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Virtue Ethics

Brad J. Kallenberg

If a burglar is breaking into the house, it is too late to begin lifting weights.

Underneath the humor, there is a truism: You are always becoming the person you are. This truism is the basis for a model of ethics.¹

1. What is Virtue Ethics?

It is sometimes helpful to think about moral situations as having three logical moments: Agent(s) perform Action(s) that result in Outcome(s). One brand of ethics treats outcomes as the most important consideration in determining right and wrong (e.g., utilitarianism). Another brand of ethics claims that some actions are right or wrong regardless of outcomes. What makes for rightness or wrongness in their eyes is the *kind* of deed an action is (e.g., Kantianism). And of course, every kind of ethicist will insist that *both* action and outcomes are germane to serious ethical analysis. But virtue ethics takes special note of the agents doing the deed.

¹ As always, I am grateful to terrific colleagues Mac Sandlin, Aaron James, and Ethan Smith who have made insightful and clarifying suggestions to earlier drafts of this essay.

In the first place, virtue ethics considers the deed in relation to “human excellence,” or to the question “What is human life *for*?” In addition to consideration of the human *telos* (where the Greek word *telos* names the “end” or “intended purpose” of a being or artifact), in the second place, virtue ethics also seeks thick descriptions rather than thin ones.² Since just about any act can be made to align with some principle or other provided the deed is described thinly enough, virtue ethics works hard to attend to all the particulars related to agents, actions and outcomes.³ Consider the following example. Francis of Assisi is championed as the paradigm of charity. Refusing to take over his father’s prosperous enterprise, Francis disavowed his family wealth by stripping naked and swapping his rich man’s tunic for the flea-ridden rough shirt of a local beggar. Thereafter becoming the most famous of the mendicant preachers, Francis’s self-induced poverty is taken by some to be a morally supererogatory habit. If however, I model my own life after St. Francis and give away my fortune (ha!), I would not be acting in imitation of St. Francis. Why? Because his life and mine are similar only under “thin” descriptions: “religiously minded males intent on growth in personal holiness.” If the descriptions are made slightly more “thick” so as to include marital status (Francis never married, Kallenberg is married and father of

² The term “thick description” was coined by the Gilbert Ryle and was later made famous in cultural studies by Clifford Geertz. Gilbert Ryle, “The Thinking of Thoughts: What Is ‘Le Penseur’ Doing?,” in *Collected Papers* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971), ch. 37. http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/csacsia/vol14/papers/ryle_1.html

³ See ch. 1 of Charles Pinches, *Theology and Action: After Theory in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002). For an example of the difference detail description makes see Brad J. Kallenberg, “The Descriptive Problem of Evil,” in *Physics and Cosmology: Scientific Perspectives on the Problem of Natural Evil*, ed. Nancey Murphy, Robert John Russell, and William R. Stoeger, SJ (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Press, 2007), 297-322.

three children), then the voluntary poverty that is heroic in Francis's case may prove to be downright immoral in my own!⁴

With respect to human excellence Aristotle has famously said,

[I]t is no easy task to be good. For in everything it is no easy task to find the middle....any one can get angry or to give or spend money—that is easy—but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right aim, and in the right way, that is not for every one nor is it easy; that is why goodness is both rare and praiseworthy and noble.⁵

While agreeing with Aristotle, I hasten to add that not only is the noble deed difficult to execute, it is almost as difficult rightly to describe! Part of what makes thick description tricky relates to the acuity (or lack thereof) of moral eyesight. Even a highly detailed description may fail to make the point to an audience that is morally myopic. Outcomes and action classes are both included in thick description. But thick description does not end with answering “what *kind* of deed was done?” and “what happened next?” Nor is it sufficient to detail the action's object, extent, timing, intention and manner as Aristotle suggests. In addition, an adequate description must be made of the identity of the agent. The agent's character is made clear by a triple-level analysis.

When I was a college student, my friend Matt and I stood one night outside his rental house in the grungy part of the city when a large sedan with six passengers drove slowly past us. We were joking and laughing—as Christians are wont to do! Suddenly the car slammed on its brakes about 20 feet beyond where

⁴ This illustration reproduced from “The Descriptive Problem of Evil,” 301.

⁵ Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics,” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle (Bollingen Series; 71:2)*, ed. Jonathon Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), II.9.

we stood. A muscular guy leapt from the car and stormed towards us wielding a tire iron, furious because he thought we were laughing at him.

At that moment I had a variety of options I might have taken. I could run (since Matt and I were running partners, I knew that I was faster than Matt!). I could close the distance and preemptively land the first punch. I could interpose myself between Matt and the attacker, shielding my friend from harm, come what may. Then again, I could act crazy, say by drooling or singing “Feeling Groovy” at the top of my lungs. Whatever I chose to do, there are a three levels to describe “doing right.”

The first level of analysis considers whether what I do is the “right thing” or the “wrong thing.” Let’s suppose, for sake of argument, that under these conditions fleeing the scene is the “wrong thing” to do and that shielding Matt from harm is the “right thing” to do. The second level considers why I did it. I might do the right thing for ignoble reasons. Perhaps I wanted to impress female onlookers peeking through shuttered windows or alternatively to get a psychological hold over Matt by placing him in my debt. Such reasons would certainly cheapen the moral value of my deed even if I did the “right thing.” But let’s suppose further, again or sake of argument, that I shield Matt for a good reason, for love of my friend. There is a third level to consider. For in the weeks to come the chatter in our circles might go one of two ways. “Kallenberg did *what*?! Really? Are you certain? Surely not...not Brad J. Kallenberg! I don’t believe it!” Or, the banter might have the opposite flavor: “What a great guy! That is just the sort of thing Kallenberg would do! Why I

remember last month when he....”

Whether or not my friends are surprised is a crucial index of the sort of character I embody. This threefold description is how a virtue ethicist describes the *telos* or goal of human living: doing the right thing for the right reason and having your friends never be surprised.⁶ Implicit in this triple-level account is that the encounter with the tire-iron, odd though it may be, was yet one more action that serves to constitute my character and to extend that character into the future—assuming my survival!

From the vantage of *Christian* virtue ethics, the point is never simply to extend my personal story. Rather, as a Christian I am implicitly committed extending Jesus’ story. And this can happen on two levels, both on the individual level and on the corporate level. The first level can be seen in the first chapter of *Philippians*.

I’ve often been bothered by the fact that Paul seems so unconcerned that the Gospel was being preached in the wrong manner—out of jealousy, strife, selfish ambition, and even with an eye to injuring Paul! (1:15-17) But Paul shrugs, “What then? Only that in every way Christ is proclaimed. And in this I rejoice, and I will rejoice.” (1:18) While it is surely right for Christians to worry about the confusion that may ensue when the Gospel message is parroted by fakers, Paul sees a deeper good in play. What the fakers cannot do to Paul is prevent the extension of the *real* story line. In verse 20, Paul uses the Greek term *megalunō* to

⁶ Ralph McInerny, *Ethica Thomistica*, Rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 90-99.

connote that he wins in either case: “according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be magnified (*megalunō*) in my body, whether by life or by death.” The term is generally translated as “exalt” or “magnify.” But such a rendering leaves unspecified the question, “With respect to *what* will Christ be magnified?” Will Christ be greater in terms of *glory, time, wealth, extension, education, job security*, or what? I suggest a *narrative* magnification fits this context best. The character and plotline of Paul’s life physically *extends* (a legitimate meaning of *megalunō*) the story of Christ in time and space. Paul’s biography recapitulates Christ’s story. On the one hand, some hearers may genuinely convert to follow Jesus *despite* the ill will of the fake preachers. On the other hand, even if there are no converts, the message still comes through loud and clear. Why? Because Christ’s kenotic character is made well known by Paul’s imitation of Christ, namely the unjust suffering that he willingly and joyfully endured (“for the joy set before him...”⁷).

So *Christian* virtue ethics analyzes moral situations relative to the “fit” of its action as measured against the character of Christ revealed in the Gospel narratives. For virtue ethics, the metric is not so much effectiveness as faithfulness to the Gospel. On the first level, faithfulness to the Story has been considered on the individual level.

The second level on which the story of Jesus can be extended resembles the

⁷ Heb. 12:2, [NASB. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture translations are my own.](#)

first, but exceeds it in important ways. Individual agents may approach similarity to aspects of Christ’s character, as we saw in Paul (and which Paul may have learned by witnessing Stephen’s prayer of extravagant forgiveness—in *imitatio Christi*—while being stoned). In addition, a community *as a whole* can be shaped in the pattern of Christ (i.e., “Christomorphic”). Later in the same chapter, Paul urges “Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27). Hiding behind the English translation is a very unique verb. The term *politeuomai* is not about behaving ourselves as much as it is about forming the right kind and manner of *polis* (community). This command is fulfilled at the individual level by individual faithfulness to Christlikeness. Yet the character of the whole community is not simply the summing up of the individual parts, for the community has its own order of reality and character. That character exercises top-down influence on the parts.⁸ It is this level of consideration—the level of “form of life” or “communal character” that can resemble Christ in ways that no individual can. It is together that we achieve “mature man [*andra teleiōn*], to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.”⁹ “It is together that we physically extend (*megalunō*) the Incarnation in the world. It is together that we constitute the “body of Christ” with Christ as our only head. To the extent that churches in the West are stripped down to nothing more than microcosms of (un)civil society, this corporate *telos* is obscured.

