

VIRTUE ETHICS AND ITS SUITABILITY FOR ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY

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Virtue has once again become a central concern of ethicists. The recent interest in recovering theories of virtue has been traced to an article published by G.E.M. Anscombe. Anscombe's ground-breaking claim was that the recent modes of doing ethics should be abandoned and replaced by virtue as the central concern of ethics. "In the wake of Anscomb's article a flood of books and essays appeared discussing the virtues, and 'virtue theory' soon became a major option in contemporary moral philosophy."¹ The dissatisfaction with contemporary ethics among philosophers was soon to be found among theologians. Gilbert Meilaender, a Lutheran ethicist, writes: "All around us are signs, if not of a revival in being virtuous, at least of a new interest in a theory of the virtues."² Meilaender claims that the widespread dissatisfaction with contemporary ethics seems centered in its "understanding of the moral life which focuses primarily on duties, obligations, troubling moral dilemmas, and borderline cases."³ Meilaender maintains that a turn to virtue would encourage other considerations and a new understanding of ethics. For an ethic of virtue,

Being not doing takes center stage; for what we ought to do may depend on the sort of person we are. What duties we perceive may depend upon what virtues shape our vision of the world.⁴

1 James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 2d ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1986), 161

2 Gilbert C. Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 1

3 *Ibid*, 4-5

4 *Ibid*, 5

Paul Wadell, a Catholic ethicist, summarizes the sense of the inadequacy of recent ethics and the attraction of virtue ethics for theologians with these words:

When we survey the literature today what we too often discover is not something to guide and instruct us, but an approach that does not go deep enough. What is missing is any normative sense of what being human entails. This is why we feel ethics so often misses the mark. We know morality involves becoming a certain kind of person. We know it entails a transformation of the self through habits and practices that work changes necessary for goodness. As Christians, we know the moral life is the spiritual life, the religious-sacramental life we have with God, a studied ongoing attempt to establish ourselves God's friends.⁵

Almost all of the desired features described above by Wadell were already in place as early as 1965 in a work by the Jewish theologian Abraham J. Heschel. Heschel published, in very few pages, a complete outline of what is, effectively, a virtue ethic in the book *Who Is Man?* Heschel establishes the "ought" that propels his ethic in the distinction and discontinuity between mere "human being" and the more of striving after "being human." There is to be found a logic, a practical reason, disclosed as one strives after being fully human. Heschel maintains that the proper categories to describe humanity must be practiced and, thereby, attained. Heschel insists that "to be human we must know what human being means, how to acquire, how to preserve it."⁶ These are all questions of virtue: who we are, where we are going, and how to get there.⁷

5 Paul J Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 12

6 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1965), 29

7 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed., (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 205, notes that "the unity of virtue in someone's life is intelligible only as a characteristic of a unitary life, a life that can be conceived as a whole."

Heschel's answer to how one might acquire and maintain the ought of "being human" are a number of sensibilities. Heschel maintains that "these features or sensibilities are no disparate trifles, random impressions, arbitrarily registered, but rather necessary components which constitute the essence of being human."⁸ These are skills peculiar to the *telos* of humanity "within which man must be understood in his being human as distinguished from being animal, from being beastly."⁹

Some of these "features" of authentic human existence are preciousness, uniqueness, opportunity, and nonfinality. All of these modes are what we ought to be, but they must be acquired. Heschel writes:

It is a fatal illusion to assume that to be human is a fact given with human being rather than a goal and an achievement. To animals the world is what it is; to man this is a world in the making, and being human means being on the way, striving, waiting, hoping.¹⁰

These "virtues" are not acquired in solitude, according to Heschel: "Man alone is a conceit."¹¹ Community is absolutely necessary, as are models of wisdom. Heschel notes that one "always looks for a model or an example to follow."¹² For Heschel, as with Meilaender, "what determines one's being human is the image one adopts."¹³

Heschel summarizes his ethics by insisting that all of this points toward character education. "Life is clay, and character is form."¹⁴ "Right living," Heschel insists, "is like a work of art, the product of a vision and of a wrestling."¹⁵ This striving after the characteristics that allow right living will take place, necessarily, within a community of tradition, because, Heschel writes, "the

8 Heschel, *Who is Man?*, 31.

9 *Ibid.*, 31-32.

10 *Ibid.*, 41.

11 *Ibid.*, 45.

