The Gods Have Said

Socrates famously asked whether the pious is pious because the gods declared it so, or whether the gods declared certain things pious because they were already.\(^1\) To paraphrase, if a god declares something ethical, was it already ethical, or is it now ethical because that god says? If the former, then the god’s edicts are irrelevant in determining ethics. Ethics should be determinable without that edict. If the latter, then the edict is an arbitrary value which possesses no inherent morality. In this case, a god’s edicts become a distraction from, even a danger to, the study of ethics.

A famous example of a god’s edicts is the Ten Commandments. Many say that, because they come from God, they are a perfect set of core ethics. Others say that whether they come from a god or not, they are a good place to start judging moral behavior. I disagree with both. In the case of the former, I’ve already described why coming from a god doesn’t make an edict moral. In the case of the latter, the Ten Commandments are too centered on religious practice to include more than a rudimentary attempt at ethics.

I will acknowledge that the context in which they were given may lend subtle meaning not immediately apparent to us. The Ten Commandments were given to people establishing a cultural identity. The strong presence of commandments which direct religious and cultural behavior instead of addressing moral issues demonstrates this. However, as ethical guidelines applicable to many societies and our culture specifically, they fall short.

An Ethical Principle

Humans are social animals. We need others to survive, from infancy and throughout our lives. There is variety, of course. Some people prefer their own company, even for long periods. But mostly what it means to be human is determined by interaction with others. Language, empathy, and ethics are parts of that interaction.

A code of ethics gives people direction on how to treat others and, often, themselves. A simple but profound statement that forms a good ethical foundation is Kant’s Second Formulation: “Treat humanity not as a means to an end, but as an end in and of itself.” In other words, people should be treated with the basic dignity of being someone with their own thoughts, goals, and difficulties rather than as a tool for use at your will. I see this as superior even to the golden rule, *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. The formulation better sums up how to treat people than the Ten Commandments or the Golden Rule, because it includes the concept that people may like to be treated differently than how you might wish to be treated. It also goes beyond how we treat people to include a look at the rights people should have.

Kant’s Second Formulation is a sword slicing through many ethical knots. Kant’s murderer at the door, asking for your child? Don’t give him information that would lead to the child’s death; doing so would be using the child as a means of enforcing your morality, rather than as an end to be protected. Abortion? If a woman is not allowed to abort within a reasonable amount of time from impregnation, then she is the means of bringing in another member of society, rather than as her own.

However, if you only have a sword, then all your problems look like they need to be slashed or stabbed. Kant’s second formulation is a good guide; perhaps the best single principle for moral decision making I’ve found. Still, a broader set of guidelines would provide more direction both on a daily basis and in extraordinary circumstances.

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3 Ibid.
Ten or So Commandments

I have already stated that I do not see the Ten Commandments as effective ethical guidelines. However, ten is a reasonably large number of guidelines which still remains manageable. So let’s look at what the Ten Commandments have, and where they could be improved. Unfortunately in neither Exodus nor Deuteronomy are the Ten Commandments actually numbered. They are written as paragraphs, rather than as a numbered list.

Different sects and scholars, therefore, number them in different ways. For this paper, I looked at six specific sets of The Ten Commandments: the Jewish Ten, the Samaritan Ten, the Catholic Ten, the Protestant Ten, the Lutheran Ten, and the LDS Ten. Among these, only nine commandments appear in the majority of these sets in some form. These are: (1) Have no other gods before me, (2) Do not take the name of God in vain, (3) Keep the Sabbath Day holy, (4) Honor your father and mother, (5) Do not kill, (6) Do not commit adultery, (7) Do not steal, (8) Do not bear false witness against, and (9) Do not covet.⁴

Each of them, therefore, has its unique take on how to fill the missing slots, combining, deleting, and adding as necessary. The first Jewish Commandment, for example, gives no command. It states “I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”⁵ The Samaritan Ten Commandments include a rather specific tenth commandment, which was to apply when they take the land of the Canaanites. They also give a reason for honoring your father and mother, separates not coveting your neighbor’s house from general coveting, and go into detail on other things not to covet.⁶ The Catholic Ten separate not coveting your neighbor’s wife from the other forms of coveting.⁷ Lutherans separate do not covet a house (or inheritance) and go into detail on what other things a person should not covet. They also give a reason to honor your parents – that you may live long on the earth.⁸ Protestants, as well as the LDS⁹, forbid “any graven

