Moral Goods: A Common Denominator for Old Testament Ethics
Jonathan Y. Rowe

The Old Testament contains many resources for ethics, including 'law', wisdom, poetry, prophecy and narrative. Their common denominator—as concerns ethics—is a concern to promote or protect particular moral goods. Realising that moral goods are more foundational than the literary genres in which they appear offers new possibilities for the use of the Old Testament in Christian ethical reflection: three are explored in the second part of this essay.

Introduction
Old Testament texts hail from a strange and distant land. There they do things differently, sometimes shockingly differently. Over the last 30 years scholars have attempted to describe and understand the morality reflected in the Old Testament and the ethic promoted there. In some respects we have reached an impasse, a point at which there is much debate about hermeneutics, but little agreement about how to traverse this foreign country—if, indeed, we can even visit—a situation that has led Brian Brock to suggest that we need to be immersed in Scripture rather than simply attempting to understand it.[1] This article proposes a new way of looking at the matter that may help overcome the interpretative obstacles impeding use of the Old Testament in the Church today.

At the beginning of the 20th century Henry Sidgwick observed that ancient ethics 'can scarcely be understood by us unless with a certain effort we throw the quasi-jural notions of modern ethics aside, and ask … not 'What is Duty and what is its ground?' but 'Which of the objects that men think good is truly Good or the Highest Good?''.[2] By 'ancient' Sidgwick meant Greek and Roman. But it is suggestive to consider whether this focus upon 'good' rather than rules or duty could be true for the Old Testament.

Moral Goods as a Common Denominator for Old Testament Ethics
Many people think that 'Old Testament ethics' begins and ends with the 'law'. Although biblical 'law' was more like general teaching than the legal stipulations used in modern courts, let us consider Exodus 22:2–3: 'If a thief is found breaking in, and is beaten to death, no bloodguilt is incurred; but if it happens after sunrise, bloodguilt is incurred'. Two important things are in view, namely, human life and property. The 'law' states that life is more important than belongings. It refuses to exculpate the daytime killing of an intruder when, one assumes, the owners of the house could both see and overpower the thief. At night, however, the risk to the lives of household members is heightened, since a ruckus in the dark could easily lead to injury to the residents themselves, and so there is no culpability should the trespasser be bludgeoned to death. In both cases human life is preferred: during the day, life is preferred to property; during the night, the life of the innocent to that of a guilty intruder.

Three points might be made. First, the fundamental question concerns 'goods' or, more precisely—because one *ought* to protect both life and property—'moral goods'. In other words, the 'law' does not exist for its own sake, but explains how moral goods should be viewed. Second, the 'law', in this instance casuistic or case law, indicates the prioritisation of goods that is to be adopted in particular situations. Third, this prioritisation may depend upon circumstances—in Exodus 22:2–3 upon

whether it was night or daytime. It is clear that moral goods rather than the 'law' itself are foundational. This does not mean that anything goes, nor that one mix of goods is as acceptable as another. It is precisely to these questions that laws are addressed. To summarise, we have looked behind the curtain of rules and found a multitude of moral goods. Now, of course, we must draw back the curtain of moral goods. What do we find?

In a canonical context the first 'good' is creation itself (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Some authors think that 'good' in these verses refers to instrumental utility. Such an interpretation coheres with the typical Old Testament use of 'good' to denote 'a state or function appropriate to genre, purpose, or situation'.[3] For this reason it is 'not good' that the animals cannot be Adam's companions, that is, they cannot serve this function. Christopher Wright, however, perceives that the creation narratives describe

> a place of order, system and structure. We live in a cosmos, not a chaos … [which] provides an objective basis and authority for the exercise of moral freedom and sets limits to moral relativism … There is a basic shape to that world which we did not invent, and therefore a corresponding shape to the moral response required of us if we are to live within it with the kind of freedom which, by God's so ordering, it authorizes.[4]

Similarly, Walter Houston argues that if the Old Testament writers 'perceive that they do not live in a just society, at least they live in a just world. The world, or to put it in theological terms, God's creation, is ordered and therefore exhibits justice'.[5] That Wright and Houston correctly identify a moral and not merely functional created order is confirmed by the biblical author's evaluation of the immoral behaviour of humankind, which mirrors God's initial positive appraisal. Before the fall 'God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good'. But post-fall, 'The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually' (Genesis 1:31; 6:5).

Moreover, it is unnecessary to drive a wedge between creation as instrumentally good and creation as good because it possesses a moral order, for one aspect of this ordering is teleological.[6] Pulling back the second curtain, then, we do not actually find anything else *per se*. Rather, we see the relationship of moral goods to each other: we see a moral order of moral goods, an ordering that legitimises certain behaviours while de-authorizing others.

