Brian A. Butcher*

"Sanctify my body and make your abode in me": Bioethical reflection in light of orthodox virtue ethics

Abstract

What are the essential elements of an Eastern Christian approach to ethics, in terms of its sources, methods and applications? Even while countenancing the array of specific bioethical issues we face in our day—including sexual ethics, embryonic and stem cell research, human cloning, euthanasia—it is prudent to step back and attend to meta-ethical reflection, i.e., a consideration of the "first principles" of theological ethics within an Eastern Christian context. Here the category of "virtue" (aretē) is paramount: it enables us to perceive the contemporary significance for ethics of such classic loci theologici as Scripture, the Fathers, liturgy, iconography and hagiography.
Keywords: Bioethics, virtue, Orthodox, liturgy, patristic

Introduction

Most of the papers in this volume are grounded in a very specific set of competencies, whether scientific or medical. I do not presume to able to speak in this vein, and can approach the matter of bioethics only from my vantage point as a theologian: in particular, my perspective is that of a Greco-Catholic who seeks to "breathe with both lungs" (to cite the famous dictum of Pope St. John Paul II)—that is, to integrate the insights of East and West, in the conviction that only in such an integration will the fullness of Christian wisdom manifest itself. The quote in the title above is taken from one of the Byzantine-Rite prayers after Holy Communion: its author, St. John of Damascus (675/6—749) invites us to consider ourselves as dwelling places for God—as temples—and to act accordingly. As we shall see, such an existential claim points to the

* Adjunct Professor, McGill University, Montreal, Canada. E-mail: brian.butcher@utoronto.ca • ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4730-4434.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.12681/aprlp.254.3282

significance of virtue as a category for bioethics: if we ourselves are divine sanctuaries, then everything that is done in, to, with, through and for our bodies is to be carefully discerned.

In the present inquiry, I would like to step back from particular bioethical issues—addressed as these are in detail by my fellow contributors with due diligence—in order to look at some of the first principles, or meta-questions, which lie behind ethical determinations and decisions. It seems to me that part of the challenge we face today, as Christians of whatever tradition, is to identify and problematize the presuppositions we carry with us into debates—as much as to critically assess the actual opinions to which we may be inclined. Not infrequently, disagreements on the ethical front remain superficial: arguments pro and con are put forward without a "deep dive" into the kind of rationality informing the contrasting stances of the respective parties.

What and whence the Good?

I would like to begin with the *Euthyphro*, one of the shortest of the dialogues of Plato (428/427 or 424/423—348/347 BC), but one which nevertheless raises an axial question common to all ethical contexts: what is the nature of the good, and whence does it proceed? Desiring to do the good, that is, how do we in turn know what it is—and how do we *know* that we know? The text proceeds by investigating the virtue of piety (*eusebeia*), displaying the characteristic *aporia* of those Platonic dialogues which feature Socrates as protagonist, in that it does not arrive at a firm conclusion one way or the other: the point is rather to bring about an awareness on the part of the reader as to the dilemma at issue.

Socrates catches his interlocutor Euthyphro *en route* to prosecute the latter's father, due to his alleged negligence causing the death, on account of confinement, of a labourer himself accused of murdering his fellow; Euthyphro believes his father to be guilty of the blood of the accused, and understands that the gods expect, in the present instance, that justice be meted out to the latter despite the very prosecution of him being an ostensible infringement of Euthyphro's duty to show filial respect—an aspect of pi-

ety. Through Socrates' analysis of the situation, the debate by and by arrives at the question of whether something is right because the gods say so—or whether the gods say so because it is right. In course of trying to respond to Socrates' objections, Euthyphro eventually realizes that he cannot give a satisfactory answer to the question at hand—and becomes subsequently diffident as to how he should behave. The question is theoretical, though the problem is quite practical: whether or not to follow through on prosecuting his father will depend on what is *really* good, i.e., pious or holy—allowing filial respect to take precedence over justice, or vice-versa.

Euthyphro's conundrum is one shared by all of us, unaware though we may be: we all find ourselves beginning *in medias res*, "in the middle of the plot" of our lives, with a set of subconscious presuppositions, derived from our upbringing and context, shaping our conscious actions—even as we speak a mother tongue before we start to think about its grammar, or find ourselves possessed of faith (or not) before we come to cleave to our religious tradition (or lack thereof). We are like actors already immersed within a drama, who only at the moment of the performance begin to ascertain our roles and how to play them well, so that the plot unfolds as it should. Christian theology has historically resolved the theoretical aspect of the question by insisting that God Himself is to be identified with the Good: His commandments therefore flow from His very being, being themselves good not because God says so, so to speak, but because He *is* so. And yet the practical aspects remain abstruse: for who has not found himself in a situation where two goods are (or seem to be) in conflict, at odds with one another?

