

Why is doing good things so difficult? Christian versus non-Christian analysis

The question of “why is doing good things so difficult” has been central to ethics and is fundamentally argued amongst philosophers as it encompasses critical questions about human nature, moral psychology and moral reasoning. There is wide agreement with all that to be good and do good is challenging, but the question of why so is far more conflicted.

In this essay I will examine the views of Christian and non-Christian ethics perspectives to analyse if morality is best understood as being dependent on divine guidance or whether it can be explained through human reason and moral development alone.

I will use examples for the Christian ethics argument from the works of philosophers Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, who argue that sin, misdirected desire and disordered love are the causes of moral corruption and that grace, faith and the guidance of God are the foundations for achieving morality.

In contrast; Immanuel Kant and Aristotle will be examined as an approach to non-Christian ethical arguments that focuses on reason, character and habit being the core principles for developing morality without having to rely on God’s guidance.

This essay will argue that Christian ethics support a strong explanation and insight into the internal moral battle, whereas non-Christian ethics make an equally compelling argument for non-divine frameworks developing morality.

Christian Ethics Analysis

Saint Augustine

Saint Augustine’s belief was rooted in the idea that whilst humans are created with good, but that they fall into sin when they fail to prioritize the love, wisdom and guidance of God, as he believed that the ultimate source of moral corruption is to not live in faith and virtue.

“For God is the highest good, and the human will is not bad when it turns to him, but when it turns away from him” - Augustine, City of God Book XII

Saint Augustine’s Original Sin, Based on Romans 5 and Genesis 3, documented that he believed that all of humanity was seminally present when Adam disobeyed God and fell from the garden of Eden, and that it was then inherited by all, which suggests that doing good is challenging because morality is not aligned with the individual but is part of humanity entirely.

“All sinned in that one man, since all were that one man” - Augustine, On the Merits of forgiveness and Sins, I.9

Saint Augustine's doctrine discusses further of inherited Sin in that concupiscence - understood as desire, particularly sexual desire is the method of which Original Sin is transmitted down from one generation to the next through reproduction - reinforcing Saint Augustine's argument of inherited guilt that came from disobeying God,

This aligns with Augustine's writings on Disordered Love, whereby he claims that the essence of sin is when humans place higher importance on lower things such as themselves or material possessions instead of a higher importance on the most important thing which is God.

In this paraphrase from City of God XII, Augustine says *"Sin is a perversion of the will, turned away from the highest goods to the lowest goods"*

Augustine firmly believes that the root of all moral corruption lies in humans disobeying and not prioritizing God, this misalignment creates a space for evil to enter and bad to replace the good that God originally intended for humanity. This explains why doing good things is difficult, because human beings due to their fallen nature are naturally inclined to misdirect their will away from the highest good that is God.

Christian Ethics Analysis Aquinas

As an alternative analysis of Christian based ethics to Augustine's focus on humanity's fallen nature and Original sin, I will look at Thomas Aquinas whose writings on human morality emphasizes the cultivation of virtue through reason and habit, guided and driven by divine laws orientated towards ultimate fulfillment in God.

Thomas Aquinas' approach on goodness and morality primarily focuses on virtue-based and teleological systems, meaning that every human action is part of a final goal (telos), and by practicing moral virtues throughout life leads to eternal reward; this explains that doing good is inherently difficult because it requires discipline, habit and good practice of reason, as opposed to humans not doing good because of any inherent corruption.

"Every agent acts for an end; whatever is done for the sake of some good. The ultimate end of human life is the vision of God and the virtues guide us towards the final beatitude" - *Summa Theologica*, I-II, Q.1, Art 1

Aquinas' approach emphasizes that goodness and morality are cultivated through reason and habit guided by divine law. Whilst humans have freedom to make their own choices and actions, they develop virtue in alignment with God's plan, with the ultimate goal (telos) of achieving beatitude and divine reward. Comparing this with Augustine, Aquinas focuses more on human reason and cause & effect whilst still applying the ultimate need for God's guidance and reward.

Thomas Aquinas' writing builds on the Cardinal virtues of Prudence, Fortitude, Justice and Temperance all of which are developed through habit and reason, and he combines these with a Christian framework, meaning that acquired virtues in everyday life alongside divine virtues such as faith, love and hope creates the foundations of moral excellence.

"Faith, hope, and Charity are infused into us by God, so that our acts are directed toward the ultimate end, which is the vision of God" - Summa Theologica. I-II Q62-66 Art 1-3.

Non-Christian Ethics

Immanuel Kant:

For the non-Christian ethics analysis of the morality of doing good things I will now look at Immanuel Kant's writings which form a rational, non-Christian approach to the exploration of the foundations and intentions of goodwill.

