

Fall 2003

Ethical Choices: A Case for Hierarchicalism

Nathan Ramsey
Cedarville University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedar_ethics_online

 Part of the [Bioethics and Medical Ethics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ramsey, Nathan, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Hierarchicalism" (2003). *CedarEthics Online*. 42.
http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedar_ethics_online/42

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Cedarville, a service of the Centennial Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in CedarEthics Online by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@cedarville.edu.

Ethical Choices: A Case for Hierarchicalism

By Nathan Ramsey

Is it right to lie in order to save a life? Is there such a thing as a 'right' choice to apply to a specific situation? Baker argues there is never a 'right' decision: "There is no such thing as a morally defensible position. That is, to be 'right' in any ethical [sense] is impossible" (1967, p. 29). How does a Christian decide which approach to take in a moral conflict? The purpose of this paper is to probe the question of making an ethical choice when there is conflict between moral principles rooted in the character of God and manifested in Scripture. I will describe three common ethical alternatives that guide many Christians, and will argue from the standpoint of one view, called hierarchicalism.

There are many times in life when Christians face what seem to be no-win, moral situations. These dilemmas may even cause moral crises for people who believe in a perfect, absolute God. When there is a choice, there is sometimes a conflict between alternatives, and we have trouble choosing the lesser-evil or the greater-good. A classic example is the hiding of helpless Jews from the Nazis during World War II. Two moral wrongs are in conflict. One is deceiving those in authority; the other is turning over helpless people to be slaughtered. For one who believes in an absolute standard of 'right' and 'wrong', there are three approaches to confront this ethical dilemma.

The first approach is called non-conflicting absolutism. This view denies that a true ethical conflict even exists. Any perceived conflict is a result of human misinterpretation, and if we have a perfect view of 'right' and 'wrong,' any illusion of conflict is dispelled. This view holds that it is always wrong to lie, even if lying might save a life. According to Geisler, this view "often tends to legalism by neglecting the spirit of the law in order to avoid breaking the letter of the law" (1981, p 64).

The second approach is called ideal (conflicting) absolutism. This view holds that sin is unavoidable in a fallen world. There are times when a person is put into a situation where sin is the only path available. One must therefore choose the lesser of two evils and then confess it. Taylor taught this idea as early as the 17th century (1660). This view holds that when it comes to telling the truth or lying to save a life, one should commit the lesser sin (lie) and then confess it.

The third approach is called hierarchicalism (graded absolutism). This view holds that moral conflict does exist and that when ethical laws are in conflict, there is a 'right' choice available via a hierarchy of principles rooted in the moral teachings of Scripture. Jones describes this view very well: "There are many moral principles rooted in the absolute moral character of God; there are higher and lower moral duties – for example, love for God is a greater duty than love for people; These laws sometimes come into unavoidable moral conflict; In such conflicts we are obligated to follow the higher moral law; When we follow the higher moral law we are not held responsible for not keeping the lower one" (1994, p. 133). This view holds that it is right to lie in order to save lives. It is the greater good and therefore is not sin.

While all three of these approaches have positives and negatives, I believe that hierarchicalism (graded absolutism) presents fewer logical problems and has more Biblical support. As we read through the Bible we come to many passages that impart moral tension. I will present two examples that support hierarchicalism (graded absolutism) as the way to make a ‘right’ choice in the situation.

One example is the story of the Hebrew midwives recorded in Exodus 1:15-21. Here, the midwives lie to Pharaoh to protect the lives of the newborn Hebrew boys. It states that they lied because they feared God more than they feared Pharaoh. Yet, God blessed them and gave them families of their own. Were the Hebrew midwives blessed despite of or because of their deceptive action?

Another example is the Sabbath question recorded in Matthew 12:9-13. Here, the jealous Pharisees accused Jesus of doing wrong for healing a lame man on the Sabbath. Jesus responded by giving an example of an exception to the rule that they would make if one of their livestock were in danger on the Sabbath. He then stated how much more man was worth than an animal, and concluded that it was not wrong to do ‘good’ on the Sabbath. If anyone who ever lived could make the ‘right’ moral choice in an ethical crisis, it was Jesus! Christianity hinges on the concept of the perfection of Christ. Allowing room to say that Jesus sinned by healing on the Sabbath shatters the very foundation of Christian belief. This story illustrates that we should not ignore the spirit of the law by following the letter of the law.

One problem with hierarchicalism is that the idea is not directly stated in Scripture. How then can we determine an order of the hierarchy that it is not laid out for us in Scripture? We cannot negate the presence of the Holy Spirit as our guide in the face of difficult decisions. While I believe that the Bible gives us everything we need to live a successful Christian life, there are gray areas where the Bible seems painfully silent. It is here that we struggle to make our best decisions. This is the point where we must depend upon the Holy Spirit and our spiritual insight to fill in the gaps. This is important to remember lest we make ethical decisions based on the whim of personal preference. In the end, we will be judged for every decision we make whether it is good or bad.

Matthew 22: 37-40 is also helpful in forming a hierarchy. When asked by the inquiring lawyer about the greatest commandment, Jesus wisely answers: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the Great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commands depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”

In conclusion, there are ‘right’ choices to be made in settling ethical situations. Hierarchicalism (graded absolutism) is supported throughout Scripture. Some moral laws are higher than others are and some good acts are better than others. Jesus chose a hierarchical view of moral values, of Sabbath rules, and of submission to civil government. ‘Right’ choices are not always easily discerned, but there is always an approach that pleases God because it conforms to His character and is manifested in Scripture. Scripture teaches a way of escape to every temptation and we are never truly put in a no-win moral situation.

References:

Baker, W. (1967). *The Open End of Christian Morals*. Philadelphia: Westminster.

Geisler, N. (1961). *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Geisler, N. (1981). *Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics*. Grand Rapids: Baker.

Jones, D. (1994) *Biblical Christian Ethics*. Grand Rapids: Baker.

Taylor, J. (1660). *The Rule of Conscience*. Book I, Ch. V, Rule 8, 100. London: James Flesher.