⁸ For an accessible account of top-down causation see ch. 6 of Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996).

⁹ Eph. 4:13, NASB.

In short, virtue ethics revolves around the question “What ought we be?” In order to see how we might begin to respond to this kind of question in concrete situations, we must get clear on two terms” (1) Who is the “we”? and (2) What is meant by “ought”?

2. Who is the “we”?

We, that is, human beings, are created animals who do our living in a material world by means of finite material bodies. To be human is to be enfleshed, embodied, incarnate. In this section I will investigate what it means to be a “human moral agent” by attending to the nature of our bodiliness. Although we each, as members of the species *homo sapiens*, presume to have insider knowledge about human agency, I will begin with reminders of what the Incarnation shows us about being be human.

In the first place, bodies matter. The Incarnation was great deal of trouble to undergo if, in the end, bodies don’t really matter. I mean, why didn’t God simply send a philosophical treatise instead of *embodying* the kingdom in a living, breathing, suffering, bleeding, dying human person?¹⁰ Apparently the kingdom could not be embodied without a body. [As 4th-century theologian Gregory of Nazianzus famously put it, “that which \[Christ\] has not assumed He has not](#)

¹⁰ The plural pronoun of Luke 17:21 indicates this translation, “the kingdom of God is among y’all.” Jesus himself stood in their midst as the embodiment of the coming/now here reign of God.

healed.”¹¹ Christ rescued us *entirely*—heart and mind, emotions and will, soul and body—by taking on our humanity in every aspect. Bodies matter, because Christ took on a human body. Moreover, if human bodies were of no import, why bother with resurrection? For not only do we worship a risen Savior who is eternally incarnate, we too are promised eternal life with a body—resurrected, to be sure, but a body nonetheless.

The bodiliness of Jesus’ human existence is pretty plain to see. He got hungry, thirsty and tired. He walked from place to place, and had to sit down from time to time. He wept when his friend died and bled when stabbed with a spear and bruised when pummeled with fists. Of particular interest for us is the fact that Jesus, whose body is fully human, shared with human beings these bodily traits: some of his knowledge was incomplete (his human brain, like ours, only weighed a couple of pounds). He wasn’t born an adult, but as a helpless baby who slowly grew up physically, socially, and mentally.¹² Along the way Jesus formed disposition and habits.¹³ And one of the things he had to learn was obedience. Importantly, the way he learned obedience was through *bodily suffering*.¹⁴ Don’t misunderstand me: Jesus never failed to obey. But he *learned* obedience as a process over time, like we do. He wasn’t ready to go to the cross at age 12 because

¹¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, “To Cledonius the Priest against Apollinarius. (Ep. 101),” ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series 2, Vol 7* (1890), <http://www.ccel.org/print/schaff/npnf207/iv.ii.iii>.

¹² Luke 2:52.

¹³ “As was his custom” Jesus arose early to pray in a lonely place; went to the synagogue; taught the crowds, and so on. E.g., Lk 4:15, 22:39.

¹⁴ Hebrews 5:8, NRSV. “Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.”

at age 12 he was successfully obeying 12-yr-old-sized commands. Not until adulthood was he ready for the ultimate obedience. Until that moment he was still in process, he was still learning. (The author of Hebrews uses the verb for learning that in the noun form means “disciple.”) Perhaps Jesus’ greatest temptation was to resist temptation using divine resources. But he did not. He obeyed perfectly while doing so *humanly*. Jesus opted to learn how to obey by taking the same route we must: by starting with easy tasks and tackling more and more difficult ones as he grew. In this way his body, and our bodies, *learn* obedience. That is part of what Incarnation means. It is the *bodily* aspect of the human condition that will help bring virtue ethics into focus. I’ll explain the irreducibly bodily nature of virtue ethics by stating and defending four claims.

2.1 The quality of any human person’s knowledge is a function of the quality of that person’s habits.

When Luke described Jesus’ custom of praying in the Mount of Olives (22:39), he uses the word *ethos*, the standard Greek word for “habit.” When the vowel is lengthened, the cognate *ēthos* connotes “character.” These two are the etymological sources for the English “ethics.” For the Greeks, one’s character was public. One’s *ēthos* was simply the constellation of all of one’s habits. Moreover, one’s character was also thought to be stable. Although the young could not display firm and unchangeable character, through the tending of one’s habits over a long time, one’s character eventually becomes “steady” (*hexis*). The Greeks were pretty optimistic on this point and perhaps unjustifiably so. Nevertheless, it seems

uncontroversial to claim that there is an ordinary connection between habits and character: the person who acts in a generous manner time and time again is counted on to act with similar generosity the next time too. We call such a character “generous” and thereby know, basically, what to expect from such a person.

The shaping of character takes time. The series of intentional acts that goes into the formation of habits (and eventually character) involves increasing attunement to one’s surroundings. If a repeated action is the beginning of a habit, what is habituated is one’s disposition to take his or her surroundings in a particular way. The world is a vast blooming buzzing confusion. What causes us to notice one aspect rather than another is due, in large part, to previous bodily action. Theologian G. Simon Harak relates a poignant story.

When I was younger, I studied karate for a few years, going three times a week for practice. One day, two fellow students of theology and I decided to go to a movie. Fran was a former Marine sergeant. John was a bright and articulate student. After we had bought our tickets individually, we regrouped in the lobby. “Did you see that guy on the other side of the ticket booth?” Fran asked me. “Yeah,” I replied. “He sure was cruisin’ for a bruisin’, wasn’t he?” “You know,” Fran said, “the look on his face...I was just waiting for him to try something,” and he put his right fist into his left palm. I started to say, “If he made a move on me, I would’ve...” but John interrupted us by saying, “What guy?”

The facts are these: Fran and I saw this young man, and we were ready even to fight with him. John, a bright and alert person, didn’t even perceive him. Why? The key lies in our respective backgrounds. In our history, Fran and I shared a training in violence. It was, significantly, a physical training which disposed us to “take things in a certain way.” Specifically, we were looking for trouble.” And we found it. John, with no

such training, didn't even perceive the "belligerent" young man.¹⁵ To the extent that the previous bodily actions are repeated frequently over a long enough span of time, the training of one's "eyesight"—what he or she is disposed to see—becomes a part of his or her character.

The connection of habits and "moral eyesight" can make sense out of otherwise puzzling biblical texts. The Psalmist insists that

With the loyal you [YHWH] show yourself loyal;
with the blameless you show yourself blameless;
with the pure you show yourself pure;
and *with the crooked you show yourself perverse!*¹⁶

Translators sometimes shy away from translating the Hebrew *patal* as "perverse" or "twisted." But the psalmist is not knocking God, but speaking the truth about the inability of the twisted person to see all things, even God, as anything but twisted. A second puzzling passage comes from the eighth chapter of Mark's Gospel.

As a young Christian I was always a bit sheepish about the healing of the blind man in Mark 8. After all, I reasoned, the Christ I worshipped was fully God as well as fully man, so why couldn't the blind man see on the first try? Why did it take the Son of God a "do over" to get it right? And why did Mark's Jesus seem entirely unconcerned by the initial flop? As I matured I was taught about the crucial importance of reading each pericope in *context*. As I read more widely I discovered that this man wasn't the only person in Mark who couldn't see clearly.

¹⁵ [G. Simon Harak, *Virtuous Passions: The Formation of Christian Character* \(Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993\), 34.](#)

¹⁶ Ps 18:25-26, NRSV. To cite another example, Paul remarks to Titus "To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled" (1:15; NASB).

Mark's Gospel has a "breathless" quality that comes from the presence of "and" (*kai*) at the beginning of nearly every paragraph. So regular is the use of "and" that when it is missing, it signals a sectional break. Mark 8:1 lacks an "and" as does Mark 9:38. This means that Mark 8:1-9:38 is thematically connected as a single section. What is the theme? Blindness! If we move paragraph by paragraph we can notice a recurring pattern.

8:14-17 After cleaning up from the feeding the 4,000 (8:1-10) and arguing briefly with the Pharisees (8:11-13), the disciples are in the boat, having forgotten to take bread along. Jesus begins teaching about the "leaven of the Pharisees," and the disciples misunderstand. Jesus asks, "*Do you not yet see or understand?*" (8:17).