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⁴ See Appendix for all six sets of Ten Commandments.
image.” Protestants also specify not coveting your neighbor’s wife nor their goods, under the same commandment.\textsuperscript{10}

It’s interesting to look at the wording for each set, what they say about the cultures they come from, and the values of those cultures. However, for this paper, we need a single set. Combining the six lists with a look at the King James Version of the Bible on biblegateway.com, I have developed a list to examine in this paper:

1) Worship no other Gods
2) Create no images
   a. Do not worship images or idols
   b. Do not overvalue or worship earthly things
3) Do not misuse God’s name
   a. Do not swear
   b. Do not make oath’s using God’s name
4) Keep the Sabbath holy
   a. Keep the Sabbath a day of rest
5) Honor your parents
6) Do not kill
7) Do not commit adultery
8) Do not lie
   a. Do not spread rumors
   b. Do not gossip
9) Do not steal
10) Do not be jealous
    a. Do not desire another’s wife
    b. Do not desire another’s house nor their inheritance
    c. Do not desire another’s servants nor their slaves
    d. Do not desire another’s property

\textbf{Moral Foundations and the Three Principles}

As one method for evaluating the Ten Commandments, I will look at Moral Foundations Theory, which is based on research and developed by social and cultural psychologists. According to this theory, there are five or six primary foundations of moral behavior. Simplified, they include caring (which covers

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{9} "Ten Commandments." The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. 2004. https://www.lds.org/topics/ten-commandments?lang=eng
\end{itemize}
kindness, nurturing, and empathy), fairness (which covers justice, rights, and sharing), loyalty (which covers patriotism and self-sacrifice), authority (which covers structure, tradition, and leadership), sanctity (which covers nobility, purity, and avoiding contamination), and liberty (which covers freedom, and opposes bullies and oppressors).  

As a second method, I will also use three principles. The first principle is: “We should treat humanity as an end, not as a means.” This is the Second Kantian Formulation, discussed above. The second principle is: “We should take time to consider our thoughts and actions—both on their own and in regards to their consequences.” One problem with Kant is that he ignores the consequences of a person’s actions in determining morality—but surely an action made to save an infant’s life is more moral than the same action without that intent. On the other hand, ethical systems that overemphasize the ends above the means may leave people committing atrocities. In reality, methods used to achieve a goal and the goal itself are intimately tied together. Either may corrupt or mitigate the other, but the nobility of either the means or the ends can still be stained by the evil of the other.

The third principle is: “We should take time to appreciate, and to nurture our mental and emotional health.” We are told that, in an airplane emergency, we should attach our own oxygen mask before assisting a child with their mask. The reason is simple: if you pass out, you cannot put the oxygen mask on the child, and you both suffer. However, if you are wearing an oxygen mask, then you can also put one on the child. Similarly, we should nurture our own emotional and mental stability. With emotional and mental health, we are better able to make rational, compassionate, and ethical decisions. We are also better able to maintain the inner strength required to stick to those decisions.

With Moral Foundations Theory and these three principles in mind, let’s look at the Ten Commandments. The first commandment that jumps out at me is 2b, “Do not overvalue or worship earthly things.” Not overvaluing earthly things is handled by the third principle, Take Time to Appreciate. Of course, carried to the extreme, appreciating can lead to overvaluing. But if you also apply the second principle, considering thoughts and actions, then you have a brake against this overvaluation. Keeping the Sabbath Holy (4 and 4a) and Do not Covet (10, 10a, 10b, 10c, and 10d) could also be covered by taking time to appreciate.

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Guidelines of Authority

Commandments 2, “Create no images” and 2a, “Do not worship images or idols” can be combined with commandments 1, 3, and 5 under a general principle of respecting authority. However, for those who do not worship a god, for those whom ‘honoring’ or ‘obeying’ their parents would cause damage, as with abuse, and for those living under tyrants or dangerous authority, this is insufficient.

