

## A Virtue-Ethical Approach to Education

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The teacher's spirituality and devotion to God and the Christian faith are pivotal for the Christian identity of the school. The question that concerns us all is: *How can we improve the teachers' abilities and competencies, so that they can really make a difference in the moral and spiritual formation of their students?*

In this lecture I take a virtue-ethical approach. The *lectoraat* Moral Education at the Reformed University of Applied Sciences in Zwolle, which I chair, aims at the development of such a virtue-ethical approach to moral education in both primary and secondary schools.\* Here follows the framework of my lecture:

1. Why I opt for a virtue-ethical approach and not primarily for other ethical theories.
2. Characteristics of the concept of virtue.
3. An investigation of the virtue-ethical tradition with attention to the attitude of Reformed and other Protestant theologians to virtue ethics.
4. Some important implications for the daily educational practice.

### 1. Why a virtue-ethical approach?

First of all I think that the most pedagogical kind of ethics is virtue-ethics. It is in fact remarkable that Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development has become dominant in educational practice. The theory of moral development, which focuses on moral justice thinking, has dominated formation practices in Western society for many years, even in Christian and Reformed education.

Kohlberg proposed three stages in the development of moral thinking, leading to the level of moral autonomy. The educational approach derived from this theory consists in reasoning about moral dilemmas in the classroom in order to stimulate moral development. The focus is on troubling moral dilemmas and borderline cases.

I do not have problems with the principle of moral autonomy as such. In his later years Kohlberg himself tried to add a spiritual – probably we would say heteronomous – aspect to his theory. My critique concerns the one-sidedness of this approach, and the fact that the link between the conclusions of a classroom discussion and actual behavior is tenuous. Borderline cases are interesting and certainly important, but we do not often have to decide in moral situations of great anxiety and uncertainty, as is the case in a dilemma like Kohlberg's famous Heinz-case.

*Heinz's wife was near death from a special kind of cancer. Heinz did not have the money to buy the very expensive drug that the doctors thought might save her. He tried to borrow the money and to get the drug from the pharmacist at a lower price, but he did not succeed. Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug. The question is: Should Heinz have done so? Why or why not?*

Kohlberg's approach is very cognitive-oriented and aims in a one-sided way at the principle of justice as the highest value. Unlike Kohlberg's theory, virtue ethics states that moral formation

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\* A *lectoraat* is a scientific research and education unit. For more information see [www.lectoraatmorelevorming.nl](http://www.lectoraatmorelevorming.nl)

is not only a matter of developing the capacity of moral reasoning (in borderline cases), but also the formation of the moral self into a virtuous character.

From a pedagogical and formative perspective, virtue ethics is much more appropriate to the aim of moral formation than is a purely cognitive approach. In my view, moral formation requires a more comprehensive educational approach, in which both moral judgment and habituation, both reasoning and moral praxis, are developed.

Secondly, moral formation is a lengthy process, which has as *positive* aim the development of the person into a moral character. Moral formation is regarded as primarily preventive instead of curative. I therefore think it's a bad idea to regard moral formation as an effective instrument (a "cure") aimed at curbing undesirable behavior of youngsters. We should not use it as a means of treating certain *negative* incidents and problems in society. In my view, moral formation must not be regarded as an externally imposed obligation but as an important preventive pedagogical task of education itself. It is exactly this pedagogical starting-point which is characteristic of virtue ethics.

In the third place, virtue theory is an ethics of the good life. As such, it focuses on the moral formation of a person as well as on the formation of that person for social and political life. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre therefore refurbished classical virtue theory in the notion of practices, including professional practices. These practices are social activities in which participants cooperate for the achievement of goods or objectives that are internal to those practices. The moral quality of a practice is established by standards of excellence that hold for that practice. Virtues are those qualities that participants in a practice need in order to gain excellence and achieve the goods internal to those practices.

