

Essay

An Emerging Consensus on Virtue Ethics in Christian Living and Sanctification

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Over the past five decades, a consensus has been emerging among Christian scholars on the need to view Christian character, particularly as informed by virtue ethics, as a key component of Christian living and sanctification. While the importance of this theme is now widely noticed, I believe there is not yet a sufficient appreciation of either the extent of the consensus or its urgency. In this essay my goal is to suggest three points to the community of Christian scholars.

First, while the role of virtue ethics was controversial among Christian ethicists within living memory, it is time for us to shift from thinking of this as a controversy to thinking of this as something Christian ethicists generally recognize as an important constitutive element of our work – that is, of Christian ethics itself. Second, that recognizing the importance of virtue ethics does not mean jettisoning “deontological” or rule-based ethics, but that the task of Christian ethics involves integrating or at least balancing concern for virtues and rules. Third, that the importance of virtue ethics is now being widely recognized outside the field of ethics, in such disciplines as biblical studies and theology, implying a much wider application and urgency for our developing appreciation of the importance of virtue as a

concept. The future may hold promising new dimensions in exploring the biblical and theological significance of the recent turn to virtue ethics – we would appear to have only scratched the surface.

Increasing Consensus among Christian Ethicists

An increasing number of publications highlight the importance of Christian character and virtue for a comprehensive understanding of Christian living. Some of the authors cited below make stronger claims, based on their perception that it is a common default conception among believers that Christian living and ethics is largely about rule-keeping. This highlights the practical urgency of the issue alongside increasing focus on its biblical and theological justifications.

It is commonly acknowledged that the 1958 publication of “Modern Moral Philosophy” by Elizabeth Anscombe, in *Philosophy*, was a major turning point in the renewal of virtue ethics. A second was Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* in 1981. Stanley Hauerwas was the first Protestant ethicist to pen a critical book-length theological treatment of Christian ethics about character, *Character and the Christian Life* in 1975 (based on his Yale dissertation, completed in 1968). A year later, Bruce Birch (Old Testament) and Larry Rasmussen (ethics) released *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, which included, apparently for the first time, a distinctive model of Christian ethics identifying character formation (virtue ethics) and decision-making and action (deontological ethics) as the two key components. Birch met Hauerwas at Yale in the 1960s and participated in regular lunch conversations with him and other ethics students.¹

Consider the development represented in the quotations below, all from important sources. These 11 quotations were selected from over 20 books articulating similar emphases.

The 1970s

Stanley Hauerwas (1975): “The basic concern of this book has been the inability of contemporary Christian ethics to develop an adequate way to articulate the nature of the Christian moral life....The ethics of character is an attempt to shift this phenomenological focus to the relation between belief and behavior, thought and action. The ethical issue is not just what we do but what we are and how what we are is formed by our fundamental convictions about the nature and significance of Christ.”²

1 Birch personally communicated this information to me.

2 Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1975), p. 229-230.

Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen (1976): “Our contention is that this traditionally neglected topic [of character formation] in American Christian ethics...should have higher priority and be considered of greater importance than has been the case....The shaping of the moral agent is as crucial for ethics as the making of moral decisions.”³

The 1980s

Gilbert Meilander (1984): “This return [to virtue ethics] suggests a widespread dissatisfaction with an understanding of the moral life which focuses primarily on duties, obligations, troubling moral dilemmas, and borderline cases....Being not doing takes center stage; for what we ought to do may depend on the sort of person we are.”⁴

Paul Wadell (1989): “[Morality] concerns us not piecemeal but entire, with a strategy not only to direct our behavior but to change our hearts....This is why we feel ethics so often misses the mark. We know morality involves becoming a certain kind of person. We know it entails a transformation of self through habits and practices that work changes necessary for goodness. As Christians, we know the moral life is the spiritual life, the religious-sacramental life we have with God, a studied, ongoing attempt to establish ourselves God’s friends.”⁵

The 1990s

Dallas Willard (1998): “But the question is, How can we keep the law?...[Jesus] knew that we cannot keep the law by trying to keep the law. To succeed in keeping the law one must aim at something other and something more. One must aim to become the *kind of person* from whom the deeds of the law naturally flow.”⁶

William Spohn (1999): “Why choose virtue ethics to be the optic for examining the story of Jesus? First of all, it is necessary to select

3 Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), p. 84 & 197. Their distinctive two-component Christian ethics model (virtues and rules) appeared on p. 81 in the 1975 first edition, and on p. 39 in the 1989 second edition.

