3

Ethics in Medieval Western Philosophy

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Introduction

Medieval philosophy is conventionally construed as the philosophy of Western Europe between the decline of classical pagan culture and the Renaissance. The originators of the notion of the Middle Ages were thinking primarily of the so called "Latin West," the area, roughly speaking, of Roman Catholicism. While it is true that this region was to some extent a unit, culturally separate from its neighbors, it is also true that medieval philosophy was decisively influenced by ideas from the Greek East, from the Jewish philosophical tradition, and from Islam. If one takes medieval philosophy to include the Patristic period then the area must be expanded to include, at least during the early centuries, Greek-speaking eastern Europe, as well as North Africa and parts of Asia Minor.

The earliest post-classical origins of medieval philosophy lie in the patristic period of Christianity, in the writings of the Church fathers. These works were produced between the second and fifth centuries by religious teachers belonging to the Eastern and Western Churches. The aim of these theological authors was to interpret Judeo-Christian scriptures and traditions with the assistance of ideas derived from Greek and Roman philosophy. Although the Fathers were not themselves speculative thinkers, they introduced into their theistic ethics, notions of considerable

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importance which recur throughout medieval and Renaissance philosophy.

Characteristics of Ethics in Medieval Philosophy

1. Medieval philosophy continued to be characterized by ethical and religious orientation. Its methods were at first those of Plotinus and later those of Aristotle. But it developed within faith as a means of throwing light on the truths and mysteries of faith. Thus, religion and philosophy fruitfully cooperated in the middle ages. Philosophy, as the handmaid of theology, made possible a rational understanding of faith. Faith, for its part, inspired Christian thinkers to develop new philosophical ideas, some of which became part of the philosophical heritage of the West. Thus philosophy and faith help people become moral beings.

2. Logic, dialectic and analysis were used to discover the truth – the principle of reasoned argumentation or *ratio* which is norm of morality.

3. The obligation to co-ordinate the insights of philosophy with theological teaching and revelation – the principle of *concordia* was very much felt. The last was the most important. Perhaps there was no other issue concerned medieval thinkers more than the relation of faith to reason and ethics.

4. Toward the end of the middle ages, this beneficial interplay of faith and reason started to break down. Philosophy began to be cultivated for its own sake, apart from, and even in contradiction to Christian religion. This divorce of reason from faith, made definitive in the 17th century by Francis Bacon and René Descartes, marked the birth of modern philosophy. Ethics too became independent of faith and philosophical intervention.

The Ethical Merit of Medieval Philosophy

Apart from its own intrinsic and variety, the thought of medieval philosophers has a special lesson for people of India in this century to lead moral life. For, whether we endorse their views or not, these people succeeded in a goal that we are far from having realised. They found a pastoral and meaningful way of expressing the Christian message in the culture and the philosophy of their times. They made use of Neo-Platonism or Aristotelianism or Stoicism – taking care to correct, purify and modify concepts borrowed from the systems whenever they felt it necessary – and worked out an expression of the Good News in terminology and thought-patterns familiar to their contemporaries. They also made use of the social and political structures than current ones in formulating all these. This is what we are aiming at in today's India. And it would be useful to see how these people achieved this aim.

The first great period of Catholic philosophy was dominated by St. Augustine among the pagans. The second period culminates in St. Thomas Aquinas for whom and for his successors, Aristotle far outweighs Plato. Philosophy was concerned to defend the faith, and invoked reason to enable it to argue with those who did not accept the validity of the Christian revelation. By this invocation of reason, the philosophers challenged criticism, not merely as theologians, but as inventors of systems designed to appeal to men of no matter what creed. In the long run, the appeal to reason was perhaps a mistake, but in the thirteenth century it seemed highly successful.

Importance of Natural Reason in Ethics

The philosophy of the medieval period remained in close conjunction with Christian thought, particularly theology, and the chief philosophers of the period were churchmen,

particularly who were teachers. Philosophers who strayed from the close relation were chided by their superiors. Greek philosophy ceased to be creative after Plotinus in the 3rd century AD. A century later Christian thinkers began to assimilate Neo-Platonism into Christian doctrine in order to give a rational interpretation of Christian faith. Thus, medieval philosophy was born of the confluence of Greek philosophy and Christianity. Plotinus' philosophy was already deeply religious, having come under the influence of Middle Eastern religion.

