



DIVINE INSIGHTS AND VIRTUOUS LIVING

A Comparative Analysis of Virtue Ethics and Christian Scripture



JACOB CORA (2223704)
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1 INTRODUCTION

The main goal of this paper is to examine the ethical and theological narratives found in the Old and New Testament, and thoroughly investigate the noteworthy development of ethical and theological ideas that result in its remarkable resemblance to virtue ethics in terms of ethical reasoning.

Virtue ethics emerges as a robust framework that empowers us to comprehend the fundamental essence of Christian scripture, grasp the intricate interplay between virtues and vices within it, and confront the challenges that have shaped early conceptions of morality across Aristotelian philosophy and Abrahamic traditions.

At the heart of virtue ethics lies a transformative shift—an evolution from mere adherence to external rules towards the cultivation of virtuous character traits as an encompassing way of life. This profound transition is also intricately interwoven within the theological narrative found within scripture. Most comparatively, the Old Testament's Ten Commandments, functioning as external laws, prescribing specific behaviors to be followed or avoided, and the New Testament, with one of the most influential themes being the Sermon on the Mount. Building upon the foundation of the Ten Commandments, Jesus challenges his disciples to transcend superficial obedience to the law and redirects their attention inward—towards their attitudes, intentions, and the development of their character.

Expanding upon this profound shift from external rules to the cultivation of virtuous character traits, virtue ethics serves a parallel purpose: the development of one's character in the relentless pursuit of a virtuous life. By embracing this ethical framework, individuals are called to engage in a continual process of self-reflection, self-discipline, and moral growth, ultimately leading to the embodiment of the virtues and principles relatedly advocated within the selected passages.

In summary, this paper aims to comprehensively examine these ethical narratives by assessing the remarkable progression of ethical and theological thought through the lens of virtue ethics. As we gain profound insights into the essence of Christian scripture, the intricate relationship between virtues and vices, and the challenges that have influenced early conceptions of morality, we find the transition from external rules to the cultivation of virtuous character; entailing the call for individuals to embark on a transformative journey, embracing the embodiment of virtues and principles emphasized within these teachings and delving into the underlying purpose which drives that very journey.

2 FOUNDATIONS OF VIRTUE

The Ten Commandments, deeply intertwined within Christian scripture, serve as a profound mirror reflecting the virtues and vices that permeate the human experience. While they offer moral guidelines, their significance surpasses mere prescriptions, as they define the virtues that shape a life devoted to the pursuit of “the good.” Consider, for instance, the commandment “You shall not commit adultery.”¹ This commandment directly aligns within the realm of virtue ethics, displaying virtues such as sexual integrity, faithfulness, and self-control, which are regarded as vital for nurturing and sustaining healthy relationships. Similarly, the commandment “You shall not steal”² warns against the vice of envy and advocates for the virtue of contentment. Once again, virtue ethics places great emphasis on cultivating virtues like gratitude, contentment, and the avoidance of envy, as they contribute to a virtuous and fulfilling existence, all which could be described as following the Platonic concept of “the good.”

While the commandments harmonize with fundamental virtues and vices, they reveal a profound connection that unveils a sense of Telos, or ultimate purpose which strives towards said “good.” Sanford with his book *Before Virtue* explains how this Telos aligns with Aristotle's notion of human completion and perfection. In the Aristotelian context, the actualization of the perfect “good” signifies reaching an end, and attaining a state of excellence in specific capacities, or in one's entire life.³ Consequently, virtues can be perceived as qualities whose exercise leads to the realization of human Telos.

In relation to the Ten Commandments, this Telos implies that embodying the prescribed virtues within them results in the actualization of a virtuous life, or from a theological perspective, a life aligned with godliness. By adhering to the commandments and nurturing virtues, individuals strive toward their ultimate purpose, aligning their actions with the divine plan and fulfilling their inherent potential. Hence, the Ten Commandments not only serve as moral imperatives but also indicate a broader framework of virtue ethics. They act as guiding beacons, leading individuals towards a life centered on a Telos. Through the development and practice of virtues, individuals attain a state of wholeness, completeness, and eudaimonia—an idea deeply associated with flourishing in both Aristotelian virtue ethics and Christianity.