8:15-21 Jesus continues to interrogate the disciples about the previous miracle, ending with "*Do you not yet understand?*"

8:27-33 Jesus and the disciples are walking throughout Caesarea Philippi. The moment after Peter makes his public confession of Jesus as the Messiah, he sticks his foot in his mouth, *not seeing* the possibility crucifixion. Jesus rebukes him: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting-your-mind (*phroneō*) not on divine things but on human things." (8:33)

9:9-13 The disciples are arguing privately because *they couldn't see* what "rising from the dead" could possibly mean.

9:14-29; 30-32 after another miraculous healing, Jesus returns to the topic of his impending death and resurrection. "*But they did not understand* what he was saying and were afraid to ask him." (9:32)

The healing of the blind man (8:22-26) sits in the midst of five other stories of blindness.

Mark's juxtaposition of the disciples' obtuseness with the healing of the blind man makes it clear: *the repair of human moral vision may be a process that takes time*. The timeful changing of how we are disposed to take the world is what I'm calling habit- and character-formation.

Does the relation between the quality of our character and the quality of our knowledge mean that God is prevented from breaking into darkness with divine revelation? Of course not. When that happens we call it “grace.” But the fact that God can break in, and sometimes opts to do so, is poor grounds for ignoring the way that insight and understanding ordinarily develops according to growth in the quality of the knower’s habits and character. In fact, the close connection between repeated actions in the body may help explain why the author of 2 Peter describes the path to fruitful knowledge in stepwise fashion:

Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence,
in your faith supply virtue (*aretē*),
and in your virtue (*aretē*), knowledge,
and in your knowledge, self-control,
and in your self-control, perseverance,
and in your perseverance, godliness,
and in your godliness, brotherly kindness,
and in your brotherly kindness, love.

For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁷

What begins with saving faith is followed not by “knowledge” but by “virtue.” The term “virtue” simply means good habits. (Bad habits were called “vices.”) Although the New Testament avoids general appeal to the concept *aretē* (perhaps to prevent Christians from confusing faithfulness to Jesus with unresolved technical topics in Greek philosophy), that it uses the term here sends a clear message: what is born of faith grows first by virtuous habit (guided, of course, by tutelage of mature others—more on that below). The young disciple’s growth in knowledge and other

¹⁷ 2 Pe 1:5-8, [NASB](#).

desirable traits from this list is dependent upon the formation of good habits.

2.2 Forming habits is biological

God invented habits. We know this because even the lowly flatworm can “learn” to turn right at the end of a T-shaped petri dish if it encounters a saline solution in the left well frequently enough! Habit is simply how animal bodies learn. I emphasize *bodies* here because even for the human animal an enormous percentage of learning happens below the level of neocortex. Throwing a frisbee, tying a necktie, riding a bicycle, recognizing the sound of clarinet, walking upright, dreading the dentist, tying shoes in the dark, knowing that coffee is brewing, and so on endlessly—these are all bits of knowing stored in the body.

Humans share this kind of learning with animals. The difference between us and the animals is that animals form habits under someone else’s direction (or by happenstance) while human beings can form habits intentionally, as an aid toward long-range self-governance. Having a neocortex does not enable human beings to bypass the painful process of bodily learning. Not at all.

Think of how difficult it is to learn to ride a bicycle. Destin Sandlin recently demonstrated how difficult it is to master riding. The experiment posed to him was whether he, an avid biker, could ride a bicycle with oppositely geared handlebars (turn right to go left, and turn left to go right). It sounds simple, but it is not. His neocortex, the part of the brain that reasons abstractly, issued instructions on which way to turn. But his body kept over-ruling him. In fact, he

practiced every day for 8 months until it “clicked.” (Of course, once it did “click, he could no longer ride and ordinary bicycle.) Meanwhile his 6-yr-old son mastered the alternative bike in just two-weeks.¹⁸

Steering a bike is *not* controlled by discursive reasoning processes (also called “theoretical reasoning”) but by bodily know-how.¹⁹ Bodily know-how is a crucial component in “practical reasoning.” By means of practical reasoning we “order our ways aright”²⁰ en route to godliness becoming “second-nature,” fragile though this acquired nature be.

2.3 Humans form habits intentionally

Ordinary people do not give public addresses to large crowds or run marathons in under four hours or willingly slay other humans in battle. But ordinary persons can be trained to do such things. (Whether any of these skills are wise to acquire is another matter.)

The notion of intentional habit formation has a long presence in Christian history. The Hebrew Bible begins with the Torah having set for us to follow a trajectory or right path.²¹ Our role, in response, is to “walk” in this path or way.

¹⁸ The YouTube account is here: <http://viewpure.com/MFzDaBzBllO?ref=bkmk>. See also <https://www.youtube.com/user/destinws2?app=desktop>.

¹⁹ For an introduction to this topic see Gilbert Ryle, “Knowing How and Knowing That: The Presidential Address,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series* 46 (1945): 1-16.

²⁰ Ps 50:23, [NASB](#).

²¹ The Hebrew noun *torah* (ח ד רװ; ת) is related to the verb *yarah* (ח ד רױ) meaning to throw a stone or shoot an arrow. The flight-path of the projectile is said to have a “direction” or *torah*. Consequently, *torah* can have both the prescriptive sense of “law” and descriptive connotation of *moré* or custom.

done and what they actually did.²⁵ The aim of this practice of examination was self-mastery. Stoic asceticism (*askēsis*) was characterized by two actions working in tandem. Since these terms get picked up by New Testament writers, it serves us well to consider them closely.

The first action is *meletaō*. This Greek word sometimes gets translated as “meditation,” but that doesn’t quite express the significance of *meletaō* or its Hebrew counterpart, *hagah* (e.g., Ps 1:2). The English word “meditation” connotes ruminating about something pleasant (a string quartet by Dvořák or the sun setting over a lake) or something timelessly true (say, the conservation of momentum or Fibonacci’s sequence). But the Greeks would have called these examples “contemplation,” which in the case of math and logic, belongs strictly to “theoretical reasoning.” Theoretical reasoning deals with universal and necessary truths, which is to say, truths that can’t be otherwise.²⁶ But the messy world of living systems and interpersonal relationships is not treated so much by theoretical reasoning as by “practical reasoning.”

The last sentence is extremely important one. Insofar as ethics involves human beings, ethics exclusively calls for an exercise of *practical* reasoning, a kind of practical savvy that takes note of contingencies and is never completely sure of results. We can see the predominance of practical reasoning for early Christians

²⁵ I stumbled upon this surprising and insightful history while researching technological ethics. Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

²⁶ If it is raining outside, we can intelligibly say “It might not have been raining.” But we cannot intelligibly say, “It might *not* have been the case that $2 + 2 = 4$.”

simply by surveying New Testament vocabulary. The New Testament never uses *theōria* in the abstract sense (the Greek term for theoretical reasoning). And the kind of knowing associated with theoretical reasoning, *epistēmē*, in which one is certain of having the correct answer (as in the certainty of knowing $2 + 2 = 4$) is likewise absent from the New Testament.²⁷ In sharp contrast, practical reasoning and the attending concepts shows up regularly. The most distinctive of these concepts is the name for the skill acquired when one becomes practically wise: *phronēsis*. This term for practical wisdom goes beyond simple “savvy,” emphasizing the thought processes that go into mulling over a plan always with an eye to taking action. The wise man (*phronimos*) build his house on a rock; Christ-followers are called to be wise (*phronimos*) as serpents, though harmless as doves; the companions to the five female morons (*mōrai*) were five wise young women (*phronimoi*); Peter is rebuked for failing to think (*phroneō*) God’s priorities; Christians can plan-to-act (*phroneō*) regarding either things of the Spirit or things of the flesh; we are adjured to exercise-the-mind (*phroneō*) of Christ, and so on.²⁸

Practical reasoning is the kind of reasoning needed when there cannot be one, clear, right answer “in the back of the book.” It is the mode of reasoning needed for coping with the messy, contingent, highly unpredictable world in which even the most reliable, brand-new machines can bend, break, or melt rather

²⁷ The exception to these absences is the word used to describe the skill, or virtue, of this kind of reasoning; the Greeks called it *sophia*. But biblical authors used *sophia* to distinguish the kind of wisdom that originated from God and that which the worldly philosophers deemed as wise. The NT does not use *sophia* to describe a human trait except by gifting of the Spirit.