One of the Church fathers whose writings outline the idea of ethics is Clement of Alexandria (150-215). By the exercise of natural reason, he and some of the philosophers of antiquity had arrived at conclusions concerning the kind of life fitting for human beings which were coincident with parts of Christian moral teaching. This concurrence was later to become a theme in the defence of moral philosophy, and of the study of pagan writers, that scholastics would offer to the charge that their enquiries endangered faith. The particular discovery of Greek philosophy which interested the Fathers was that of practical reasoning (*ratio practica*) or right reason. Both Plato and Aristotle had argued that there is a faculty of rational judgement concerned with choosing the right way of acting. Excellence in the exercise of this power constitutes the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom – *prudentia* and conduct in accord with its deliverances is moral virtue.

The idea of an innate power of moral knowledge is open to at least two interpretations. On the first, human beings are endowed with a capacity for rational thought, and starting from certain premises, knowledge of which is not dependent on revelation, they can arrive at conclusions about right conduct. On the second interpretation, the relevant endowment is one of a faculty of moral sense by which they can simply intuit what it is right or wrong to

do. Borrowing from the vocabulary of later theories, it may be useful to describe these views as 'rationalist' and 'intuitionist' respectively.

Ethics: Sin, Vice and Virtue

For Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, there existed the problem of how we can ever do what we know we ought not to be doing. This is the problem of *akrasia.* From this ancient perspective, perhaps the most striking thing about Augustinian ethics is its easy acceptance of *akrasia.* In Confessiones II, Augustine tells of stealing pears as a boy of sixteen. He spends two chapters ruminating on what might have motivated his theft. It was not the pears themselves, he says, for he had better ones at home. He concludes that it was the flavour of sinning that motivated him.

In *De libero arbitrio,* Augustine admits that the question of why we do evil disturbed him greatly when he was young and moved him toward Manicheism. Once he accepted the idea of original sin, however, he found nothing paradoxical in saying of someone: 'He hates the thing itself because he knows that it is evil; and yet he does it because he is bent on doing it'.

Augustine was an extreme intentionalist in ethics. In *De sermone Domini in monte* (Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount), he identifies three necessary and sufficient conditions for committing a sin: receiving an evil suggestion, taking pleasure in the thought of performing the act suggested and consenting to perform the act. Thus in Augustine's view, whether one commits a sin is in no way dependent on whether the contemplated action is actually carried out. Even when the action is carried out, it is the intention (understood as suggestion, pleasure and consent), rather than the action itself, or its consequences, that is sinful.

Augustine also devoted two treatises to the topic of lying. In the first of these, *De mendacio* (On Lying), he first suggests that a person S lies in saying p if, and only if (1) p is false, (2) S believes that p is false and (3) S says p with the intention of deceiving someone. He then considers three cases: first, that of someone with a false belief who wants to deceive another by saying something that is, unknown to them, quite true; second, the case of someone who expects to be disbelieved and so knowingly says what is false in order to instil a true belief; and third, the case of someone who, also expecting to be disbelieved, knowingly speaks the truth in order to instil a falsehood.

Augustine seems not to know what to do about these problem cases. He contents himself with insisting that the conditions (1)-(3) are jointly sufficient, without taking a stand on whether each is singly necessary.

Discussing virtue and vice, Augustine contrasts those things that are desirable in themselves with those that are desirable for the sake of something else. He says that things of the first sort are to be enjoyed (fruit) whereas those of the second sort are to be used (utility). Vice, he adds, is wanting to use what is meant to be enjoyed or wanting to enjoy what is meant to be used.

Ambrose had already added the Pauline virtues of faith, hope and love to the classical virtues of temperance, courage, wisdom and justice. Augustine follows Ambrose in this, and he follows St Paul in assigning first importance to love; in fact, he offers an interpretation of each of the seven virtues that makes it an expression of the love of God. Thus temperance is love 'keeping itself whole and incorrupt for God'; fortitude, or courage, is love 'bearing everything readily for the sake of God', and so on. Virtue, he says, is nothing but the perfect love of God. In this way Augustine provides a Christian analogue to Plato's idea of the unity of the virtues.