12 *Ibid.*, 8.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*, 99.

15 *Ibid.*

authentic individual is neither an end nor a beginning but a link between the ages, both memory and expectation.”¹⁶

Heschel might be described as but another philosopher of being as long as he seems to be describing being *qua* being, but his point is that having an “ought” at the center of being human indicates a prior requiredness. This is theology: “Theology asks about being as creation.”¹⁷ We strive, according to Heschel, after being human because there is a goal that comes with creation before the fact of being. Virtue is, then, a response to God’s searching. Striving is inherent in Heschel’s ethic, because God is in search of humanity.

Not unlike more recent virtue theorists,¹⁸ Heschel holds that the problem is that “modern thinking has often lost its way by separating the problem of truth from the problem of living, cognition from man’s total situation.”¹⁹ What would Heschel substitute for the confusion? He maintains that “the decisive form of human being is *human living*. Thus the proper theme for the study of man is the problem of living.”²⁰ The confusion of contemporary morality stems, according to Heschel, from the attempt to derive “ought” from “is.” Heschel claims:

Against the conception of the world as something just here, the Bible insists that the world is creation. Over all being stand the words: Let there be! And there was, and there is. To be is to obey the commandment of creation. God’s word is at stake in being. There is a cosmic piety in sheer being. What is endures as a response to a command. Philosophically the primacy of creation over being means that the “ought” precedes the “is.” The order of things goes back to an “order” of God.²¹

¹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 71

¹⁸ It is my suggestion that Heschel be considered a virtue ethicist. To my knowledge, no one has ever so identified Heschel.

¹⁹ *Who Is Man?*, 94

²⁰ *Ibid*, 95

²¹ *Ibid*, 97

This insistence that an “ought” precedes any grasp of what “is” is also central to the thought of Alasdair MacIntyre, arguably the most influential theorist in the recent revival of virtue ethics.²² What we ought to become has to do with gaining virtues appropriate to a given end. MacIntyre—not unlike Heschel—thinks that the moral disarray of our age is due to the absence of a shared telos that would point to what ought to be. What modernity does have is a collection of ethical fragments of what remains to us after the traditions of virtue have been abandoned. It is MacIntyre’s argument that after the traditions of virtue were rejected, “the language of morality passed from a state of order to a state of disorder.”²³

While the text *After Virtue* is MacIntyre’s most often quoted book, he has held and traced an identifiable position since at least the 1966 publication of a history of ethics. The last chapter of that work laments that modern moral philosophy begins with the assertion of G.E. Moore that ethicists have heretofore simply been mistaken. It is Moore’s claim that prior ethicists have been confused about good, i.e., that earlier thinkers supposed there to be some natural property termed “good”—which is, of course, Moore’s famous “naturalistic fallacy.” Here can be found, according to MacIntyre, the seeds of emotivism. Emotivism, as explained by MacIntyre, is the position “that the only authority which moral views possess is that which we as individual agents give to them.”²⁴

In contrast to a moral landscape made up of isolated individu-

22 An oft-rehearsed argument stemming from David Hume to G.E. Moore has been understood to conclude that the move from any fact to what ought to be is a fundamental mistake, a fallacy. The pertinent texts are David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* published in 1739, especially Book III, Part 1, which was added in 1740, and G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903). In each of MacIntyre’s major works there is a significant section devoted to the question of the relationship of “ought” to “what is.” One should be willing, in any case, to grant MacIntyre that from a classical context “ought signified the presence of storable reasons that transcended personal preferences,” according to Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel: The Language of Morals and Their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 204.

23 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 11.

24 Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: Collier Books, 1966), 264.

als, maintaining incommensurable emotivist stances, MacIntyre would have us recover an ethics of virtue.²⁵ Such a recovery would entail that a community agree on its end or telos. The characteristic *telos* would entail virtues, skills, or excellences that would allow progress toward that end. All of which would have an institutionalized form that would shelter and preserve the structures of virtue. In a reversal of the usual and expected criticism, MacIntyre maintains that in such a community of virtue not only is moral criticism possible, but that in no other sort of community is there an established moral vocabulary that would allow for criticism of the sort that might allow for resolution. MacIntyre's position is that the interminable arguments of modernity are not simply because of profound differences, but because we have no common tradition that might adjudicate differences of interpretation.