¹ Bible Gateway Passage: Exodus 20:14 - New International Version,” Bible Gateway <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus%2020%3A14&version=NIV> [accessed 1 July 2023].

² Bible Gateway Passage: Exodus 20:15 - New International Version,” Bible Gateway <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus%2020%3A15&version=NIV> [accessed 1 July 2023].

³ Jonathan J. Sanford, “Teleology in Aristotelian Ethics: Every Virtue Needs a Goal.” *Before Virtue*, (Catholic University of America Press, 2015) p. 206, JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt15nmjqp> 11, [accessed 2 July 2023].

Moreover, the striking resemblance between these virtuous commandments and the ethical reasoning of the Greek fathers raises intriguing questions. If we were to set aside the influence of the Abrahamic tradition, how would the Greek fathers arrive at such similar ethical insights? This parallel can be understood through the perspective of Saint Thomas Aquinas' theory of natural law, which posits that humans possess an inherent capacity for reason. Through reason, they can grasp and conform to the moral principles governing human nature, ultimately leading to a virtuous life.⁴

3 THE NATURAL LAW OF VIRTUE

The concept of natural law theory centers around the way in which we, as human beings, engage in reasoning, specifically good and evil.⁵ It is through this process of human reasoning, in conjunction with the principles of natural law, that we can fully comprehend the profound conclusion drawn by Aquinas. Aquinas summarizes well the concept of natural law within Question 94 of the "Prima Secundae." These writings provide a definition of the natural law as "the participation of rational beings in the eternal law."⁶ Although, not explicitly illuminated in theological doctrine, Aquinas asserts that Aristotelian virtue ethics serves as a paramount exemplification of this human reasoning of good and evil.

At the heart of natural law theory lies the understanding that universal principles govern human behavior and morality. These principles, accessible to human reason, are discovered through reflection and observation of the natural world. Courage, justice, temperance, and wisdom are among the virtues regarded as moral excellences contributing to the harmonious functioning of society and the fulfillment of human nature, as we previously discussed in terms of a *Telos*. Aquinas recognizes that these virtues are not exclusive to Christianity but are integral to the broader fabric of human existence. He emphasizes the compatibility between Aristotelian virtue ethics and Christian teachings, recognizing that both traditions share a common foundation rooted in comprehending the natural law. This recognition is particularly significant within a Catholic approach to scripture, as it acknowledges that moral reasoning can extend beyond the confines of biblical texts.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica: Part II-II (Secunda Secundae)*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2007 <https://doi.org/10.1604/9781426498121> [accessed 4 July 2023].

⁵ Jonathan J. Sanford, "Natural Law in Aristotelian Ethics: Every Virtuous Action Needs Its Reason." *Before Virtue*, (Catholic University of America Press, 2015), p. 232, JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt15nmjqp.12> [accessed 4 July 2023].

⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica: Part II (Secunda Secundae)*.

The connection between natural law and virtue ethics highlights the shared moral framework that transcends religious boundaries. Let us consider, for example, verses from the Gospel of Matthew 5:13-16:

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."⁷

Within this scripture, you could interpret salt as a metaphor for virtue. The metaphor of salt losing its saltiness suggests that virtues can be lost or compromised. If the salt loses its saltiness, or if one loses their virtues, they lose their purpose or telos in life. Then, what good are they? Similarly, the light of the world can be seen as a metaphor for moral guidance, assisting others in achieving virtuous illumination. This concept is not only an ideal within Christianity but is also rooted in virtue ethics. In Aristotle's ethical works, particularly in *Nicomachean Ethics*, he argues that being surrounded by virtuous individuals provides moral guidance, inspires virtuous actions, and aids in the development of one's own character.⁸ Moreover, he emphasizes the reciprocal nature of virtue, which benefits the moral growth of all involved.

