

Virtue Theory: A Dialectic

John: Hi Ray! How are you doing?

Ray: Just great, on my way to the campus gym for some racquetball. Care to join?

John: Wish I could, but I need to go to the library to do some research for my history class. But we can chat and until we get to the gym, then I'll continue on myself.

Ray: Awesome! But remember, you owe me a rematch from last week!

John: Ha! You're on for next week.

Ray: I'm going to hold you to that!

John: Glad we ran into each other. I've been doing a lot of thinking, and I think I know why the theories of morality we've discussed always break down.

Ray: Really, why is that?

John: Because they are too formulaic. It's like they assume morality is like some computer program -- if you punch in a given set of circumstances, you will get a specific result. That seems appealing at first, and some things are so obvious that the formula seems to work well. But then

Ray: But then what?

John: It's hard to say, but the more you look at it, the more you realize that the formula is too simple. It doesn't account for the reality of life. The things that may not happen very often, yet they still happen. And then the formula gives you an ugly result.

Ray: Well, we did agree that morality is not meant to make one feel good; it's about how to act in a given set of circumstances.

John: Yeah, but it seems to go beyond merely not liking the results. Spending a few hours doing research instead of playing racquetball is not something I like to do, but I know it is the right thing to do. No, the results from these formulaic theories, when looked at in their entirety, give repulsive results. It's not that I'm saying, "I don't like the result;" I'm saying, "No way this can be the right thing to do!"

Ray: I think I understand. It seems to me that you are finding out that the formula morality theories are too simple for the complicated world we live in.

John: Exactly! That's exactly what I'm trying to say!

Ray: Be careful you don't say that too loud; you don't want Professor Chism to hear you!

John: Ha! Yeah, he keeps telling us that our brains are made of cells, which are made of molecules, which are made of atoms. And since atoms behave in a predictable manner if you know all the forces that act on them, then our thoughts must be predictable as well.

Ray: Hey, do you realize that you called the theories "formulaic?" Doesn't that tell you something about them?

John: Yeah, now that you mention it, it does. To some degree or another, all the moral theories we talked about do assume that all one has to do is know a few things and then the results are predictable.

Ray: But they don't work, do they?

John: Well, again, to a large degree they all do, but they all break down at some point. But while they break down for different reasons, there does seem to be a common denominator between them.

Ray: And what is that?

John: Insufficient information. You cannot know all the possible situations that can possibly come up, and you cannot know all the circumstances that affect the situation. I think if you could know all the relevant information, then you could come up with a perfect idea of morality.

Ray: Very interesting! I like where this is going. But wouldn't you need to be able to not only see, but to understand, the infinite in order to have all the information you need?

John: Yes, I think you are right.

Ray: But we are not infinite, so we can't see or understand the infinite, can we?

John: No. And I know where you are going with this. I have to admit, it would be wonderful if your God actually existed, as He could provide insights into the areas where our understanding fails.

Ray: So, you admit that having God around is not only a good thing, but is actually a need man has?

John: Well, yes. I suppose.

Ray: Okay, now I'm confused. If you have discovered God in your own way, then why don't you accept Him as being real?

John: Because, it's terrifying! If God exists, then so does Hell! It is better to die and face oblivion than to spend eternity in torment!

Ray: You just said that having God around is a good thing, but then you just turned around and said it is terrifying! Please excuse me having a laugh over this.

John: Well, having a little God, just enough that everyone does the right thing, is comforting. But it's not enough to just do the right thing if God is real. He's perfect, and if you are less than perfect, then you must be repulsive to Him. And if you are repulsive to Him, then what hope do you have? Does any of this make sense to you?

Ray: Actually, it makes perfect sense. To tell you the truth, I think you understand Christianity better than most who claim to be Christians. I think "cradle Christians" tend to be too comfortable with the idea of God, and take their salvation for granted. It's actually refreshing to find someone who is

looking at God for the first time, as they can appreciate who God really is. We really need to find time to talk about this, but it is way too deep for the time we have left before we get to the gym. Promise me we'll get together over this sometime soon!

John: Nah, I'm good. In ethics class, we just covered Aristotle and Virtue Theory. He proposed that you ought to look at all the facts you can, and make a decision on how to act based on those facts. In other words, you come up with the best moral solution for any given situation as the situation develops. To help you with this decision, he came up with some factors to consider. This keeps you from falling into the formula trap we talked about.

Ray: I see, but we also said that you can't know everything you need to know to make these decisions.

John: True, but that's not what Aristotle was after. For him, the desire to be the best one can be, the word he used was "*eudaimonia*," was the purpose of man. He said that man should strive to be the most moral person one could be, but he never claimed perfection was possible. For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is an everlasting journey; one never actually reaches it.