I propose two Guidelines of Authority. These apply the Moral Foundations of authority, fairness, and loyalty.

1) Respect legitimate authority.

A legitimate authority treats those over whom it claims authority with justice, and ensures that its subjects’ needs are met as well as can be. The authority might be a leader, a constitution, a teacher, or a parent. People will need to determine details of what makes an authority legitimate; this is a good exercise of the second principle.

The goal of this guideline is to support a stable society and respect for law, which parallel’s Kant’s maxim to act out of respect for the law. It even covers “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s,” and obeying the law in a general sense.

2) Stand against tyranny.

Tyranny, here, is the abuse of power, whether that power is real or imagined. This guideline recommends not just changing laws or people when they begin to violate their authority, but also standing against bullies and cruelty perpetrated by others.

Guidelines of Compassion

We are left with four remaining commandments. Let’s go over them in order. There are not many who would argue against “Do not kill” being basic ethics. However, most people do not need an explicit rule to not kill people, so I would like to expand it, and add prohibitions against slavery and cruelty.

I therefore propose two Guidelines of Compassion. These apply the Moral Foundations of caring and liberty, as well as being strong examples of the first principle. Carrying out these guidelines may be assisted by applying the third principle.
3) *Do not kill or cause harm, nor allow another to be harmed.*

Command six covers not killing, but doesn’t mention torture, harassment, or bullying, each of which can be tied up with murder or lead to a person’s suicide.

This guideline covers not only murder, torture, molestation, and physical harm, but emotional and mental harm as well. An exception for physical harm might come in the defense of one’s self or another. This guideline also says not to turn your head when you know these things are going on. In this way, it overlaps with the second guideline.

Even if not covered by other guidelines, commandments 8a and 8b – do not spread rumors and do not gossip, would be covered here. Rumors and gossip can cause tremendous harm in people’s lives.

4) *Do not force people into servitude, nor treat them as property, nor treat them cruelly.*

This is the no slavery rule, not included in the Ten Commandments, but also covers not mistreating servants or, really, anybody. As a bonus, it encodes the “No cruel or unusual punishment” concept found in the American legal system. It is also an obvious example of the first principle.

Forcing people into servitude is more than not owning slaves, however. There are situations where people work for an employer with meager pay, and are forced to spend their pay only on food provided by the employer and rent for living quarters, again provided by the employer. This is an example of forced servitude. Even treating people cruelly while they are doing their jobs – say, by being verbally abusive against a stockperson, clerk, or phone worker, for example, violates this guideline.

**Guidelines of Sincerity**

The seventh and eighth commandments – do not commit adultery and do not lie – will be covered by the more inclusive Guidelines of Sincerity. These fall solidly under the Moral Foundation of fairness.

5) *Honor your oaths and keep your contracts, in word and spirit.*

Here “Honor your oaths” and “Keep your contracts” are essentially two ways of stating “Keep your promises”. However, it seems for oaths (promises without legal documentation) and contracts (promises with legal documentation)
both to be here. Violating either the spirit of a promise, or its wording, violates the fundamental principles of fairness and trust that underlie society.

6) **Be honest: avoid falsehoods and misdirection.**

Following this guideline, it’s not enough to not lie. You should not allow others to believe a falsehood, even one you did not originally tell. The purpose behind adding “Avoid falsehoods and misdirection” to “Be honest” is to circumvent people saying that they weren’t “technically” lying when they intentionally misled someone.

It also feeds back into the guideline on oaths and contracts. In this case, it states that you should not make a promise or contract you don’t intend to keep. It also states you should not enter promises or contracts under false pretenses.

**Guidelines of Property**

The ninth commandment, do not steal, will be covered by the Guidelines of Property, falling under the Moral Foundation of fairness.

7) **Do not steal another’s property, time, or credit.**

This guideline is basically the commandment “Do not steal,” but more directly addresses a broader variety of issues—including copyrights, plagiarism, and music piracy. It also applies to giving people credit and fair compensation for their work, including work created for hire. Additionally, it covers working while you are at work. Doing non-work related activities, which usually includes surfing Facebook or texting, is stealing an employer’s time and money.

