

Source of Ethics

Gerald del Campo · 16 August 2026

A man's ethical behavior should be based effectually on sympathy, education, and social ties; no religious basis is necessary. Man would indeed be in a poor way if he had to be restrained by fear of punishment and hope of reward after death.
— Albert Einstein.

The origins of ethics spark endless debate—a debate I hope never truly ends. Some claim ethics are gifts from the divine, while others, especially atheists, see them as woven into the fabric of our humanity: born from empathy, our social instincts, and the awareness that we are all connected. In this view, ethical behavior is not handed down from above, but rises up from what it means to be human.

Here lies a fascinating paradox: if ethics are uniquely human, does that not hint at something divine within us? Yet, how truly human is this quality when so few live by it consistently? Perhaps this is the spirit behind the phrase “let my servants be few and secret” (AL 1:10). The Western Mystery Tradition has always been captivated by the quest to become more than just human. Looking at the world around us, it is easy to see why such a goal might be so compelling.

Atheists sometimes lay the world's troubles at religion's feet, arguing that true morality should spring from principle or compassion, not fear of punishment. Yet this critique paints with too broad a brush. Not all religions are rooted in fear, nor do all believers act ethically because of it. We must acknowledge both the shadows and the light: while religion has been twisted to justify horrors, it has also

inspired immense good—acts of kindness and courage that continue to shape our world.

In a remark widely attributed to Martin Sheen, he offered the provocative observation that Christianity “hasn’t been tried.” The statement is obviously too absolute; remarkable Christians have certainly attempted to live according to the teachings of Christ. But the underlying criticism is worth considering. If so many people who identify with a religion fail to practice its central ethical principles, perhaps the problem is not necessarily the paradigm itself, but the people who claim to follow it. And if Christianity, with two thousand years of history behind it, has so rarely been practiced consistently, how much more difficult is it to judge a relatively small and demanding tradition such as Thelema?

Too often, Christians have paid only lip service to the teachings of Jesus. While many religious groups and individuals do feed, heal, and shelter those in need, their charity sometimes comes with strings attached—an expectation of conversion that muddies the waters of true compassion. This makes me reflect on the hypocrisy that can lurk within religious zeal: some champion their faith not out of love, but for the sense of superiority it brings. In trying to appear virtuous, they may actually undermine the very ideals they claim to uphold.

In short, it may not be the religious ideals that have faltered, but rather the followers who shy away from the discomforts their beliefs demand. Their loyalty lasts only as long as it suits their own interests.

On the other side, religious believers sometimes accuse atheism of causing society’s ills, claiming that faith in God is essential for morality. But this accusation misses the mark. It assumes that only fear of divine punishment can keep people honest, when in reality, atheists can be just as principled, compassionate, and morally responsible as anyone. Traditions like Buddhism and Taoism, which do not require belief in a creator god, still place great emphasis on right action.

Sometimes, the ethical atheist is driven by a deeper sincerity than the believer who acts out of fear of hell or hope for heaven. Compassion, love, principle, or enlightened self-interest can all inspire ethical action—regardless of faith. The real

divide is not between the religious and the nonreligious, but between those who have made ethics a part of themselves and those who simply follow rules imposed from outside.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the problem with religion-based ethics is to consider the political use of “Christian values.” In the 2004 U.S. elections, many voters supported candidates who were presented as exemplifying Christian values while simultaneously supporting positions that their opponents regarded as hostile to compassion, equality, liberalism, or social welfare.¹ Crowley was clearly right about at least one shortcoming of so-called democracy: popular election does not necessarily select for wisdom, virtue, or genius.²

While religion can advocate extraordinarily high ethical standards, we would err greatly if we identified ethics exclusively with religious conviction. If ethics were confined to religion, we would expect ethical behavior to be found only among religious people. Clearly, that is not the case. Ethics are not synonymous with religion.

What Are Ethics?

