

Virtues

A third distinctive element in Christian moral theology is its understanding of the virtues. Often discussions about ethics focus on actions: “What should I *do* in this particular situation?” Focusing on actions—the “ethic of doing”—is an important aspect of moral reflection, but it is only half the equation. The other, and perhaps more important, half concerns character, the “ethic of being,” which focuses on the *kind of person* one is.¹² Just about everyone would say that Mother Teresa was a good person. We say this because we know about the good she did for the poor of Calcutta as well as others around the world. Adolph Hitler, on the other hand, was not such a good person. We say this because we know that he was responsible (directly or indirectly) for the deaths of millions of people during the 1930s and 1940s. The question one must ask oneself is, what kind of person do I want to be? Do I want to be known as a person of good moral character, or something else? One’s moral decisions play an important role in answering these questions and, as we will see in a moment, there is an essential relationship between the choices one makes and the kind of person one is.

So how does one go about making good moral choices that, in turn, makes for a person of good moral character? The answer lies in the virtues. A virtue is a disposition of the will by which an individual willingly and consistently chooses to act in a morally good way. Virtues are ongoing patterns of moral behavior that develop (people are not born with them) through our free and intentional choices. For example, one develops the virtue of honesty by freely choosing to always tell the truth. One develops the virtue of justice by consistently rendering to others their due. By willingly and consistently making good moral choices, one develops the virtues that help one become a person of good moral character.

It is precisely here that we recognize the importance of virtues for the moral life. Virtues are important because there is an essential relationship between the choices one makes (ethic of doing) and the kind of person one is or is seeking to become (ethic of being). In order to be a person of good moral character one must make consistently good moral choices and, generally speaking, in order to make consistently good moral choices one must be a person of good moral character. Again, the example of Mother Teresa illustrates this point well. Mother Teresa developed good moral character through the many good moral choices that she made throughout her life. Therefore, when faced with an important ethical decision—and she faced many—she possessed the type of character that more readily allowed her to make the correct moral decision. Each correct moral decision, in turn, then aided her in further developing her good moral character.¹³ Now Mother Teresa is not unique here; think of any person in your life who is of good moral character and you will recognize the same relationship at work. In short, the virtues serve as the foundation for consistent responses to the many moral decisions people face in their lives, and define who they are as persons.

So what are the virtues and how does one apply them to moral decision-making? Virtues can be understood both philosophically and theologically. The moral (or human) virtues are those that can be known philosophically through reason; thus they can be developed and practiced by all people no matter what their faith tradition—if any at all. Prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance are the primary or cardinal virtues, the ones on which all others “hinge” (this is what the word *cardinal* means). Thus any moral virtue that one cultivates falls under one of these four main categories. Prudence is the virtue that disposes one to discern the good, to choose the correct means of achieving this good, and then to act in accord with this discernment. This virtue is often defined as practical wisdom or “right reason in action.” Justice is the virtue that disposes one to render to each person what is due to them. This virtue helps one to consistently act in ways that nourish right relations with others, for example by respecting others’ rights and establishing peace and harmony in relationships with them. Fortitude



connotes strength, so it is the virtue that enables one to face difficulties well. This virtue ensures consistency in the pursuit of the good and it enables one to overcome obstacles to living a moral life. Finally, temperance is the virtue of self-control. It is the virtue that inclines one to enjoy pleasures in reasonable and moderate ways, and it provides balance in the use of created goods.¹⁴

OK, so if all people can understand prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance through reason, what is different about Christian moral theology? Christianity responds by stating that in order to live a moral life one needs to cultivate not only the moral (human, philosophical) virtues, but the theological virtues as well. The theological virtues relate directly to God, are infused into the souls of believers by God, and are revealed through faith. In fact, the first theological virtue is faith. Faith is the virtue by which one believes in God and believes all that God has revealed. It is the virtue by which the Christian professes belief, bears witness to it, and shares it with others. In terms of the moral life, faith is important because through it one believes what God has revealed about correct or ethical behavior. As stated earlier, Catholicism maintains that moral truth is revealed through both Scripture and the Tradition of the Church. Faith is the virtue by which one understands this truth and confidently acts in accord with it throughout one's life.¹⁵

The second theological virtue is hope. Hope is the virtue by which one desires to live in full communion with God in heaven, and places one's full trust in the promises of Christ. It is the virtue that "inclines us to yearn for union with God,"¹⁶ because God is one's true destiny and source of ultimate fulfillment. In terms of the moral life, it inspires and purifies one's activities and orders them toward God's kingdom. It also protects one from discouragement or disillusionment during times of difficulty, and it sustains one when one feels abandoned. Although the *Catechism* does not specifically state it, hope can also be understood as the belief that one's good works can positively influence the temporal order, that one can make the world a better place. Now one may not always recognize the immediate benefit of these good works, but through hope one can be confident that these works are part of God's overall plan and will come to fruition in God's own time.¹⁷

The final theological virtue is charity (love). Charity is the virtue by which one loves God above all things and loves one's neighbor as oneself. It is the virtue that animates and inspires the other virtues, binds them together "in perfect harmony," and is the "source and goal" of Christian practice.¹⁸ What it means to love both God and neighbor has already been discussed, and will not be repeated here. But the virtue of love is crucial to living a Christian moral life because it calls one to act differently from the world. Those who truly love God and neighbor recognize that all people are created in God's image and seek to uphold the common good of society as a whole.

Overall, Christianity maintains that the theological virtues constitute the foundation of morality. One cannot be a Christian or live as God wishes without knowledge and practice of them. They are essential for one's ongoing efforts to do good and avoid evil.

Endnotes

12. Richard Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 7–8.
13. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true. A person who is not of good moral character cannot consistently make good moral choices and, generally speaking, one cannot make consistently good moral choices if one is not a person of good moral character.
14. For further discussion of the cardinal virtues, see William Mattison, *Introducing Moral Theology: True Happiness and the Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 76–79, 98–99, 136–40, and 181–82. See also CCC, nos. 1804–11.
15. This discussion of the theological virtues is adapted from CCC, nos. 1812–29.
16. Mattison, *Introducing Moral Theology*, 258.



17. Mattison speaks to this point directly: "Hope's foretaste of the true fulfillment that ultimately satisfies us most effectively illuminates the ways in this life that such fulfillment is not yet present. Furthermore, hope's steadfast clinging in trust that the realization of this destiny is a real possibility actually generates movement toward that goal, even though full realization is not possible here." See Mattison, *Introducing Moral Theology*, 259.
18. CCC, no. 1827.

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