Ethics: 'Ought' and 'Can'

Augustine also attacked the Pelagians for their views on the avoidance of sin, focusing on the question of 'ought' and 'can'. (Pelagianism is a heretical theological position regarding grace and free will; it originated with the fifth-century British monk Pelagius (354-418 AD), who believed that every good could be got through prayer except virtue. He emphasized the primacy of human effort in spiritual salvation). Pelagius and his disciple Coelestius, had made the principle that 'ought' implies 'can' a central tenet of their religious and ethical teaching. As already noted, Augustine was the person primarily responsible for defining their teaching, Pelagianism, as a Christian heresy. In his treatise *De perfectione justicia hominis* (On Man's Perfection in Righteousness), subtitled 'In opposition to those who assert that it is possible for one to become righteous by one's own strength alone', Augustine describes the chief thesis of Coelestius as the contention that if something is unavoidable, then it is not a sin; there is simply no such thing as an unavoidable sin. Augustine responds to Pelagius and his disciple by rejecting the simple disjunction that either something is not a sin or it can be avoided. 'Sin can be avoided', he writes, 'if our corrupted nature be healed by God's grace.' Thus in a way, Augustine agrees that 'ought' does imply 'can', but only with a crucial qualification. 'Ought' implies 'can with the gratuitous assistance of God', but it does not imply 'can without any outside help'.

Augustine's response to dreaming as a possible threat to knowledge claims fits together with his intentionalism in ethics and his anti-Pelagianism to produce an interesting problem as to whether one is morally responsible for the acts of one's dream self. He agonizes over this problem in Confessiones. Three ways of justifying a claim of no responsibility suggest themselves. I could say I am not

responsible (1) because I am not my dream self, or (2) because what happens in a dream does not really happen, or (3) because I am powerless to avoid doing what my dream self does, and 'ought' implies 'can'.

Augustine's philosophical and theological commitments seem to undercut each of these three responses. Thus (1) is undercut, it seems, by his somewhat concessive response to scepticism. I can know that something tastes sweet to me, Augustine insists in *Contra academicos*, whether or not I am dreaming. It seems to be a consequence of this insistence that, if I am dreaming, I am my dream self. As for (2), it seems to be undercut by Augustine's strong intentionalism in ethics. Thus when I commit adultery in my dreams, even if no 'outward' adultery takes place, still I entertain the evil suggestion, take pleasure in the evil suggested and give consent; so there is wrongdoing. As for (3), as noted above, Augustine rejects the Pelagian insistence that 'ought' implies 'can'. or rather, he accepts it only with an important qualification. Although 'I ought to refrain from consenting to fornicate' does, in Augustine's view, entail that I can so refrain with the help of God's grace, it does not entail that I can refrain strictly on my own, that is, without any divine grace. Yet if I receive no grace and consent to fornicate, I sin, according to Augustine, and it is just for God to punish me.

Ethics: On Killing

Although Augustine's thoughts on suicide are not particularly original, they have been extremely influential. His position became Christian orthodoxy, which in turn influenced decisively the legal thinking in predominantly Christian countries. Augustine's position is that, with certain specifiable exceptions (primarily, lawful executions and killings in battle by soldiers fighting just wars, anyone who kills a human being, whether himself or anyone else,

is guilty of murder, and murder is prohibited by divine commandment).

Augustine did not invent the idea that certain requirements must be satisfied if a war is to count as just. The theory of just warfare - both the conditions that must be satisfied if a war is to be entered into justly (*jus ad bellum*) as well as the requirements of justice in the waging of war - are already well developed by Cicero in his *On the Republic*. Nor was Augustine the first Christian thinker to develop a theory of just warfare; Ambrose had already done so.

Nevertheless, Augustine is usually considered the father of the modern theory of the just war. Such deference is appropriate in that it is in Augustine, more than in Cicero or Ambrose or anyone else in the ancient world, that later theorists have found their earliest inspiration.

