

## Vocabulary quiz study instructions

Be prepared to write a one sentence definition of these terms that shows you understand the gist of the concept:

antinomianism  
autonomy  
canon law  
cardinal virtues  
casuistry  
categorical imperative  
conscience  
deontological ethics  
determinism  
emotivism  
eudaemonism  
golden mean  
heteronomy  
intuition  
intuitionism  
magisterium  
metaethics  
moral autonomy  
natural law  
pluralism  
pragmatism  
probabilism  
prudence  
relativism  
slippery slope  
teleological ethics  
utilitarianism

# S. Grenz and J. Smith Pocket Dictionary of Ethics

**antinomianism.** Literally, "against or in opposition to, the \*law." Antinomianism as a Christian theological term asserts that grace through \*faith has abolished the law (Gal 3:11; Eph 2:8-9), and that therefore the Christian is no longer subject to the law in any sense. Taken to an extreme, antinomianism leads to licentious if not ethically questionable conduct. That it was a problem in the early church is evident by the repeated warnings against it found in several New Testament writings.

**autonomy.** Literally, "self \*law" or "self rule," and hence the independent exercise of an individual or community's \*will leading to moral claims that are seen to be determined by the individual. In general, autonomy—which is often viewed as the opposite of \*heteronomy and is sometimes contrasted to \*theonomy—entails the rejection of all moral claims deemed to arise from a source that is external to the individual or \*community or to which the individual or community does not have direct access. *See also* freedom; individualism; moral autonomy.

**canon law.** The body of rules established by ecclesial bodies for the

government of their internal relationships and the conduct—including the ethical conduct—of their members. In Christian circles, canon law is codified and utilized primarily by the Roman Catholic Church (*see also* encyclicals), the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Church of England. Some proponents suggest that canon law initially arose in the New Testament era as the Jerusalem church formed the apostolic college in order to establish some general theological and ethical guidelines for believers everywhere (Acts 15). These rules grew throughout the first century until they were eventually codified by the Western church in the *Corpus iuris canonici*. The term "canon law," as an expression of ecclesial rules, is generally not used by Protestants.

**cardinal virtues.** A term used especially in \*virtue ethics to refer to the central or principle character traits that lie at the heart of, or promote, the \*good life. \*Plato spoke about four principle virtues that he saw as being related to the three functions (or perhaps "parts") of the soul. Thus, \*wisdom corresponded to reason, \*courage to spirit or \*will, and \*temperance to desire or appetite, with \*justice forming the integrative virtue. Sometimes the Greek cardinal virtues are listed as \*prudence, justice, temperance and \*fortitude. As a Christian ethicist, \*Thomas Aquinas accepted these four but believed that they were to be subordinate to the three \*theological virtues of \*faith, hope and \*love.

**casuistry.** Linked to the idea of "case law," casuistry refers to any form of argument about moral or legal issues that argues from the abstract to the particular. Casuistry seeks, then, to apply abstract or universal moral \*principles to particular, unique cases (*see also* universal moral judgments). Ethicists often claim that casuistry is found in the New Testament, such as in Paul's attempt to apply Christian principles to the question of eating meat that had been

sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8). Casuistry as a form of moral argument developed in the late Middle Ages as a means of assisting priests as they served as confessors. Some adherents of \*situation ethics reject casuistry on the basis of the uniqueness of every ethical \*decision-making context. *See also* probabilism.

**categorical imperative.** The designation of the supreme \*principle of \*duty, according to certain ethicists in the tradition of \*deontological ethics but especially Immanuel \*Kant. Kant offered several formulations of the categorical imperative, the most important of which states, "Act in conformity with that maxim, and that maxim only, that you can will at the same time to be a universal law" (*see also* universal moral judgments). Hence, for Kant, right actions flow out of right principles, and right principles in turn govern, at least in theory, situations. In any situation, Kant advised, do the act that is motivated by the sincere belief that what you are doing is the \*right thing to do not merely for you, but for anybody seeking to act properly in any similar situation. A second form of the categorical imperative focuses more on the treatment of others: "Act in such a way that you always treat humans not merely as a means to an end but also as an end." *See also* imperative; rule-deontology.

**conscience.** The inner witness to moral \*responsibility or the inherent human ability or capacity to discern \*good and \*evil, \*right

and wrong, as well as to sense \*guilt when moral codes are transgressed. Although generally used with reference to individuals, the term also carries a metaphorical meaning when it refers to a person who is viewed as acting as the conscience of a nation or \*society. On the basis of several biblical texts (e.g., Rom 2:14-15), many Christian ethicists view the possession of a conscience as part of God's general revelation or \*beneficence to humankind, albeit one that leads to human guilt before God. Consequently, conscience is not sufficient for attaining a moral life; to it must be added special revelation and divine assistance.