Having drawn back the curtain of rules and moral goods, what happens if we draw back the curtain of the moral order? Behind the final curtain we find God, creator and redeemer, a discovery that has two important implications. First, because God is, to return to Sidgwick, the 'Highest Good', the notion of the 'imitation of God' is prominent throughout the Old Testament.[7] Second, although we have drawn back the curtain of rules, we must not abandon them. Because biblical teaching has the same divine source as creation itself, it reflects a true understanding of the moral order of moral goods. Thus there is no problem at all in the psalmist's petition that God teach him his ways, that is, the 'law' (Psalm 27:11), for the plea is to know how God would have him or her act in the world he has created.

The latter point enables us to think of moral goods as a 'common denominator' for Old Testament ethics. Norman Whybray groups the many things considered good in the Old Testament under 12 facets of the 'good life', including food, longevity, family, justice, land and security.[8] It is unsurprising that not only 'law', but other genres seek to promote or protect these goods. For example, the need to participate in agricultural tasks essential to family wellbeing is reinforced by proverbial comments concerning the sluggard (Proverbs 26:13–16). Similarly, Psalms 111 and 112 mention mercy, sharing and justice, with the intention that worshippers inculcate dispositions favourable to practices that realize these moral goods.

The prophets, on the other hand, highlight instances where the people do not choose wisely. Thus when Isaiah pronounces 'Woe to those who join house to house' he specifies the goods in peril as a result of avaricious property speculation. These are the goods of agricultural productivity and 'fairness' with respect to the enjoyment of the fruit of the land (Isaiah 5:8–12).[9] And in narrative, authors can bring together a constellation of moral goods and promote a particular view of how they should be configured by approving of characters' sometimes unexpected choices, for example, Michal's loyalty to David in 1 Samuel 19:10–17. In all these cases moral goods lie behind the proverb, narrative, song or 'law'.

With this relationship between moral goods and the

various literary genres of the Old Testament in mind we can turn to consider some implications for the Church.

Moral Goods and the Hope of Old Testament Ethics

In this brief space I can only highlight three promises for ethical reflection arising from a focus upon moral goods.

First, we need to realise that any understanding of the moral order of moral goods cannot be reduced to knowledge of rules, aphorisms or any other literary genre describing that order. Furthermore, since the world created by God is a complex place no single principle or group of principles can hope to capture its whole richness; and this without going into the implications of our limited, sinful understanding of the moral order.

Aristotle conceived of his 'golden mean' as a fine edged ridge, falling away on both sides to ever greater depths of error. His rather pessimistic assessment was that there were numerous ways of doing something wrongly, but few right ways. Using the idea of hitting a target, he maintained that 'there are many ways of missing to be in error … But there is only one way to be correct. That is why error is easy and correctness is difficult' (*Nicomanchean Ethics* 1106b30–32). Aristotle's stance, however, is not compatible with the Bible's conception of a created moral order, to which there are many possible ways of responding well. Instead of a pinnacled mountain or ridge, the biblical view is more like Table Mountain, South Africa. Although there are limits to proper conduct, there is a wide plateau upon which we may live ethically well. This is obvious from a consideration of a negative decree like 'do not murder'. This command certainly sets a limit, but leaves plenty of scope for perfectly moral human behaviour that values the good protected by the rule.

Second, when Amos asks the rhetorical questions 'Do horses run on rocks? Does one plough the sea with oxen?' (Amos 6:12), he assumes the answer is obvious. This is what gives the following phrase its force: 'But you have turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood'. The sins enumerated by Amos concern the conversion of evils into goods, and vice versa, a process that is presented as obviously unnatural, a 'cosmic nonsense'.[10] In other words, there is a 'natural morality' in which moral goods are, in principle, discernable to all; although, obviously, not everyone chooses to live this way. Because the heart of natural morality concerns the possibility of a universal perception of moral goods, it is to be expected that others, including those from different cultural and religious traditions, can correctly perceive this order. This opens up new vistas for interfaith dialogue since it becomes simply unnecessary to affirm that Christians possess exclusive insight into ethics. What's more, because both Scripture and 'natural morality' share the same divine source, one can account for moral virtue as a disposition towards morally upright selections of moral goods (and avoidance of evils) wherever it may be found but, at the same time, also maintain that 'correct' selections are reflected in the Bible.[11]

