

# ETHICS AND THE PERFECT MORAL LAW<sup>1</sup>

Harry Bunting

## Summary

*This paper examines contemporary virtue ethics and the claim that Christian ethics is a virtue ethic. Three central theses are identified as being central to virtue ethics: a priority thesis, a perfectionist thesis and a communitarian thesis. It is argued that defences of the priority thesis—it best addresses the moral crisis in our society, it does justice to historical consciousness and it remedies the incompleteness in deontic ethics—are unconvincing. It is argued that virtue and moral perfection are best understood in terms of psychologically appropriate dispositions to act in accordance with moral principles. It is further argued that the communitarian thesis raises relativist difficulties and fails to do justice to the universal elements of morality. Each of these arguments is developed philosophically and the implications for Christian ethics are explored. In light of the theory of virtue sketched in the paper it is concluded that the independence thesis, upon which virtue ethics rests, is untenable and that an examination of the structure of the universal moral principles underlying the Christian faith remains the proper subject matter for Christian ethics.*

## I. Introduction

It is recorded in Holy Scripture that when God told the prophet Samuel to anoint a King of Israel from amongst the sons of Jesse the Bethlehemite, seven of Jesse's sons were considered and all seven rejected.

Unexpectedly, God instructed Samuel to appoint as King the youngest son—David—because, we read: 'man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart' (1 Sa. 16:7).

At an early point in the unfolding of God's purposes, therefore, we

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are introduced to a moral distinction between appearance and reality, between an outward self and an inward self which is the true self; and we are cautioned that it is the inner self which is of primary moral importance. The distinction between how people appear and how they truly are appears again and again in Scripture; it is prominent both in modern and in ancient culture, and it is a distinction which is as central to common sense as to academic reflection. At the level of common sense the distinction appears when we reflect on the multiplicity of motives, good and bad, which may be behind apparently identical actions; and it is most keenly felt when we encounter hypocrisy in others or in ourselves. The distinction provides one of the grand themes of fiction, the delicious details of whose infinite permutations have fascinated countless generations of dramatists and novelists. I am led to believe that it is a favourite theme in existentialist literature where it takes various forms, chiefly a flight from '*mauvaise foi*' and a quest for authenticity. Since 1999 is the centenary of the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, we should not forget that it is a distinction in which Freud also was intensely interested.

An emphasis on the moral significance of inner character is of importance to our present purposes for two inter-related reasons. Firstly, a stress on inner character as opposed to outward action is a prominent feature of contemporary philosophical ethics where the emphasis has given rise, in recent decades, to the emergence of the school which is called 'virtue ethics'; and thereby has been responsible, if confident voices are to be believed, for the most significant restructuring of the general contours of ethical theory in the modern period. The stress on duty and obligation which is the hallmark of 'modern ethics' from Hobbes to Rawls is to be replaced by a stress on character; deontic terms give way to aretic. In the first place, then, an emphasis on character has promised to open up a new agenda in philosophical ethics.

Secondly, and building on this first point, an emphasis on inner character is important because of the widespread conviction, in Christian academic circles, that Christian ethics is a virtue ethic.<sup>2</sup>

See especially S. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); J.J. Kotva, *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1996); G.C. Meilander, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), and J. Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue* (London: SPCK, 1996).

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Stated informally, it is claimed that there are biblical and theological foundations for the claim that character is the primary focus in Christian ethics. The moral perfection of Jesus and His role for believers as master and guide, the centrality of the doctrine of sanctification, the stress on the communal nature of the moral development of the believer: the existence of these and other themes has convinced some recent writers that Christian ethics is a virtue ethic. Our purpose, therefore, is to consider this thesis.

A preliminary clarification is necessary at this point. I have mentioned the stress upon character in contemporary virtue ethics, suggesting that this distinguishes virtue ethics from deontological ethics. However, whatever distinction we may draw between deontic and virtue ethics, it cannot be drawn quite as simply as this because writers in the deontological tradition such as Kant are extremely interested in character and virtue-theorists such as Aquinas are extremely interested in moral principles. Some alternative account of the issues is called for; some more substantive account of the distinction between deontic and aretic ethics is needed as a framework within which to discuss the claim that Christian ethics is a virtue ethic.

Perhaps there are as many forms of virtue ethics as there are defenders of that point of view. Nevertheless, some common themes run through classic expositions of the position. The fundamental contentions of virtue ethics appear to be threefold:

- (1) A priority thesis: aretic and deontic terms are irreducible and the former are of prior moral significance; Christian moral theory primarily involves aretic terms.
- (2) A perfectionist thesis: ethics, and Christian ethics in particular, are centrally concerned with the perfection of character; all other moral concepts are derivable from the concept of a morally paradigmatic person.
- (3) A communitarian thesis: all moral virtues, including Christian virtues are intelligible only within the context of culture-specific or historic-specific communities or traditions.

Christian virtue ethics amounts, in brief, to a priority thesis, a perfectionist thesis and a communitarian thesis. In assessing the central claim that Christian ethics is a virtue ethic I propose, therefore, to examine these theses in turn and to attempt to form a judgement as to whether and to what extent these central claims are true.