**deontological ethics.** The method of moral reasoning that asserts that the moral propriety of an act resides entirely in the act, being somehow connected to what is intrinsic to the act itself, and is not dependent upon the intent or the motive of the doer (*see also* intention). There are several forms of deontological ethics, including act-deontology and \*rule-deontology. The rule-deontological approach suggests that moral behavior should be determined by one or more rules that govern all actions and all situations. Advocates differ over the number of such rules and how moral reasoning ought to proceed in a situation in which two or more rules are in conflict (such as the conflict between truth-telling and the protection of innocent persons evidenced in the biblical story of Rahab [Josh 2]). Immanuel \*Kant popularized a monistic form of rule-deontology with his articulation of the \*categorical imperative.

**depravity.** *See* total depravity.

**determinism.** Generally defined in opposition to the concept of \*free will, \*determinism, as it relates to \*ethics, asserts that all human behaviors are the necessary or inevitable result of prior causes. Natural determinism sees all events as a direct result of prior causes in a

chain of cause and effect present throughout the universe. Theological determinism asserts that God directly or indirectly causes all events. Many ethicists reject both forms of determinism on the assumption that neither allows for the possibility of free human choice, which is foundational for moral \*responsibility.

**emotivism.** An alternate term for \*noncognitivism, the theory that ethical judgments do not carry cognitive meaning, that is, they do not ascribe moral properties to acts or persons, at least not in any manner that is objectively true or false. Taken to the extreme, emotivism declares that ethical statements are merely the forceful expression of a speaker's emotions. Many proponents, however, add that such expressions have the goal either of commanding a similar emotion in the hearer or of evoking approval or disapproval in the hearer. f

**eudaemonism.** An ethical theory that asserts that \*happiness is the highest \*good and the basis for moral \*obligation. \*Aristotle is often cited as proposing an ethic of happiness. Yet he understood the term not as denoting a psychological state but as referring to well-being or living well. Christian ethicists debate the question as to whether happiness can form the basis for or the goal of the ethical life, especially in the light of Jesus' admonition to his disciples to seek first the reign and \*righteousness of God (Mt 6:33).

**golden mean.** An aphorism coined by \*Aristotle that asserts that the excellence of the moral virtues consists in habitual moderation. The \*principle of the golden mean suggests that a \*virtue lies in the mean between deficiency and excess. Thus, \*courage is the mean between cowardice (the \*vice of deficiency) and foolhardiness (the vice of excess).

**heteronomy.** The approach to ethical reflection in which moral and ethical \*principles are derived from a source outside the individual, such as revelation or an authoritative institution. Immanuel \*Kant rejected heteronomy in favor of \*autonomy. In his estimation, morals arise through the exercise of the autonomous rational \*will.

**intuition.** A means to knowledge that appeals to an immediate insight into a particular reality or state of affairs that arises apart from inference or general rules. \*Kant understood intuition to be the passive sense-awareness that produces a specific information base through the cooperation of imagination and discursive understanding; this intuited knowledge yields a type of data whose detail was the responsibility of the sciences to establish. *See also* intuitionism; prima facie duty.

**intuitionism.** Also known as nonnaturalism, a theory of justification that asserts that basic ethical concepts are gained through \*intuition rather than deduced from sense perception or scientific observation. Because these concepts arise through intuition, rather than by deductive reasoning, they are self-evident. According to G. E. Moore, goodness (*see* good, goodness) is the best example of an ethical concept that is self-evident and known through direct apprehension. Ethical judgments, statements about what is \*right, in turn, are derived from this direct perception of goodness, for *right* means "cause of a good result." f

**magisterium.** The group of persons, generally vocational theologians and church officials, who by virtue of their place within the teaching office of the Roman Catholic Church possess the authority to determine the content of and to pass on to others official church doctrine, teachings and practices. The *Magisterium* in a narrow sense designates the authoritative body of teachings within the Roman Catholic Church, as set forth by the bishops acting under the authority of the pope. The teaching of faith and morals is the primary objective of the magisterium.

**metaethics.** A synonym for \*analytical ethics, the aspect of philosophical or \*general ethics that examines the nature and grounds of ethical beliefs. Metaethics includes the study of the meaning of ethical concepts such as "right," "good," "free," "responsible." It explores the various proposed methods of justifying moral assertions. It also raises the question of how \*ethics itself can be rationally justified. Thus it asks, "Why be moral?"

**moral autonomy.** The belief that moral direction is internal, arising through the operation of a principle resident within the individual moral agent. In the Enlightenment, the locus of moral \*autonomy was believed to lie in the light of reason present within each human being, which in turn gave the individual access to universal \*law written into the very structure of the universe.

**natural law.** A \*law presumed to be grounded in \*nature itself. A natural law is a \*norm for ethical behavior that is deemed binding on all humans because it coheres with the human essence (*see also* human nature) or with the structure of the universe, perhaps because it was legislated by God. The idea initially arose among the ancient Greeks and Romans, especially the \*Stoics. But it came to the fore in the Christian tradition as thinkers drew from both philosophy and the Bible to devise a theory of \*morality and \*politics that could be understood to be universally applicable. Insofar as natural laws can be known by reason alone, without revelation, they provide guidance for all humans, and when followed they enhance the \*common good, but also render each person morally responsible to a divine judge. In jurisprudence, natural law theory is invoked to set limits to the legislative prerogatives of rulers. In this sense, it forms an alternative to legal positivism, which suggests that human sovereigns are not subject to constraints from any higher court of appeal. f