Immanuel Kant believed that humans struggle with the tension of being torn between desires and duty, and that morality is grounded in reason and subjected to the moral law causing an internal battle to overcome personal desires and to make actions based on moral understanding regardless of self.

In Kant's 'Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals' Section I, he explains that;

"an action from duty has its moral worth not in the effect expected from it, nor in any inclination, but in the maxim according to which it is determined by the moral law".

This shows that his understanding of morality is deontological and that the struggle to do good things comes from performing actions detached from one's own expectations, gains or anticipated reward, to instead focus on actions in adherence only to moral law.

In another quote from Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals (1785), section I, he writes;

"It is impossible to conceive of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it that can be called good without qualification, except a good will".

This suggests that doing good things is hard because motives can be mixed and difficult to personally discern, the challenge of focusing on moral judgement is for humans to perform actions that conform to rational moral law whilst not being able to accurately know the intentions and motives of our own actions.

Christian ethics emphasizes divinity and grace as the foundations for morality whilst non-Christian approaches explore how humans can develop understanding of morality and virtue without divinity or faith.

Non-Christian Ethics

Aristotle

For the final non-Christian analysis of why it is difficult for humans to act morally, I will look at the writings of Aristotle which contrast with Kant's emphasis on duty being the basis of morality, and emphasizes that cultivating virtue through habit is the foundation of developing morals.

Aristotle writes in Nicomachean Ethics that;

"Moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name 'ethike' is derived from 'ethos', that is, character. Therefore it is clear that none of the virtues arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature'. - Book II, Chapter 1

In this, he argues that human morality (virtue) is not innate to us but instead is developed through habit and practice which is guided by our understanding of reason, and that we form our virtues through our cultivation of character and by repeatedly doing good things gradually builds moral excellence.

Aristotle writes that *"Moral virtue is a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency"* - Nicomachean Ethics, Book II, Chapter 6

Aristotle explores the difficulty of doing good things by noting that humans naturally lead towards extremes, either excess or deficiency, and that ultimately finding a balance, or the "golden mean" provides the best moral guidance. For example, in the case of appetite; eating too much (gluttony) or not eating enough (self-denial) represent extremes, whilst courage and recklessness are extremes, Virtue lies with balance which relies on conscious effort, repeated practice and balance, which demonstrates that doing good things is challenging.

This weakens Augustine theory in particular, as he argues that all virtue is rooted in God and by divine grace, but his account does not fully consider the role of human reasoning, identity and independence and makes it less applicable to those who believe that morality can be developed through human experience.

Critical Analysis

A critical evaluation of the Christian and non-Christian ethical perspectives discussed in this essay provided a strong explanation of why it is hard to do good things, but none of the perspectives can fully justify the reasoning or foundations of human morality.

Saint Augustine provides a strong reasoning explaining the internal moral struggles with his writing on disordered love and humans inclination towards sin, but this can be criticised for being pessimistic and too dependent on God's law; It also does not account for human reasoning and too dependent on divine guidance.

Thomas Aquinas offers a more balanced approach by combining reason and habit with divinity and God's laws, but this then excludes non-religious individuals from his framework making it less universally applicable.

In contrast, Immanuel Kant discusses moral difficulty through the internal tensions between inclination and duty to, but this can be criticised for neglecting human emotions and the real-life complexities of human relationships.

Aristotle argues that all virtue is developed through habit and practice, but his account does not fully consider the role of God for religious individuals who consider faith and divinity to be the foundations of virtue and morality.

Importantly, there is no clear empirical evidence that shows Christian believers act more morally than non-Christian believers which challenges the Christian based ethics and the belief that following divine laws has any impact on producing better moral outcomes. Whilst Christian ethics does offer a solid foundation for developing internal morality, non-Christian ethics provides a more flexible and accessible framework for developing moral behaviour.

Evaluation

The perspectives analysed in this essay provide insight and compelling explanations as to why doing good things is difficult; however, neither of the individual arguments nor their combination offers a fully comprehensive account and understanding to answer this question that's applicable to all individuals.

The powerful understanding of humans' internal struggles through sin and disordered love, accompanied by the consequences of disobeying God from Saint Augustine highlight the strength that divine grace can lend to humans in order to guide them towards morality and virtue. Similarly Thomas Aquinas supports this view whilst incorporating reason and habit as the foundations of developing morality, though both approaches rely heavily on the belief in God.

In contrast, Immanuel Kant's rational and structured theory based on duty and moral law can be criticised as emotionless and disconnected from lived experience. Aristotle presents a more practical and arguably more universal approach, yet still not fully representative of the diversity of human moral perspective.

The difficulty of doing good things is best described as being a complex and balanced mix of internal tensions, moral reasoning, human desires and habit, with effort and discipline required which provides challenges to all humans.

References

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