Virtues, then, are not only related to the moral formation of a person, they have also a specific application in (professional) practices. Applied to the professional practice of education this means that virtues are the qualities of the teacher both as a person and a professional. Virtues are moral qualities, comparable to Korthagen's *kernkwaliteiten*, but at the same time much more concrete than these *kernkwaliteiten*, because of the specific meaning of the virtues. My point is that in Korthagen's concept there is no standard by which we can determine what qualities are the *right* qualities. Christian virtue ethics can provide us with such a standard.

This brings me to my fourth and final argument for adopting a virtue-ethical approach. I think that virtue ethics is the most appropriate ethics for Christian moral education. It is true that virtue ethics is of ancient Greek origin. But it also formed the ethical framework of the Christian Middle Ages, and Christian virtue ethics is imbedded in the biblical ethics of God's commandments.

## 2. A characterization of virtue

Our question is: how are we to characterize virtue? As mentioned, virtue ethics finds its origin in classical antiquity, especially in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle's description of virtue is still the standard in moral philosophy. This does not mean, however, that a virtue ethics inspired by a Christian worldview and practised in the modern era should entirely adopt Aristotle's ethics. I will return to this later. For determining the idea of virtue we can, nevertheless, follow one of the definitions that Aristotle gives.

### (2.1) A virtue is a state of character

In Aristotle's definition, a virtue is first of all to be regarded as a state of character, *hexis* in Greek or *habitus* in Latin, a state that is acquired through experience and habit. In today's

context we could say that virtue ethics is not so much concerned with what you are or are not allowed to do (norms), nor primarily with the ideals you are striving for (values). Virtue ethics aims at developing states of character. Virtues are dispositions: one becomes inclined to conduct oneself in certain ways. But virtues are more than just dispositions. They not only equip us for certain activities, they also influence how we perceive the activities in which we engage and how we respond to situations and to other people. That's why we can call them character traits.

The meaning of this can be explained with the Greek word *karasso*, which means "carving." One might say that I put small carvings in my personality by means of all my actions (and by the actions of others which relate to me). If certain actions develop into a habit, those carvings become a track, through which a lasting character trait is developed. They become part of my attitude. If such a trait is good we call it a virtue, if bad, we call it a vice.

### *(2.2) Virtue determines our actions and choices*

Our character traits not only determine what we will do, but also how we will respond to the situations in which we find ourselves. We mostly make our choices on the basis of character traits, often without being aware of this. Example: If I am a negligent person I do not have much regularity in my life: one moment I will focus on this and the other moment on something else. But this irregularity also shows a pattern which reveals my character. How do we determine what is the right, i.e., the *virtuous* pattern?

### *(2.3) Virtue is a mean*

The answer is that virtue must be considered as a quality that can be characterized as *a mean* (*meson*). According to Aristotle, virtue is concerned with feelings and actions in which there is the possibility of excess, deficiency, and an intermediate level, namely the mean. Virtue is a mean between two vices, which can be described as too much or too little, too early or too late, too fast or too slow, etc. But to understand what the mean is we will have to realize that virtue is always an *optimum* as well, which means: it is the best possible quality. A virtue is not an avoiding of extremes, but an excellence.

The standard example is the virtue of courage. Somebody who is courageous does not keep the mean between a little courage and a lot of courage, but between being afraid of danger and not being afraid of danger at all. The first vice we call cowardice (a vice of deficiency), the second recklessness or rashness (a vice of excess). Courage in the virtue approach of Aristotle is the perfect mean between these two. The practice of virtue as a mean enables one to give an appropriate response in a given situation.

Looked at this way most virtues can be described as character traits in which a natural emotion or passion finds its best shape. Anxiety, for example, finds its best shape in the virtue of courage, moral anger in that of justice, consumerism in the virtue of temperance.

### *(2.4) Virtue manifests itself in the prudent person*

Aristotle states that the mean is relative to us, which does not imply relativism, but indicates that a virtue does not mean the same thing for everybody at any moment. Virtues are qualities which make it possible to do the right thing at the right time, etc., but it is not possible to say for once and all what is the mean, i.e., the right way of reacting.