**pluralism.** As a general term, the outlook characterized by the advocacy and embrace of the presence of variety and diversity. As a philosophical term, pluralism is the perspective that elevates the categories of diversity, multiplicity and difference, rather than homogeneity, unity and sameness. In social theory, pluralism is the celebration of a social system that promotes the presence, \*autonomy and ongoing development of diverse religious, ethnic, racial and social groups within the system. Pluralism as a stance in theology is the belief that there are many paths to and expressions of truth about God, and several equally valid means to salvation. In \*ethics, pluralism generally refers to the belief that all moral principles arise out of a particular \*community that espouses them, and that in any \*society that includes a multiplicity of moral communities a plurality of possibly competing ethical systems will exist simultaneously. Pluralists often add that because an act or \*principle of action can only be judged from within the context of the particular community that espouses it, there is no universal standpoint from which to adjudicate the debate among moral communities or to determine definitively which ethical system is valid. Some pluralists conclude from this situation that the various

ethical systems are equally valid. *See also* conventionalism; relativism; tolerance; universal moral judgments.

**pragmatism.** As a philosophical concept, an epistemological theory that assumes that every truth or idea has practical consequences and that these practical consequences are a critical test of its truthfulness. Some pragmatists add that there are no transcendental sources of truth; therefore, truth and values are relative to their usefulness to either individuals or societies. Pragmatists such as William James regard the world as ethically neutral but capable of being improved. In \*ethics, pragmatism is sometimes associated with \*utilitarianism, insofar as both appeal to results in the process of making moral judgments.

**probabilism.** A \*principle, especially prominent among Jesuit propo-

nents of \*casuistry and articulated in the Latin phrase *lex dubia non obligat*, that states that a person is released from an \*obligation when thorough investigation fails to dispel uncertainty regarding the moral status of the proposed obligation. Some ethicists restate the principle in a positive form as declaring that an action may be performed without incurring moral culpability if the agent has probable reason to believe that it is legitimate or has a seemingly valid moral rationale in favor of it. Another reformulation of the principle declares that in a case of sincere doubt, the course of action that favors liberty may be followed. Critics aver that probabilism promotes moral laxity, for it means that an individual's decision to act or to dismiss an obligation can be based on a single expression of probable doubt by an authoritative moralist. Moreover, the circumstances endemic to nearly every situation are so complex as to produce some measure of doubt about any prescribed \*duty or course of action.

**prudence.** A \*virtue that entails practical \*wisdom or the ability to adapt appropriate means wisely in order to reach a \*good or beneficial goal, especially through the exercise of foresight. Prudence was often listed among the \*cardinal virtues in classical Greek philosophy, but it has been praised by Christian thinkers as well. \*Augustine, for example, defined prudence as \*love distinguishing with sagacity between what hinders it and what helps it. \*Thomas Aquinas understood prudence as the intellectual virtue that directs a person to the choice of the right means to a proper end. In recent years, prudence has been used in the narrower sense of cautious wisdom or the exercise of discretion or careful reflection prior to acting. It has also been erroneously associated with prudishness.

**relativism.** As a general concept, the assertion that all beliefs, opinions, judgments or claims to truth are conditioned by and dependent on contingent factors connected to the persons or groups that espouse them; the theory that the basis for all judgments varies according to time, place, and personal or group perspective. Hence, relativism assumes that the context in which any discourse occurs influences its outcome or the conclusions that arise from it. Relativism readily leads to the conclusion that the situational character of all discourse means either that no \*absolutes or universals exist, or more narrowly that we have no access to a standpoint from which we could reach conclusions about what is absolute or universal. Moral relativism declares that assertions about the \*right and the \*good, as well as \*laws or \*principles that guide human moral behavior, are contextually conditioned. See also conventionalism; idealism; pluralism; postmodern ethics; universal moral judgments.

**slippery slope.** An argument that cautions against an action that may not necessarily be objectionable in itself on the basis that it would set in motion a train of events that would lead to an undesirable outcome. The slippery slope argument has been used in the debates over several contemporary ethical issues. For example, some ethicists argue against legalizing voluntary \*euthanasia because it will lead to such evils as the imposition of social expectations on elderly or terminally ill persons to end their lives prematurely or that it will open the door to \*involuntary euthanasia.

**teleological ethics.** An approach to moral reasoning, sometimes known as consequentialism, that asserts that the rightness or wrongness of an act is determined by its outcome, namely, by the amount of \*good it produces or \*evil it prevents. Hence, in any given situation the moral agent should inquire as to which act will produce the greatest possible balance of good over evil. Proponents of the teleological approach differ with each other regarding whose benefit ought to be the concern of the moral agent, some arguing that one's own good is the sole concern (\*ethical egoism), whereas others aver that the good of others must be considered (\*utilitarianism).

**utilitarianism.** A theory of moral reasoning within \*teleological ethics that looks to the principle of utility, that is, the degree to which an act is helpful or harmful in the world as a whole, to determine the rightness or wrongness of an act. Moral living, therefore, consists in doing that act that brings about the greatest balance of \*good over \*evil for the greatest number of people.