4 Gilbert Meilander, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 4-5.

5 Paul Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), p. 19 & 12.

6 Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), p. 142-43.

one form of ethics. It is impossible to give an account of Christian moral life without opting for some form of moral philosophy. Every theology contains a philosophy as an inner moment, because it must operate from some model of human experience. I believe that virtue ethics provides the most comprehensive account of moral experience and that it stands closer to the issues of moral life....Virtue ethics, with its attention to character, is the appropriate way to approach scripture since it discloses the character of God....Biblical ethics goes beyond rules and principles, though they are not ignored, to the level of transformation of character.”⁷

The 2000s

Glen Stassen and David Gushee (2003): “To counter the corrosive force of modern atomistic individualism, several ethicists are arguing that we need to focus not only on right and wrong decisions but on what shapes the character of those who make the decisions and do the actions....We prefer to call this move in ethics not simply virtue ethics, but – using a more comprehensive term – character ethics....[In this book] we want to develop character ethics in a systematic way.”⁸

Samuel Wells (2004): “The last thirty years have seen a revival of the understanding of virtue in Christian ethics....Virtue ethics has become a shorthand term for all the writers in the field who have grown tired of the conventional emphasis on decision and the neglect of the character of the person or ‘agent’ making the decision. The emphasis on virtue in Christian ethics has shifted attention from the deed to the doer. It is the agent who matters, more than the action: ethics is about forming the life of the agent more than it is about judging the appropriateness of the action.”⁹

The 2010s

N. T. Wright (2010): “Rule-keeping...is the broad framework within which many people in today’s Western world have come to think of the gospel of Jesus Christ....But we know, deep down, that some of the key things that make us human are being creative, celebrating

7 William Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 1999), p. 27-30.

8 Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), p. 56-57 & 59.

9 Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), p. 80-81.

life and beauty and love and laughter. Rules matter, but they aren't the center of it all....Character matters more, and provides a framework within which rules, where appropriate, can have their proper effect."¹⁰

Daniel Westberg (2015), "The contribution of Aristotelian [virtue] ethics to a biblically based Christian morality is not obvious at first.... Here we can assert that there has been a strong interest in moving away from the act-centered moral systems of Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics and from utilitarianism to the broader view of character and virtue....Interest in virtue ethics has led to more fruitful explorations of biblical perspectives on character formation and moral development."¹¹

Jeff Dryden (2018): "This book assumes that the redemption of human moral agency is an essential goal of the gospel proclamation as found in the NT. At the same time, I also assume that human moral agency cannot be circumscribed by what we have normally described as 'ethics,' especially when ethics is understood as moral casuistry within an idealist deontological (Kantian) framework, which is on the whole assumed in the discipline of NT studies when it ventures into ethics. In a way that is similar to virtue ethics (and its Aristotelian foundation), I understand ethics as describing not simply duties but the totality of moral agency entailed in the pursuit of true joy."¹²

What began as an outsider's perspective – even an indictment to be filed against the field of ethics as practiced – has become the assertion of a consensus view, even if certain classic intellectual challenges (echoing "what has Athens to do with Jerusalem?") are still foregrounded.

Integrating Virtues and Rules

Virtue ethics emphasizes the human agent, with particular attention to factors that contribute to or hinder our becoming agents who typically act morally. Christian philosophers J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig note:

10 N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), p. 44, 47 & 49.

11 Daniel Westberg, *Renewing Moral Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), p. 20-21.

12 J. de Waal Dryden, *A Hermeneutic of Wisdom: Recovering the Formative Agency of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, Academic, 2018), p. 19.