How, then, can one determine the mean in a given situation? For this, practical wisdom, *phronèsis* or prudence, is needed. To know what is prudent and reasonable in a situation we have to pay attention to two things: 1) the aim or *telos*, and 2) the circumstances. Paying

attention to the aim means that you wonder: what is the good or final end at which my action is aimed? And paying attention to the circumstances means that you wonder if your reaction is right in this *specific* situation. In antiquity they used to explain the meaning of *phronesis* by pointing to the practice of archery. The Bowman can only hit the bull's eye when he looks both at the target and at the circumstances, like the influence of the wind.

A second rule of thumb to determine the right attitude entails finding the mean by watching good examples, that is, the behavior of prudent people. It is to find out what a person whom we consider to be excellently prudent, courageous, patient, magnanimous, righteous etc., would do. The good example is a criterion. Watching it shows us the way by which we can keep the mean ourselves.

To conclude: a virtue is a stable disposition or character trait leading to (re)actions and behaviour in accordance with a mean as determined by practical wisdom in relation to given situations.

### *(2.5) Virtues are interrelated*

Someone who has one particular virtue is not yet a good person. One single virtue can even be used for wrong purposes. For example, a Nazi can be a courageous soldier, yet his cruel treatment of Jews and other people shows that he completely lacks the virtue of justice. Therefore he is not a virtuous person. In Holland we used to say "*één deugd maakt nog geen deugd*" ("one virtue doesn't yet make virtuous"). Virtues are interrelated and interconnected.

Consistency and comprehensiveness are traditionally found in four main virtues to which the other virtues are subjected. These are the cardinal virtues: courage, temperance, prudence, and justice. These four virtues are 'cardinal' because together they form the hinge around which all virtues rotate (*cardo* is the Latin word for 'hinge'). This means that one should be able to recognize each of the four cardinal virtues in other virtues. For example:

- The virtue of temperance is present in every virtue as the mean between excess and deficiency.
- Courage is required as a virtue when there is a risk or danger. When you are in difficult situations it will show whether you really are honest, faithful, responsible, respectful, and so on.
- Justice has to do with right distribution. For example, you can be honest, but if you are honest at the expense of your friendship, you are not honest in the right way.
- Finally, prudence is the virtue which makes it possible to apply a virtue in the right way in a given situation.

### *(2.6) Telos*

Aristotle holds that virtues gain their meaning in the perspective of the end (*telos*). The highest good of human life is happiness (*eudaimonia*). According to Aristotle, happiness consists in the realization of the best human opportunities in a certain form of life, which coincides with life as a citizen in the city state or *polis*. One could say that the virtues enable us to live a life characteristic of flourishing human beings. That brings me to the next part:

## **3. Virtue ethics in the Christian tradition**

### *(3.1) Augustine and Thomas Aquinas*

Though virtue ethics is of ancient Greek origin, it also formed a constitutive part of Christian ethics in early Christianity. The difference is that virtue ethics commonly followed by Christians is imbedded in a biblical concept of morality in which the Divine Law plays an

important role. And a fundamental correction brought about by Christianity is the introduction of the idea of radical evil and the role of the will.

The Church Father Augustine emphasizes the radical nature of evil and in doing so corrects the optimism found in Greek virtue ethics. In *The City of God*, Augustine remarks that because the virtues of the pagans are not grounded in knowledge of and love for God, they should be understood as vices. For the will should aim at the highest good, but in reality it often turns out to be an evil will. This means that moral formation is not only concerned with the mind (he who knows what is good will do it) and the passions, as is the case with the Greeks, but also with the aim of developing the will into a good will. Such is not something that people can accomplish themselves; it requires the working of God's grace in one's life.