²⁸ In order, Mt 7:24, 10:16, 25:2, 16:23; Ro. 8:5-7, Phil 2:2,5.

than work like they “should,”²⁹ the kind of world in which relationships will cool, sour and wither without constant care. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Back to the Stoic form of asceticism that involves two steps. Step one is *meletaō*. For the Stoics, *meletaō* belongs to practical reasoning. It involves thinking about the real world with an eye to acting. For the Stoics, *meletaō*

is composed of memorizing responses and reactivating those memories by placing oneself in a situation where one can imagine how one would react. One judges the reasoning one should use in an imaginary exercise (“Let us suppose...”) in order to test an action or event (for example, “How would I react?”).³⁰

In short, *meletaō* is a kind of imaginative training exercise. One improves one’s future responses by anticipating in advance real situations through mental role-play.³¹ It involves both memorizing a treasury of set responses and then going further by envisioning how one might embellish on a set response to adapt to a never-before-encountered situation.³² Perhaps the ultra-shy person, before venturing out, will rehearse the steps needed for taking the city bus. Since people will likely be encountered, the shy person might arm himself or herself with adequate quips for responding to uninvited interactions, all the more likely if the bus is very late or very crowded.

The Apostle Paul refers to this culturally familiar notion in his first letter to Timothy (1 Tim. 4:13-16). He reminds Timothy to attend to the readings,

²⁹ See ch. 2 of Brad J. Kallenberg, *By Design: Theology, Ethics and the Practice of Engineering* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013).

³⁰ Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” 17.

³¹ Athletes do this sort of mental prep work before competing.

³² Even the most brilliantly witty improv actors spend *hours* memorizing one-liners, humorous character voices, gestures, etc. [see](#) Samuel Wells, “Drama as Improvisation,” in *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 59-70.

exhortations, and teachings. We can imagine that these contain the stock scripts Timothy needs to rehearse (such as “rejoice always” and “pray constantly”). Timothy is told to “*practice (meletaō)* and *inhabit*—live into, ‘be in’—these things.” The result? His progress would be evident to everyone. This result is not a surprise. Virtue ethics expects moral progress to be possible. And insofar as character is public, one’s progress (or lack thereof³³) will be on display for anyone to observe. The link between moral progress and the stock treasury of behavioral scripts is *meletaō*. The present tense imperative mood of both verbs (i.e., both “*meletaō*” and “be in”) indicates a continuous or repeated action. Timothy is to live into Christian teaching by means of the ongoing practice of mental rehearsal called *meletaō*.

The second action word that New Testament writers borrow from Greek culture is *gumnazō*, from which we get the English “gymnastics.” Some prominent Greek voices, such as Aristotle, tended to use *meletaō* as the generic term for training.³⁴ But others, like the Stoics, were more explicit in reminding us that training is *bodily*. As important as mental preparation is, training is incomplete unless bodies are exercised. This exercise included regularized activities like rehearsing dance moves or gymnastic routines. And it also involved more open-ended exercises, such as scrimmages and improv role playing.

The physical side of spiritual-moral training was quickly picked up by the earliest Christians. Recall that Christianity was illegal in the Empire until the

³³ Think of Hymenaeus, Alexander and Philetus; 1 Tim 1:20 and 2 Tim. 2:17.

³⁴ See Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics,” III.5 and VII.10.

fourth century.³⁵ Thus for some 300 years there were unpredictable waves of persecution, some of which were very severe. During this era we read reports of the most eccentric forms of Christianity.³⁶ They practiced sleep deprivation, light deprivation, intentionally poor diet (mixing ashes with their food), semi-starvation (fasts of 2, 3, even 40 days), isolation, and self-inflicted pain (e.g., binding up limbs with leather thongs until the limb went numb; when the straps were released the returning blood supply to the limb was excruciatingly painful). These are certainly strange tales. Most Christians today are embarrassed by these oddballs who claimed to follow Jesus. Today we would quickly refer them for psychiatric treatment and hospitalize them for their own safety. But what if there was method in their madness? What if, given their justifiable expectation of imminent torture at the hands of pagan rulers, these oddballs were *training themselves to endure*?³⁷ The Romans had gotten quite creative in their methods of torture.³⁸ What if the so-called “whacko” Christians were not so whacko after all, but Christians of the utmost seriousness and practical wisdom? Fourth-century church historian Eusebius recounts the tale of one Christian woman who could not be broken.

Blandina was filled with such power that those who tortured her from morning to night grew exhausted and admitted that they were beaten, for they had nothing left to do to her. They were astounded that she was still

³⁵ Christianity became legal around 315 and mandatory around 387 C.E.

³⁶ Eusebius Pamphilus of Caesarea, *The Church History*, ed. Paul L. Maier (1999).

³⁷ Maureen A. Tilley, “The Ascetic Body and the (Un)Making of the World of the Martyr,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LIX, no. 3 (1991): 467-79.

³⁸ Thielemann van Braght, ed. *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians Who Baptized Only Upon Confession of Faith, and Who Died for the Testimony of Jesus, Their Savior, from the Time of Christ to the Year A.D. 1660 Compiled from Various Authentic Chronicles, Memorials, and Testimonies*, 14th ed. (Scottsdale, PA & Kitchener, OH: Herald Press, 1985).

alive, since her whole body was smashed and lacerated, and they claimed that any one of the tortures was enough to end life, let alone a succession of them augmented. But the blessed woman, like a noble athlete, gained in strength while confessing the faith and found comfort in her sufferings by saying, “I am a Christian and nothing wicked happens among us.”³⁹

It was cases like these that turned the tables on paganism. Rather than the torturer breaking the will of the Christian, *the practiced resilience of the Christian broke the torturers.*

Returning to New Testament ethics, we find *gumnazō* applied in Hebrews 5:14, “But solid food is for the mature (*teleiōn*), for those whose faculties (*aisthētrion*) have been fully trained (*hexis*) by bodily exercise (*gymnasia*) to skillfully discern (*diakrisis*) good from evil.”⁴⁰ Two terms indicate that, according to the author of Hebrews, it is bodily exercise that *completes* the formation process. The word *teleiōn* connotes “mature” in the sense that such ones have achieved their purpose or *telos*. In addition, the author uses the word *hexis*, which in Greek culture meant “second nature” or a steady condition of the soul. The upshot of the training was improved discernment.

We don’t need convincing that good and evil are not always easy to tell apart. Although sometimes they can be. The answer to the question “Shall I murder my neighbor?” can be looked up in any number of ethical tables. But we run into difficulty with the murkier cases. Then perhaps we need something more like a “reliable nose.” Today we use terms like “reliable nose,” “good ear,” and

³⁹ Eusebius Pamphilus of Caesarea, “Martyrs in Gaul,” in *The Church History*, ed. Paul L. Maier (1999), 172.

⁴⁰ Translation mine.

“delicate touch,” and “skilled eye” to refer to highly trained surgeons, engineers, musicians, and so on—practitioners who have spent long years honing their skills through physical practice (typically under the tutelage of a master). Likewise in Hebrews 5:14, the word for “perceptive faculties” (*aisthētrion*) refers not to perceptiveness available to anyone, but perception by those who have been fully trained. The doctor reading an X-ray, the musician listening to a performance, the engineer observing a faulty mechanism—these practitioners each perceive things *obvious* to them but lost on the rest of us. Let’s face it, even when the physician tries to show us what the X-ray “clearly shows,” we can’t see anything remarkable at all. But that is because we are unexercised.

We may live in a democracy, but virtue ethics is not democratic. Virtue ethics is a varsity sport. Those who work hardest and respond well to coaching make the most progress and, therefore, get the most playing time.

It is no surprise that the first Christians valued skilled judgment and discernment. What may be surprising is the notion that “a good nose” for telling good from evil is not something one is born with. It is not something that one can simply turn on like a light switch. Rather, skilled judgment is developed by bodily training. But why should Christians find that so surprising? The Incarnation of the Son together with the repeated promises of our bodily resurrection, seem to constitute a pretty strong hint that whatever else the Christian life is, it cannot be anything but bodily. Despite the temptation to think of the mind as the complete controller of the body (a view inherited from Plato), repeated bodily activity has

been shown to change the physical structures in the brain.⁴¹ This recent finding is a game-changer for ethics. All to say: the way of wisdom in ethics need not begin with a speculative theory. Rather, it may begin by bodily training.

This section began with the claim that “humans form habits intentionally.” But now I must clarify whose intention is at work. On the one hand, according virtue ethics, every intentional act is inherently a moral act. There may be *non-intentional* actions, such as when I absent-mindedly scratch my chin. (This class of actions I share with my dog, who also scratches her chin.) But insofar as an act is done intentionally—insofar as I *have* a reason for acting, my action is value laden.⁴² (“Having a reason” is not something I can say of my dog; although she can act *for* a reason, only humans *have* reasons in acting.) But that is not to say that *mine* is the sole intention embodied in the action I carry out. For example, a carpenter’s apprentice may be intending to cut 100 dovetail pins to practice her carpentry skills, but a master carpenter to whom she is apprenticed may have earlier noticed her shoddy dovetails and assigned her the 100 cuts as a training regimen. Her cutting of the 100 pins embodies both her intentions and those of the master who trains her.