I define ethics as a standard of right and wrong that guides what human beings should do in matters involving rights, duties, commitments to society, justice, and specific virtues—such as the *Eleven Virtues of Thelemic Knighthood*.³

Above all, ethics is about forging your own standards. This is the mark of a truly ethical person. Since feelings, laws, and customs can all stray from what is right, we must constantly test our principles to see if they are rational, consistent, and grounded in reason.

Studying ethics is a noble pursuit: it means holding our beliefs and actions up to the light, and demanding that our institutions live up to the values we profess. Sadly, this kind of ethical self-examination is all too rare in our times.

In other words, studying ethics helps us break free from the grip of peer pressure, conformity, and the hunger for approval. It urges us to build an inner compass

and live by principles we have chosen for ourselves. That, in spirit, is as Thelemic as it gets.

Altruism, Self-Interest, and Compassion

Nietzsche and his peers argued passionately that pure selflessness might be a myth, since nearly every action, however noble, brings some benefit back to the doer. In this light, perhaps no act is ever entirely selfless.

But we already know that.

G. K. Chesterton perhaps expressed the problem better than anyone:

The modern world is not evil; in some ways the modern world is far too good. It is full of wild and wasted virtues [...]; virtues gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone. Thus some scientists care for truth; and their truth is pitiless. Thus some humanitarians care only for pity; and their pity (I am sorry to say) is often untruthful.⁴

Nietzsche distinguishes pity from stronger forms of human concern, arguing that pity can perpetuate weakness by preserving dependence rather than empowering the individual to stand or fail by his own strength.⁵ Some Thelemites have extended this idea further, arguing that removing compassion and charity would somehow cleanse humanity of weakness and create a stronger human being.

Crowley sometimes appears to move in a similar direction in his comments on *Liber AL*, particularly when interpreting some of its more difficult passages. Ironically, so few people seem willing to apply the advice of either Nietzsche or Crowley consistently: question everything, including the conclusions of Nietzsche and Crowley.

There are many reasons to doubt that compassion is a weakness at all.

First, Crowley appeared to grow more cynical as he aged, and some of his later remarks clash sharply with the idealism of his youth.

Second, Crowley's view of Christianity was inevitably shaped by his strict, conservative upbringing. It is no wonder he targeted it so fiercely. This does not mean his criticisms lack value, but it does mean we should question them rather than accept them at face value.

Third, both Nietzsche and Crowley overlook the idea that compassion might be a natural part of being human.⁶ They also miss how compassion, cooperation, and empathy have fueled our survival and progress. We help each other; no one stands alone. Without cooperation, our societies, cultures, and technologies would never have blossomed. Sometimes, true strength is found in numbers.

Fourth, it makes little sense to condemn compassion, reverence, or empathy just because acts of kindness can also benefit the giver. Compassion springs from many wells, and the joy we feel in helping others does not taint the goodness of the act.

Think of those labeled as “weak.” Without Einstein—whose childhood is often wrapped in myth—we might have lost out on scientific wonders. Without Stephen Hawking, our grasp of the universe would be dimmer. Joseph Merrick, the “Elephant Man,” showed remarkable courage and dignity in the face of adversity that would have crushed many. Imagine a world that cast aside such people simply because they did not fit a narrow idea of strength.

Strength wears many faces, and sometimes it reveals itself only with time.

“Every man and every woman is a star” (AL 1:3).

This does not mean everyone will change the course of history. Rather, an ethical society should give each person the chance to discover their own unique contribution.

Fifth, Christianity has often emphasized altruism and responsibility toward others, while egoism places one's primary obligation upon oneself and one's own development. Nietzsche, Crowley, and others have characterized altruism as a form of “slave morality.” I agree that self-interest is not inherently immoral. In fact, I would argue that a healthy concern for one's own development is necessary.

The distinction lies in what we mean by self-interest.

The Order of Thelemic Knights does not pursue charity to appear “selfless” in the usual sense. We do it because it helps us grow. The fact that others benefit is not an accidental byproduct, but a result we gladly embrace.

Perhaps the real ethical aim is not to stamp out self-interest, but to expand it—so that we see our own well-being as intertwined with the well-being of others.