In place of a moral landscape of unresolvable conflict, MacIntyre has attempted to describe what any community of virtue might require, although he seems not to have advanced the locating of any such vital community of virtue. The oft-quoted conclusion to *After Virtue* is a melancholic lament that we have no choice but to wait for the establishment of some such community. Stanley Hauerwas, in contrast, is certain that the searched-for community of virtue is Christianity. He has made it his task to describe Christianity as the concrete community that MacIntyre sought for in the abstract. Hauerwas has never written a book that did not credit MacIntyre with

25 MacIntyre's claim is that contemporary moral argument is, for the most part, an emotivist mix of disconnected fragments, which is the argument of *After Virtue* and *A Short History of Ethics*. For MacIntyre, there are but three possible stances available to the post-Enlightenment person. These three are "Tradition," "Encyclopaedia," or "Genealogy." The first is characterized by being "limited" to the frame of a tradition, the second is characterized by the claim that one might stand in all traditions at once, the last is characterized by the claim that one need stand nowhere. The three would be represented by Aristotle, Kant, and Nietzsche. This last argument is the subject of Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990). An earlier book attempted to demonstrate that there is no universal rationality or notion of justice that might adjudicate these claims and, thus, we are forced either to the first or third stance. This is the argument found in Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

locating the fundamental notions that Hauerwas is attempting to incarnate.

Most of the eighteen books published by Hauerwas are collections of brief essays on a wide variety of subjects. There is no one book that might describe his position comprehensively. There is, however, an essay that is particularly helpful in presenting a concise overview of the Hauerwas project. This essay, entitled “The Politics of Church: How We Lay Bricks and Make Disciples.” marks an attempt to uncover and display the logical form of becoming a Christian in the light of MacIntyre’s theoretical work.

MacIntyre has employed readily recognizable skills as analogies to bridge the epistemological gap and to indicate how becoming moral is like being apprenticed to a craft. Hauerwas suggests that an everyday practice such as bricklaying might help Christians think about what it means to be church. Learning to be a mason involves entering a tradition of skillfulness in a particular way, because no one learns bricklaying as if it were newly minted from out of the private world of the apprentice. Rather, one learns crafts—and, by implication, becomes virtuous—by being guided into the present state of a history or tradition of ends, goods, ways, and mentors. Hauerwas explains that

bricks have different names—for example, klinkers—to denote different qualities that make a difference about how one lays them. These differences are discovered often by apprentices being confronted with new challenges, making mistakes, and then being taught how to do it by the more experienced.²⁶

All of this talk about bricklaying harkens back, of course, to a central metaphor of MacIntyre; and Hauerwas applauds the clarity brought to ethics by MacIntyre’s “extensive account of the craftlike nature of morality.”²⁷ Hauerwas continues:

MacIntyre argues that the moral good is not available to any intelligent person no matter what their point of view.

²⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 102.
²⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

Rather, in order to be moral, a person has to be made into a particular kind of person if he or she is to acquire knowledge about what is true and good. Therefore transformation is required if one is to be moral at all.²⁸

The commitment to sanctification by transformation is not at all foreign to Reformation notions of Christianity, and Hauerwas is well within his tradition as a Methodist in insisting on it. However, Hauerwas maintains that such transformation is found primarily in worship and liturgy.²⁹ Hauerwas writes that “it is through liturgy [that] we are shaped to live rightly the story of God.”³⁰

Worship is, therefore, the practice that forms Christians, even as “bricklaying” forms proper “bricklayers.” Bricklayers ought to be seeking the goods that contribute to bricklaying, and, as such, are internal to that practice. Bricklayers may be corrupted when they form themselves to desired “goods” that are not essential to the craft of bricklaying. For example, bricklayers who want to make large sums of money by debasing their work at the behest of corrupt officials will soon find that they have damaged the craft and their ability to perform it. Hauerwas holds that any Christian community may likewise be debased by forming itself not for God, but for the world. The first classical instance of such debasement of Christian formation, according to Hauerwas, came in the fourth century, when Constantine “honored” the church by offering it the “rewards” of political power. Just as the formation of good bricklayers is in sharp contrast to the formation required by corrupt officials, so Christianity as a community of virtue is always to be found in opposition to the world and its ability to form us. Hauerwas insists that a community “cannot help but be a social ethic, since it must stand in sharp contrast to the world which would have us build our relations on distortions and denials.”³¹