Virtue ethics

As already mentioned, the apparent point of *Euthyphro* is *not* to deal with the specificity of the scenario presented, entirely plausible though this must have been to the original audience. After all, by the end of the story we still do not know what Euthyphro will end up doing! Nevertheless, we are duly provoked to ponder well what *we ourselves* would do if caught up in a similar situation—and, more importantly, to ask ourselves *why* we would pursue one

particular course of action over another. The point of the Dialogue, that is, is to challenge us to think about how we would know what we should do in a given situation. Broadly speaking, what is being brought into relief in this text, as elsewhere in Plato and as later developed by Aristotle, is what will in our day come to be called "virtue ethics." It is this sort of ethics which has arguably been characteristic of the Eastern Christian traditions, even as it has been thematized anew by modern thinkers concerned with finding a way to escape the seemingly ineluctable impasse between deontology and consequentialism.

At the risk of oversimplifying, deontology denotes an approach in which ethics are a function of rules; this is very common in secular society, even if people realize that it is hardly a straightforward matter to discern what the rules should be; who should promulgate them; and how they should be enforced. A second approach, also readily encountered in our day, is consequentialism (most popularly, in the form of utilitarianism): here, it matters less what the rules are, than the consequences thereof. Crudely put, this is encapsulated in the following expressions: "As long as I don't get caught....''; "As long as no one gets hurt...."; "As long as whatever happens is more or less in keeping with the spirit of the law...." One can easily see, on the one hand, how such an approach abets all sorts of dereliction, corruption and abuse. But on the other hand, the prospects for taking rules as paramount seem likewise troubling: how does law, in this case, not become impersonal and inflexible, and perhaps outrightly inhuman? There appears an ineluctable tension, between recognizing there *should* be an objective standard to which everyone is equally called, but that the expression of justice nevertheless really does need to take account of (mitigating) circumstances, and so forth. Justice, that is, needs to be executed in what, to use theological terminology, we would call a "pastoral" manner: hence, in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the conventional distinction between *akribia* and *economia*, or "strictness" and "flexible solicitude."

Virtue ethics, in turn, presents a potential *via media* between the positions articulated above: a way of navigating, rather than

capitulating to, the stated tension between them. In virtue ethics the emphasis is placed neither on rules nor on consequences as such—though these are both taken under advisement—but instead on what it means to be a human being: and, how this relates, in the words of great Jewish rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-72), to "being *human*." This in turn implies a consideration of the *telos* or goal to which we are summoned, the end to which they ought to aspire.[1] The big questions raised in virtue ethics therefore include: Who are we as human beings? What is our origin and destiny? What is the best way of acknowledging said origin and achieving said destiny?

Being, in sum, precedes doing; actions are to be evaluated in terms of anthropology—and *this* is where the most productive discourse is to be had. To care for what it means to be *virtuous* is to pause before entering upon a given ethical threshold, descrying what the prospective choices will convey and compel with respect to the *persons* implicated. Notice how we use the word "humane" as a descriptor for someone who is virtuous; we speak of a humane approach to "x" or "y." Even though everything that people do is, technically, *human,* many things are far from *humane*! Without a scrutiny of virtue, actions come to be subtly regarded as extrinsic to their agents, rather than appearing, as it were, as the fruit whose quality shows forth the health of its respective tree.

Ethics, in this approach, constitutes a kind of "practical knowledge," which Aristotle termed *phronesis*. It is not a matter of "knowing," so much as of "know-how-to-do," *savoir-faire*: knowledge as craft or art, rather than as idea. What is to be known, thus, is how to become virtuous: namely, how to become the kind of creatures we are intended to be by our Creator. As St. Augustine (354-430) rightly says, in *Confessions*: "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee" (I:1). Accordingly, what is ethical is that which corresponds to the *ethos* of coming to rest in God—and this, the East has traditionally called *theosis*

[1] Virtue ethics prompts consideration of a "normative sense of what being human entails." It stands contrary to an emotivism in which "the only authority which moral views possess is that which we as individual agents give to them" (Woodhill, 1998, 62).