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## II. The Priority Thesis

I have characterised virtue theory as a priority thesis. It is important to note, however, that it can take stronger and weaker forms. On the weak version virtue theory merely involves an independence thesis, to the effect that aretic and deontic terms are independent of each other and that an independent understanding of each is of importance to ethics. The independence thesis is the philosophical foundation of much virtue theory, so if my later arguments call into question the independence thesis then either virtue ethics will have to be rejected or its significance sought in very different quarters.

In its earliest formulations, in the work of Anscombe and MacIntyre, virtue ethics took the form of a stronger, redundancy, thesis.<sup>3</sup> On this view deontic ethics gives rise to interminable and inconclusive argument concerning moral dilemmas; or it presupposes the fiction of a divine law-giver, a theological context which no longer has cultural relevance. For these reasons, it is argued, it is best replaced by an ethic of character which takes the cultivation of character as its central concern. These contentions are highly questionable. There is little agreement concerning moral dilemmas amongst defenders of virtue ethics; it is unclear why deontic terms necessarily require a theological context and it is even more unclear that theology is culturally irrelevant. For these reasons I am not persuaded by the redundancy thesis.

More common is the intermediate position priority thesis, which grants a role to deontic principles but argues that aretic considerations take priority over them. Defenders of this form of virtue ethics would concede that moral principles have an important role in morality—they may and often do function in guiding our conduct. However, they do so only because they summarise, or generalise the decisions of ideal moral exemplars. When principles no longer play a useful role, for example when they conflict and give rise to moral dilemmas, the true nature of moral theory is revealed:

what should be done is what a morally perfect person would do in the circumstances. The important point is that moral rules and principles possess no independent moral significance.

Unlike deontic theories, then, virtue ethics recognises the importance of virtuous character. This seems to be its central, and

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Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981).

G.E.M. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy* 33 (1958), 1-19;

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most important insight and it is an insight which underpins all of the various forms, moderate or radical, which virtue ethics currently takes.

Rather than pursue virtue ethics as an abstract philosophical theory, however, let us examine it as it appears in a Christian context, taking as an example of such an approach the recent book by J.J. Kotva, *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics*.<sup>4</sup>

Central to Kotva's theory is the distinction with which I introduced this paper: that between modern ethics and virtue ethics. Modern ethics is concerned with 'rules, principles, goods and step-by-step decision making procedures for resolving moral quandaries' and for 'determining the moral status of specific acts'.<sup>5</sup> Virtue ethics, by contrast will follow Aquinas' conviction that 'Christian moral reflection profits from the adoption of an Aristotelian framework',<sup>6</sup> and is centrally concerned with agent-centred issues: its teleological structure describes human nature as it is, the 'telos' or the end which it could be and the qualities of character, themselves internally related to the end, necessary to effect the transition from the former to the latter.

A substantial part of Kotva's book is devoted to documenting the central role which virtue plays in Christian ethics. The chapters which demonstrate the centrality of virtue to theological and biblical themes are detailed and, irrespective of any philosophical conclusion which may finally be drawn on Kotva's project, these sections are impressive demonstrations of the centrality of character and virtue to Christian moral life. When exploring specifically theological material, Kotva's treats of concepts such as sanctification and Christology. Drawing on the work of

writers such as Erikson, Macquarrie and Berkof, Kotva shows that sanctification involves a process of personal eschatology in which, as virtues such as love, joy and peace are cultivated, the character of the believer is transformed into the likeness of Christ. Central to Christian virtue we also find a distinctive moral interpretation of Christology. Jesus' question: 'who do you say that I am?' (Mt. 16:15), is not an historical or a metaphysical question, Kotva claims; on the contrary, it is a moral question. The incarnation involves a unique disclosure of God's nature and so basic moral virtues gain an authoritative expression in the context of the life

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Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1996. Kotva, *The Christian Case*, p. 5.  
Kotva, *The Christian Case*, p. 1.

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and teaching of Jesus.

In a similar vein Kotva explores biblical connections to virtue.

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Themes such as the importance of the inner life, the perfectionist moral example and the master-disciple relationship are all documented in detail in the Gospel narrative and in the Pauline writings. In all of these ways Kotva succeeds in demonstrating the presence, in Christian tradition, of themes which are centrally concerned with virtue.

When assessing the significance of this textual and theological evidence we must make a distinction, of the first importance, between two theses:

- (1) a moral thesis: Christian ethics involves the cultivation of certain moral and theological virtues, and
- (2) a philosophical thesis: Christian ethics is a virtue ethic.

To show that (1) and (2) are distinct it is sufficient to point out that the truth of (2) commits one to holding the independence thesis whereas the truth of (1) entails no such commitments.

If this distinction is kept in mind then Kotva's case in the central chapters of the book collapses because his carefully documented evidence is evidence only for the truth of (1), not evidence for the truth of (2). This

central point can be grasped if we approach the issue from a different point of view. Suppose that we documented from Scripture and from theology the importance of law to divine-human relations, finding it central to God's covenant relations with the Jews and in the 'new covenant' which the Gospel era introduces. Would this establish that Christian ethics is a contractarian version of a deontological ethic? Or does the prominence of the ideal of beneficence in the Christian life establish that Christian ethics is a version of consequentialism? If the answer to these questions is 'yes' then Christian ethics could be shown to embrace contradictory ethical systems.