Virtue ethics aims at defining and developing the good person and the good life, and virtues are those character traits that enable people to achieve *eudaimonia* or happiness, not understood as a state of pleasurable satisfaction, but rather as a state of well-being, or excellence and skill at life....Given a vision of ideal human functioning and skill, virtue ethics places great importance on character and habit.¹³

Virtue ethics asks the questions: What sort of person/community should I/we become? What is the best life for human beings/communities?

Virtue ethics is traditionally contrasted with rule-based or “deontological” ethics. In a Christian context this is also called “divine command ethics.”¹⁴ This gives prominence to identifying and then doing one’s moral duty, according to reasonable moral norms. It asks the questions: What should I/we do? What is my/our duty? What universal rule applies in this case?

Divine command ethics uniquely specifies an account for the objectivity and authority of moral obligation and duty, which virtue ethics by itself would not supply. The importance of this element to a Christian view of ethics is obvious. God is most definitely a teacher, but he is not merely a teacher, and he did not create the world solely to provide us with learning opportunities. He is the Lord – our king, lawgiver and judge. We see this both in the OT (e.g., the Ten Commandments, Exodus 20:1-17; the Shema, Deuteronomy 6:4-7) and in the NT (Jesus’ summary of Torah with two commands to love God and our neighbor as ourselves, Matthew 22:37-40; and his new commandment to love one another, John 13:34-35; and 15:12). Any view of Christian ethics that does not involve obedience to authority is out of court.

Yet virtue ethics provides other, equally essential biblical themes that rule-based ethics does not offer. Jesus had pointed things to say about people who did not want to submit to his kingship, but he had equally pointed things to say about those who obeyed outwardly while not possessing the right character (whitewashed tombs, cups clean on the outside but filthy on the inside, etc.). God is love and, as a lawgiver, his first and highest law is to love. While this involves more than merely the acquisition of a certain kind of character, it does not involve less than that.

The most important theme of virtue ethics is *eudaimonia* – happiness or, better, human flourishing. “A good or happy life for human beings (*eudaimonia*) is a virtuous life, where the virtues are conceived as reliable dispositions to act and react well, that is, for the right reasons and with the

13 J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017), p. 468-69.

14 For an orientation to divine command ethics, see the relevant chapter in Steve Wilkens, ed., *Christian Ethics: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017).

right feelings.”¹⁵ Certain biblical terms point toward human flourishing, overlapping with the import of *eudaimonia*. The Hebrew *ashrey* (‘*ašrēy*) along with its Greek equivalent, according to the LXX, *makarios*, mostly translated as “blessed,” convey being “fortunate” and “happy” in the classical sense (e.g., Psalms 1:1, 106:3, 119:1-2 and 144:15; Matthew 5:3; John 13:17; Romans 4:7-8 (citing Psalm 32:1-3); and James 1:12 & 25).¹⁶ *Shalom*, as “well-being,” “fulfillment,” “prosperity” (e.g., Psalm 35:27; Jeremiah 29:7), also shares conceptual connections with the core concept of *eudaimonia*. What comes to mind is Jesus’ claim: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full [Greek *perissos*, over and above, excessive, in full abundance]” (John 10:10).

Scripture also values virtues with lists of God-like and Christ-like virtues (and corresponding human vices) appearing throughout, particularly in Paul’s letters (e.g., the love chapter, I Corinthians 13:1-4; the fruit of the Spirit, Galatians 5:19-24; Philippians 2:1-2 and 4:8; Colossians 3:5-9).¹⁷ God highlights his own divine qualities or virtues – communicable divine attributes – when revealing himself to Moses in the cleft of the rock: “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love [*hesed*] and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6; see also Nehemiah 9:17; Psalms 86:15, 103:8 and 145:8; Joel 2:13; and Jonah 4:2). Additionally, virtue ethics includes insights about how the formation of morally good personal character occurs – or does not.