("deification, divinization"). The corollary is that what is unethical, what is *sinful*, is that which causes a deviation from our proper course—whether or not this involves a breaking of rules, or a series of observable consequences. Sin is the arrow not hitting its mark, as the New Testament Greek *hamartia* connotes; in the lexicon of St. John of Damascus, it is a matter of not following our inner logic, the *scopos* proper to our nature. As Armenian Orthodox ethicist Vigen Guroian puts it: "Only as a result of sin do human beings experience law as externally imposed codes and commandments, usually in the form of prohibitions that indicate when the harmony and unity of life are lost, [but not] how they might be restored" (2002, 21).

To be sure, the Bible itself, along with the manifold expressions of Christian tradition, are replete with varied metaphors for sin: transgression, stain, defilement, corruption, infraction, scandal, blasphemy, illness, and so on (Ricoeur, 1969). Every language has its own inherited ways of denoting and connoting what ultimately resists complete definition—that very evil which Scripture see as expressed in and effected by the Fall. Each negative metaphor sheds light on the matter, while not giving a full picture; conversely, each metaphor for salvation—return, cleansing, purification, flourishing, exoneration, reconciliation, forgiveness, healing, or what have you—likewise illustrates something about virtue, though not exhaustively so. The essential point I wish to make is that to think about ethics in terms of virtue is to situate humanity in a wider frame of reference than merely rules or consequences: it is to contemplate our *story*.

The elements of virtue ethics

Justin Martyr (c. 90-100—165), and several Church Fathers after him (e.g., St. Athanasius, St. Gregory Nazianzus, St. Maximus the Confessor, St. John Climacus) approached the classical philosophical patrimony of their day as bearing "seeds of the Word": elements of truth, goodness and beauty which could be "harvested" in the service of the Gospel. At the time of Christ, Stoic philosophy—exemplified in the *Meditations* of Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius

(121-80)—had high regard for the cultivation of virtue. What the Church Fathers added, however, was a recognition of the *origin* of virtue in God Himself, and the concomitant importance for the divine life to take root and flourish in the human person as made in the image of God and destined to grow into the divine likeness for eternity. Eastern Orthodox ethicist Joseph Woodhill summarizes their conviction: "The battle for the life in Christ is waged on the field of character and is won in virtue" (1998, 69).

In the interpretation of the Fathers, as also in his reading of contemporary theorists, Woodhill discerns the following key elements of a comprehensive virtue ethics:

1) ***Telos***
2) ***Practice***
3) ***Virtue***
4) ***Community***
5) ***Narrative***
6) ***Mentor***

We can elaborate upon Woodhill's explication of each of these, in terms of how they organically appear within the Eastern Christian traditions handed down to us. The *telos* has already been mentioned above: it is, of course, *theosis*, becoming "partakers in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). This goal recognizes that salvation is *dynamic*; created *imago Dei*, we nonetheless lack in our present experience the divine "likeness," the resemblance to God which ought to come naturally to us—that is, flow from our originary "nature"—but now often appears, due to sin, as "unnatural." The celebrated patristic text in this connection is that of St. Athanasius, from *On the Incarnation*: "God became man in order that man might become god" (2011, 54:3). But this only builds on the earlier contention of St. Irenaeus, in *Against the Heresies*: "For the glory of God is the living man, and the life of man is the vision of God" (2006, 4.20.7). Theosis is the result of a life lived "in Christ," by the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Guroian observes, "The Incarnation also presents this theanthropic voca-

tion as a new moral imperative, that human beings strive to imitate this Jesus Christ who is both archetype and perfect example of a deified humanity" (2002, 15).

Key to the Church's teaching on theosis is a theological construal of anthropology in which *freedom* remains a feature of human existence, even after the Fall: our liberty to do the good is limited, impeded and impaired—but not absent. Empowerment obtains through the Holy Spirit, by means of the wisdom disclosed in Scripture and Tradition, and the grace given in the Mysteries, in prayer, fasting and almsgiving: we *become* free as we exercise our freedom in obedience to conscience, both cognizing, ever more accurately, good from evil, and acquiring the wherewithal to act in a manner coherent with our cognition. In habitually choosing the good, our character develops as the product of synergy, the "cooperation of human and divine energies" (Guroian, 2002: 15).