Different Ethical Paradigms, or Why Kant We Get Along?

The five approaches that follow are some of the most influential ways to tackle ethical questions. Each brings its own strengths and blind spots, and countless other methods lie beyond the scope of this work. Every ethical tool, after all, can be twisted to justify the very wrongs it seeks to prevent.

Utilitarian reasoning can be divided into different forms of consequentialist thinking, whereas ethical egoism places the individual’s benefit at the center of moral deliberation. These approaches may overlap in practice even when their philosophical foundations differ.^{[7](#)}

The key is that most of us do not stick to just one ethical theory. We mix and match, often unconsciously, drawing from different frameworks as situations demand.

In the end, whether or not we have studied ethics, we all face choices between right and wrong. Making the hard calls demands self-knowledge, integrity, and genuine effort.

The Utilitarian Approach

Utilitarianism is a consequentialist ethical theory associated particularly with Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Bentham spent much of his life criticizing

existing law and advocating legal reform, and he developed utilitarian reasoning as a way of evaluating laws and policies.

In its classical form, utilitarianism holds that the morally right action is the one that produces the greatest overall utility—traditionally understood in terms of happiness and the reduction of suffering. It is therefore more accurate to say that utilitarianism seeks to maximize overall good than to choose the option that causes the “least evil.”⁸

When using a utilitarian approach to evaluate an ethical course of action, we might begin by asking:

- *What options are available to us?*
- *Who will be affected by our decisions?*
- *What benefits and harms will each course of action produce?*

After considering these questions, we select the course of action that yields the greatest overall balance of benefits over harms.

One clear shortcoming of utilitarian reasoning is its potential to sacrifice justice or individual rights for aggregate benefit. Imagine, for example, a society that could greatly improve medical knowledge by conducting involuntary experiments on prisoners serving life sentences. A strict maximizing calculation might attempt to justify the practice by arguing that the suffering of a few would produce enormous benefits for millions.

Most people instinctively recognize the problem. We do not consider a person morally disposable simply because another calculation yields more beneficiaries. This is one reason rights-based and justice-based approaches are so important: they place limits on what we are permitted to do even when the consequences might appear favorable.

The history of apartheid in South Africa provides another useful illustration. Its defenders attempted to justify white political control partly by invoking social

stability and economic consequences. If those predictions had been correct, a purely consequentialist argument might have been constructed in defense of the system despite its discrimination. The fact that a system produces desirable consequences for some people does not automatically make the system just.

The Rights Approach

The Rights Approach is strongly associated with the work of Immanuel Kant and with the principle that human beings possess dignity because they are autonomous moral agents capable of choosing for themselves. Human beings should not be treated merely as objects to be manipulated for someone else's purposes.

In other words, a person should be respected as a person and permitted to direct their own life, subject to the rights of others.

Kant wrote, "Every action is right which in itself, or in the maxim on which it proceeds, is such that it can coexist along with the freedom of the will of each and all in action, according to a universal law."⁹

Some of the rights commonly emphasized in this approach may remind Thelemites of *Liber Oz*. The resemblance is worth considering, although similarity does not establish historical influence.

Among these rights are:

- **The right to truthful information.** The right to be told the truth about matters that may affect our lives.
- **The right of privacy.** The right to do, believe, and say what we choose, provided that we do not violate the rights of others.
- **The right not to be injured.** The right not to be harmed except where the circumstances provide a legitimate ethical justification or where we knowingly assume a risk.

- **The right to what is agreed.** The right to rely upon reasonable expectations arising from promises, contracts, and freely entered agreements.

When using the Rights Approach, the central question becomes:

Does this decision respect the rights of everyone affected by it?

The USA PATRIOT Act provides a useful historical case study for this approach. Enacted in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the law expanded government investigative powers in areas including surveillance and access to certain records. Critics argued that these powers endangered privacy and civil liberties; supporters argued that they were necessary tools for national security.

The important ethical question is not simply whether the law was useful. It is whether the government's methods respected the rights of the people affected by them.