Whereas Augustine taught that the virtues are a matter of grace, several centuries later Thomas Aquinas emphasizes the natural capacity of man to be virtuous, although this is a capacity created by God in human nature. With Aristotle, Thomas considers the desire for happiness as a motor for our actions and the good as something we feel attracted by instead of something we feel obliged to do by commandments and duties. The Divine Law functions as an external principle, but virtues are the internal principles serving as qualities of the soul. He who has virtue does the good spontaneously (*prompte*), with ease (*faciliter*), and with pleasure (*delectabiliter*). This does not mean that Thomas fails to take into consideration the destructive influence of the fall into sin on human nature. But he focuses on the connection of human nature with the intrinsic good as a motor of action. Among the virtues acquired by man himself are the original Greek cardinal virtues of temperance, courage, prudence and justice, which are distinguished from the so-called theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, which are infused by divine grace.

### *(3.2) Protestantism and the virtues*

In the churches of the Reformation, the concept of virtue has had a different framework. Martin Luther's criticism on the merits of good deeds and his radical emphasis on grace meant that virtues can only be considered in a positive way if they are related to Christ. The Reformation broke with the Thomist scheme of nature and grace and the distinction between natural and theological virtues resulting from this. A gradual development from a sinful into a virtuous human being is impossible: a Christian needs a continuous return to grace.

In Luther's view, the moral self is determined by the divine verdict, which means that one is both sinner (when seen and judged in oneself) and saint (only in Christ). However, this criticism of Aristotelian and Thomistic virtue ethics does not prevent the Reformers from speaking in a positive way about virtues. Luther gives the virtues their place, but only within a larger context in which divine grace rather than human virtue is preeminent. It seems to me that Luther speaks paradoxically about the relation between grace and good deeds, and this makes his evaluation of virtues ambiguous. For instance, there is a tension between the way he sees possibilities for good deeds in civil life (which implies that virtuous traits of character can be developed) on the one hand, and his stress on our passive role before God when it comes to justification. The gift of faith is infused in such a way that we do not bring our virtue to God but that He in Christ brings virtue to us. In his *Lectures on Galatians*, Luther unites both perspectives: "Christians do not become righteous by doing righteous works; but once they have been justified by faith in Christ, they do righteous works." That's why he can regularly refer to various virtues, such as gentleness, humility, friendliness, hope, and love.

John Calvin also values the virtues in the context of the Christian life. Especially in his commentaries we find a great many references to virtues. He fully agrees with Augustine and

considers virtues to be fruitless as a means of justification. The concept of faith is not to be understood in terms of virtues. But when Calvin deals with the sanctified Christian life in book III, chapter 6, of his *Institutes*, he appears to be in full agreement with the Church Fathers who wrote so well and profoundly about the various virtues. He himself does not deal with them in detail, because his intention is not to extend his instruction in virtuous living “so far as to treat of each virtue specially, and expiate in exhortation. This must be sought in the writings of others, and particularly in the Homilies of the Fathers” (III.6.1). The division followed by Calvin is that, on the one hand, “the love of righteousness, to which we are by no means naturally inclined, may be instilled and implanted into our minds” (III.6.2), and on the other hand, we are prescribed a rule which does not make us err: namely to obey God and his commandments (III.7.2).

You might say that virtue ethics (cultivating love of righteousness) goes here hand in hand with an ethics of obligation (following God’s commandments). And in a certain sense this is also the case in Protestant ethics as a whole. But whereas in medieval morality and in Thomist ethics, virtue ethics has the primacy over commandments, the opposite is true for Protestant ethics. Generally speaking the ethics of obligation, based on the Ten Commandments, is the basis and the framework within which virtues have only a modest function. The aspect of duty *outweighs* that of virtue.

### (3.3) Rejection of the virtues

So, whereas with Luther and Calvin and for instance also with Melancton and Ursinus, virtues did not play an unimportant role, Protestant ethics developed more and more into a pure ethics of obligation, although there were important exceptions. But especially in the twentieth century the interest in virtue ethics was displaced by a hostile attitude towards the concept of virtue, ending in an *en bloc* rejection in Neo-Calvinistic theology. The Reformation’s doctrine of justification was being *opposed* to the concept of virtue. But as I have shown Luther and Calvin themselves did not reject the virtues as their modern neo-orthodox interpreters did.