Although Augustine accepts the commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill', he interprets it in such a way that not everyone who brings about the death of another can be properly said to kill. Thus, he writes in *De civitate Dei*, 'One who owes a duty of obedience to the giver of the command does not himself kill; he is an instrument, a sword in its user's hand.' Thus an executioner may bring about the death of a convict without killing, and so may a soldier end another's life without killing, especially when war is being waged 'on the authority of God'.

In general, Augustine takes over the Roman principles of just war as set forth by Cicero and adds his own emphasis on the intention with which the acts of war are performed. This following passage is characteristic:

What is the evil in war? Is it the death of some who will soon die in any case, that others may live in peaceful subjection? This is merely cowardly dislike, not any religious feeling. The real evils in war are love of violence,

revengeful cruelty, fierce and implacable enmity, wild resistance, the lust of power, and such like; and it is generally to punish these things, when force is required to inflict the punishment, that, in obedience to God or some lawful authority, good men undertake wars.

Beyond such insistence that war should not be fought from love of violence, revengeful cruelty or lust for power, Augustine did not work out specific principles for the just conduct of war. Still, in making it plausible to many Christians that killing in war need not fall under the divine commandment not to kill; Augustine freed others to develop principles for what might be considered the just declaration of war, as well as the just conduct of war, once it has been justly entered into.

Aquinas' View on Ethics

Aquinas' moral theory is developed most extensively and systematically in the Second Part *of Summa theologiae*. Like almost all his predecessors, medieval and ancient, Aquinas sees ethics as having two principal topics: first, the ultimate goal of human existence, and second, how that goal is to be won, or lost.

Summa theologiae sometimes called the Treatise on Happiness, develops an argument to establish the existence and nature of a single ultimate end for all human action, or, more strictly, the kind of behaviour over which a person has 'control'. First, 'all actions that proceed from a power are caused by that power in accordance with the nature of its object. But the object of will is an end and a good', that is, an end perceived as good by the willer's intellect (*Summa theologiae* 1.1c). From this starting point Aquinas develops an argument designed to show that a human being necessarily (though not always consciously) seeks everything it seeks for its own ultimate end, happiness.

Aquinas argues that the often unrecognized genuine ultimate end for which human beings exist (their 'object') is God, perfect goodness personified; and perfect happiness, the ultimate end with which they may exist (their 'use' of that object), is the enjoyment of the end for which they exist. That enjoyment is fully achieved only in the beatific vision, which Aquinas conceives of as an activity. Since the beatific vision involves the contemplation of the ultimate (first) cause of everything, it is, whatever else it may be, also the perfection of all knowledge and understanding.

Aquinas devotes just four questions of *Summa theologiae* to 'the goodness and badness of human acts in general'. Although considerations of rightness and wrongness occupy only a little more than ten per cent of the discussion in Questions 18-21, Aquinas nonetheless appears to think of rightness and wrongness as the practical, distinctively moral evaluations of actions. His emphasis on the broader notions of goodness and badness reveals the root of his moral evaluation of actions in his metaphysical identification of being and goodness.

What makes an action morally bad is its moving the agent not toward, but away from, the agent's ultimate goal. Such a deviation is patently irrational, and Aquinas' analysis of the moral badness of human action identifies it as fundamentally irrationality, since irrationality is an obstacle to the actualization of a human being's specifying potentialities, those that make rational the differentia of the human species. In this as in every other respect, Aquinas' ethics is reason-centred:

In connection with human acts the words 'good' and 'bad' are applied on the basis of a comparison to reason, because... a human being's good is existing in accordance with reason, while what is bad for a human being is

whatever is contrary to reason. For what is good for anything is what goes together with it in keeping with its form, and what is bad for it is whatever is contrary to the order associated with its form. (*Summa theologiae* 18.5c)

It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that Aquinas takes moral evil to consist in intellective error. Because of the very close relationship he sees between intellect and will, the irrationality of moral wrongdoing will be a function of will as well, not just of intellect. In Aquinas' view, the moral evaluation of a human action attaches primarily to the 'internal act', the volition from which the external act derives. Since 'will is inclined toward reason's good [the good presented to will by intellect] by the very nature of the power of will', bad volition stems from defective deliberation (*Summa theologiae* 3). As intellect and will continually influence each other, so bad deliberation can also be an effect of bad volition. Moreover, practical intellect's mistakes in identifying the best available course of action may also have the passions of the sensory soul as sources.