The possibility of multiple intentions being realized in a given human act turns ethics into a team sport. But before we can examine the sociality of ethics, I

⁴¹ Jeffrey M. Schwartz, “Neuroanatomical Aspects of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy Response in Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder,” *British Journal of Psychiatry* 173, no. suppl. 35 (1998): 38-44.

⁴² Charles Pinches, “Human Acts Are Moral Acts,” in *Theology and Action: After Theory in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 87-110. Pinches is commenting on St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Christian Classics, 1981), I-II.1.1.

must examine on final, oft-overlooked aspect of the condition in which we find ourselves constrained to live out our ethics.

2.4 Habit formation is opposed by entropy

Habits have staying power, but only up to a point. Their failure is attributed to a stubborn feature of the fallen world. As members of the physical world, human lives are subject to the same conditions that the material world is subject. Chief among these is *entropy*.

Not all energy in a closed system can be harnessed. Some of it will be wasted. The energy that cannot be harnessed is called “free energy.” The rule of physics is this: “free energy always increases.” The increase of free energy is why your coffee grows cool, why engines overheat, why a clean room gets messy, why the guitar goes out of tune, why the wind-up toy winds down and stops. Entropy is the name given to explain why mechanisms may bind, break off or melt; why cars rust; why living things sicken and die. Entropy is the tendency of things to become more random and disordered.

We live in an entropic world. To a large extent, human living is matter of coping with entropy around us. We clean the room, we repair the machine, we re-wind the toy, we lubricate the engine, we tune the guitar, and we reheat our cold coffee. In each instance we are adding energy to the “system” to lessen or postpone the effects of entropy. In our entropy-coping existence we have an ally in the fact that systems are nested. I stand outside the mini-system of the wind-up toy and

can add energy to that system by winding up the toy. The earth as a whole is a macro-system that receives a constant injection of energy from outside itself, from our sun. Without the sun everything on earth would have run down long, long ago. Between the extremes of the mini- and macro-systems is where we do most of our living. At every level of system, we are busy adding energy to combat entropy.

In addition to the gift of sunshine that makes the crops grow without the farmer knowing how,⁴³ entropy is a slow enemy and can be delayed by another phenomenon of creation. Newton tells us that something in motion tends to stay in motion. A moving object “wants to,” and would, stay in motion were it not for the slowdown drag of entropy. Physicists call this tendency “momentum.” One of the ways engineers are trying to store energy in the twenty-first century is by using giant flywheels. These heavy wheels are very, very heavy and very, very difficult to put into motion. But once they get up to speed, they tend to keep spinning. They won’t spin forever (there is no such thing as perpetual motion), because entropy in the form of friction will eventually win the battle and the flywheel will stop. But imagine: if the tiny motors that get the flywheel up to speed were, say, solar powered, then in the nighttime, the flywheel might return the favor by turning turbines to generate electricity until morning.⁴⁴

Since human beings belong to the material world, it is not surprising to learn that there are human analogs to momentum as well as entropy. We know it

⁴³ Mark 4:26.

⁴⁴ Beacon Energy in Stephentown, NY is currently building a 20-megawatt flywheel for energy storage. <http://www.energydigital.com/greentech/1775/Worlds-Largest-Flywheel-Energy-Storage-System>.

is ridiculous to say that “I fell out of love while brushing my teeth!” One might *realize* that love had died during a toothbrushing. But love is like a flywheel; it takes time to get it up to full speed and then has a tendency to continue spinning. This is why break-ups are so painful; the official relationship may be over, but the love flywheel continues to spin, perhaps for a very long time while love winds down. And that slow grinding and winding down hurts.

What we are calling “habits” are on the side of momentum. The fact that we can form habits is an enormous gift from our Creator. We could have all be born stupid flightless birds, like the emu!⁴⁵ Thank God, *we can learn!* Both our bodies and our minds can retain each learned lesson (at least for a while).

But not forever. Entropy in the human world shows itself in the difficulties we face retaining our learning and keeping skills from going rusty. Entropy also affects our relationships. A close friendship that is left untended for weeks on end will slowly cease to be a close friendship. In short, “entropy” names the susceptibility of any given friendship to fall into disrepair. And therefore we must *work* at communicating, for *miscommunication* is just as likely.

In addition to causing friction between friends, entropy also hinders human virtue formation. Obviously, it is far easier to *fall* into a bad habit than it is to *form* a good one. That we use different terms, “fall” vs. “form,” indicates that the playing field is tipped against character development. No, if character is to improve, it will

⁴⁵ A bird trainer once said that the emu was the only bird he had never been able to train. Apparently, the emu’s memory lasts only about 15 minutes. So most of the daily training time is wasted by the emu getting to know the “new” trainer—who had been coming every day for weeks on end!

take a regular, repeated, or even constant injection of energy. And although growth of habit means one will be slightly more disposed to see and act in the habituated way, there are no guarantees. Even the most trenchant habits have a failure rate. In fact, a habit in one set of conditions may not hold firmly if one simply changes context.⁴⁶ As a theologian I might prefer to use the term “sin” to “entropy.” The point is the same whatever the term. Entropy opposes any and every attempt we undertake to do good. But we are assisted by a long list of gifts. Taken together, we call these gifts “God’s grace.” It is grace that we can learn and form habits; it is grace that we are raised by others we learn to call family; it is grace that we received adequate nutrition while our newborn brains were developing; it is grace that we were educated by teachers with sound education.

3. What is meant by “ought”?

No one is born an expert at anything. We each enter human existence as complete and utter novices. Human existence has been going on for millennia, and we, as the tiniest of players, enter the game three years before we are potty-trained. So how do the tiny, untutored players learn what “ought” means? Well, they begin in the way they learn all spoken words, by hearing a term over and over within a particular context, the word’s “home,” so to speak.⁴⁷ We learn what “chair” means by hearing it spoken while we are sitting on, climbing onto, sliding off of,

⁴⁶ Alex Spiegel, “What Vietnam Taught Us About Breaking Bad Habits,” *National Public Radio* (02 Jan 2012). <http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2012/01/02/144431794/what-vietnam-taught-us-about-breaking-bad-habits>.

⁴⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and Rush Rhees, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1953), §116.

stubbing toes on, and losing crayons into chairs. Later we will count, fetch, and stack chairs. We may even reupholster chairs or play musical ones. We learn what “God” means by hearing and saying the word in a host of contexts: praying, thanking, singing, evangelizing, confessing, and so on. Likewise the rudimentary sense of word “ought” (as well as “should,” “must” and the like) is picked up by its association with ordinary daily activities:

“Ouch!...Mom! She hit me!” (Sally, you *shouldn’t* hit your brother.)”

“♪ Everybody *ought* to go to Sunday School, Sunday School, Sunday School....♪”

“Johnny, make your bed! You *have to* make your bed before you go out to play. You *must* make your bed this instant. You *ought to* make your bed every day.”

In simplest terms, words like “should” and “ought” slowly become associated with the form of life in which we are trained to act against our instincts. A child is both malleable and conflicted. At one level it wants to pull the cat’s tail but at another level it learns that this will have bad consequences or disappoint mom (etc.). With repetition, the child somehow transfers the desire to avoid consequences to the desire to no longer do the bad thing.⁴⁸ As the child grows, he or she encounters more nuanced occasions for hearing “ought” and “should,”: “You should keep your knee over the ball when kicking,” and “You’d better clamp that before drilling!” Coaching tips are perceived as weightier when the (young) adult, who has sampled many practices in childhood, settles on a small handful for a lifetime (say, engineering and carpentry, or piano and gardening). The “oughts” learned in the

⁴⁸ This transfer comes much easier to children than to adults. See ch. 1 of Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices*.

context of skill-based practices are simultaneously bound up with notion of “excellence” in the respective practice.

So far so good. We understand that a novice who is incapable of seeing what an expert practitioner sees must be coached by means of heuristics or tips that she or he *can* understand, albeit imperfectly for now but will come to understand it fully in time.⁴⁹ The novice’s devotion to the ongoing task of implementing tips and training regimens is a function both of their love for the practice itself and their trust in the coach.

Once, while out walking my dog past the local tennis courts, I tried an experiment: I offered a sound coaching tip to a perfect stranger who was practicing his serve.⁵⁰ His response? “I’m just messing around; I don’t want to get any better.” Which translated meant, “Mind your own business!” Fair enough! He neither trusted me (why should he?) and perhaps really didn’t care about improving. As a result, there was nothing more for me to say. But let’s suppose that instead of a hack tennis player, we encounter someone who is living badly. And when we offer tips for improvement, the hack-at-living says, “I’m just messing around; I don’t want to live better!” Are we left tongue-tied? Or are we not rather tempted to say, “But you *ought* to want to live better!” Here the word “ought” transcends any locally chosen goals and locally administered tips. One may freely choose to pursue excellence in tennis. If excellence in tennis is the goal, then what [the player](#)

⁴⁹ Billy Vaughn Koen, *Discussion of the Method: Conducting the Engineer’s Approach to Problem Solving* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 26-58.