Ray: I see. And how does this work?

John: Well, suppose I see someone being mugged. I need to determine what my options are -- do I try to stop it, do I try to contact the authorities, do I try to help the victim when it is over, or some combination of these things? I need to consider how many are involved in the mugging and how big they are. I need to consider how much danger the victim is actually in. I need to consider how fast police can show up. I need to consider what I have the ability to do, like perhaps push them away from the victim or take pictures of the muggers with my phone. From all the information I can get, I need to come up with a plan and then act on it. From an eternity point of view, I may or may not come up with the best course of action. But I do have the ability to act on the best course of action I can determine by myself.

Ray: You may not have realized this, but, other than the denial of God, you just described Natural Law as taught by the Catholic Church.

John: Aristotle died centuries before Jesus was supposed to be around. You simply stole his ideas.

Ray: I think "stole" is a strong word. It was the Catholic Church that saved Aristotle's works from being lost to man, otherwise they would have been destroyed when the Roman Empire fell. And Saint Thomas Aquinas, who formulated the Church's Natural Law doctrine, made no secret about where his inspiration came from. He wanted to prove that secular philosophy was not opposed to Christian faith, and had the greatest respect for Greek thinkers.

John: Ha! So you admit that Christianity is an evolutionary step from paganism?

Ray: I never said that. You told me you loved reading Greek and Norse mythologies, right?

John: Yeah, so?

Ray: Can you tell me exactly which pagan gods actually behaved in a manner suggested by Aristotle, and which myths I can read so I can see them myself?

John: ... No, I can't. There really isn't anything I would consider moral in their behaviors. Some of them may have been nice now and then, but there is no indication of *eudaimonia* in any of the stories I can think of. They were gods, and therefore all powerful, so they had no need to improve themselves.

Ray: So, is it fair to say that there is no evolution between pagan "morality" and Christian morality, only a connection between Christian morality and someone who happened to live in a pagan culture?

John: Yeah, you are right. But don't you think it is odd that a Christian would want anything to do with pagans at all?

Ray: The wheel was developed in a pagan culture, does me being a Catholic mean I shouldn't drive a car because of that?

John: No, but driving a car is a practical thing to do, and I seriously doubt it has anything to do with your beliefs of God. You are saying that Aristotle has influenced your beliefs in God.

Ray: No, not at all. My belief in God included the idea that man was made in His image. We already agreed that God is capable of seeing and understanding all possible considerations, and is therefore able to determine right from wrong perfectly. Now granted, we are imperfect images of God. But doesn't it make sense that we ought to be able to see and understand moral considerations, and therefore be able to determine right from wrong to some degree?

John: Yes, I can agree with that -- *if* God existed. But that doesn't have anything to do with Aristotle being a pagan.

Ray: I agree, it has nothing to do with Aristotle being a pagan. It has everything to do with him still being a man, and therefore made in God's image. If Aristotle, or any pagan for that matter, was able to find truth despite not having the *Tanakh* or the Bible to lean on, should I discard it simply because they were a pagan? Or should I marvel at how God was not limited in spreading His wisdom?

John: That makes sense, but it still seems awkward. How can the pagans be right and Christians be right? Even I know that is a contradiction.

Ray: The Catholic Church believes, and I agree with it wholeheartedly, that God's truth is present in man. Being pagan, or even atheist, does not change this fact. But while pagans had truth, Christianity has a better understanding of the truth, and Catholics the best understanding of all. You might think of it as three cameras trying to take a picture of the same thing, but one camera lens is badly out of focus, and another is slightly out of focus. All three will take a picture, but the best picture will be the one whose lens was best focused.

John: So, you are saying that man doesn't need God? He can figure things out all by himself, just as Aristotle taught? If so, then why need God?

Ray: Because knowing right from wrong is not enough.

John: What?

Ray: Okay, let me put it to you this way. Do mafia hitmen stop at red traffic lights?

John: I suppose so. It would be stupid if they didn't. They might get hit and killed by an oncoming truck.

Ray: But yet they have no problem killing people, which could lead to a lifetime in prison or even execution.

John: Well yes, because they know the "family" will make arrangements so they won't get caught, and even if they are caught, they have a good chance of fixing the trial so the hitman walks free.

Ray: Exactly, so what is going on here? What is the difference?

John: Well, as long as they don't think they will have to pay for being immoral, they will do amoral things. But you are talking about psychopaths; most people are naturally inclined to do well.

Ray: Are they? Why did you say you found God terrifying?

John: Because God demands you to be perfect, and I'm imperfect.