Furthermore, 'because the good [presented by intellect] is varied in many ways, it is necessary that will be inclined through some habit toward some determinate good presented by reason so that will's determining activity may follow more promptly' (*Summa theologiae* 50.5, ad 3).

Habits of will are conditions necessary for our carrying out our volitions in particularly good or particularly bad ways, as regards both the 'executive' and the 'determining' aspects of volition; and the habits that play these crucial roles in Aquinas' moral theory are the virtues and the vices.

The four 'cardinal virtues' can be understood as habits of this sort. Reason's habit of good governance generally is prudence; reason's restraint of self-serving concupiscence is temperance; reason's persevering despite self-serving

'irascible' passions such as fear is courage; reason's governance of one's relations with others despite one's tendencies toward selfishness is justice.

Aquinas' normative ethics is based not on rules but on virtues; it is concerned with dispositions first and only then with actions. In addition to the moral virtues in all their various manifestations, Aquinas also recognizes intellectual virtues that, like the moral virtues, can be acquired by human effort. On the other hand, the supreme theological virtues of faith, hope and charity cannot be acquired but must be directly 'infused' by God.

Passions, virtues and vices are all intrinsic principles, or sources, of human acts. However, there are extrinsic principles as well, among which is law in all its varieties. Consequently, Aquinas moves on in *Summa theologiae* 90-108 to his *Treatise on Law*, a famous and original treatment of the subject. The best-known feature of the treatise is Aquinas' concept of natural law. Law in general is 'a kind of rational ordering for the common good, promulgated by the one who takes care of the community' (*Summa theologiae* 90.4c), and 'the precepts of natural law are to practical reasoning what the first principles of demonstrations are to theoretical reasoning.… All things to be done or to be avoided pertain to the precepts of natural law, which practical reasoning apprehends naturally as being human goods'. Human laws of all kinds derive, or should derive, from natural law, which might be construed as the naturally knowable rational principles underlying morality in general: ' From the precepts of natural law, as from general, indemonstrable principles, it is necessary that human reason proceed to making more particular arrangements… [which] are called human laws, provided that they pertain to the definition (*rationem*) of law already stated'.

As a consequence of this hierarchy of laws, Aquinas unhesitatingly rejects some kinds and some particular instances of human law, for example: 'A tyrannical law, since it is not in accord with reason, is not unconditionally a law but is, rather, a perversion of law'. Even natural law rests on the more fundamental 'eternal law', which Aquinas identifies as divine providence, 'the very nature of the governance of things on the part of God as ruler of the universe'.

The Nature of Virtue Ethics

In medieval philosophy, the phrase virtue theory or virtue ethics refers to ethical systems that focus primarily on what sort of person one should try to be. Thus, one of the aims of virtue theory is to offer an account of the sort of characteristics a virtuous person has. The ultimate aim of virtue theory is eudemonism (Gk *eudaimonia* happiness) which speaks the highest ethical goal as happiness and personal well-being. It is roughly meaning 'flourishing' or 'success.'

The word 'virtue' finds its origin in Latin *Virtus* and in Greek *Arête*. A virtue is a quality of character, a disposition to do what is right in a particular direction. A virtue is also a habit of action considering to the quality of character or dispositions. According to Aristotle, "Virtue is a permanent state of mind, formed with the concurrence of the will and based on an ideal of what is best in actual life, an ideal fixed by reason." In this way, virtue is an acquired quality. To achieve '*eudemonia*" one must live by what can be considered virtues such as charity, stoicism (indifference to pleasure or pain), honesty, friendliness, fairness and so forth.

The methods of virtue ethics are in contrast to the dominant methods in ethical philosophy, which focus on action philosophy. For example, both Immanuel Kant and

utilitarian systems try to provide guiding principles for actions that allow a person to decide how to behave in any given situation. Virtue theory, by contrast, focuses on what makes a good person, rather than what makes a good action. As such it is often associated with a teleological ethical system - one that seeks to define the proper *telos* (goal or end) of the human person.