The paradigmatic Orthodox *practice* is surely liturgy—though taken not simply as ritual, but inclusive of the asceticism, and spiritual and corporal works of mercy, which flow from and back into worship, even as blood is pumped by the heart throughout the body while returning thereunto. In an Indian context, we should perhaps speak rather of yoga—that "yoke" which guides us to move ourselves together with others in the right way. As Woodhill contends: "'Through liturgy...we are shaped to live rightly the story of God.... Worship [is] the practice that forms Christians, even as 'bricklaying' forms proper 'bricklayers.' (1998: 68)." Guroian concurs: "For through the sacraments of the Church Christ, who is the Life, enters the person and takes the person into his life....The spiritual life is both an ascetical striving to do good and a mystical reception of transforming grace" (2002: 16-17). Revelation is imparted especially, if not exclusively, through worship inasmuch as it is there that the truly Christian *darshan* obtains, so to speak: the Lord and His saints speaking to us through the sacred texts, gazing upon us through their icons even as we contemplate them—they who have preceded us in virtue and reaped the concomitant rewards.

At the heart of virtue ethics is, of course, virtue—literally, from the Latin, "manliness, strength, courage, excellence." In the Chris-

tian rendition of the matter, however, such is ultimately construed to be synonymous with *love*—of God, neighbour and self. With all the aforementioned in the background, we can see how virtue cannot be reduced to following a law, nor evaluated purely in terms of consequences. To use an expression from the Indian context, it is bound up with what is implied when we greet others: Namaste—"I bow to (the divine within) you," that is, I recognize your *dignity*—as, presumably, I recognize my own—and will act unto you in accord with this recognition. When we start to ask whether a given action is consonant with our dignity as human beings, we are tantamount to considering what is virtuous; if we perceive, further, that our dignity and virtue are bound up with being children of God, siblings of the one whom the Nicene Creed calls "True God and True Man," and the "Light of Light," then we will esteem above all the counsel of St. Paul: "But now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light" (Ephesians 5:8 ESV).

The *community* where virtue is acquired is the Church, in which are found, *inter alia*, structures of accountability as well as a society of learners, of fellow "craftsmen." Moreover, inasmuch as Christians are not "people of the book" in fact, but people of the Word-made-flesh, the recounting of their story requires the embodied presence of others—as per the ancient saying, *Unus Christianus, nullus Christianus* ("One Christian is no Christian")—pre-eminently in the communal conversation enacted in the liturgy, and what precedes and follows it. It is in and with others, rather than by recourse to an authoritative text as such, that an ethic is inspired and instilled.

The *narrative* is the Gospel, but as recounted in the "multi-season" version constituted by the lives of the saints across the centuries, represented and re-presented in the course of the liturgical year. As Woodhill observes, "To speak of virtue entails that we tell stories" (1998: 74). For love, or indeed any virtue, to signify effectively, it requires being referred to a particular example. The life of Christ, as depicted in Scripture and enacted in worship is reiterated in the saints' lives, further chapters in the tale. Each episode of a "little Christ," i.e., a Christian, extends a fresh example of the one exemplar.

Finally, the *mentor(s)* are, to use the language of India, our *gurus*: those faithful and faith-filled men and women who in our own day both illumine the way and accompany us on the journey. The Eastern Christian traditions have always known such: those who, whether monastics or living in the world, become spiritual fathers and mothers to others, after the pattern of St. Paul in regard to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 4:15). Of course, our first mentors are, please God, our own parents and relatives; and then our godparents, clergy and teachers. But each of us has to arrive at a point, as we pass into adulthood, of freely placing ourselves under the guidance of those capable and worthy of offering such.

Back to bioethics

What does all this have to do with bioethics? The burden of this chapter has been to point to the sources, methods and ends of bioethical reflection, rather than to address specific scenarios. But I hope that it has become clear how entering upon any such scenario will require, whether consciously or unconsciously, reference to matters discussed above. To seek to act virtuously, according to the sixfold schema above, is to dispose oneself to respond differently, from the get-go, to neuralgic controversies which might otherwise seem intractable. A modest example: how often does the Feast of the Annunciation—and the Visitation which follows soon thereafter—figure in discussions of abortion (rights)? Do we stop to consider how Our Lord was present in the womb of His Mother from the moment of the Annunciation—and hailed *in utero* by his cousin when the latter's mother Elizabeth was met by Theotokos (Luke 1:39-45)? Would anyone make so bold as to suggest that Christ or John the Forerunner were not fully *persons*, but only fetuses? The iconography, hymnography and calendar of the Church, no less than the Gospel pericope, teach truths which are belaboured in vain, in the forum of secular argumentation.