It is clear therefore that the moral and philosophical theses which I outlined are logically distinct. No doubt Christian ethics encompasses a variety of virtues but it does not follow from this that Christian ethics is a virtue ethic. The virtues which feature in the Christian life can be analysed in a variety of ways and which of these ways is correct is a philosophical rather than a textual question.

It should be clear then that two things are needed to establish that Christian ethics is a virtue ethic: firstly an account of the nature of a virtue which provides a basis for distinguishing between virtue ethics and deontological ethics; and secondly an argument which shows the greater interpretative explanatory power for Christianity of virtue ethics. At no stage does Kotva proceed in this way and his project is

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seriously flawed as a result. He simply believes that the presence of references to virtue in Scripture and theology establishes that Christianity is a virtue ethic and this is insufficient to establish his case.

What Kotva does do, however, is to offer moral and philosophical arguments for accepting virtue ethics and since the arguments in question are so widely used and are in some quarters influential I shall look at them in some detail.

According to Kotva virtue ethics is philosophically preferable for the Christian for three principal reasons: it can best address the problems posed by the moral crisis in our society, it can best do justice to the rise of historical consciousness and it remedies the incompleteness which characterises modern theories.

The crisis to which Kotva refers in the first argument, and which virtue ethics is designed to remedy, is a moral and spiritual crisis: the institution of the family is in jeopardy, levels of violence are rising, social order is collapsing. For those, like myself, who are unclear as to why an acceptance of virtue ethics will remedy the crisis, rather than for example a revival of Kantian reverence for the moral law, Kotva has two answers. Firstly, virtue ethics can best address the crisis because it ‘recognises that worthy companions and role models are vital to the development of virtuous character’.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, the ‘moral bankruptcy’ which we deplore in our society derives from an emphasis on an ideal of individual authenticity which involves people being ‘free to give themselves over to undisciplined urges and felt needs’ at the expense of virtuous citizenry.<sup>8</sup> Kotva’s characterisation of deontic ethics at this point is suggestive of egoistic, hedonistic and perhaps amoral personal self-indulgence which he urges us to set aside in favour of a more socially responsible ethic.

An initial response must be to challenge the prejudicial terms in which Kotva proposes to conduct the debate between modern, deontic ethics and virtue ethics. What in particular is the connection between modern ethics and Kotva’s conception of individual autonomy?

Kotva’s strategy is to contrast hedonistic individualism with an ideal of other-regarding communal citizenship, identify deontic ethics with the former and virtue ethics with the latter, and then ask us to

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Kotva, *The Christian Case*, p. 6. Kotva, *The Christian Case*, p. 7.

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choose whom we will serve. This is an unacceptable way to conduct a philosophical debate. The ideals of hedonistic individualism and communal citizenship can both be interpreted along the lines of either deontic ethics (principles) or virtue ethics (dispositions of character). To portray deontic ethics as necessarily hedonistic is a misleading strategy. Kant’s ethics with its stress on imperfect obligations and respect for persons as ends in themselves seems very remote from the egoistic caricature which Kotva has drawn. Mill devotes a significant part of the second chapter of *Utilitarianism* to distancing utilitarianism from this hedonistic egoism.<sup>9</sup>

Nor, unless we have forgotten Adam Smith's ideal observer, can we deny modern ethics access to theoretical role models. It may be that virtue ethics assigns a role to the concept of a morally perfect person which differs from that assigned to it in familiar consequentialist or rationalist theories. But even here the contrast should not be exaggerated. Kant talks a great deal about a morally pure will and Mill often invokes the notion of a perfectly impartial and beneficent person. There is no reason in principle, therefore, why modern theories are excluded from using the theoretical construct of an ideal role model. Kotva is right to stress that within Christian ethics the moral role model takes a particularly concrete form. However, since it is the theoretical interpretation of Christian ethics which is at stake in the present argument we cannot appeal to the life of Christ in support of one or other of these theories.

Secondly, virtue theory and modern ethics are contrasted by reference to the rise in historical consciousness; the former, but not the latter, we are told, enjoy 'historical consciousness' and so recognise the pervasiveness of social change and the moral sensitivity appropriate to it. Virtue ethics recognises, Kotva argues that 'we are historical creatures, situated in specific and cultural contexts with particular beliefs, practices and commitments. All knowledge, including moral knowledge, is historically grounded and at some level informed by the setting from within which it is known.' The consequences that Kotva draws from this, by way of criticism of modern ethics, are firstly that context is important for ethics and secondly that it is 'almost impossible' to view moral rules as 'purely objective and unchanging'.<sup>10</sup>

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J.S. Mill, 'Utilitarianism' in *Collected Works*, ed. J.M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969; vol. 10).

<sup>10</sup> Kotva, *The Christian Case*, p. 8.