Furthermore, virtue ethics emphasizes the critical role of practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) as a character trait required for discernment and decision-making in daily living, an important theme in Scripture both in the NT (e.g., James 3:13-18) and in the OT, particularly in the wisdom literature. In his study of Proverbs, Arthur Keefer comments: “The visions of Aristotle and Proverbs do not equate, but they do correspond in their treatment of character and practical wisdom.”¹⁸ The writer to the Hebrews uses classic Greek

15 Linda van Zyl, *Virtue Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 14.

16 For further reading on *ashrey* and *makarios*, see Jonathan Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), p. 41-67. Ellen Charry develops the biblical foundations for “asherism” [from the Hebrew *ashrey*] in *God and the Art of Happiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010): “Christian theology lacks a substantial doctrine of human flourishing. Asherism seeks to fill that gap by proposing that salvation is a realizing eschatology of growth into the beauty and wisdom of God. Happiness is enjoying life through a divinely initiated pattern of spiritual growth” (p. 157).

17 See James W. Thompson, *Moral Formation according to Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011) for an extended study of Paul’s lists of virtues and vices.

18 Arthur Keefer, *The Book of Proverbs and Virtue Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 11. Keefer also notes: “Character, formed by wisdom, is the aim of Proverbs” (p. 42). For further reading on practical wisdom see Edward

terms from both ethical and educational theory when illustrating growth in wisdom: “But solid food is for the mature [*teleios*], who by constant use [*hexis*] have trained [*gymnazō*] themselves to distinguish [*diakrisis*] good from evil” (Hebrews 5:14). Along with right thinking, virtue ethics values right emotions (e.g., delighting in, longing for, and love for God’s word and commands, Psalms 119:97, 111, 127 and 174).

Finally, virtue ethics highlights the importance of – in Aristotelian terms – a friendship “of similar virtue”¹⁹ (e.g., Philippians 1:27 and 2:1-2), which is both a fulfilling end in itself and yet also a significant relational means for virtue formation (e.g., II Timothy 2:2 and 22). Within a Christian context, this extends even to our friendship with God (James 4:8).

Jesus and Paul explicitly identify a link between inner disposition (virtue) and obedient action (rules) as the ideal: “Forgive your brother or sister *from your heart*” (Matthew 18:35); “doing the will of God *from your heart*” (Ephesians 6:6). These two main normative ethical theories both provide important contributions toward a robust Christian ethic. Some Christian philosophers and ethicists recognize that scripture reveals a two-fold ethical emphasis. J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig note: “Each position [deontological ethics and virtue ethics] has had its share of advocates, and there is no clear winner in this debate. However, it may be that the complementarity view best expresses the ethics of the Bible since scripture seems to give weight and intrinsic value both to moral commands and virtues of character.”²⁰ Some biblical scholars also acknowledge a dual focus. Keefer discerns that two normative ethical theories are evident within the book:

Proverbs takes two perspectives on morality, the first of which is character-based rather than rule-based, as each individual act stems from a particular quality of character, either wise or foolish. The second perspective focuses on those actions, the good or bad deeds that the book advises or condemns, and to that extent resembles a rule-based ethic.”²¹

M. Curtis and John J. Brugaletta, *Discovering the Way of Wisdom: Spirituality in the Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004) and Kristján Kristjánsson, *Aristotelian Character Education* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 85-103.

19 “But complete friendship is the friendship of good people similar in virtue,” 1156b6, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2nd ed., trans. by Terrence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), p. 122.

20 Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, p. 471. A two-component ethics framework is also being adopted by some philosophers; for example, L. J. Pojman recommended such a “complementarity ethics” model in *Ethics*, 5th ed. (Belmont, Ca.: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), p. 165.

21 Keefer, *Proverbs*, p. 205.

The important task for developing a robust Christian ethic is to blend, or at minimum balance, these two ethical theories. Furthermore, we must incorporate distinctively Christian foundational elements that are missing in secular versions of both theories. For example, in secular form, neither ethical theory can provide an adequate ultimate ground for morality. All that is good, true and beautiful is sourced in our tri-personal God. Scott Rae summarizes the matter well: “Christian morality is a blend of virtues and principles, with the character of God as the ultimate source.”²²

Virtue Ethics beyond Ethics

Another “tipping point” that deserves to be acknowledged is that Christian scholars beyond the field of ethics are increasingly incorporating a virtue-ethics perspective in their research. A good number of published book-length treatments in biblical studies and theology employ virtue ethics as an important framework in their overall structure. Among such works that I am aware of, the earliest three were released between 1996 and 2004. However, over 20 have been published since 2008. Interest in virtue ethics among biblical scholars and theologians seems to have greatly increased in recent years relative to previous decades.

