

1.1 Basic understanding and some definitions

1.1.1 Ethics

Ethics is the science in the domain of philosophy that studies human actions in relation to their being morally good or bad, i.e. in as far as those actions are good or bad by themselves or by the intention of the person who is executing them. Circumstances can play a part in the judgment.

There are many different schools in ethics that judge actions by criteria such as those derived from natural law, from Revelation, from other religious sources, but also on the basis of efficacy, efficiency, organization, complexity, utility etc. In concrete situations, one may arrive at concordant conclusions with people of different backgrounds, whereas there is disagreement on the fundamentals. It is, therefore, necessary to base each ethic judgement on the same sound principles. According to the background, the criteria will differ and systems of practical rules will emerge that are called morals.

This section of the website book is based on the moral teaching of the Catholic Church.

1.1.2 Medical ethics

Medical ethics is that part of ethics that is confined to actions concerning the biological and psychical nature of man, actions that aim at improving his health, at preventing disease and/or to bring about favorable changes in failing life functions.

1.1.3 Standards of catholic medical ethics

Catholic medical ethics find its standards and background in the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. These teachings are based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ and its interpretation by the tradition of the Church. The Church is continuing this interpretation by the authority of the Pope and the bishops in community with him and with the assistance of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in particular.

1.1.4 Basis of the formulation of those standards by the Church

The basis of these formulations is the commandment of love of Christ which includes all other commandments of God, and on natural law that is founded on natural law.

1.1.5 Christ's commandment of love

This commandment is a double one: 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and: You must love your neighbour as yourself' (Matt 22, 37-39).

1.1.6. Natural right

The natural right of man is what is due to man on the basis of his being human, i.e. on the basis of *what man is*. This right is determined by natural law, i.e. the system of laws that God laid down in his creation and that thereby applies also to man. Man is able to know this through natural reason.

1.1.7 Natural law

Natural law is the entire complex of the most fundamental principles of morality. It is written in the soul of all men. It is nothing but the light of reason that God bestowed on us; because of it, we know what we should do and what we should avoid. It is invariable and its most important precepts are formulated in the Ten Commandments.

1.1.8 Natural law imperative

The Church takes the stand that natural law is an objective fact that man cannot withdraw from, without being untruthful, since it naturally belongs to man to know it.

1.1.9 Acceptability of principles generally used in secular bioethics ethics

The following principles, based on consensus, are generally put forward:

1. The principle of the autonomy of the person
2. The principle of beneficence, i.e. of wanting to do well
3. The principle of non-maleficence, i.e. of causing no harm
4. The principle of justice.

These principles are of great importance but deserve further precision and clarification.

1. Autonomy of the person is not unlimited and does not cover the authority over one's life as such, which is a gift of God. Autonomy has limitations where decisions are concerned that are incompatible with human dignity and the consequences thereof.
2. The principle of beneficence is in conformity with the commandment of charity ("love wills the other good").
3. The principle of non-maleficence is of the same order. Both principles are to be used bearing in mind the well-being of the entire person, his life, his integrity and his finality as a human being.
4. The principle of justice should be applied correctly. Here it means that every man is to be given or allowed what is due to him by natural law, on the basis of his being human. Applying justice which is based on materialistic systems, or justice as laid down in civil law, is not appropriate.

1.1.10 Way of thinking of the Church in its interpretation of precepts emanating from Revelation and natural law?

The Catholic Church starts from a realistic philosophy, meaning that man is able to know the objective truth, that finally is in God, by applying his reason based on the observation of creation and from Revelation; man should let himself be guided in his actions by the objective values that are contained in this knowledge. This excludes ways of thinking that are based solely on subjective values, on materialism, relativism, utilitarianism, proportionalism and consequentialism.

1.1.11 Man according to the Catholic Church

Man is a composite living being that consists of a material body and an immaterial soul – that is the principle of life of man and the bearer of his highest capacities: intelligence and free will. These make man a person; for by these capacities he can reflect on himself and his finality and be responsible for his acts.

1.1.12 Human dignity

Human dignity is the quality that confers on every human being the right of respect for his life and integrity as a person.

1.1.13 Basis of human dignity

Human dignity rests primarily on the fact that God created man after His image and likeness. This means that in man there are capacities that were directly conferred on him by God as a reflection of His own being, i.e. reason and free will.

Moreover, human dignity is based on man's finality: the goal that God creates for every man and with which he must agree, out of free will. This goal is to achieve eternal happiness in the contemplation of God's glory after temporal life on earth.

1.1.14 Immediate consequences of the dignity of man

These consequences are:

1. One should preserve human life if possible;
2. One may not intentionally kill a human being;
3. One should not instrumentalize a human being, i.e. use him or her as a means to a purpose that is alien to him, to his wellbeing or his finality.

1.1.15 Intentional killing of a human being

Nobody is allowed to intentionally kill another person on personal authority, for whatever motive. This indictment is based on the principle of human dignity.

This does not include inflicting death as a means of self-defense (which is necessarily involuntary) and the right that the lawful authority may have to apply a death sentence as punishment for a very serious offense, where the justification is the protection of the community.

1.1.16 Instrumentalizing the human body

It is not allowed to make the human body, be it one's own body or that of a fellow human, an instrument of an activity that aims at something that is alien to the wellbeing, the integrity and/or the finality of the person.

Any instrumental use of the human person and his body should always take into account his wellbeing and integrity and demands his full and well-informed consent (and, in the case of labour in tenure, a reasonable remuneration).