

# Virtue and Moral Dilemmas

While teaching a Religious Education class recently, a student asked me if it was okay to tell a lie if it was for a good cause. While this particular case was easy to handle, it did make me consider the moral foundations one has available to make such a choice.

There are those, of course, who claim God is not necessary. Virtue Theory is perhaps the best of this group. It is very old, with Aristotle being the most influential proponent of it. It is so good that Saint Thomas Aquinas used it extensively for his model of Natural Law Theory. The biggest difference between the two is that Natural Law Theory is grounded in God, and I will show what a difference that makes soon. In both of these theories, one is told to be the best self one can be. Another popular secular theory is Kantianism, formulated by Immanuel Kant. It parallels the so-called "golden rule" of doing unto others as one would have done onto oneself. There is Utilitarianism, where moral outcomes justify the actions taken to achieve them. There is also Contractarianism, where people agree, either implicitly or explicitly, to codes of conduct that they will abide by because they benefit as much or more than they have to contribute.

By themselves, none of these are completely adequate. Virtue Theory and Natural Law Theory break down because of man's inherently sinful nature. Man does not normally want to be the best he can be; he wants to be something else. Even those driven to excellence oftentimes become excellent in areas they were not meant to be excellent in (a major reason so many successful people are miserable). Saint Aquinas, of course, never intended Natural Law Theory to stand by itself, and I will get to the support he was counting on soon.

Kantianism falls apart as soon as one accepts two or more ethical codes of conduct. Unlike the "golden rule," which is grounded in God, any moral standard one takes is absolute and unforgiving. One is easily drawn into a moral dilemma whenever two or more standards come into conflict. One example could be someone foolishly promising not to tell a secret, then discovering the secret is about a crime the other did or is about to. It's even possible to create dilemmas over a single moral standard. Consider a code against killing. Game theorists have a challenge where one is standing next to a railroad switch with an oncoming train. On one set of tracks is a person who will not get off in time, while on the other set of tracks is a group of five people who are in the same danger. Which track does one send the train down?

Utilitarianism answers these dilemmas quite easily (better to put the criminal in jail and better to let one die than five). Actually, it answers every scenario the game theorists come up with that I am aware of. But when things go too smoothly, one should beware of hubris. The problem with Utilitarianism is that we are always limited in what we know. Many decisions that go against moral norms seem wise at the time (or at least inconsequential), but lead to grievous outcomes due to unforeseen consequences. And this is man at his best. Acedia (intellectual laziness) and Utilitarianism are a recipe for disaster.

Contractarianism is perfect in a perfect world. If everyone does their best to maintain their end of the bargain, then life can indeed be better for all. But those who benefit most from the system are those who do not hold up their end of the bargain while living among others that do. Laziness and self-interest, especially when mixed with cunning, undo this theory.

There are actually many other problems with these theories, but these are the most obvious. So,

what is the Christian answer?

Christians have at their disposal the seven virtues, which comprise three Theological (or God-based) Virtues and four Cardinal (or Rational-based) Virtues. They are:

Theological Virtues:

Faith: to have trust in. For Christians, we have Faith that Jehovah will keep His word to make things right in the end.

Hope: a longing for better things. For Christians, we have Hope that we will go to heaven.

Charity: in short, it is agape: to love the unlovable. For Christians, we believe we are all unlovable (as in undeserving of love), but that Jehovah loves us anyway. We, in turn, need to show that same love to others.

Cardinal Virtues:

Prudence: to see the outcomes of decisions

Justice: to consider the dignity of all involved

Temperance: to apply the right amount of effort for the given situation

Fortitude: to persevere against difficulty

Theological Virtues cannot be reasoned out; they must be taught and ultimately come from God. Cardinal Virtues are based on human reason. Saint Aquinas' Natural Law Theory is based on the Cardinal Virtues. He recognized how, without God and the Theological Virtues, they would fall apart in human sinfulness. Indeed, unlike most moral and ethical philosophers, Saint Aquinas freely admitted to the inherent flaw that sin imposed on his or any other human centered work. Saint Aquinas, and all other Christian philosophers, will "ground" their theories in the Theological Virtues, whereas theories that don't recognize some form of deity must eventually ground them in law. This is why atheism and socialism will forever be married to each other. Without the Theological Virtues to inspire people to help their neighbors, laws must force them to.