A virtue ethic will ask, to paraphrase an Evangelical Christian trend dating back several years ("What would Jesus do?"): "What would Mary do?" "What would Elizabeth do?" Of course, we immediately realize that there is no way either could conceive of *not*

recognizing the sons within them as already becoming the men God would make them. Nevertheless, one readily encounters "pro-choice" Christians throughout the world, for whom the questions above would not be pertinent or decisive. It seems to me that many a bioethical challenge could be productively re-framed in terms of whether the respective options in question would advance those concerned along the path of virtue or not—whether said options would help those concerned become imitators of the saints, in their imitation of Christ: one cannot imagine, I daresay, Ss. Joachim and Anna resorting to IVF, despite their pain at being childless; nor St. Simeon asking for MAiD, on the heels of pronouncing the *Nunc dimittis*; nor the Desert Fathers contemplating the prospects for cryogenics; nor the *monachoparthenoi* ("virgin monks") like St. Marin-a/os (715-50) actually availing themselves of gender-reassignment surgery, in order to further their aspirations for participating in the life of a male monastery....

In all seriousness, I believe that it does behoove us to ask what our fathers and mothers in the faith would do, were they in our shoes. The varied conditions and circumstances of the saints show us that virtue is attainable in all walks of life, if we only employ the means given to us to achieve it. If we are sincere in wanting to ourselves become like them, and similarly even be remembered as examples of virtue, we need to situate ourselves and our determinations *sub specie aeternitatis*—in the light of eternity. Without presuming to resolve every bioethical "hard case," I would nonetheless contend that one must *begin* with the kind of considerations outlined above, so as to foster the kind of context in which said "hard case" can find a virtuous solution.

We should also be careful at presuming, even granted the quantum leap forward we have experienced on the level of science, technology and medicine, that our contemporary challenges are always that different from our forebears. Cloning was not a temptation in the first century, of course, but contraception, abortion and infanticide were known and frequently condoned by pagans; and it is hardly necessary to enumerate the variety of sexual practices known to the ancient world. Christians were known, from the

earliest times, for rescuing abandoned children and raising them as their own: a particularly courageous act when such children were discarded due to physical or mental disabilities.

Conclusion

Let's try to tie all the foregoing together. We began by referring to the *Euthyphro* and the problem of locating the grounds for ethics, an objective moral standard. Catholic teaching has developed a well-refined view of "natural law," deftly explicated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, building on the legacy of medieval scholastic theologians, *inter alia*. This has in turn been extended to pronounce upon an array of bioethical issues. And yet Catholic clergy, no less than their Orthodox counterparts, would undoubtedly attest to the discrepancy between the clarity of their respective Church teachings and the degree of adherence to the same, on the part of the faithful. It would seem that the problem, across the board, is not *understanding* what is to be done, but being virtuous enough to do it—to "take up [one's] cross," whatever this should prove to be.

I have argued that fostering the virtue in question requires revisiting the constitutive elements undergirding it: *telos*, practice, virtue, community, narrative and mentor. Doing so may at least set the stage for a modern Euthyphro to have a chance at sorting out whatever thorny situation in which he should find himself. And only with reference to virtue, will we be able to cultivate the kind of society in which we all desire to live.

Stavros Fotiou (2013), summarizing several Church Fathers, speaks of the three levels of morality: that of the slave, the servant and the son. The slave does the good out of fear of punishment; the servant likewise obeys, but out a desire for reward; it is the son, however, who seeks the will of his father in love, such that the good is done as if it were obvious—the only course of action to be reasonably countenanced; the only thing in keeping with the dignity of the son possessed of piety towards his father. May the many and varied challenges outlined in this book be confronted in this spirit, that the Lord may indeed sanctify our bodies and make His abode within us.

References

Athanasius, (ed. Behr, J.). (2011). *On the Incarnation* (Vol. 44b). St Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Fotiou, S. S. (2013). The Wine of Cana and the Levels of Human Morality. *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, *58*(1-4), 43-55.

Grant, R. M. (2006). *Irenaeus of Lyons*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203136171.

Guroian, V. (2002). *Incarnate Love: Essays in Orthodox Ethics*, 2nd ed. University of Notre Dame Press.

Ricoeur, P. (1969). *The Symbolism of Evil*. Beacon Press.

Woodhill, J. (1997). Virtue Ethics and Its Suitability for Orthodox Christianity. *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, *41*(1), 61-75.