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Virtue Ethics for Christians

Benjamin R. Kilian

If one would tackle any major problem in life it is helpful to observe the comprehensive nature of the thing from an external vantage point before diving into the gritty details. This is also described as grasping the “big picture” or getting a birds-eye-view on the problem. I think that this holistic approach is helpful when dealing with ethical issues as well. In this paper I will first define the common approaches to normative ethics and then point out reasons that one approach in particular is a superior ethical framework from which Christians should work.

Normative ethic describes the moral rules that should be followed in everyday life (Stewart, 2009). Three main types of normative ethical theories have developed throughout history. They are utilitarianism, deontological theories, and virtue ethics.

Utilitarianism is concerned with one central principle, namely: maximizing happiness in the world. This goal is accomplished by judging actions based solely on their outcomes or consequences. An action is considered right if it brings about the maximum amount of happiness possible (Rachels, 2007). Each individual counts for the same number of happiness units and no other criterion should be considered when making a moral decision.

Deontological theories are duty-based systems of ethical thought. They include Kantianism and Divine Command Theory. They concentrate on the nature of the action itself as well as its motive in order to determine whether that action is right or wrong (Stewart, 2009). For these theories, consequences are irrelevant; rigidly obeying a set of specific rules or principles is the key to acting rightly in a given situation.

Virtue ethics was initially developed by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. It has been slightly modified by modern thinkers to eliminate some of his more radical ideas. Virtue ethics is mainly concerned with the *person* behind the action and not as much with the action

itself. It considers one's emotions, attitudes, habits, and lifestyle as morally relevant to life (Kotva, 1996). In other words, the agent's character is a vital aspect of moral action. The virtues that characterize a virtuous or moral person can be listed, though a given list may not be exhaustive.

I believe that Christians can adopt a version of this idea of virtue as a moral guide for their lives. Christians believe that when God saves a person He changes his very nature. A heart and will of disobedience and outright rebellion towards God is replaced by a heart of obedience and a true desire (and ability) to become Christ-like. This means that a person who was formerly incapable of doing good (as defined by God) is now clothed in the righteousness of Christ and has an entire new set of desires. The virtue of a Christian does not come by being virtuous, but rather from the virtue or righteousness that Christ imputed to them on the cross. God makes people new creations. This modified idea has a fundamentally different starting point than the secular view of virtue ethics which says that one becomes virtuous by practicing the virtues (whatever they may be). This version of virtue ethics says that one becomes virtuous through Christ and then that virtue is lived out and matures through sanctification, or the process of becoming like Christ. Because Christians believe that God's nature is the ultimate source of true virtue they must reflect His character to make morally right choices (Wilkens, 1995).

I think that adopting this idea of virtue ethics can help erase the problems that arise from utilitarianism and deontological theories. Virtue ethics is more holistic in its view of the moral agent than are the other theories. The other two theories are atomistic in nature. They take each individual action and hope that a continued series of right actions will lead to a right and moral end in life. Both categories focus on conforming to external rules, but they often miss out on the

bigger picture of the overall trajectory of one's life choices (Stewart, 2009). The ultimate end (*telos*) or purpose of life is just as important as the individual moments that make up our lives.

Utilitarianism suggests that the happiness of the world is the ultimate goal of morality. Deontology claims that doing one's moral duty according to the given rule is the most important thing in moral decision-making. Christianity virtue ethics says that emulating Christ and thereby bringing God glory through our sanctification is the chief goal (*telos*) of every Christian. Those who are not Christians also have the ultimate end of bringing God glory. However, it is not through imitating Christ, but rather by paying the debt of their sin through eternal suffering.

Additionally, Christian virtue ethics makes the heart attitude of the agent relevant in the moral decision-making process. For the deontologist, the attitude of the agent makes no difference whatsoever. The motive for rightly following the rules is duty. An agent must do what the rules say, not because she has any inclination to do so, but because she must follow the rules. For utilitarians, when it comes making the right choice the only important factor is that it maximizes pleasure or happiness in the world. But Christians can imitate Christ by following their own virtuous nature and *enjoy* doing the right thing at the same time.

Not only is the individual agent important, but one's social context or community is a crucial component of virtue ethics. No one makes moral decisions isolated from his community. This is clearly shown by the objection most often brought up against virtue ethics: because virtue ethics describes what one should *be* rather than *do*, it is not helpful in prescribing what to do in a given situation. In other words, it gives no real guidance to the agent in moral decision making.

In response to this objection, it should be pointed out that human beings are not autonomous, self-determining agents, but we live in community with others and can and should seek the help of those who we see as morally superior to ourselves (Hursthouse, 2002). This is

important because it displays the biblical truth that we are not alone in living out the Christian life. There are many believers who have gone on before us and have struggled with the same issues with which we are wrestling. There are people that God has placed in our lives today that can help guide us in difficult decisions where we are unsure of the right action.

Virtue ethics can inform our understanding of what it means to act righteously as a follower of Christ. I believe that virtue ethics can prescribe right action insofar as the agent is adhering to the virtues found in the nature of God. The agent is not left to his or her own devices to determine what those virtues are. God has given the Christian a new nature and has promised to be continually at work in changing and sanctifying His children. Christians can be moral, not because they maximize happiness units, or because they perfectly follow a standard set of rules, but because they are new creations of God. They have the very nature of Christ within them to give them guidance and direction in the moral decision-making process.

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