It is the Christian way to evaluate all moral situations through these virtues. Some may be more important than others in one situation or another, but none of them can simply be ignored. Any time one finds oneself in a moral dilemma, I guarantee that at least one of the above virtues has been "held hostage," as I like to say. I will go over some common examples of such cases.

Faith is often taken hostage when we decide we need to handle a problem instead of letting God handle the problem. In other words, when our want to *avoid* failure exceeds our faith that God will help us *in* failure. If we study hard for a test but are still anxious about failing, then we may be tempted to cheat on the test. If we give into that temptation, we are essentially telling God that we don't trust Him anymore.

Hope is very close to Faith when it comes to being taken hostage. Indeed, to hold one of these two hostage almost always means holding both hostage. My test example from above certainly could fit here. The biggest difference between the two is that a lack of faith comes from fear while a lack of hope comes from despair. When one's boss demands extra time at the end of the work day and one knows the work still won't be done, choosing to be angry about it as opposed to giving the sacrifice to God's glory is a sign of a lack of hope.

Charity is held hostage when we don't act on pity for another human or animal. When we fail to

recognize the dignity in others, we are holding charity hostage. While it is often necessary to group people into categories to facilitate intelligent discussion, it is too easy to forget that this grouping only identifies a single common aspect of them. A label may identify a particular opinion or characteristic of a person, but this label does not define the person itself. So much of the name calling in the media these last several years is an all too obvious example of holding charity hostage in public discussion.

Prudence is rarely held hostage deliberately, as identifying all possible courses of action and all likely outcomes of each option is often beyond our ability no matter how smart or educated we are. This is where Utilitarianism breaks down, as many actions have far-reaching and complex consequences. But we may hold prudence hostage unwittingly if our pride won't let us admit we don't know. Instead, we may be tempted to substitute hope in place of admitting we don't know. While hope is part of the process, this is not the place for it. More often than not, we can fall back on the 3,400+ years of wisdom collected in the Bible. All that wisdom can see outcomes we never can.

Justice is held hostage when we pick and choose whose dignity to serve. No matter how obvious the evidence, every criminal deserves a trial, not a lynching. No crime, no matter how heinous, takes away the human dignity of those involved. Curiously, our current culture seems to actually care more about the dignity of the criminal than that of the victims, friends and family of the victims, or society at large. The trial needs to be fair and honest to respect both the dignities of the accused and those affected by the crime. If a fair trial does result in a guilty verdict, then the dignities of those affected by the criminal deserve justice in the legal sense.

Temperance is often taken hostage simply by being ignored. This was talked about in Kantianism. By having a Kantian "all or nothing" approach to ethics, the door to acedia is wide open. We no longer have to think with Kantianism, we just do what our maxims demand and ignore the consequences. As a Christian, each situation should be judged on its own merits instead of an uncompromising principal. But temperance can also be held hostage by doing the right thing but with too much or too little effort. If someone is worried about how they dressed for a given occasion, we can give an honest answer without inflating their ego or destroying their self-confidence.

Fortitude is perhaps the virtue held hostage the most. All too often, we really do know what the right thing to do is. We just don't want to do it. We might pass someone stranded in the snow so we can get to a warm place ourselves. We might not tell the truth because we don't want to risk losing a friend. This list could go on and on. Instead of standing up for what we know is right, we try to rationalize our way out of our misbehavior to avoid any unpleasantness.

In the end, Christian views of morality are not simplistic; they are complex. They need to be, because we live in a complex world. Acedia is a mortal sin. As G.K. Chesterton said, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult, and left untried." But while Christian ethics are complex, they are also intuitive. Although the seven need to be examined one by one for each situation, they invariably seem to come together of their own accord.

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Original Publication Date: 10 June 2021