Aquinas's comprehension of virtue ethics serves as a crucial link connecting human rationality, natural law, and the moral principles of Christianity. By recognizing the virtues inherent in human nature and their alignment with universal principles, Aquinas establishes a profound correlation between virtue ethics and the scriptural teachings. Sanford, in quoting Macintyre's book *After Virtue*, beautifully encapsulates Aquinas's perspective, highlighting his belief that the "same logical and conceptual structure" is held between the New Testament's account of virtues and an Aristotelian account, even if their content differs.⁹ Consequently, Aquinas emerges as a paramount figure in exploring the interconnectedness of Aristotelian virtue ethics and Christian ethics. However, I maintain the belief that this progression extends beyond a mere transformation of habits. Instead, I align myself with philosophers who emphasize the significance of intention as the driving force behind these habits. Let us now delve deeper into this crucial distinction and explore how intention shapes character and influences the journey towards virtue.

⁷ Bible Gateway Passage: Matthew 5:13-16 - New International Version," Bible Gateway <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%205%3A13-16&version=NIV> [accessed 4 July 2023].

⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. by Sarah Broadie and Christopher Rowe, 2002 <https://doi.org/10.1604/9780198752714> [accessed 5 July 2023].

⁹ Jonathan J. Sanford, "Teleology in Aristotelian Ethics: Every Virtue Needs a Goal." *Before Virtue*, (Catholic University of America Press, 2015) p. 211, JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt15nmjqp> 11, [accessed 5 July 2023].

4 INTENTION BEHIND VIRTUE

While Aristotle recognized the importance of habituation in the cultivation of virtues, there is an additional layer to consider. It is not solely the act of repeating virtuous actions that leads to the formation of habits but also the underlying intention behind those actions. The intentions we hold shape our character and guide our actions, ultimately influencing the habits we develop. In this context, intention serves as a crucial element that sets the stage for the cultivation of virtues. It is through intentional choices and conscious efforts that we mold our character and direct our actions towards the pursuit of goodness. By examining our intentions, we gain a deeper understanding of our values, motivations, and the virtues we aspire to embody.

Drawing from this perspective, the New Testament provides valuable insights into the significance of intention in the development of virtues. It emphasizes the importance of cultivating a pure heart, aligning our intentions with divine principles, and seeking righteousness. The teachings of Jesus Christ highlight the transformative power of intention, urging individuals to go beyond external actions and focus on the inner disposition of the heart. For instance, let us again consider the commandment "You shall not commit adultery."¹⁰ At its core, it is a straightforward rule prohibiting adultery. However, in the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament, this narrative expands beyond the surface level of the commandment and its virtues.

A relevant passage that addresses this is found in Matthew 5:27-28, part of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus declares, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."¹¹ Here, Jesus delves deeper into the issue by addressing the internal state of the heart, moving beyond the external act of adultery. This teaching emphasizes the importance of cultivating virtuous *intentions*. Virtue ethics recognizes that true moral goodness surpasses mere compliance with external rules; it encompasses the internal disposition and motivations that drive our actions. Jesus challenges his audience to introspect, examining their intentions and desires, and urging them to eliminate lustful thoughts while fostering purity of heart.

By underscoring the significance of internal intentions, Jesus highlights that virtuous actions should originate from a virtuous character of intention. He calls for a transformation of the heart, aligning one's desires with virtuous principles such as love, respect, and self-control. Continuing in the passage, Jesus emphasizes the extreme measures one should take to combat temptation and safeguard virtuous intentions. He metaphorically states,

¹⁰ Bible Gateway Passage: Exodus 20:14.

¹¹ Bible Gateway Passage: Matthew 5:27-28 - New International Version," Bible Gateway <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%205%3A27-28&version=NIV> [accessed July 5 2023].