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At this point, once again, the characterisation of modern ethics is suspect. Contrary to Kotva, consequentialist and rationalist theories do not ignore context and can adjust perfectly well to social change. Consider, firstly, technological change. Modern forms of communication mean that we now have knowledge of poverty-stricken parts of the world which our ancestors knew nothing about; modern developments in agricultural technology and modern forms of transport mean that western industrial

countries have it within their power to help poor countries in ways which hitherto were not available. Consequentialists and Kantians would happily agree that obligations can change in the light of historical developments such as these. Secondly, reflect on the multitude of ways in which context can alter moral realities at a single period of time. People who live in desert conditions obviously have different water-conservation obligations than do people who live in countries where there is a ready supply of running water. Consequentialists and Kantian theorists can easily accommodate the contextual constraints which varying circumstances place upon our obligations.

What may lend plausibility to Kotva's criticisms of modern ethics is a distinct and erroneous conception of the way in which moral principles feature in moral theory. According to this conception moral principles are absolute and are restricted to specific and contextually defined actions. If this were so then indeed a principle based morality would be insensitive to context and historical change. However, as I have argued, modern moral theories are structured around principles—Kant's principle of respect for persons and the consequentialist beneficence principle come readily to mind—which are highly general and which transcend specific cultural contexts. They are able, therefore, to accommodate social change and historical context in ways which Kotva has not considered possible.

Kotva's third and final reason for preferring virtue ethics is that it remedies the incompleteness—or the partial picture of the moral life—which we find in deontological ethics. The alleged inability to account for friendship and other personal aspects of morality life are particularly highlighted and it is claimed that virtue ethics possesses superior resources for dealing with these problems.

As is well known the problem of the partiality of human affections is particularly acute for consequentialists. If we agree with Mill that 'as between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him (the utilitarian) to be as strictly impartial as a

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disinterested and benevolent spectator',<sup>11</sup> then it seems that relationships—for example to friends, to family, to nation—which are fundamental to common-sense morality are beyond the moral pale and moral agents are required to act so as to maximise impersonal utility whatever the individual cost.

I have two comments to make on this argument. Firstly, a striking feature of modern philosophising is the resourcefulness which consequentialists have shown in reacting to the problem of personal relations. An early strategy was to move from Benthamite utilitarianism in the direction of a pluralist account which held that goodness was, in Mills' words, 'a concrete whole' whose 'ingredients' included such things as friendship, music, health, power and fame.<sup>12</sup> A second, more recent, step has been to reject utilitarian hedonism and to adopt, in Peter Railton's words 'a pluralist approach in which several goods are viewed as intrinsically, non-morally valuable—such as happiness, knowledge, purposeful activity, autonomy, solidarity, respect and beauty'.<sup>13</sup>

However, by far the most popular approach has been to keep consequentialist justification separate from motivation, the general idea being that there is a consequentialist justification for having non-consequentialist motivations, namely that having them is the best means to the end of value maximisation.<sup>14</sup> This is not the place to discuss in detail the merits of these and other possible defences of consequentialism, especially since Kotva ignores the existence of such well known defences of utilitarian friendship as the ones that I have mentioned. Suffice it to say that, in the light of familiar arguments we cannot dismiss modern ethics on the simple grounds that it is incapable of accommodating the common-sense ethics of friendship.

My second point is this. Is friendship not a problem also for virtue ethics? Whether one should save a drowning member of one's own family or save three strangers is a quandary for consequentialists but it is equally unclear what a perfectly virtuous person would do in the circumstances. And does the consequentialist response in terms of promoting a multiplicity of goods not seem remarkably like a

<sup>11</sup> J.S. Mill, 'Utilitarianism', p. 218.

<sup>12</sup> J.S. Mill, 'Utilitarianism', p. 235.

<sup>13</sup> P. Railton, 'Alienation, Consequentialism and the Demands of Morality',

*Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13 (1984), 134-71, here from p. 149.

<sup>14</sup> See L.W. Sumner, *The Moral Foundation of Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

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description of the constraints under which a perfectly good person would decide on the appropriate course of action in such cases?

At least two conclusions follow. Firstly, Kotva has not given convincing reasons to accept his radical conclusions: modern ethics has the resources with which to deal with the problems which he raises. Secondly, although Kotva's intention is to emphasise the contrast between modern ethics and virtue ethics what impresses one most is the continuities between the two. This second point is worth developing in a little more detail.

Kotva's defence of virtue ethics is based on developing a series of contrasts between virtue ethics and deontological ethics and arguing in each case that across a range of problems virtue ethics provided preferable accounts of our moral convictions. What I have argued, however, is that none of these arguments are successful. On close examination it is the parallels and not the contrasts which strike us. Thus a recovery of a proper deontic ethic is as likely to overcome the modern crisis as is an aretic ethic; deontic and aretic ethics can both do justice to context and cultural change; they can equally well account for friendship and the personal. Far from opening up a gap between the two forms of ethics we discover how closely related they are. How significant, therefore, is the gap between deontic and aretic moralities? Is there a gap at all? This is something which we must now question.

According to Kotva virtues are stable affective and intellectual dispositions which contribute to human good and they manifest themselves in actions performed primarily for their own sakes. Suppose however that a moral agent has a stable disposition to act out of respect for moral principles which contribute to the human good. Are these different affective and intellectual states or are they different ways of describing one and the same state? We shall make it more concrete by considering a specific virtue, namely veracity and examining the relationship between virtues and principles. Suppose that the first person possesses the virtue of truthfulness and the second person has a stable disposition to act in accordance with the moral principle: 'one ought to be truthful'. Wherein does the moral difference lie? If there is no difference at all then a central plank on which virtue ethics rests has been removed.

