

Why the 10 Commandments are not a sufficient basis for ethics

There are three reasons: internal tensions, insufficiency, ambiguity. More on each, below. But first a note about terminology. The wording and numbering vary in different traditions. I shall not number them Or choose between wordings. Instead, I shall identify them with the following abbreviations:

- have **no other gods** but God
- honour **parents**
- keep **sabbath** holy
- no **graven images**
- no taking **God's name** in vain
- no **killing**
- no **adultery**
- no **stealing**
- no **false witnessing**
- no **covetousness**

Now the problems.

internal tensions

For every pair of these commandments there is a possible situation where they conflict. For example **parents** and **adultery** give different instructions if your parents advise you to commit adultery or to kill. It is not hard to think of examples of this. You might be stuck in an

unhappy marriage and your father says "Put up with it: the children will be harmed by a divorce. Just find yourself a nice lover." We might imagine a proviso that, for example, parents are not honoured by immoral obedience. But that is not any of the commandments. And moreover it would be circular, since the commandments are being considered as specifying what it is to act morally.

Insufficiency

There are many things that you should not do which are not covered by any of the 10. Most basically, none of them tells you not to inflict pain or distress on others. Perhaps this is inevitable for exceptionless commandments since there are a few situations where inflicting pain or distress is the right thing to do. All parents might you to measure some member of a despised group. (This might suggest that not killing trumps loyalty to parents. But this is stated nowhere in the standard 10.) The same goes for telling lies, which is on occasion required, as when it would be cruel to tell the truth. There are also some things it is good to do which are not required by the 10. For example making the most of your potentialities, or trying to make the social and cultural environment better. Such things are not individually required, but it would be a terrible situation if no one did them. (And it would be a pretty miserable life that did not contain a few of them.) A related point is that acts that it is good to perform are often not forbidden not to perform. For example forgiving those who have been less than kind and friendly to you. The theme here is living up to a moral ideal.

ambiguity

Some of the commandments are deeply ambiguous, and can be understood very different ways. This is clearest with [killing](#). Very few of those who take the commandments as the basis of morality are vegetarians, and very few are pacifists. So the prohibition must be to taking human life and even then it allows individual and national self-defence. (And many such people are in favour of capital punishment, taking human life and not in self-defence.) Similar remarks could be made about each of the 10.

mysteriousness

I have no idea what a [graven image](#) is. And I do not know what is to be included under [covetousness](#). For example, is wishing that you were as successful as some other people to covet what they have. (Or is it just the short list of things you are not to covet mentioned specifically in the Bible? If so, there are many possible objects of covetousness that are not covered.) And it is not clear to me what [false witness](#) covers. Does it cover all lying, or at the other extreme does it apply only in a court of law? I am pretty sure that very few people are at all confident that they can answer these and similar questions. (Some Catholic moral discourse folds all sexual misconduct under [adultery](#). This seems to me to be reading into the commandment what for other reasons you want to be covered.) So this is another way in which the commandments give usable advice only if you first know what your obligations and values are. (One consequence then would be that different people would include different acts under these headings, in accordance with their or their

culture's list of what is permissible and what is not.)

These are the main reasons why the 10 Commandments cannot be taken as sole or sufficient guides to what you should do. One underlying general reason for this is that they are expressed in terms of what is forbidden. But being a decent person, let alone being a good one, requires considering what you should do as well as what you must not do. And it requires attention to duties, obligations, and rights as well as what is absolutely forbidden for all people at all times.