Some of the original claims about the Act were broader than the law itself. For example, Section 215 permitted the government, under specified conditions and with court involvement, to seek certain business records and other tangible things. The provision was not written specifically for libraries, although library records could theoretically fall within its scope. The controversy nevertheless became an important symbol of the tension between national security and individual privacy.

Similarly, the post-9/11 debate over "enemy combatants" involved questions of detention, due process, and the rights of citizens and noncitizens. These issues were not simply products of the PATRIOT Act; they also involved other statutes, executive policies, military authorities, and Supreme Court decisions.

This distinction matters. Ethical criticism becomes stronger, not weaker, when the facts are precise.

The Fairness or Justice Approach

The Fairness or Justice Approach concerns whether people are treated equitably and whether benefits and burdens are distributed according to relevant and defensible principles.

The fundamental questions are:

- *How fair is the act?*
- *Does it treat similarly situated people similarly?*
- *Does it demonstrate unjustifiable favoritism or bias?*

Consider Oregon's Measure 36, approved by voters in 2004, which amended the state constitution to define marriage as between one man and one woman. The measure provides a useful example of how the Justice and Rights Approaches can reach similar conclusions from somewhat different starting points.

Same-sex couples were denied legal recognition and the associated benefits that heterosexual married couples could receive. Those benefits included inheritance rights, hospital visitation and decision-making rights, tax treatment, adoption rights, and other legal protections.

From a fairness perspective, the question is straightforward: if two groups are similarly situated with respect to the benefits and responsibilities of civil marriage, what ethically relevant reason exists for granting those benefits to one group while withholding them from another?

This issue also raises a broader question about the relationship between civil law and religious doctrine. In a pluralistic society, religious communities may define marriage according to their own beliefs. The ethical question for government is different: whether civil law should impose a single religious or moral conception of marriage on everyone.

Rules such as equal opportunity and fair housing laws exist because discrimination can prevent individuals from competing on genuinely equal terms. Such laws are not perfect, and they can sometimes be misapplied. But the

existence of imperfect implementation does not establish that the underlying principle is wrong.

Consider two people.

One is the head of a corporation, received the best education money could buy, never struggled to pay rent or put food on the table, inherited his father's fortune, and eventually became the figurehead of the organization.

The other is an immigrant or single parent who arrives with little more than a dream, attends an overcrowded and underfunded school, struggles through poverty, and eventually builds a successful small business.

Who is the superior human being?

Is accumulated wealth the sole measure of strength, or are there other forms of strength that matter just as much?

The Common-Good Approach

The Common-Good Approach has roots in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. It suggests that an individual's good is inseparable from the good of the community in which they live.

John Rawls described the common good in terms of general social conditions that are advantageous to everyone.[¹⁰](#)

This approach invites us to look closely at the systems, institutions, and environments we usually overlook, and to ask whether they help people truly thrive. Affordable health care, public safety, environmental protection, education, justice, and peace all come into focus through this lens.

To pursue the common good, we must see ourselves as part of a shared community. This leads us to ask:

- *What kind of society do we want to create?*

- *What values should hold that society together?*
- *What institutions will help us achieve those values?*

The Common-Good Approach does not ignore individual rights. Instead, it urges us to focus on what unites us, rather than fixating on what sets us apart.

For example, suppose you believe that the children of politicians who authorize wars should not automatically be exempt from the consequences of those wars, or that politicians should use the same public institutions they ask everyone else to support. You may be reasoning through the Common-Good Approach: you are asking whether those who make decisions are subject to the same social conditions as everyone else.

The Virtue Approach

The Virtue Approach takes a different path. Rather than asking only about outcomes or rules, it asks: what kind of person do our choices shape us into?

At its heart, this approach assumes that certain virtues can speed up our personal growth—and, in turn, help humanity grow as well. When someone becomes more courageous, disciplined, compassionate, or self-reliant, their example can spark growth in others too.

Virtues give us the strength to reach for our highest potential. When we truly make them our own, they become part of who we are—not just rules, but living qualities.

A virtuous person is therefore, in an important sense, an ethical person.