28 *Ibid*

29 The insistence on worship and liturgy as essential to ethics controls large portions of Hauerwas’ ethics, and is a rather “unprotestant dictum” according to Robert W Jenson, “The Hauerwas Project,” *Modern Theology* 8 (July 1992) 290

30 Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today* (Durham, North Carolina The Labyrinth Press, 1988), 107

The claim that a transformation is required in order to know the true and the good, so typical of the ethicists surveyed, is a theme that evokes strong resonance in Orthodox Christian thought. It is possible to uncover a deep and pervasive concern with the acquisition of true virtue by personal transformation in the Greek Fathers, the canonical exemplars of the Tradition. From Athanasius the Great, to the Cappadocian Fathers, to Maximus the Confessor and John Climacus, the battle for the life in Christ is waged on the field of character and is won in virtue.³² Maximus the Confessor, writing of the one who has grown mature in Christ, contends that “he creates through spiritual exercises the world of virtue as if this were some visible reality.”³³ Athanasius ends the famous *On the Incarnation* with an appeal for all true believers to find their way into a correct understanding of the Scriptures by a transformation of the self wrought only by following the saints as exemplars into the “fellowship of life.”³⁴ Jaroslav Pelikan maintains that the Cappadocians made “the doctrine of the *aretai* a recurring theme.”³⁵ Pelikan notes that Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the Cappadocians, said of Athanasius in *Oration* 21.1 that “in praising Athanasius, I shall be praising *arete*.”³⁶ Pelikan emphasizes that by making this claim, Gregory Nazianzen is managing to hold worship and virtue (*arete*) together. Pelikan notes that Gregory Nazianzus maintained that “of all the *aretai*, none was more pleasing to God precisely as worship than the *arete* of showing

31 *Ibid*, 103

32 A classic description of the struggle where possession of virtue is to win the battle is found in *John Climacus The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, Introduction by Kallistos Ware, *The Classics of Western Spirituality A Library of the Great Spiritual Masters* (New York Paulist Press, 1982), 236

33 *Maximus the Confessor Selected Writings*, trans George C Berhold, *The Classics of Western Spirituality A Library of the Great Spiritual Masters* (New York Paulist Press, 1985), 142

34 *On the Incarnation*, trans /ed A Religious of C S M V (New York St Vladimir’s Theological Seminary, 1953), 95

35 Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (New Haven and London Yale University Press, 1993), 141

36 *Ibid*, 307

mercy to others.”³⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, another Cappadocian, the younger brother of Basil the Great, believed that the virtues “were the highest treasure to which human ambition could aspire.”³⁸

As if echoing the evident patristic concern with virtue and relating their concern to present attempts at a revival of virtue ethics, the Orthodox Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas writes that “Stanley Hauerwas comes close to the relationship of character and theosis in the Orthodox tradition.”³⁹ This recognition is not at all surprising, inasmuch as Hauerwas has built his theological ethics on the foundation of the recovery of classical Greek ethics attempted by Alasdair MacIntyre. One might go so far as to say that they are retracing—if not replicating—the footsteps of Orthodox Christianity, but this is not to claim that they have taken all of the same turns or options. Because of the fundamentally classical elements embedded in the foundation of contemporary virtue ethics, it is attractive and useful to Orthodox Christianity. The key elements of this “classical” understanding are *telos*, practice, virtue, community, narrative, and mentoring. Each of these elements will now be described in turn, especially as each relates to and is interdependent with the other elements. As the six elements are described, I will suggest, further, why Orthodox ethicists should find them useful and compatible with Orthodox Christian thought.

Telos is the first element to be considered. The recovery of ethics as essentially teleological is central to the work of virtue ethicists. They have recovered the central question of any adequate virtue ethics: Who ought we to strive to become? What is life’s end? Both MacIntyre and Heschel insist that the world is not made up simply of “facts” with an occasional ethical dilemma, but that our life-world is permeated with ethical import. The world is thoroughly colored by what ought to be.

