

Virtue Ethics and Natural Law  
Dr. Paul J. Hoehner  
Christ the Redeemer Church, Portland, Maine  
February 24, 2008

## Outline of Course

- Introduction to Christian Ethics: Ethics as Theology
- Secular Ethics: Man's attempt to do ethics without God
- Post-Modern Ethics: The end of ethics...is it all relative?
- Virtue Ethics & Natural Law
- Building A Christian Approach to Ethics
- Excursion: Jonathan Edwards' Distinct Approach to Christian Ethics
- Issues at the Beginning of Life
  - Defining Human Life
  - Stem Cell Research and Modern Biotechnology
  - Abortion and the Sanctity of Human Life
- Issues at the End of Life
  - Defining Death
  - Euthanasia and End of Life Care
  - Death Penalty, Just War, etc.

## Levels of Thinking

### Worldview: Anthropocentric or Theocentric

What is the nature of God, the world, and man?

What is "good"?

### Sources of Authority

Nature, Reason (Philosophy/Science), Revelation, Community/Tradition

### Methods of Moral Reasoning

Deontology (rules), Teleological (outcomes), Existential (attitudes, virtue)

### Principles

Beneficence, Justice, Veracity, Autonomy

### Rules

Policies, Laws, Codes

### Decisions

Specific Issues

## Options for a Pluralistic Society

- Mid-Level Principlism
  - Beauchamp & Childress *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*
  - Respect for Autonomy
  - Beneficence
  - Nonmaleficence
  - Justice

## Options for a Pluralistic Society

- Casualty
  - Jonsen & Toulmin *The Abuse of Casuistry* (1988)
  - Case Analysis Approach

## Options for a Pluralistic Society

- Neo-pragmatism
  - What is useful? (not “true” or “right”)
  - “*For the pragmatist, sentences are true not because they correspond to reality, but because they work—because they perform some useful service.*” -Richard Rorty

## The Turn to Virtue

- Asks, “Who am I? What is my story? How do I respond?”
- Does not focus on individual decisions, but rather on what kind of person I am that is making the decision
- “Good” is what a good person does

## *The Nichomachean Ethics*

### -Aristotle

- A training in the virtues which promote goods internal to practices
  - Temperance, Justice, Courage, Wisdom
  - Faith, Hope, Love (Aquinas)
- Practical wisdom (*phronesis*)
- Shaped by a community (training & practice)

## Christians and Virtue Ethics

- Collapse of the Enlightenment
- Key role of communities (Church)
- Key role of sacred texts (Scripture)
- Rejection of modernism without relativism
- Emphasis on virtue
- Overcomes radical individualism of modernism
- Makes moral discourse accessible to non-philosophers

## Virtue Ethicists

- Alasdair MacIntyre
  - *After Virtue (1991)* “To act virtuously is not, as Kant was later to think, to act against inclination; it is to act from inclination formed by the cultivation of the virtues.”
  - Ethics can never be autonomous and can never be done outside a real-life history of a community that carries on the moral tradition
  - No clear sense of the *telos* or “good”
- Edmund Pellegrino
  - *The Virtues in Medical Practice (1993)*
  - *The Christian Virtues in Medical Practice (1996)*

## Virtue Ethicists

- Stanley Hauerwas
  - There is no universal ethic, and there are no universal moral principles
  - The moral life is always rooted in, nurtured, and sustained by a particular community with a vision of what it means to be “good” and “human” and with communal stories that carry the vision
  - “*What is at stake in most of our decisions is not the act itself, but the kind of person we will be.*”

## Assessment of Virtue Ethics

- Positive
  - Emphasizes the Biblical role of the heart
  - The moral life is not just about what we do but about what we are (indicative and imperative)
  - Ethics is always reflective of a larger vision, a narrative
  - Emphasizes the need for wisdom, training and practice (perceptive faculties)
  - Shaped by and within a community (the Church)
  - Calls on the Church to be prophetic and counter-cultural (salt and light, a witness)



## Perceptive Faculties

- Philippians 1:9
  - *e,pignw,sei epignosei* (knowledge): intensive religious and moral knowledge; what one comes to know and appropriate through faith in Christ
  - *ai,sqh,sei aisthesei* (depth of insight): moral action of recognizing distinctions, perception, insight, understanding
  - *dokima,zein dokimazein* (discern, test): examine, prove, test, approve
- Hebrews 5:14
- Romans 12:2

## Problems with Virtue Ethics: Locus of Authority

- Authority resides in the community, Scripture is a *secondary* authority
  - Scripture not a revelation of God's norms to His people
  - A record of what previous believers understood to be a faithful response
- *"I do not assume that all the moral advice and admonitions found in Scripture have the same significance or should be positively appropriated. Each needs to be evaluated separately and critically"* --Stanley Hauerwas
- *Genuine faithfulness to the authority of Scripture means that we must go not only beyond the Biblical text but sometimes even against the text...the openendedness of the biblical text is God's invitation to us to contribute creatively to plot resolution in a future that is genuinely unscripted."* –Middleton and Walsh

## Problems with Virtue Ethics

- Diversity of interpretations, and resulting practices, among believing communities
- The place of norms and principles
- Relativism and pluralism
- Sectarian nature of communitarian ethics

## What We Can Learn

- Ethics is more than simple calculation
- Ethics is about "art" "fixing form out of chaos" "ordering the goods"
- We must move from the mechanical objective "decision-making" ethics to a more dynamic, organic, perceptive view of "ethics" (use of the perceptive "faculties")
- Used not individualistically, but as part of the Body (Church)
- "Perspective Equilibrium" (Aristotle)

- Paying attention to details of life, complexities of the human experience and particular experiences

## Natural Law Ethics

- Moral laws built into the fabric of nature (human nature or reason) like the laws of physics
  - Accessed by reason or observation
  - Examination of creation and human reflection
- C.S. Lewis, the “*Tao*” of creation
- Romans 2:14,15
- Declaration of Independence
  - ...we hold these truths to be self-evident

## Cicero

### De Re Republica, 3.22.33

*True law is right reason in agreement with nature; it is of universal application, unchanging and everlasting; it summons to duty by its commands, and averts from wrongdoing by its prohibitions...It is a sin to try to alter this law, nor is it allowable to attempt to repeal any part of it, and it is impossible to abolish it entirely...[there is] one master and ruler, that is, God, over us all, for he is author of this law, its promulgator, and its enforcing judge.*

## “Law” according to Aquinas

*Summa theologica I-II, q. 90*

- Reasonable, in the sense of directing action
- Ordained to the common good
- Legislated by the proper authority
- Duly promulgated

## Kinds of Law *ST I-II Q.91*

- Eternal (the mind of God)
- Divine (a species of eternal)
- Natural (distinctly rational/a mode of participation)
- Human (ordinary positive law)

## Hume’s Critique

- David Hume (1711-1776)
  - What is “natural” in “natural law?”
    - Natural vs supernatural
    - Natural vs unusual or rare
    - Natural vs artificial or created

- Naturalistic fallacy: cannot derive an “ought” from an “is”

## What can we learn?

- Ethics derives from the will of God and His nature (Divine Command), it transcends human nature (Kant)
- Ethics is somehow built into the nature of the universe (Natural Law)
- Ethics rests on human nature and the human heart (Virtue)
- There must be a goal to ethics (teleological and eschatological)