⁵⁰ My shameless interruption was inspired by Wittgenstein’s illustration in Rush Rhees, “Some Developments in Wittgenstein’s View of Ethics,” in *Discussions of Wittgenstein* (Bristol, UK: Thoemmes Press, 1996), 97.

ought to do is obey tips issued by a qualified coach. But in the case of human living, the purpose or *telos* (i.e., that which human life is *for*) is given, not chosen. (On this theological point all four authors agree.)

We may think we are free to choose a different *telos*; but we'd be mistaken to think so. The human *telos* is not ours for the choosing any more than horses can choose to fly. Sadly, the fact that the human *telos* is not optional does not make discernment of it any easier. Nevertheless, the connection between *telos* and obligation is still fundamental even when we have only a novice's grasp of the *telos*.

Take Wilt Chamberlain for example. The former basketball star reportedly claimed, by his own reckoning, to have slept with over 20,000 different women. I have sometimes asked one half of an ethics class to defend the claim "20,000 is good" and the other half to defend the claim "20,000 is bad." After a lot of embarrassed chuckling, the reasons start to trickle in on both sides. Sooner or later someone in the class thinks to do the math: 20,000 is more than 2.3 women per day. Suddenly the penny drops: Chamberlain's sexual feat entirely displaced the possibility of his maintaining a single long-term intimate relationship.

Chamberlain may have chosen this *telos* freely. But even secular students are apt to feel sorry for Chamberlain because he was mistaken. Why? Because dying without an intimate life partner is *not* what human life is for. So, one aspect of the human *telos* appears to be intimate friendship. Human life is for making and keeping friends, especially a life partner. That much specificity about the human

telos is pretty undisputed (even if we lie along a spectrum about what “intimate life partner” entails).

Virtue ethicists claim that if we had a clear grasp of the *telos*, moral obligation would be straightforward. We know clearly what wristwatches are *for* and therefore, we are crystal clear about how a wristwatch *ought* to perform.⁵¹ But the human *telos* is not so straightforward. In fact, people have been arguing about what is “the Good” or “excellence” for as long as they’ve been able to speak. And note, since we each enter the debate as untutored novices, any single individual’s grasp on the *telos* is going to be affected by the quality of our coaches and our respective moral progress to date. Left to our own devices, serving as one’s own moral coach may well end disastrously. The trouble in Judges—“[all the people](#) did what was right in their own eyes”⁵²—is not a culture of moral relativism but the poor quality of each person’s “eyes.” The untutored human being when presented with the human *telos* cannot see it any more clearly than his or her character allows. The Savior was crucified and raised again to rescue us from, among other things, our poor moral eyesight, to save us from the condition described in Psalm 18, “To the crooked, You appear as twisted.”⁵³

As a first step in naming the human *telos*, virtue ethicists, including Christian virtue ethicists, examine arenas in which the *telos* rises close to the

⁵¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 58.

⁵² [Judges 17:6, 21:25, NRSV.](#)

⁵³ Hopefully it is obvious that humans need much more repair than simple clearing of our moral eyesight!

surface (like we saw above with friendship).⁵⁴ One such arena is Practice.⁵⁵ I'll capitalize "Practice" when I mean any social enterprise by which novices are progressively trained by experts to acquire skills by means of which they can both excel and grow to appreciate the goods all insiders recognize. Examples of formative Practices include medicine, engineering, carpentry, music, and so on. Many Practices are the means by which human beings have come to cope with the contingent, entropic world.⁵⁶ Such Practices are valued by the rest of us for their usefulness to society. But practitioners themselves value the Practice for goods that only an insider can appreciate. (Why else would someone play triple-A baseball, or take a degree in theater, or become a theologian?! Not for the wages!)

Taken together all the Practices constitute the warp and weft of life in community. We cannot all be doctors, but some of us had better be doctors. We cannot all be musicians, but some of us had better be or we as a community will fall short of achieving the human Good. So goes Aristotle's argument in Book One of *Nicomachaen Ethics*. And the *telos* he thinks we're questing for? Aristotle is a bit vague, but at the level of common life he describes the *telos* as *eudaimonia*, which literally means "good spirit" (perhaps as in, "there's a sweet, sweet spirit in this

⁵⁴ Brad J. Kallenberg, "The Master Argument of MacIntyre's *after Virtue*," in *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre*, ed. Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Thiessen Nation (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 7-29.

⁵⁵ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3d ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 187. See also Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Thiessen Nation, eds., *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre*, reprint ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003, repr.).

⁵⁶ The twelfth-century theologian Hugh of St. Victor is the first to see engineering, "*ars mechanicus*," as part of the gracious, redemptive plan of God. For an account of Hugh's *Didascalicon* see ch. 10 of Kallenberg, *By Design: Theology, Ethics and the Practice of Engineering*.

place”) or, as it is more commonly translated, “well-being.” At the level of the individual, the human *telos* with respect to Practice is simply to excel at the Practice(s). That description remains equally vague since, as we know, understanding of the standards of excellence within a Practice can only be as deep as the novice has progressed in the respective training regimen.

A second arena in which *telos* comes close to the surface is “tradition.”⁵⁷ By “tradition” I mean to borrow Alasdair MacIntyre’s notion of a group of people who exist across time and are identified by their ongoing (sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit) discussion about what “the Good” is. When the argument breaks the surface into explicit discussion, it is necessarily carried on in a particular conceptual language.⁵⁸ What is the chief *telos* of being human? “To glorify God and enjoy Him forever” says the Westminster Confession. The conceptual language all Christians share is a product both of our adherence to narratives (see below) and our engagement in Practices that are distinctive to living out the Gospel together. Our Christian tradition had its inception at Pentecost, when a group of people were animated by God’s Spirit to rally around authoritative voices and texts (Peter’s sermon, Paul’s letters, the Evangelists’ Gospels, the Hebrew Bible, etc.). These voices and texts launched a conversation in

⁵⁷ MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 222. MacIntyre expands this definition beginning on p. 12 of the second volume in his trilogy, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

⁵⁸ For the clearest explanation I can muster concerning the relation of “tradition” to ethics see Brad J. Kallenberg, “Tradition-Based Rationality,” *The Colossians Forum Glossary* (25 July 2012). <http://www.colossianforum.org/2012/07/24/glossary-tradition-based-rationality/>.

a peculiar Christian dialect.⁵⁹ To say the same thing differently, we as Christians cope with our environment in distinctive ways, both in our manner of speaking and by our manner of doing. We might say that the Christian tradition (in MacIntyre's sense) is about a particular pattern of communal living, one dominated by the Practices of witness, worship, works of mercy, discipleship and (Spirit-directed) discernment⁶⁰ as well as distinctive manner in executing all Practices (for example, *charity hospitals*).⁶¹ Of course, what the phrase "distinctive manner" actually means when applied to this or that Practice is something we as novices must suffer to learn progressively, as we are coached by those who've been in the game longer than we.⁶² Perhaps the most we can say is that our life together, the confluence of all these Practices, ought to be shaped like Jesus. (More on this below.) Rephrased in terms of "tradition" the *telos* of human life is faithfully to extend the ongoing discussion about the Good by becoming conversant in the language called Christian and by means of assiduous participation in identity-constituting Practices.

⁵⁹ It is a common phenomenon that any group that exercises practical reasoning together will quickly develop their own conceptual language. For an account of this among design engineers see Louis L. Bucciarelli, "Designing, Like Language, Is a Social Process," in *Engineering Philosophy* (Delft, Netherlands: DUP Satellite (Delft University Press), 2003), 9-22. For an account of the linguistic character of Christianity, see Herbert McCabe, *Law, Love and Language* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

⁶⁰ Nancey Murphy, "Using MacIntyre's Method in Christian Ethics," in *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre*, ed. Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Thiessen Nation (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003, repr.), 30-44.

⁶¹ Andrew T. Crislip, *From Monastery to Hospital: Christian Monasticism & the Transformation of Health Care in Late Antiquity* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

⁶² And, of course, sometimes coaching goes awry and the Practice becomes deformed. Such is the fragile nature of both the world and our virtues.