Renewed interests in virtue theory arise from dissatisfaction with the way we do ethics today. Most discussions about contemporary ethics consider major controversial actions: abortion, nuclear war, gene therapy, etc. These discussions basically dominate contemporary ethics. Virtue ethicists have more extensive concerns. We believe that the real discussion of ethics is not primarily the question about what actions are morally permissible, but rather who should we become? In fact, virtue ethicists expand the question into three key related ones: Who are we? Who ought we to become? How are we to get there?

To answer the first question, we must focus on two major considerations. First, what standards are we to measure ourselves against? Second, how will we know whether we are measuring ourselves fairly? Regarding the first point, two of the most important works in ethics attempt to assist us by naming the basic virtues. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle gives us eleven different virtues that are necessary for citizens to engage. The different virtues are concerned with the regulation of non-rational desires (bravery, temperance and good temper), external goods (magnificence and magnanimity) and social situations (truthfulness and wit). Apart from these, happiness, friendship, generosity and practical wisdom are some of these. In the *Summa Theologiae,* Aquinas takes from Plato, the four cardinal virtues and he adds with these the three theological virtues. He states that we can acquire the cardinal virtues through deliberately willed and enjoyed

habitual right action; the theological virtues are gifts from God. These virtues help us to answer the question of self-understanding like are we just, prudent, temperate and courageous?

But how can we be sure that we are not simply deceiving ourselves regarding our self-understanding? Here, Aristotle suggests that we can know ourselves by considering how we act in spontaneous situations and we discover ourselves when we act in the unplanned world of ordinary life. We may believe that we are particularly brave or cowardly, but that assessment is only correct if it conforms to how we actually behave in the unanticipated, concrete situation. Self knowledge is key, critical and honest and not based on wishful thinking.

The second question, "Who ought we to become"? embodies a vision of the type of persons we ought to become. We use the virtues to set the personal goals that encourage ourselves to seek. St Thomas and others call this goal the "end". That is, the middle question sets the end that we should seek. That end is a type of person with the cardinal virtues. Setting this end means that the fundamental task of the moral life is to develop a vision and to strive to attain it. Inasmuch as that vision is who we ought to become, then, the key insight is that we should always aim to grow. As a person-oriented ethics, this insists that without growth, we cannot become moral.

Setting such an end describes then another way that virtue ethicists are different from other ethicists. Rather than first examining actions and asking whether we should perform them or not, virtue ethicists suggest that we ought to set ends for the type of people we believe we should become. Thus, to the extent that we are examining our lives and seeking ways of improving ourselves for the moral prosperity of our world, to that extent we are engaging virtue ethics.

Turning to the third question, in order to get there, we need to practice the cardinal virtues along with theological virtues. Modern virtue ethicists often claim Aristotle as an ancestor. Aristotle, however, was himself working through an agenda laid down by Plato and Socrates. Socrates asked the question at the heart of Greek ethics: 'How should one live?'

Conclusion

The ancient philosophical task was to show how living virtuously would be best for the virtuous person. Plato's *Republic* attempts to answer the challenge that rational people will aim to get the most pleasure, honour and power for themselves. His argument is that justice, broadly construed, is to be identified with a rational ordering of one's soul. Once one sees that one identifies oneself with one's reason, one will realize that being just is in fact best for oneself. Aristotle continued the same project, aiming to show that human happiness consists in the exercise (not the mere possession of) the virtues. Ultimately, Aristotle's method is similar to Plato's. Much of *Nicomachean Ethics* is taken up with portraits of the virtuous man intended to attract one to a life such as his. For Aristotle, all of the 'practical' virtues will be possessed by the truly virtuous person, the man of 'practical wisdom'. Medieval philosophy tries to make a distinction between ethics and morals or morality. Everyone, even the most uncivilized and uncultured, has its own morality or sum of prescriptions which govern their moral conduct. Nature had so provided that each man establishes for himself a code of moral concepts and principles which are applicable to the details of practical life, without the necessity of awaiting the conclusions of science. Ethics is the scientific or philosophical treatment of morality. Morality is the content and ethics is the study of the content.

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