"If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell."¹² While figurative, these words convey the seriousness of addressing the internal root causes of immoral actions. This passage underscores the significance of personal responsibility in cultivating virtuous intentions. It calls for introspection and self-discipline, urging individuals to proactively avoid situations and influences that may lead them astray. It highlights the need for individuals to be mindful of their internal struggles and make intentional choices that align with virtuous principles.

5 A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

Aquinas's theory of Natural Law encompasses all human beings who are created in God's image and possess a knowledge of morality and objective truth. However, there exists a deeper spiritual understanding that concerns the soul and its destiny beyond this earthly life. This concept is further developed in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, which we can see in Matthew 5:13:

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."¹³

This verse aptly illustrates that beyond virtuous intentions, there lies a heavenly reward. This narrative resonates with the idea of nurturing the quality of the soul, which is also intertwined with virtue ethics. For instance, we can turn to Socrates, the teacher of Plato. While Socrates viewed virtue from a perspective of knowledge, he deeply cared about the quality of the soul, considering it to be the ultimate pinnacle of life. Plato expounded upon this notion in his work *Phaedo*, which explores his belief of the immortality of the soul and its paramount importance.

Furthermore, Plato discusses the nature of love and the soul in his work *Phaedrus*, albeit with love as the primary focus. Nevertheless, he also delves into the qualities of the soul. Plato posits the existence of multiple parts of the soul, each corresponding to specific virtues and vices. In a similar vein, Mahatma Gandhi, familiar with Christian doctrines, held a comparable perspective on living a virtuous life. He faced criticism for his comments on Jewish persecution during Nazi Germany, advocating non-violent resistance and emphasizing the significance of the afterlife over the present one. Gandhi firmly believed that compromising virtuous character through

¹² Bible Gateway Passage: Matthew 5:29 - New International Version," Bible Gateway <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%205%3A29&version=NIV> [accessed 5 July 2023].

¹³ Bible Gateway Passage: Matthew 5:11-13 - New International Version," Bible Gateway <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%205%3A11-13&version=NIV> [accessed 2 July 2023].

killing would not be worth the consequences in the next life, even going to the lengths of saying “the Jews should have offered themselves to the butcher’s knife.”¹⁴ While not asserting the correctness of his stance, it is intriguing to draw parallels between these ethical reasonings.

6 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the profound exploration of virtue ethics in Christian scripture and philosophical traditions reveals compelling parallels. Regardless of religious affiliation, Aquinas's theory of Natural Law illuminates the ethical reasoning that enables individuals to cultivate moral character through habits, intentions, and other ideals. While it is argued virtues require the formation of habits and adherence to ethical principles, a deeper dimension emerges—the Telos, an unwavering pursuit of ultimate purpose within or beyond this life. These shared patterns of ethical reasoning trace their roots back to early Greek and Christian narratives, demonstrating the interconnectedness that binds them.

Additionally, the examination of virtue ethics across Christian scripture and philosophical traditions underscores their profound interconnectedness within ethical reasoning. Despite differences in frameworks and theological foundations, they converge on the belief that genuine moral character aligns with an ethical progression present in both virtue ethics and the New Testament. Both Christian and virtue ethicists' ethical narratives acknowledge the importance of nurturing the soul's quality and seeking higher purpose or ultimate fulfillment, whether through Christian concepts of heavenly rewards, Greek aspirations for eudaimonia, or the emphasis on the telos of a virtuous life. By exploring these parallels, we gain a deeper understanding of the intricate nature of ethical inquiry and humanity's relentless pursuit of moral excellence. Ultimately, the convergence of Christian and Greek ethical reasoning provides fertile ground for further contemplation and introspection, inviting us to unearth the timeless wisdom embedded within these profound philosophical and spiritual traditions.

¹⁴ “Mahatma Gandhi on Zionism and the Holocaust,” Jewish Currents <https://jewishcurrents.org/mahatma-gandhi-on-zionism-and-the-holocaust> [accessed 13 July]

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