Below is a sample of seven such works representing important inroads of virtue ethics in fields beyond ethics itself:

Daniel Harrington and James Keenan, *Paul and Virtue Ethics: Building Bridges Between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010).

Joel Biermann, *A Case for Character: Toward a Lutheran Virtue Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014).

William C. Mattison, *The Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology: A Virtue Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Jonathan Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017).

Patricia Vesely, *Friendship and Virtue Ethics in the Book of Job* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

Pieter Vos, *Longing for the Good Life: Virtue Ethics after Protestantism* (London: T & T Clark, 2020).

Dogara Ishaya Manomi, *Virtue Ethics in the Letter to Titus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021).

²² Scott Rae, *Introducing Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), p. 30. For further study see Rae’s more comprehensive text, *Moral Choices*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018).

These authors are convinced that a virtue ethics framework provides a helpful heuristic for biblical studies and theology, compatible with a Christian worldview. Regarding his 2017 study of the Sermon on the Mount, listed above, Mattison notes:

One of the most important developments in moral theology and Christian ethics has been a return to prominence of the role of virtue....Another broader goal of this project is to demonstrate not only that a virtue ethic is compatible with Scripture, but also that there is an illuminating convergence between the Sermon on the Mount and a virtue-centered approach to morality.²³

This suggests we have only scratched the surface in exploring the biblical and theological importance of the recent turn to virtue ethics. It is exciting to contemplate what the future may hold!

There is an urgent need to incorporate insights from virtue ethics as we conceptualize Christian living and sanctification in our teaching, preaching, writing and blogging. It is encouraging to witness the growing number of substantive virtue ethics-focused book projects in biblical studies and theology. Relevant themes from virtue ethics can provide significant contributions toward a more holistic conception of Christian living beyond a singular focus on rule-keeping. As N. T. Wright notes:

Jesus himself, backed up by the early Christian writers, speaks repeatedly about the development of a particular *character*. Character – the transforming, shaping and marking of a life and its habits – will generate the sort of behavior that rules might have pointed toward but which a “rule-keeping” *mentality* can never achieve.... In the last analysis, what matters after you believe is neither rules nor spontaneous self-discovery, but character.²⁴

Extra Credit Homework

For those desiring further reading about virtue ethics, the following books are highly valuable.

Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

²³ William C. Mattison, *The Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 1.

²⁴ Wright, *After You Believe*, 7.

- Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- Kristján Kristjánsson, *Aristotelian Character Education* (London: Routledge, 2015).²⁵
- Linda van Zyl, *Virtue Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

The following resources consider virtue ethics from a distinctively Christian perspective, and provide additional comments, adaptations, and extensions necessary to fit biblical faithfulness.

- Joseph J. Kotva, *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown, 1996).
- Jonathan Wilson, *Gospel Virtues* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998).
- Rebecca K. DeYoung, Colleen McCluskey and Christina Van Dyke, *Aquinas's Ethics: Metaphysical Foundations, Moral Theory and Theological Context* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).
- Paul J. Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: An Introduction to Christian Ethics*. 3rd ed. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

Kotva offers an argument for the compatibility of virtue ethics within a Christian worldview, noting areas where secular theories need adjustment. Wilson provides a general reader's introduction with an exploration of the theological virtues of faith, hope and love, along with some relevant practices for each. DeYoung et al. offer a readable and helpful synthesis of Thomas Aquinas' profound Christian ethical theory, in which Aquinas integrates relevant concepts from Aristotle's virtue ethics within his *Summa Theologiae*. Wadell presents a fairly comprehensive textbook on Christian ethics set within a virtue ethics framework.

²⁵ *The Journal of Moral Education* devoted a special issue to reviewing Kristjánsson's important book (2016, Vol. 45, No. 4).