G.J. Warnock states:

If it were agreed that we have here (that is, in the disposition to non-maleficence, fairness, beneficence and non-deception) four moral virtues, it

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could scarcely be contentious to derive from this the proposition that we have here, by the same token, four fundamental moral standards or moral principles.<sup>15</sup>

Warnock's argument invites one to conclude that virtue ethics is simply the mirror image of the ethical theories based on principles.

As yet we have some way to go, however, because a person who possessed a settled disposition to behave on a principle enjoining truthfulness but who was truthful for the wrong reasons—for example out of fear or in pursuit of reputation would not be displaying a moral virtue. To be a virtuous person the disposition must be truthfulness for its own sake. With a suitably enriched psychology the gap between acting virtuously and acting on principles is beginning to shrink. More, however, needs to be said.

We might again imagine two people both of whom have a disposition to act for the sake of truthfulness, but with this important difference. The first person did so spontaneously and joyfully, whereas the second person did so grudgingly and reluctantly. Clearly we would not regard the second person's behaviour as truly virtuous.

Building on this we can see how the gap between virtue and principles has all but disappeared. Consider any virtue. If a person possesses a settled disposition, joyfully and spontaneously to act for the sake of the moral principles associated with that virtue, then that person possesses the virtue in question. A moral virtue, then, is simply a suitably motivated disposition to act for the sake of moral principles. This being the case it is not surprising that we detected strong parallels between deontic and aretic responses to the issues which we were exploring in our earlier discussions; virtues and principles are different ways of talking of the same thing, different ways of characterising the same aspect of moral reality.

### III. The Perfectionist Thesis

The second form which the ethics of character takes is a stress on the importance of the concept of moral perfection. Here again, it is claimed, philosophy and Christian theory converge: at a purely philosophical level virtue ethics transcends deontic ethics, its insights extending to Christian

ethics partly as a consequence of the philosophical theory and partly as an exposition of neglected aspects

<sup>15</sup> G.J. Warnock, *The Object of Morality* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1971), pp. 71-72.

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of Christian tradition and Christian experience. Since the concept of an authoritative, morally perfect exemplar is notably absent from modern moral theory, and since it plays such a conspicuous role in Christian ethics, the project is neither contrived nor fanciful.

Prominent amongst recent philosophers who have stressed the importance of moral paradigms have been Alisdair MacIntyre, Lawrence Blum, and Harold Alderman.<sup>16</sup> Their purely philosophical exposition of the concept of a moral exemplar typically gives rise to two main claims: that paradigms are primary in moral theory and that narrative is the proper form of moral deliberation. These theses are clearly and forcefully developed in the article by Harold Alderman to which I have referred and it is his exposition of perfectionism which I shall follow.

Firstly, Alderman argues that in moral theory moral paradigms are primary, and goods and rules, if they have a place at all, are secondary.

Philosophical reasoning necessarily takes something as given; something upon which all other explanations and justifications are based, and beyond which there is no appeal. Instead of appealing (as do consequentialists) to goods or appealing (as do Kantians) to rules, virtue theorists argue that we learn how to act by acting and that we learn how to behave properly by simply observing proper behaviour. From this it follows that moral goods and moral principles take, at best, second place.

Consider the status of moral goods. Alderman concedes that since the paradigmatic individual is taken to be the highest good, any account of paradigms ultimately presupposes a theory of goodness. However the status of the paradigm is necessarily of a different logical order from any specific good because in connection with any other good, be it happiness or knowledge or beauty, there are some circumstances under which the good is morally undesirable whereas there are no circumstances in which paradigmatic character is morally undesirable. Consider next the status of rules. It is by imitation, by watching an exemplar, that we learn how to do skilful things such as dancing and cooking. It follows, therefore, that since

being moral means learning how to do the right thing morally, learning how to be moral is strictly like learning how to do other things. Rules, then, are secondary because they are not strictly necessary in learning to be

<sup>16</sup> See L. Blum, 'Moral Exemplars', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988), 196-221; H. Alderman, 'By Virtue of a Virtue', *Review of Metaphysics* 36 (1982), 127-53.

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moral. Mere knowledge of rules, therefore, is not enough. Neither a moral agent nor a social anthropologist can find out what is right merely by learning rules. Rather it is by an understanding of and an empathy with the paradigmatic character that right conduct can be elucidated. Hence rules are secondary to character; they are 'autobiographical footnotes which have been mistaken for life itself'.<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, accepting morally paradigmatic character as primary entails conclusions concerning the structure of a moral system. In a deontological theory deductive connections hold between rules, empirical descriptions and practical judgements. Such a theory, however, is either deductively complete and substantially inadequate or is substantively adequate and deductively incomplete: one way or the other, Alderman argues, it fails. In place of deductive relationships virtue theorists propose the completeness and the substance of narrative relationships, the narrative relationships embodied in the life and example of a paradigmatic individual. The moral life, then, is one which conforms to that of the exemplar; moral dilemmas are resolved by emulating what the exemplar would do in the circumstances. Of course, different narratives compete for our allegiances but here the test is 'which of these narratives tells the human tale most fully?' To what extent, then, does this conception of moral theory illuminate Christian ethics?