The third arena, just as nuanced and involved as Practice and tradition, is “narrative.” Parents use narrative, or story, to raise their children (think of “Honest Abe,” “The Good Samaritan,” and so on) because human beings live story-shaped lives and it is only by means of stories that children learn how to tell what “fits” and what doesn’t “fit.” This claim is a mouthful. I mean to say that ethics can’t do without stories. Truth be told, even the “nothing-but-the-facts” scientist cannot get along without stories! Consider: the formula “ $F = m \cdot a$ ” is *not* obvious as a standalone expression. A novice might conclude that the force of love is found by multiplying the mass of an elephant by the acceleration of the economy. These misapplications are only “obvious” to those who have been trained to understand which force, which mass, and which acceleration are relevant. How was this highly specific skill of similarity recognition cultivated? Story problems; *tons* of story problems. As in physics, so too in theology. The divinely revealed name, “YHWH Yireh” (roughly, “the LORD provides”) is but a “law-sketch” that calls to mind the much longer tale of Abraham that culminates in the episode of Genesis 22.

The stories or narratives Christians cling to are not all of equal weight. We learn to consider some texts “canonical” insofar as these are the ones we live by. The *telos* of human living according to the narrative slice of virtue ethics, then, is “to live faithfully to the right stories.” But again, which stories trump which others for priority, and what manner of following makes for faithfulness is something into which novices must be trained.

To recap: Virtue ethics is inconceivable apart from close attention to the human condition. We each begin life naked and untutored and inarticulate. To become fully human requires much training. Since we cannot train ourselves, we are—especially initially—at the mercy of those who surround us and who give us tips for going on in the right way. If all goes well, we get a jump start into the habit-formation process. Whether we form the “right” habits—aka virtues—is uncertain, since our entire community is battered by a world that is entropic on both the material and social level. And rather than conclude that each must “do what he or she *can*,” as the saying goes, virtue ethicists must say rather that each is constrained to “do as he or she is *inclined*,” for each will do what he or she sees as “fitting” insofar as his or her inclinations have been previously formed by involvement as practitioners in Practices, as voices in our tradition, and as living characters in canonical narratives.

Everything in the former paragraph holds also for *Christian* virtue ethics...except for the parts that are entirely different! Aristotle recognized humility as a habit, but disdained it as a nasty habit. For followers of Jesus, humility is not a vice, but a virtue of the highest order. What parts are the same and which ones differ is a matter for training. For those who are in Christ, “it is a whole new world.”⁶³ And we can only act—virtuously or viciously—in the world we can see.⁶⁴

⁶³ This is a more literal rendering of 2 Cor 5:17 and was a favorite emphasis of my own first and best ethics teacher, James Wm. McClendon.

⁶⁴ Duke ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas, frequently repeated this dictum of Iris Murdoch’s after

4. Application

For virtue ethics, there is no such thing as an ethical problem “in general.”

Even recognizing relevant similarities between a new problem and one previously dealt with can be tricky, despite being armed with the thickest of descriptions. No; every ethical problem is unique, because each one is situated in a particular, never-to-be-repeated context. Consequently, I’m tempted to stop writing now. But I hope one final illustration will make clear the primary lens through which virtue ethicists view every ethical problem in particular. Before we can ask “What ought so-and-so do?” we must first ask, “What sort of people ought we be?”⁶⁵

I worry about technology. I worry about the ways technology alters our form of life. And I worry that this alteration warps the kind of community Christians ought to be. The 1789 version of the *Book of Common Prayer* contains a “Morning Prayer” that thanks God “especially for having delivered us from the

first [referring to](#) it in Stanley Hauerwas, “The Significance of Vision: Toward an Aesthetic Ethic,” in *Vision and Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publishers 1974; repr., Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972/1981), 30-47. [Original citation from Murdoch is](#) Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 35-36. [Other Hauerwas uses are](#) Stanley Hauerwas, “The Demands of a Truthful Story: Ethics and the Pastoral Task,” *Chicago Studies* 21, no. 1 (1982): 65-66. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Where Resident Aliens Live: Exercises for Christian Practice* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 59. [And see](#) Stanley Hauerwas, with James Fodor, “Murdochian Muddles: Can We Get through Them If God Does Not Exist?,” in *Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 155-70.

⁶⁵ When analyzing the issue of abortion, Hauerwas proclaims that the parable of Mt 25 requires Christians to be on the side of both the unborn child and on the side of the single, unwed mother-to-be, because both the child and the mother are “the least of these.” Hauerwas then proceeds to ask, “what kind of community must we be to become capable of supporting both unborn children and outcast mothers? Stanley Hauerwas, “Abortion Theologically Understood,” in *Virtue and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre*, ed. Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Thiessen Nation (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003, repr.), 221-38. See also *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

dangers of the past night.”⁶⁶ The words strike us as odd. Why does the prayer sound a bit childish to us? Think about it: *We* do not give thanks with such intensity because we did not fall asleep terrified of the darkness. Why not? Because *we have electric lights*. Has the electric light forever altered the fervor of prayer? Quite possibly. We may never know that former fervor, because those who lived prior to electrification (ca. 1860s) are no longer around to tell us what it was like.

Electricity has become deeply embedded in our contemporary form of life. “Embeddedness” is one mark that qualifies a technology as *politically* successful. Historian of technology John Staudenmaier observes that some technologies count as successful simply because they work well. Glide[®] Dental Floss is one such product. Yet if all the dental floss in the land popped out of existence tonight at midnight...no one would notice! That is because dental floss, as well as it works, has not become successful in the sense that it fundamentally shapes our community, our *polis*. By contrast consider asphalt. Asphalt works reasonably well, although it is ever in need of repair. But if all the asphalt in the land popped out of existence at midnight, life would screech to a halt—the loss of truckways, parking lots, suburban roads, airplane tarmacs, and so on, would shut down shipment of food, medical supplies, mail, building supplies, *ad infinitum*. Asphalt is “politically”

⁶⁶ n.a., “Morning Prayer,” in *The Book of Common Prayer, and Administration of the Sacraments, and Other Rites and Ceremonies, as Revised and Proposed to the Use of the Protestant Episcopal Church, at a Convention of the Said Church in the States of New-York, New Jrrsey [Sic], Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and South-Carolina, Held in Philadelphia, from September 27th to October 7th, 1785*, ed. Episcopal Church (London: re-printed for J. Debrett, opposite Burlington House, Piccadilly, 1789).

successful because it has become deeply embedded in our corporate life.⁶⁷ We could not live for long without it. So too for electricity, the automobile, and indoor plumbing. And so too for the smartphone.

That the smartphone is ethically troubling can be seen from any number of angles. There is systemic injustice at the level of the device: the technology is completely dependent upon “conflict minerals,” such as tantalum. In the Congo, tantalum is being mined under great duress and sold to developed nations, the proceeds of which sales fund treacherous civil wars and genocide campaigns.⁶⁸ The devices are assembled by economic slaves, typically somewhere in Asia, whose working conditions are so poor that managers at one plant had safety nets installed outside worker dormitories to prevent suicidal workers from succeeding in jumping to their deaths.⁶⁹ Social media such as Facebook is kept attractive by relentless “content moderation.” A team of over 100,000 work around the clock *in real time* preventing offensive posts (like footage of actual beheadings).⁷⁰ The two billion smartphones in operation today depend upon massive data storage infrastructure, euphemistically called “The Cloud.” Actually “The Cloud” is an enormous fleet of warehouses in remote locations each burning as much energy as

⁶⁷ John M. Staudenmaier, SJ, “The Politics of Successful Technologies,” in *In Context: History and the History of Technology; Essays in Honor of Melvin Kranzberg*, ed. Stephen H. Sutcliffe and Robert C. Post (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1989), 150-71.

⁶⁸ See, e.g., Jessica Benko, “Making and Unmaking the Digital World,” *The New York Times* (5 June 2015). <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/making-and-unmaking-the-digital-world.html?src=xps>.

⁶⁹ See, e.g., Charles Duhigg, David Barboza, and with Gu Huin, “The Ieconomy; in China, the Human Costs That Are Built into an Ipad,” *ibid.* (26 Jan 2012). <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C02E2D71438F935A15752CoA9649D8B63>.