For a Thelemite, this approach naturally raises questions such as:

- *What sort of person will this action make me?*
- *Will I compromise my character, betray my beliefs, or betray myself?*

- *Will this action reflect badly on the philosophical or religious paradigm I have chosen to represent?*
- *Will this decision promote or interfere with my development?*
- *Is this behavior consistent with the person I am trying to become?*
- *Are this behavior and its consequences compatible with my True Will?*

The Virtue Approach centers on self-worth, integrity, and character. It values action, because who we are is shown by what we do—not just by what we say we believe.

Unlike rule-based or consequence-based ethics, it recognizes that moral life cannot always be boiled down to a single rule or a neat calculation.

Consider a classical ethical dilemma: a man's wife becomes gravely ill, and he spends an astonishing amount of money trying to save her life. With the same amount of money, he might have saved ten strangers.

A strict utilitarian calculation could conclude that the money should be used to save the greater number of people. A virtue ethicist might argue that placing the welfare of one's spouse above the welfare of strangers can itself be morally appropriate because loyalty, love, and personal commitment are genuine human virtues. Few people would want to live in a world in which we were expected to abandon our spouses whenever a mathematical calculation produced a larger number of strangers to save.

This example shows that ethical theories are tools, not magic formulas.

Applied Ethics, or Ethical Problem Solving

Sadly, there are no ready-made templates or foolproof answers that deliver tidy solutions to ethical dilemmas.

Wouldn't that be nice?

In the end, we all have to roll up our sleeves and face the messiness of real ethical choices. Our best tools are good information, a grasp of ethical frameworks, and a genuine effort to do as little harm as possible.

First and foremost:

Cause no harm.

At the very least, when confronted with an ethical dilemma, ask yourself:

- *Do I have all the facts?*
- *What are my options?*
- *What consequences are reasonably foreseeable?*
- *Which option produces the most balanced outcome?*
- *What benefits will my decision provide, and who will receive them?*
- *Will my course of action violate anyone else's rights?*
- *Will my action show unwarranted favoritism or discrimination?*
- *Which decision contributes most to the common good?*
- *What sort of person will this decision make me?*
- *Is my chosen course of action consistent with my own ethical principles?*

Utilitarianism urges us to weigh consequences. Rights-based ethics insists people are never just means to an end. Justice asks us to look for fairness. The Common-Good Approach reminds us we are part of a larger community. Virtue ethics shows us that our choices shape who we become.

A mature ethical person is willing to use all these tools—and, just as importantly, to question them.

Ethics is not about finding a rule that lets us stop thinking.

It is about learning to think responsibly, especially when no rule can make the decision for us.

1. This is a characterization of the political argument being made here, not a claim that all supporters of the 2004 candidates held identical views or that “Christian values” inherently entail the positions listed. _
2. See Crowley's *Liber 194: An Intimation with Reference to the Constitution of the Order* for his criticism of popular election. _
3. Valor, Nobility, Discernment, Pride, Compassion, Fidelity, Passion, Strength, Discipline, Self-Reliance, and Hospitality. _
4. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chapter 3, “The Suicide of Thought” _
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, §7. Nietzsche's criticism is directed specifically at “pity”; pity and compassion should not automatically be treated as synonyms. _
6. Whether compassion is primarily innate, learned, evolutionarily advantageous, culturally constructed, or some combination of these remains a substantive question in psychology, neuroscience, and evolutionary theory. _
7. Consequentialism is the broader family of theories in which moral evaluation depends on consequences; utilitarianism is one important form of consequentialism. Ethical egoism is a separate position and should not be treated as a subdivision of utilitarianism. _
8. Classical utilitarianism is commonly associated with maximizing overall utility, traditionally happiness or pleasure and the reduction of suffering. “Least evil” is therefore better treated as shorthand than as a precise definition. _
9. Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, “Doctrine of Right.” The Doctrine of Right was first published in 1797; the original manuscript's publication history should be distinguished from later English editions sometimes titled *The Science of Right*. _
10. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, : rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999) _