³⁷ *Ibid*

³⁸ *Ibid*

³⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Toward Transfigured Life: The Theoria of Eastern Orthodox Ethics* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Light and Life Publishing Company, 1983), 183

This placing of an ought or *telos* at the center of the life-world is attractive to Orthodox Christians. The Orthodox Christian ethicist Stanley Harakas, writing about the is/ought distinction made by the Cambridge Platonists, claimed that their “efforts failed in part because they sought to embed their philosophy of the moral life in an order outside the will of God. Is and ought are intertwined.”⁴⁰

Teleology is seen by Orthodox Christians to be buried in the very fabric of human existence. Orthodox Christians have traditionally distinguished between “image” and “likeness” in the biblical creation account to mean “potential” and “striving.”⁴¹ Any account, therefore, that begins with what ought to be, will be fundamentally attractive and useful to Orthodox Christians. For Orthodox Christians it is Christ who ought to be, i.e., who is willed by the Father. God is our *telos*, to be found in Christ. The *telos* of human life is not a private affair. The discernment, struggle, and acquisition of our end is accomplished only within a community of practice and virtue.

Practice and virtue are the second and third essential elements of a virtue ethic. A practice is formally defined by MacIntyre as “cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate.”⁴² The Orthodox

40 Stanley Harakas, “The Natural Law Teaching of the Eastern Orthodox Church,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 9 (Winter 1963-64) 224.

41 The Septuagint version of the Scriptures as used by the Greek Church reads Genesis 1.26-27 as *eikon* and *homoiosis*. As understood by the Eastern Church, these words indicate participation in and striving toward a *telos* as essential elements of salvation. This distinction comes from Irenaeus of Lyon and is a commonplace in Orthodox piety. The anthropology of image and likeness is understood by Orthodox to be the golden thread uniting the whole of the faith. Any ethic would need to be able to account for this, if it is to be employed by Orthodox believers. John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1979), 139, explains that “the ‘natural’ participation of man in God is not a static givenness; it is a challenge and man is called to *grow* in the divine life.” Meyendorff concludes that salvation is, indeed, a gift, but, just as essentially, it is also a task and we must strive after it.

42 *After Virtue*, 187. MacIntyre suggests that some common sorts of practice would be

Christian notion of liturgy would fulfill MacIntyre's notion of practice. Wayne Meeks, reflecting on MacIntyre, claims that "ritual, within a functioning religious community, is paradigmatic practice."⁴³ The importance of liturgy for Orthodox Christians is well-known. What is less known is that Orthodox Christians consider liturgy to be as wide as the church. "Church" itself is the fundamental practice within which more specific liturgies are practiced. Constantine Cavarnos maintains that for the Greek Fathers asceticism "embraces a whole well-organized way of life or 'life-style'—one that takes into account the entire human being, soul and body, and is followed throughout one's life, under the direction of a spiritual guide."⁴⁴ Cavarnos, in the same place, equates *askesis* and practice. For Orthodox Christians the "practice" of being mentored into a way of life in Christ, the church, where the *telos* of transformation toward God in Christ might be accomplished, is fundamental.

Arete is the classical Greek term for "virtue," and is all but untranslatable. In tracing classical education and, so, virtue through ancient history, Marrou suggests that virtue is "the ideal value, to which life itself must be sacrificed."⁴⁵ *Arete* was for the ancients more likely to be grasped in a person than in a definition. *Arete* is best summed up as how one "lived and died in the effort to embody a certain ideal, a quality of existence."⁴⁶ The understanding of what that life was has varied through the ages; but a virtuous person remained the one who in the context of that life could be called "excellent." The difference between classical culture and Christianity is seen by Marrou as mainly one of a differing *telos*. While the final end of humanity varied in each school, the pedagogy

architecture, football, and farming

43 Wayne Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 91

44 Constantine Cavarnos, *The Hellenic-Christian Philosophical Tradition* (Belmont, Massachusetts: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1989), 55-56

45 Henry I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. George Lamb (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1956), 11

46 *Ibid*

was much the same Marrou claims that the classical school for virtue never really came to an end, but was continued in the Greek Christian East. If this is so, and it seems to be, then a certain familiarity with the notions of virtue ethics should be expected among Orthodox Christians, insofar as they are inheritors of the "Greek Christian East." Marrou notes that "from 425 to 1453 the University of Constantinople was a most fruitful center of study, the main pillar of the classical tradition"⁴⁷

A brief definition of virtue that would be intelligible from classical, to Christian, to modern times, would be "recognized standards of excellence." A formal definition of virtue presented by MacIntyre reads: "an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to the practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods."⁴⁸