The precise interpretation of the biblical ideal of perfection is a matter of some controversy, but its centrality to Scriptures and to orthodox Christianity cannot be doubted. In the Old Testament the word 'perfect' is often used as meaning 'whole' or 'sound' or 'true'. Following from this, in the New Testament 'perfect' denotes the completeness and blessedness of Christian experience. It is in this sense that Jesus used the word in Matthew's Gospel when He affirms what might be regarded as the final consummation of Christian experience: 'You therefore must be perfect (imperative future), as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt. 5:48). Out of

the wide range of senses of perfection which we find at least two are of relevance to the theme of moral perfection. Their interrelations and the intersection of each with moral theory throw light on the significance of virtue ethics. They are what I shall call ‘developmental’ perfection and ‘end-state’ perfection.

Developmental perfection is a process described in the Pauline <sup>17</sup> Alderman, ‘By Virtue of a Virtue’, 144.

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epistles in terms of our putting off the old humanity and putting on the new (e.g. Eph. 4:22-24). Its inception is Christ’s injunction ‘take up your cross and follow me’ and made specific in uncompromising terms in His words to the rich young ruler: ‘If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor...and come, follow me’ (Mt. 19:21; Lk. 9:23). The culmination of the process thus commenced is the realisation of redemption when we are translated into His image or glory. In this sense perfection is a process; a process which has had a profound inspirational effect on the Christian church throughout the ages. Motivated by its vision there developed the ‘imitation’ literature of the medieval tradition, made famous in Thomas a Kempis’ *On the Imitation of Christ* and having its Anglican counterpart in William Law’s *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. Here Jesus is the pattern, the ideal, the paradigm of the Christian life. Be conformed to Christ; do what Jesus would do in your situation; allow your life to be moulded into an image of the Master.

However, there is a quite different form of perfection, what I have called ‘end-state’ perfection which refers to a conception of perfection that is not in any way associated with ideas of moral or spiritual betterment. Rather it denotes the consummation of Christian experience in another order of existence.

‘The perfect man’ Trench says, ‘is one who has attained his moral end and that for which he was intended, namely to be a man in Christ.’<sup>18</sup>

This eschatological sense gains its supreme statement in Christ’s words, expressed in the future imperative, and towards which all Christian experience looks and moves: ‘You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.’ The aspiration of the Christian soul can go no further than this, the state summarised by the author of Hebrews as one in

which: 'the spirits of just men are made perfect' (Heb. 12:23). The contrast between the two senses which I have described is most clearly expressed in Paul's words which anticipate the spiritual completeness of Christian character: 'When the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away' (1 Cor. 13:10).

Perfection in this sense properly belongs to God and becomes available to human beings only in a derivative sense; not through their effort, but by virtue of a relationship with God which is made possible

<sup>18</sup> R.C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (London: MacMillans, 1871).

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by the redeeming work of Christ. It comes as a gift, not as an achievement or as a possession. All that God has and is, is perfect; and it is the relationship of the believer with God, and that alone, which will determine their share in this kind of perfection.<sup>19</sup>

It is a central Christian belief that Jesus was a perfect man, that He is the paradigmatic figure, the true moral exemplar. In what then does His perfection consist? The answer, taken from His own words, and running through the Gospel narratives is this: His perfection lies in His complete obedience to the will of God the Father. At an early stage in the teaching of His disciples Jesus explains that 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me' (Jn. 4:34) and it is reaffirmed in His prayer to His father in Gethsemane: 'nevertheless, not as I will but as thou wilt' (Mt. 26:39). As a consequence obedience to the will of God is the badge of Christian discipleship: it is 'he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven' who will enter the kingdom (Mt. 7:21), it is 'whoever does the will of my Father in heaven' that is described as a member of Jesus' family (Mt. 12:50). End-state perfection and developmental perfection are best understood, therefore, in terms of human wills being transformed so as to be obedient to the will of God, culminating in a will that is wholly devoted to that end. It is the concept of doing the will of God which provides an all-comprehending unity to Christian perfection.

The account of perfection in terms of obedience to God's will is, however, what Bernard Williams would call a rather 'thin' conception of perfection. To what exactly does such obedience commit one? The answer, repeatedly given in the Gospels and in the Pauline epistles, is that obedience to God is

expressed in a heart given over to unqualified love of others. Christ's teaching on the mountain ends with an injunction to be perfect summing up a lengthy exposition of what is involved in loving not only ones neighbour but also ones enemies (Mt. 5:43-48). This principle is described as the fulfilment of the 'royal law' (Jas. 2:8 repeated in Rom. 13:10); and after exhorting his readers to love not 'in word, neither in tongue, but in deed and in truth', John adds: 'And this is His commandment: that we should believe in the name of his son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment' (1 Jn. 3:18, 23).

Christian perfection, therefore, finds its all-embracing unity in obedience to the Law of God, manifesting itself in unqualified love—

<sup>19</sup> I therefore hold that in this eschatological sense perfection is a gift freely and unconditionally given by God, and also that it is a goal towards which all Christians must strive, however well or badly.

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with all the heart, soul and mind—for others (Mt. 22:37-40).