The most important argument raised against virtue ethics was that the concept of virtue implies an element of selfishness and perfectionism which was defined as *the capacity for meritorious action*. The theory, it was assumed, misconceives the relation between man and his Maker by the anthropological presupposition of the human soul as in a certain way autonomous instead of dependent on God. It was also argued that the Bible does not speak of an attitude, but of an obedient response to the divine demand. Because of these arguments many Protestants question statements about the moral qualification of the person in favor of statements about the divine demand and its obedient fulfillment.

This shift within Protestantism after the Reformation to an ethics of obligation, and finally the entire rejection of virtue ethics in twentieth-century Protestantism, has had great consequences.

Whereas virtue has to do with a stable disposition, a *habitus*, duty refers to *independent* just actions. Virtue ethics deals with the question whether you are a “just person.” And this is exactly the problem with virtues in Protestantism. Afraid of a doctrine of human self-sufficiency, many Protestants could no longer honour virtue as a *habitus* or attitude in ethics and distilled instead an ethics of obligation from the Bible, rather than an ethics of virtue. In this vision, virtues must be framed by rules, laws, norms and duties and even then virtues are no more than means enabling us to live in obedience to the commandments. I think that this is why Protestant educators also had difficulties with the idea that children can grow in good

character and that their virtues can increase like the flourishing tree that is planted by streams of water (Psalm 1).

#### *(3.4) The need for virtue ethics in Protestantism*

I consider this shift from virtue to duty both theologically and pedagogically a serious limitation because it insufficiently recognizes the importance of inner motivation. An ethics of obligation tends to be law-abiding. But law as such is an external motivation, and basing ethics on law means that attention is automatically fixed on legislation and the maintenance of law instead of on the inner motivation of the actor. Although the ideal may be a joyfully converted human being who desires (through God's grace) to live in agreement with the Law of God, in the Reformed pedagogical practice there seems to be too much emphasis on devotion to duty, discipline, regulation, self-control, obedience, commandments, and prohibitions. See on this also J. C. Sturm's overview of neo-Calvinist pedagogical writings, which left the impression that God's work of conversion must be guarded meticulously and that the converted human being cannot really be trusted.

After World War II, ethicists and pedagogues such as Brillenburg Wurth, Schippers and Waterink opposed the idea that the Ten Commandments can be obeyed without an inner loving bond with these commandments. Brillenburg Wurth, in fact, pleaded for a "rehabilitation of virtue," without, however, finding many followers. Jochem Douma also paid attention to the virtues, but his ethical framework is still characterized by the dominance of moral principles and rules derived from Scripture.

In my estimation a rehabilitation of the concept of virtue as a state of character is necessary, although I agree that in pedagogical practice we also need principles, rules, and laws. But in the end good actions originate from the good *habitus* of a morally formed person. The true meaning of the concept of *habitus* is the continuity of one's actions as based in a disposition or character trait. Furthermore, it seems that there is hardly any obstacle from a theological point of view to connect justification through faith and grace alone with an ethics in which this grace works in such a manner that a human being focuses on God as the source of the good so that he can really acquire substantive virtues. The most important argument for this is that the Reformation's criticism was not directed at the concept of virtue as such, but at the human capacity for meritorious action in justification. If I am correct, the question then becomes whether there are theological reasons for rejecting virtue ethics. For one can imagine a theory of virtue as a theory of the constitution of the actor, including its quality by habit, but excluding any idea of meritorious action. Besides, the striving in Christian virtue ethics is urged by God, who is the highest good and the source of love. Following the line of the Protestant and biblical doctrine of grace one might say that the recognition of being a sinner teaches us to receive the moral good from God, but at the same time to receive this truly, so that the Christian attitude is possible because of our being in Christ.