8) **Replenish what you use; repair what you damage; clean up your messes.**

This guideline means standing up, admitting wrongdoings, and making amends. It does not have a parallel in the Ten Commandments. However, it does act as a counterbalance to the contracts of the fifth principle. That is, each side of a contract should give as much as they get. It also applies to being a gracious guest, caring for the environment, replacing supplies you use, and picking up after your dog.

**Guidelines of Respect**

All the Ten Commandments, and more, are covered by the Three Principles and the first eight Ethical Guidelines. The last two I will propose here apply to an
issue that has finally come to the forefront in our society, dealing with rape and other issues of consent. These are the Guidelines of Respect. They apply the Moral Foundations of caring, fairness, sanctity, and liberty. They are strong applications of the first principle.

9) *Respect other’s bodies and wills as their own.*

This is the basic “do not rape” rule, which covers ‘no means no’ at all times and places. It also covers a variety of principles to prevent things from getting to that point, including not forcing people into situations that make them uncomfortable. In addition, because you should be respecting other’s bodies, you should not be degrading or mistreating people based on how they choose to dress or to decorate themselves. Additionally, it means that people get to make their own medical decisions.

An interesting side effect of this is that a person’s gender identity is to be respected; you don’t get to tell someone whether they are a man or woman. It is their body to make decisions about.

10) *Do not assume consent that cannot be knowledgably and willingly given.*

This covers a wide variety of issues, and is intended primarily in regards to sexual conduct. It forbids incest, bestiality, pedophilia, and having sex with people who are drunk or passed out. This is, however, not limited to sexual situations, and should also cover issues regarding medical and legal decisions.

**Conclusion**

I think these guidelines stack up fairly well in comparison to other systems. I invite people to look at their own ethics or other existing ethical systems and compare them to it. By doing this, I believe we can achieve a greater consensus on what is ethical, what is not, and what has no ethical component.
Appendix

JEWISH TEN COMMANDMENTS\textsuperscript{12}

1) I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.
2) Though shalt have no other gods before me
3) Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain
4) Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy
5) Honor thy father and thy mother
6) Thou shalt not murder
7) Thou shalt not commit adultery
8) Thou shalt not steal
9) Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor
10) Thou shalt not covet anything that belongs to thy neighbor

SAMARITAN TEN COMMANDMENTS\textsuperscript{13}

1) You shall have no other gods before me.
2) Save the day of Sabbath to make it holy.
3) Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which Yahweh your God gives you.
4) You shall not murder.
5) You shall not commit adultery.
6) You shall not steal.
7) You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.
8) You shall not covet your neighbor's house.
9) You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his man-servant, nor his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's.
10) When you take possession of the land of the Canaanites, set up great stones, and plaster them with plaster, and write on them all the words of this law.


CATHOLIC TEN COMMANDMENTS

1) I am the LORD your God; you shall not have strange gods before me
2) You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain
3) Remember to keep holy the LORDS day
4) Honor your father and your mother
5) You shall not kill
6) You shall not commit adultery
7) You shall not steal
8) You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor
9) You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife
10) You shall not covet your neighbor’s goods

LUTHERAN TEN COMMANDMENTS

1) You shall have no other gods
2) You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain
3) You shall keep the day of rest holy
4) Honor your father and mother, that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth
5) You shall not kill
6) You shall not commit adultery
7) You shall not steal
8) You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor
9) You shall not covet your neighbor’s house
10) You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his cattle, nor anything that is his

PROTESTANT TEN COMMANDMENTS

1) Thou shalt have no other gods before me
2) Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain
3) Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image
4) Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy
5) Honor thy father and thy mother
6) Thou shalt not kill

TEN ETHICAL GUIDELINES

7) Thou shalt not commit adultery
8) Thou shalt not steal
9) Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor
10) Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s goods.

LDS TEN COMMANDMENTS\(^{17}\)

1) Thou shalt have no other gods before me
2) Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven images
3) Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain
4) Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy
5) Honour thy father and thy Mother
6) Thou shalt not kill
7) Thou shalt not commit adultery (or any other sexual sin)
8) Thou shalt not kill
9) Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor
10) Thou shalt not covet

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