This brief exploration of the foundations of Christian perfection enables us to review the perfectionist thesis implicit in Christian virtue ethics. The most striking feature of Christian perfection is the centrality to it of law, resulting in a remarkably close connection between deontic and aretic elements. If the Christian ideal of perfection is of a perfectly loving person then the ideal may equally well be expressed by reference to the principle of love. The perfect moral agent is the agent who has a psychologically appropriate

disposition to act in a loving manner.

The same point can be made slightly differently. Jesus' life

constitutes the paradigm for human conduct. But if it can be characterised, then the principles will be both descriptive and prescriptive. If so, then a recognition of Christ as the perfect moral exemplar is consistent with viewing Christian ethics as being constituted by rules and principles.

It may be claimed that the fact that there is an intimate relationship between Christian perfection and the fulfilment of the law does not of itself establish that the divorce between virtue and principles is mistaken. Perhaps the Judaeo-Christian tradition is misguided and confused; perhaps it is the task of philosophical analysis to make the distinctions necessary to

bring order into this jungle of religious and moral ideas. Well, this may be so, but philosophical arguments are needed to show this and if the perfectionist philosophical arguments are inconclusive then we are entitled to assume that the *prima facie* evidence provided by the Christian faith does not support the contentions of virtue ethics. This in fact is what I wish to argue and I will briefly indicate why I consider Alderman's arguments to be inconclusive.

Firstly, Alderman argues that in moral theory goods are secondary to perfections, because there are no goods such that they may not in some circumstances be morally undesirable whereas perfection suffers from no such defect. This seems to me to be inaccurate in a number of ways; partly because I do not think that there are any circumstances in which unqualified love is morally undesirable, partly because the necessary truth that what a morally perfect agent does will in all circumstances be morally good is not an informative account of the foundations of ethics. An analysis of moral perfection in terms of doing what is morally good fails in the same way that an account of one's duty in terms of what one ought to do fails. What is needed is more than this necessary truth: we need an account which will guide

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our actions and the best way in which Alderman's account will do this is to introduce a basic principle such as love or a Kantian good will, thus collapsing his perfectionist theory into a principle based theory.

Secondly, Alderman holds that moral rules are secondary to what a perfect agent would do because we learn moral truth primarily by example; and we only formulate rules at a later date. But this is an unconvincing argument. If my argument is correct then in learning by example one is *ipso facto* learning implicit moral rules. Even if Alderman is correct in his learning theory, nonetheless this seems to be an argument which if anything establishes the primacy of rules, because there is always a normative element built into the notion of choosing correctly, or doing something correctly. Surely there must be moral standards implicit in the claim that someone is getting behaviour right, which suggests that after all it is normative rules which are primary.

Alderman's arguments therefore do not undermine the considerable evidence which suggests that perfection and principles are inextricably linked, in excellence in general and in Christian perfection in particular.

## IV. The Communitarian Thesis

The third form taken by the ethics of character is a stress on community: it is claimed that moral virtues including Christian virtues, are intelligible only within the context of certain culture- specific or historic-specific communities.

Such a communitarian thesis holds that ethics, and *a fortiori* Christian ethics, must eschew the misguided desire to find and apply universal moral principles and must be located in specific historical or cultural contexts. What conclusions, positive and negative, does this communitarian thesis entail? Is it consistent with the universalism which many generations of apologists have claimed to find at the heart of the Christian message? In particular, is it true?

These are questions which we must now address. Let us do so by looking first at what I have referred to as the supposedly universalistic character of Christian ethics and by asking if it is consistent with the particularist character of virtue ethics.

From its inception a conspicuous, and at times a surprisingly unpopular feature of the Christian message has been its vigorously universal appeal. The Christian message, to ‘Jews or Gentiles...bond

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or free’ (e.g. 1 Cor. 12:13), was a message which presupposed only the common humanity of its hearers: that the human race has undergone a moral catastrophe, the most serious consequence of which is our alienation from God, the ground of all goodness; that this moral catastrophe has its root in human pride; that the root cause of that moral catastrophe continues to create untold moral havoc in the lives of individuals and collectivities to this day; that the moral consequences of the catastrophe are both cognitive—human moral discernment is fatally distorted, and conative—human motivation is morally impaired; that humans are unable by their own individual or collective efforts to ameliorate their predicament; that at infinite cost God has provided redemption, freely available to all who accept it in faith and repentance; that the fellowship to which acceptance of salvation provides access is indifferent to race, culture, social or historical situation. These central tenets of the Christian faith are universal in character. Nor has this inclusiveness been a mere aspiration. Over the centuries, and to a remarkable degree, the Christian message has continued

to attract the rational allegiance of countless millions of people who are historically, geographically and culturally remote from one another. The church which Christ founded is one which knows no barriers—cultural, social, ethnic or economic: it owes allegiance to the same Lord and hence to a single set of values paradigmatically displayed by His life and death. Christians believe that the simple explanation for the universal appeal lies in the fact that all human beings have basic spiritual needs to which the Christian faith provides the answer. This, then, is what I understand by the universality of the Christian faith.

This universality renders puzzling one aspect of the thesis that the Christian ethic is a virtue ethic and it is this puzzle that I shall now explore.