As I have shown, the Reformers themselves left room for such a sanctification of the Christian life. A Christian ethics cannot limit itself to speak only of God's grace and then turn to God's demand and the duties derived from that, but has also to speak of the believer's active life, and the constitution of the agent. Scripture does this for instance in the catalogues of virtue in the New Testament (e.g. Phil. 4:8; 1 Pet. 2:9; 2 Pet. 1:3-5; see also Gal. 5:22f.). Human beings must be morally formed, for they are not good by nature.

So my plea is for a reintroduction of virtue ethics both in Protestant ethics and in the practice of moral formation (although, again, I think that virtue ethics must be combined with external norms which are given, for example, in the Ten Commandments).

#### 4. Some implications of the practice of moral formation

(4.1) A virtue-ethical approach of moral education does not aim first of all at the education of the student but of the teacher. Generally speaking, “examples are better than precepts.” Teachers should therefore in the first place learn to reflect on themselves. This can be done, for example, by asking oneself what a truly exemplary teacher is like, and what in all kinds of moral situations would be the right, that is to say the optimal reaction. Courses for teachers are in fact being developed in Zwolle which focus on these issues.

(4.2) The daily pedagogical interaction between teacher and student is important. Moral formation should be integrated in education as a whole, rather than being only the subject of specific lessons in ethics, and rather than taking the form of discussions on moral dilemmas. This does not exclude lessons, but most important are the unplanned moral situations which can become “golden moments,” in which more may be learned than in a whole series of lessons. A teacher must have the pedagogical ability to respond adequately to questions regarding virtuous acts. In Zwolle we research the way in which this is done by teachers and how it can be improved.

(4.3) The strength of the virtue-ethical approach is that it is connected with motivations which already exist. The question of a modern ethics of obligation is: what do I have to do? The question of virtue-ethics is: how do I want to be? This is a question which children and young people are strongly occupied with. It is also a normative issue within the framework of a Christian view of humankind. A virtue-ethical approach appeals to the intrinsic motivation of students, as does good education in general – namely to challenge them to make connections between what they are good at with what they would like to be. By giving responsibility to students and by trusting them, desires can be used in a positive way.

(4.4) Because of this it is important that the school is a community where teachers and students know each other. For Reformed education in which the idea of community is still alive, there are great opportunities in this area, even though in society as a whole the unity between school, home and church is no longer taken for granted. Schools which still form a community must strive for a situation in which teachers, students, supporting staff and parents feel connected and know that they are appreciated.

In short, if we want to follow the virtue-ethical approach to moral education in our schools we must think of it in terms of gradual formation, start with ourselves as teachers, and realize that the education of a virtuous person takes place in *community*. Our goal as Christians is, in the words of Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck, to “become *people of God* well equipped, *even perfectly* to all good deeds.”

#### **Bibliographical Information**

(1) A more extended and documented version of this lecture will appear in Bram de Muynck, Johan Hegeman & Pieter Vos, eds., *Bridging the Gap: Connecting Christian Faith and Professional Practice*. Proceedings of the European IAPCHE Conference 2009, Sioux Center, Dordt Press, to appear.

(2) In 2010, two books were published (in Dutch) on virtues in educational practice, respectively for secondary and elementary schools. They are:

- Gerrit van der Meulen, Pieter Vos & Wilma van der Jagt, *Dat doet deugd: Praktijkboek morele vorming voor het voortgezet onderwijs* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2010), 140 pp. (see [www.uitgeverijboekencentrum.nl/shop\\_details.php?productId=23252](http://www.uitgeverijboekencentrum.nl/shop_details.php?productId=23252)).

- Wilma van der Jagt & Pieter Vos, *Doe me een deugd. Praktijkboek morele vorming voor het basisschool* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2010), 127 pp. (see [www.boekencentrum.nl/shop\\_details.php?productId=23109](http://www.boekencentrum.nl/shop_details.php?productId=23109) ).

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