⁷⁰ See, e.g., Adrian Chen, “The Laborers Who Keep Dick Pics and Beheadings out of Your Facebook Feed,” *Wired* (23 Oct 2014). <http://www.wired.com/2014/10/content-moderation/>.

a small town.⁷¹

The above facts are startling enough to give ethicists of any stripe grounds for objecting to the use of smartphones as morally tainted. But as a virtue ethicist I am also deeply worried about the change to our corporate form of life that social media is precipitating as the smartphone becomes “politically” successful in Staudenmaier’s sense. For example, studies are beginning to show that our attention span related to words is shrinking. (This news can’t help but be troubling for “people of the Book.”) Young adults can easily absorb a four-hour film without any flagging of energy. But those same persons cannot read printed text for four hours much less listen with comprehension to four hours of audio lecture. Of course, who would be dumb enough to attempt to deliver a four-hour *audio* lecture! Umm...his name was Abe Lincoln. When Stephen A. Douglas debated Lincoln in Peoria, IL, neither was a candidate for major office like U.S. Senate or President. They were both ordinary citizens debating ordinary issues on an ordinary stage. Douglas spoke uninterrupted for *three hours*. Lincoln’s reply—amicably postponed until after dinner, was *four hours* long. No pictures, no sloganeering, just seven hours of highly nuanced debate that presumed the listeners not only had familiarity with historical precedents but also could handle “irony, paradox, elaborate metaphors, fine distinctions, and the exposure of

⁷¹ See, e.g., James Glanz, “Data Centers Waste Vast Amounts of Energy, Belying Industry Image,” *The New York Times* (22 Sept 2012). <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/23/technology/data-centers-waste-vast-amounts-of-energy-belying-industry-image.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.

contradiction.”⁷² The audience who could listen with comprehension was comprised of *ordinary* folk, bankers, housewives, farmers, and delivery boys. But that was 1854.

I’m unsure whether the dropping attention spans of (some? most? all?) individuals counts as a distortion of our form of life. So let me try to make the case from a different vantage point. I claim that social media has become embedded in the same manner the automobile has, namely by making us a covetous people.

It is common knowledge that Henry Ford’s assembly line revolutionized manufacturing. Before Ford, manufacturing was done on a small scale by craftsmen and their guild. Since Ford, it is all assembly line all the time: relatively unskilled laborers work like mad to join together pieces previously machined to spec.⁷³ What is less commonly known is that a second revolution was precipitated a decade later by Ford’s competitor at General Motors: Alfred Sloan. Ford may have changed the process, but Sloan changed the *telos* of manufacturing. Previously the purpose of making cars was the car itself. But for Sloan, the “primary object” was “not just to make cars” but “to make money.”⁷⁴ Ford changed industry, but Sloan succeeded in changing our whole culture. Instead of purchasing an artifact out of need—as my grandparents did—my parents’ generation learned to purchase out of sheer desire. Historian Emma Rothchild

⁷² Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 47.

⁷³ Merritt Roe Smith, “Army Ordnance and the ‘American System’ of Manufacturing, 1815-1861,” in *Military Enterprise and Technological Change: Perspectives on the American Experience*, ed. Merritt Roe Smith (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 39-86.

⁷⁴ Emma Rothchild, *Paradise Lost: The Decline of the Auto-Industrial Age* (New York: Random House, 1973), 38.

explains:

Sloan's idea for upgrading consumer preferences was that automobiles should change each year, and should each year become more expensive (at least relative to the cost of production). The rate at which people trade in their old cars would grow. Each year, the new-model cars would have more improvements added on, different engines, different styling, different comfort features. Cars of the same shape and size, made from the same basic metal parts, could be sold with different equipment, at different prices....Sloan wrote that "It is perfectly possible, from the engineering and manufacturing standpoint, to make two cars at not a great difference in price and weight, but considerably different in appearance."⁷⁵

Sloan's strategy became known as "turnover buying," and the entirety of Western culture embraced it. You'll have to forgive my jaundiced eye: my grandma taught my mother how to darn socks so that they'd last forever! Yet when my socks seem even a touch saggy, the nice man in the brown truck delivers a bag from Amazon to my front door! How long are socks *supposed* to last? How long do cars last? How long do smartphones last? The turnover time of the smartphone is now *less than three years*.

Every three years we are suckered into desiring a new version of a device that pretty much does what the last one did, only costs more.⁷⁶ Seems like Sloan won that ideological battle. But our coveting isn't bounded by lust for the device itself, whether it is the iPhone6, or the iPhone 643. "Free" apps like Facebook profitably sell advertising that pops up constantly on smartphone displays. While some users pat themselves on the back for resisting the lure of pop-up ads, the truth is, if pop-up ads didn't produce revenue across the targeted population,

⁷⁵ Ibid., 38-39.

⁷⁶ Sendhil Mullainathan, "Hold the Phone: A Big-Data Conundrum," *The New York Times* (26 July 2014). <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/27/upshot/hold-the-phone-a-big-data-conundrum.html?src=xps&abt=0002&abg=0>.

there'd be no more pop-up ads. And no more pop-up ads would mean no more Facebook.

St. Isaac of Nineveh, a desert father from the seventh century CE, advised younger disciples to be wary: “the *sight* of [worldly] things, their splendor and existence kindles in [our body] a desire for them.”⁷⁷ So long as these things are kept at a distance, continues Isaac, they will cause us little strife. But if worldly things are near, our affections resonate with a “strong power...to weaken the [Christian] strugglers and turn aside their mind.”⁷⁸ Smartphone users carry all the pleasures of the world in the palm of their hands. Is this wise? And to make matters worse, each phone is colluding with giant algorithms that conspire together to send automatically especially those ads that pique this user's lusts. Again Sloan wins; we lose.

Many readers will surely be surprised by grisly details about smartphones of which they were unaware. There is a kind of bliss, isn't there, in remaining unaware—when one does not know, one does not “see.” When one cannot “see,” one cannot act. Prior to reading the last few pages, the smartphone did not stand out glaringly as an ethical minefield, but blended seamlessly with the rest of our busy lives. In fact, we purchase smartphone family plans and congratulate ourselves for having done our children a “good” turn.

In addition to arguing that virtue ethics is concerned about what we can

⁷⁷ Isaac of Nineveh, *Mystical Treatises (Ascetical Homilies)*, trans. Translated from Bedjan's Syriac Text with an introduction and registers by A. J. Wensinck (Amsterdam: n.p., 1939), 158.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 159.

and cannot “see,” I also argued above that the forming of habits is a simple fact of biology. When we do not form habits intentionally, they are formed for us. A recent study of 18-24-yr-olds found that 5% (one in 20) check their smartphones *once every minute*. The average wait time between cold checks is a mere ten minutes. Theologian and ethicist Jeff Vogel suggests we may willingly be colluding with the habit of frequent checking because we live lives “in pursuit of interruption.” We want “something—anything—to happen.” And with a smartphone we can generate our own interruption. Thus we acquire the habit of holding ourselves in the state of perpetual readiness to be distracted.⁷⁹

Of course, not all of our habits are fallen into. I’ve also argued that human beings are built to form habits *intentionally*. The earliest Christians deliberately imitated Christ (2 Pe 2:21), imitated Paul (1 Cor 11:11), imitated Paul’s disciple Timothy (2 Tim 2:2), imitated faithful leaders, (Heb 13:7), imitated other congregations (1 Thess 2:14), and so on with each successive generation. By the fourth century, Athanasius wrote about the imitation principle this way:

One cannot possibly understand the teaching of the saints unless one has a pure mind and is trying to imitate their life....anyone who wishes to understand the mind of the sacred writers must first cleanse his own life, and approach the saints *by copying their deeds*.⁸⁰

If the chain of Christians-imitating-Christians can provide us with any tips it would be this: Chief among the body-shaping activities that can counter covetousness is “fasting.” Although serious fasting is not in vogue today, it once was. When fasting had been practiced by Christians for nearly a

⁷⁹ Jeff Vogel, “Manufactured Disruption: Why We Keep Checking Our Phones,” *Christian Century* (24 June 2015): 11-12.

⁸⁰ St. Athanasius, *The Incarnation of the Word of God : Being the Treatise of St. Athanasius, De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, trans. Newly translated into English by a religious of C.S.M.V. With an introd. by C.S. Lewis (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 96 (IX§57).

millennium, it was “known to every one” that fasting “is the fountain of all good.” Indeed, it was common knowledge that fasting was the “strengthening of all the virtues” and is in itself “beautiful,” since fasting “naturally excites vigilance unto God.”⁸¹

The kind of fasting of which our forebears spoke is not to be confused with skipping desserts or foregoing foods we deem yucky anyway. Fasting is the regular, surrender of what we need to live. Food obviously fits. But what about the smartphone? Perhaps smartphone use fits this category too. (Then again, perhaps one cannot know until one tries to give it up.)

I find myself secretly hoping that the seventh-century theologian Isaac of Nineveh is exaggerating: “For fasting is a storehouse of all virtues. And he that despises it, makes all virtues totter.”⁸² I, for one, would rather face the day with “a full tank” than with hunger gnawing around the edges. So I consult another of the church fathers and find that Augustine of Hippo agrees with Isaac of Nineveh: “in this world we ought *not* to love fullness.”⁸³ What am I to do? When my ‘druthers goes head to head with the church fathers, whose ‘druthers should I trust? It depends: who am I? Of which people am I a member? And what sort of people ought we to be?

⁸¹ Isaac of Ninevah, *Mystical Treatises (Ascetical Homilies)*, 160-61.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 161.

⁸³ St. Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe, Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers (First Series). Volume VIII (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 259.

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