and inauthentic. In this schema, chastity becomes a form of deviant sexual behavior and the stigma is placed on the virgin rather than the nonvirgin.

Statistical morality operates according to the following syllogism:

*Premise A*—the normal is determined by statistics;

*Premise B*—the normal is human and good;

*Conclusion*—the abnormal is inhuman and bad.

In this humanistic approach to ethics, the highest good is defined as that activity that is most authentically human. This method achieves great popularity when applied to some issues but breaks down when applied to others. For instance, if we do a statistical analysis of the experience of cheating among students or lying among the general public, we discover that a majority of students have at some time cheated and that everyone has at some time lied. If the canons of statistical morality apply, the only verdict we can render is that cheating is an authentically human good and that lying is a bona fide virtue.

Obviously there must be a relationship between our ethical theories and our moral behavior. In a real sense, our beliefs dictate our behavior. A theory underlies our every moral action. We may not be able to articulate that theory or even be immediately conscious of it, but

nothing manifests our value systems more sharply than our actions.

The Christian ethic is based on an antithesis between what is and what ought to be. We view the world as fallen; an analysis of fallen human behavior describes what is normal to the abnormal situation of human corruption. God calls us out of the indicative by His imperative. Ours is a call to nonconformity—to a transforming ethic that shatters the status quo.

### A Serious Inconsistency

Even within relativistic claims, a serious inconsistency emerges. The 1960s brought a moral revolution to our culture, spearheaded by the protests of the youth. Two slogans were repeated, broadcast side by side during this movement. The tension was captured by these twin slogans: “Tell it like it is” and “Do your own thing.”

The cry for personal freedom was encapsulated in the “inalienable right” to do one’s own thing. This was a demand for subjective freedom of self-expression. When the guns were turned on the older generation, however, a curious and glaring inconsistency was heard: “Tell it like

it is.” This slogan implies an objective basis for truth and virtue. The adult generation was not “allowed” to do their own thing if doing their own thing deviated from objective norms of truth. The flower children demanded the right to have their ethical cake and eat it too.

I was once maneuvered into an unenviable counseling situation by a distraught Christian mother, a modern-day Monica (mother of Augustine) anguishing over the wayward behavior of her nonbelieving and rebellious son. The lad had retreated from his mother’s constant religious and moral directives by moving out of the family home and into his own apartment. He promptly decorated his apartment with black walls and strobe lights, then adorned the room with accoutrements designed for the liberal indulgence of hashish and other exotic drugs. His was a bacchanalian “pad” into which he promptly invited a willing coed to join him in luxurious cohabitation. All of this was to his mother’s unmitigated horror. I agreed to talk with the young man only after explaining to the mother that such an encounter would probably engender further hostility. I would be viewed as the mother’s “hired gun.” The youth also agreed to the meeting, obviously only to escape further verbal harassment from his mother.

When the young man appeared at my office, he was

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# Is it possible to know right from wrong?

It's common to hear people say that they "want to do the right thing." But it can be tough to know what the right thing is. On what basis do we make our decisions?

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul argues that the Bible is the supreme source for ethical guidance. While it doesn't contain commands for every situation, it does provide clear principles. With wisdom and thoroughness, Dr. Sproul helps us apply these principles to several major ethical dilemmas.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

**Dr. R.C. Sproul** was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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