With *telos*, practice, and virtue comes community, another essential element of virtue ethics. "It is always within some particular community with its own specific institutional forms," according to MacIntyre, "that we learn or fail to learn to exercise the virtues"⁴⁹ A communitarian turn seems to be central to virtue ethics. To enter into a practice in pursuit of some end or *telos* would be, MacIntyre asserts, "to subject my own attitudes, choices, preferences and tastes to the standards which currently define the practice" (*ibid.*, 190) Clearly, the focus of a virtue ethic as presented by MacIntyre shifts importance from the isolated individual to the community of believers Orthodox Christians would, undoubtedly, agree with Wayne Meeks, who holds that "we cannot begin to understand the process of moral formation until we see that it is inextricable from the process by which distinctive communities were taking shape Making morals means making community."⁵⁰ Community is, then, the fourth essential element of virtue ethics that derives

47 *Ibid* 340

48 *After Virtue*, 191

49 *Ibid* 194-95

50 *Origins of Christian Morality*, 5

from and is intrinsically related to *telos*, practice, and virtue.

Narrative is yet another essential element for a virtue ethic. To recoup the argument, virtue is that excellence, skill, or acquired characteristic expected of one who is appropriately formed in the wisdom of a given community that is told in their stories. According to Wayne Meeks, MacIntyre and Hauerwas have staunchly maintained, that

narrative is not merely a help for moral teaching—a relish to make the main dish go down easier, as Plutarch put it—but it is essential to proper moral reasoning. Moral discourse need not always be in the form of a narrative, but MacIntyre and Hauerwas argue that to be coherent and successful it must be connected with narrative. To speak of virtue entails that we tell stories.⁵¹

MacIntyre likewise convincingly contends:

It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, wolves that suckle twin boys, youngest sons who receive no inheritance but must make their own way in the world and eldest sons who waste their inheritance on riotous living and go into exile to live with the swine, that children learn or mislearn both what a child and a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are. Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions and their words.⁵²

The last of the six elements is that of mentor.⁵³ As ancient as virtue ethics is the question “can virtue be taught?” David Hicks, in trying to recapture the ancient understanding of *paideia*, education for virtue, has observed that “no notable or influential ancient, it is fair to

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁵² *After Virtue*, 216.

⁵³ The word mentor derives from what is, perhaps, one of the oldest texts in the history of education in virtue. It comes from Homer’s *Odyssey*. Mentor is the friend of Odysseus who was entrusted to care for Telemachus, the king’s son.

say, ever answered this question in the negative.”⁵⁴ Virtue, then, can be taught, and the mentor is the one entrusted with that task. A mentor is one who must know, teach, and emulate the life of virtue. The mentor is the one who participates in virtue in such a way as to embody the tradition of virtue and links past with future by guiding initiates. For Orthodox Christians, the mentor is one who participates in Christ’s teaching as a teacher. There is no figure more characteristic of Eastern Christianity than the elder as mentor. Orthodox Christian literature is full of figures of the *geron*, in Greek, or *starets*, in Russian. Starets Zossima, the mentor of Karamazov’s son Aloysha, in Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, is a typical Orthodox Christian mentor. A mentor is a necessary element of any virtue ethic, because such an ethic requires that we learn, or relearn, the language and ways of community and discipleship. The mentor and the pupil are the most elementary form of community outside of the natural community of family, which is not necessarily a community of virtue.

In summary, what remains, in its basic form, that might shape a virtue ethic? A virtue ethic must be able to establish a *telos* or end that would orient human life. The *telos* would be constitutive of the community or fellowship in pursuit of that end. The fellowship must maintain those practices that develop into appropriate virtues in the acquisition of the fellowship’s characteristic ends. All of which occur in a community advancing appropriate mentors who embody the narrative tradition. These fundamental elements, i.e., *telos*, practices, virtues, community, mentoring, and narrative, can be exercised to orient moral inquiry and to examine the Orthodox Christian tradition for a virtue ethic.⁵⁵ Those elements would serve as a hermeneutic of virtue.

54 David V Hicks, *Norms and Nobility: A Treatise on Education* (Savage, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, Inc., 1991), 22.

55 Vigen Guroian, teaching at Loyola, Baltimore, is writing within the parameters of a virtue ethic. See his *Incarinate Love: Essays in Orthodox Ethics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), *Ethics After Christendom: Toward an Ecclesial Ethic* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), and *Life’s Living toward Dying* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996).



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