In fact, finally, the revelation of God must be central to Christian ethics—and ethics part of the gospel itself—because the identification of things as goods or evils, and their prioritisation, is either not always obvious or, if it is, people do not behave as they should. Yet by taking moral goods as more basic than 'law', wisdom, or narrative one can avoid collapsing any one genre into the other. For example, to take a popular misconception, one does not need to assume that narrative is merely illustrative of 'law'. Furthermore, one can avoid the problems inherent in a common approach to appropriating the Old Testament in Christian ethics, that of 'middle axioms' or 'mediating principles'. On this understanding one needs 'to climb the ladder of abstraction', attempting to identify the 'principles' indicated by the ancient text before translating these ideas for new contexts. Instead, by taking moral goods as foundational one should 'descend the ladder of abstraction', becoming *more* concrete and taking the moral goods in the text *more* seriously. This will necessitate close attention to the social context of biblical stipulations and so on, but by doing so we may avoid some of the hermeneutical problems in which Old Testament ethics is currently mired.

Conclusion

My purpose has been to demonstrate the utility of viewing moral goods as a common denominator for Old Testament ethics. To return to Brian Brock's proposal, as we sing God's praises, read the history books, use biblical wisdom, and meditate upon Old Testament 'laws' our lives are (re)orientated, that is, our understanding of the correct order of moral goods is renewed: Scripture becomes part of us, and we live in its *habitus* rather than standing outside looking in.

———————————

[1] Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). For the 'strange land' analogy see Cyril Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land: Studies in Old Testament Ethics* (OTS; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001) and, more

hopefully, Andrew Sloane, *At Home In a Strange Land: Using the Old Testament in Christian Ethics* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2008).

[2] Henry Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics* (7th ed.; London: MacMillan, 1907), 106.

[3] Robert Gordon, 'טוב' in W. A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), 2.353–57, quote 353.

[4] Christopher Wright, 'Old Testament Ethics', in D. J. Atkinson and D. H. Field, eds., *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1995), 48–55, quote 49.

[5] Walter Houston, *Contending for Justice: Ideologies and Theologies of Social Justice in the Old Testament* (LHBOTS 428; London: T&T Clark, 2006), 15.

[6] The other is generic. On whether a Platonic (A ordered to serve B) or Aristotelian (A ordered to flourish as A) conception of teleological ordering is to be preferred see Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (2nd ed.; Leicester: Apollos, 1994), 34.

[7] There is a debate about whether 'imitation of God' in the Old Testament is 'a scholarly wish' or 'the key to biblical ethical theory'—see, respectively, Rodd, *Glimpses*, 73; Gordon Wenham, 'The Gap between Law and Ethics in the Bible', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 48 (1997): 17–29, quote 27. For a careful discussion of the evidence see Walter Houston, 'The Character of YHWH and the Ethics of the Old Testament: Is *Imitatio Dei* Appropriate?', *Journal of Theological Studies* 58 (2007): 1–25.

[8] Norman Whybray, *The Good Life in the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002). For an enduring discussion of the variety of meanings of 'good' (*viz.* 'the good rationally aimed at', goods that are 'good for' something else, and 'a good something' as a specimen of a class of things) see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (2nd ed.; trans. T. Irwin; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 1094a17–24, 1097a24–37.

[9] For these and other examples see Erhard Gerstenberger, *Theologies in the Old Testament* (trans. J. Bowden; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), 61–75; Eryl Davies, 'Walking in God's Ways: The Concept of *Imitatio Dei* in the Old Testament', in E. Ball, ed., *In Search of True Wisdom: Essays in Old Testament Interpretation in Honour of Ronald E. Clements* (JSOTSup 300; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 99–115

[10] John Barton, 'Natural Law and Poetic Justice in the Old Testament', in *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations* (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 2003), 32–44, quote 38.

[11] Note the commonalities between ancient Near Eastern legal stipulations and biblical 'law', and the resemblances between Proverbs 22:17–23:11 and the Egyptian sayings of Amenemope.

For further reading

- On Old Testament ethics in general, a comprehensive yet eminently readable theological introduction is Christopher Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004).

- The literature on moral goods goes back to the ancients; a good survey can be found in Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century* (2nd ed.; London: Routledge, 1998).

- For a further discussion of moral goods in Old Testament ethics, see Jonathan Y. Rowe, *Michal's Moral Dilemma: A Literary, Anthropological and Ethical Interpretation* (LHBOTS; New York, T&T Clark, forthcoming)

Dr Jonathan Rowe (Ph.D., St Andrews) is Principal of the *Seminario Evangélico Unido de Teología*, El Escorial, Madrid, where he teaches mission and ethics. Prior to working in Spain he taught at All Nations Christian College, London, and served for several years as a health services manager in the UK, Uganda and Pakistan. A former KLICE grantee, he has published in the fields of mission, ethics and Old Testament.