

Virtue Ethics: Building Disciples with Character - Part 2

Christians have no sense of “ownership” on virtues and virtue ethics.

When Paul penned his message to the Galatians, he was aware that four centuries earlier the Greek philosopher Aristotle had emphasized the importance of virtues.

Aristotle distinguished between intellectual virtues (traits that help us to think and reason well) and moral virtues (qualities that help us to live and act well in community).

Virtues required practice, Aristotle taught, they could not simply be learned in an academy. He introduced the relationship between virtues and the discovery of one’s purpose as a human.

The virtues were important for the fulfillment of one’s personal mission or “telos.” Happiness was the product of the coherence of practice and purpose.

The influence of Aristotle continues to shape current debates about the nature of a moral life.

Earlier than Aristotle, Confucius had lived and taught in China (561 to 479 BC). Confucius also rejected an approach to morality based on rules and regulations. He believed that people of good character would automatically exemplify good behavior.

He emphasized two main virtues that continue to shape Chinese culture. “Jen” represents compassion or humaneness. “Li” stands for good manners and decorum.

Discussions of ethics and faith in modern China inevitably make reference to the ongoing influence of Confucius.

These two historical figures remind us of the importance of recognizing other perspectives on virtue and of the need to enter into dialogue with people who are sincere in their desire to be people of integrity.

Awareness of virtue ethics from different cultures and time periods reveals that:

1. Virtues are contextual.

It is in a particular context with its personalities and social tensions that certain virtues become important for the individual and the broader community.

To return to the example of St. Francis, referenced in [part 1](#), the decision to make a virtue of poverty would have made no sense in a social setting of widespread deprivation and hunger.

2. Virtues are role dependent.

The virtues required of a teacher in Malawi will have important differences from the virtues of a firefighter in Toronto. The virtues demanded of aid workers in a time of famine will have some significant differences from those of a respected bank manager in New York.

There is room to debate the possibility that there are gender differences in assigning priority to certain virtues.

3. Virtues are influenced by culture.

For example, precision with time is a virtue in Switzerland. It is not valued as highly in parts of Africa. Cross-cultural and international workers need to be attentive to different moral codes that emphasize distinct sets of virtues.

4. Virtues are not learned in a classroom or by reading a book.

As Aristotle taught, the development of a virtuous life requires years of practice. Virtues become personal traits only through a long road of dedication in which there inevitably will be moments of testing, personal failure and success through stubborn endurance.

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Editor's note: This is the second of a three-part series. Part 1 is available [here](#). Part 3 is available [here](#).