The purpose of theology is to serve the fullness of community life. One service of this discipline is to provide us with conceptual models that help us reflect and clarify central issues with direction and consistency. These qualities can then flow into action of individuals and the larger community. In terms of clinical ethics this means that the conceptual systems developed by theological analysis can be expected to be useful in the practical doing of ethics.

I believe that a Christian tradition that considers beneficence as the center of the moral life has much to offer the current discussion of health care ethics. In much recent bioethical discussion “beneficence” is only one of several basic principles. But in a long-standing Christian tradition beneficence stands as the foundational principle, grounding all else. I believe that this classic Christian perspective on the moral life can open some fresh vistas for the ethics of health care.

In this essay I will first develop a basic model of the moral life as beneficence-grounded. I will then expand this fundamental idea of beneficence beyond the realm of interaction between individuals, to include realms of “institutional and societal beneficence.” And finally I will explore some implications of this expanded beneficence model.

PART ONE: A SKETCH OF ETHICS AS BENEFICENCE – LOVING IN THE SITUATION OF FINITUDE

An adapted parable captures the heart of the problem we will explore.

_The Conflicted Samaritan:_
A man was once on his way down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of brigands; they took all he had, beat him and then made off, leaving him half dead. Now a priest happened to be traveling down the same road, but when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. In the same way a Levite who came to the place saw him, and passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion when he saw him. He went up and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them. He then lifted him on his own mount. As the Samaritan traveled further he came upon another man who had been beaten and needed care. He likewise ministered to him and set him on his mount. As the three turned the next bend in the road the Samaritan’s heart sank for there were two more figures lying on the side of the road in the foreground and further, before the road turned in the distance he made out one further traveler, struck to the ground and needing help. His heart was filled with pity and compassion – but with growing distress – for his resources would be exhausted long before he reached the last person in his view. And he could only guess at what lay around the next bend.
This parable presents two kinds of ethical conflicts:
1. the *existential ethical crisis* of the priest, Levite, and Samaritan who confront their duty and make a decision. We will not concern ourselves with such ethical decisions; and
2. the *normative ethical crisis* where in Dewey’s terms: “The struggle is not between a good which is clear to him and something else which attracts him but which he knows to be wrong. It is between values each of which is an undoubted good in its place but which now get in each other’s way” ([10], p. 7).

With this parable as a starting point I want to argue that all normative decisions represent such conflicting loyalties and that we have not taken sufficient note of this underlying values-in-conflict fabric of our ethical life.

Love of neighbor stands as the basic commandment of Christian morality. In *Quadragesimo Anno* Pius XI says: “all the commandments . . . may be reduced to the single precept of true charity” ([30] #137).

In Christian Scripture the most dramatic and stark presentation of the central role of love of neighbor comes in Mt. 25 when religion and morality are cast in these surprisingly simple terms of response to neighbor’s need.

Then the King will say to those on his right hand, “Come, you whom my Father has blessed take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me.” Then the virtuous will say to him in reply, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you; or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and make you welcome; naked and clothe you; sick or in prison and go to see you?” And the King will answer, “I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me” [Mt. 25:34-40].

Karl Rahner has repeatedly elaborated the theology behind this passage when he delineates the radical unity of love of God and love of neighbor [31, 32]. He poses the question: is love of neighbor identical with love of God to the radical extent that no act of love of God can occur which is not an act of neighbor-love? His answer: “The primary act of love of God is the act of categorial-explicit love of neighbor. In this act of neighbor-love God is directly met in supernatural transcendentality – always un thematic but actually. The explicit act of love of God is always borne by this trusting, loving opening to all of reality which occurs in the act of love of neighbor. It is true with a radical – not merely psychological or ‘moral’ – necessity, that one who does not love one’s brother, whom one ‘sees,’ cannot love God, whom one does not see, and that a person can only love God, whom one cannot see *in so far* as a person loves their visible neighbor” ([31], p. 295).

If the commandment to love our neighbor is foundational, what of the other commandments – not to steal, kill, covet, and the like? How do they relate to this fundamental commandment? As species to genus. They translate the foundational commandment of love into specific areas of life. Paul’s letter to the Romans spells this out.