Ray: And by "imperfect," you mean we do have a tendency to do bad things.

John: Yes, but not murder!

Ray: Can you really say that? Have you ever been so angry at someone that you really wanted to hurt them?

John: Well yes, everybody has had that happen.

Ray: Uh-huh. And why didn't you?

John: <sigh> Because I was afraid of what would happen afterwards. But I would never kill anyone.

Ray: Are you sure? If you could hurt someone anytime you felt like it because there were no consequences, do you really think you wouldn't eventually kill someone?

John: <sigh> Yes, you are right again!

Ray: You talked earlier about *eudaimonia*. How many of your classmates do you really think will take the lesson to heart and try to improve themselves?

John: Probably not many, but I sure will.

Ray: And how far will you pursue this?

John: Oh, all the way! I think being a "moral exemplar," as Aristotle called it, is a great thing to be. That way I can help others be better people as well!

Ray: You know I love ya, bro. But do you really think you will push yourself as hard as you can?

John: What?!? Don't you have faith in me?

Ray: Oh, I believe your heart is in the right place. But what did you just say as we passed the engineering building? That the idea of God was horrifying because He is perfect and we aren't?

John: But with virtue theory, you don't have to be perfect, you only have to try.

Ray: Okay, so what is your goal? To be 99% perfect, 80% perfect, something else?

John: Umm, I haven't thought of that. I think I could be about 90% there.

Ray: Okay, and how do you measure this?

John: What do you mean?

Ray: What standard do you measure success by? How do you know if you have met your goal, or if you still have to work on it? And even if you could define this goal and meet it, why stop then?

John: Hey, that's a trick question! You came up with the percentages; I was just following you.

Ray: I have a standard to live by with Jesus. What's your standard?

John: Well, I told you -- Virtue Theory!

Ray: You also made it quite clear that Virtue Theory is a journey, not a destination. So how are you measuring your journey?

John: Well, I guess I ought to find a moral exemplar and use him as a standard.

Ray: Okay, that's not a bad idea. But who would you choose?

John: Um, I haven't thought of it yet. I guess I need to spend some time observing people and see who appears to be the best example of morality I can find, and then try to emulate them.

Ray: Why limit yourself to people here on campus? Why not look at people throughout history, look for those who made a difference with their lives? Why not pick the best one in history you can find?

John: Well, Aristotle said you can't learn morality from a book, you need to find someone who has internalized virtue, and follow their lead.

Ray: When he said you can't learn morality from a book, did he mean you can't learn morality as a formula, or you can't learn about people from a book?

John: Umm, I don't know. Our past talks certainly show why you can't learn how to be moral simply by talking about morality, but I'm having a hard time thinking why you can't learn about morality by reading about moral people. Seems to me it's just another form of observing people.

Ray: I agree with that. So, if you had your choice of anyone throughout history, who would you pick as a moral exemplar?

John: Well, the best moral exemplar in history is Jesus, even the most die-hard atheists agree that he was a good man like no other.

Ray: You realize that your own argument has once again led you to God!

John: Hey, YOU are the one who led me here.

Ray: I simply asked some clarifying questions; you provided the answers.

John: Well, I don't deny that Jesus was real, but all the talk about him being God was added later, he never claimed he was God.

Ray: Well, I disagree with that, but now that we are at the gym, and I'm going to have to go. But I do have a final thought for you to consider until we meet again.

John: Okay, what is it?

Ray: While I admit that Jesus called Himself God in a manner that is hard for us to understand today, especially to those who are not familiar with the Bible, there is no question whatsoever that others called Him God in His presence. He was sentenced to death because people thought He claimed He was God.

John: Yeah, so?

Ray: Well, is it feasible for the best example of a moral exemplar mankind has to offer would allow people to falsely call Him "God" and not correct them? Unless, of course, there was nothing to correct?

John: Yeah, that does sound kind of deceitful. Unless there was a misunderstanding in his responses.

Ray: He was executed by the most humiliating and painful way man has ever come up with. If *ever* there was a time for a man to be clear in what he has to say, *this* was the time to do it. But He didn't.

John: Well, maybe he was a little crazy?

Ray: Are you listening to yourself? The most perfect example man has of what being moral looks like is coming from a man who is insane?

John: Okay, I'll just have to look for someone else.

Ray: But you admitted that even the most die-hard atheists don't deny that the goodness of Jesus exceeded those of anyone else. You don't want to learn from the best?

John: Okay, okay. Once again, you gave me a lot to think about. Have fun at racquetball. I'll see you tomorrow in class!

Ray: Awesome! I hope studying goes well for you.

John: Later, bro!

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