A central feature of contemporary virtue ethics is its strong stress on the distinctness of community and on the role of community in shaping moral consciousness. According to Alisdair MacIntyre communities are not mere associations of individuals.<sup>20</sup> Communities share common goals and ends which are not merely the sum of, or generalisations from, the private ends of the individuals who make up the communities. It is because communities share these common goals, because they are viewed as our goals rather than my goals by

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<sup>20</sup> See especially *Whose Justice? What Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

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each member of the community, that a community acquires its distinctive identity. It is for this reason also that MacIntyre holds that the moral fragmentation which he detects in contemporary liberal society, with its stress on individual rights, can be mitigated in a social order reconstructed around the virtues which flourish in communities.

MacIntyre expresses this communitarian thesis in terms of ‘traditions’ definable by reference to ‘socially embedded’ practical rationality. Rationality, MacIntyre explains, should not be thought of in the post-enlightenment way as involving neutral and context-independent ways of judging the claims of competing theories, but as taking different forms in different traditions. Thus he describes Aristotle’s theory, Aquinas’ synthesis of Aristotelianism and Augustinian Christianity, the seventeenth

and eighteenth century Scottish tradition and modern liberalism each of which constitutes a distinct tradition. Each embodies ways of reasoning about conduct and shared methods of solving practical problems; each involves forms of life which are embedded in social and political institutions. Most importantly, MacIntyre argues, there are no ‘context—free’ forms of argument and deliberation; there are no considerations which have force for all human beings as such, irrespective of social context.

Granted the universalist aspects of the Christian faith that I have described above it is surprising to note how quickly contemporary expositors of Christian ethics have adopted a virtue ethic and to accept the specifically communitarian elements that I have highlighted. It is clear, however, that prominent defenders of Christian virtue ethics such as J.J. Kotva, S. Hauerwas and R. Bondi seem willing to accept these aspects of the virtue approach.<sup>21</sup>

The communitarian elements of virtue ethics contain both negative and positive elements. The negative element is a rejection of universal and objective rules as embodied in the deontological tradition. The positive element involves the thesis that ethics is best understood in the narrative contexts of historically and culturally distinct communities.

Kotva is explicit about the communitarian implications of his version of virtue ethics. Current ethical theory, he argues, ‘must pay considerable attention to the historically particular situation’. He goes on:

<sup>21</sup> J.J. Kotva, *The Christian Case*; S. Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life* (Texas, Trinity University Press, 1981); and R. Bondi, ‘The Elements of Character’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 12 (1984), 201-218.

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We are historical creatures, situated in specific historical and cultural contexts with particular beliefs, practices, and commitments. All knowledge, including moral knowledge, is historically grounded and at some level informed by the setting from within which it is known.<sup>22</sup>

The conclusion which he draws from these innocuous observations— by what process of reasoning I know not—is that deontic ethics must be replaced by virtue ethics. He writes:

It is now almost impossible to view moral rules as purely objective and unchanging... If nature and society are basically unchanging, then general principles are fine and we simply do whatever those before us did. But if nature and society change and develop, then we must attend to contextual variety and situational specificity.<sup>23</sup>

The moral theory to which passages such as these would normally lead is moral relativism. And when Kotva invites us to accept virtue theory we are entitled to ask why historical and cultural diversity does not undermine the relevance of virtues. For example, if Kotva intends us to take his words at face value then we must construe him as holding that because late 20th century culture differs greatly from the culture of 1st century Rome a moral principle such as 'one ought to be just' or 'one ought to be truthful' cannot have application in both societies. I shall postpone for the moment discussion of whether these views are reasonable and concentrate on Kotva's consistency. What is unclear is whether Kotva holds that virtues have application across historically and culturally remote periods; whether, to be specific, virtues such as justice or veracity have transcultural application. If they do, then I cannot understand why the relevant rule cannot also have application. If they do not, then why accept a virtue ethic? Why not defend an explicit version of moral relativism?

A similar emphasis on community and virtue is to be found in the work of S. Hauerwas. Hauerwas' ethics developed out of a dissatisfaction with two traditions, a legalism which made moral rules central to decision making and a situationalism which placed an undue emphasis on context in decision making; views which were influential in the middle decades of this century. The solution to the deficiencies of both was a theory which gave central place to character and the qualification of character by those narratively embedded reasons for action which are to be found in specific historical traditions. To his

<sup>22</sup> Kotva, *The Christian Case*, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Kotva, *The Christian Case*, p. 8.

credit, Hauerwas does not shrink from the relativist implications of this account. Any search for objective and universal reasons is bound to fail, he

says, because the concept of reason itself is tradition- dependent. He writes:

The defence against a hard relativism cannot lie in the presumption that there is a 'reason' that can assure complete objectivity, for our rationality is always context dependent on the kind of men that we are or ought to be.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, then, the communitarian strand of virtue ethics represents a further attack on the existence of rational, objective moral standards, stresses the fragmentary nature of moral thought and defends the integrity of local culture-specific moral traditions. It seems to me to be important for Christians to challenge the strand of thought which I have just outlined, in particular its insistence that morality is fragmented and its claim that morality is necessarily internal to culturally-specific traditions. This I shall now briefly do.

Defenders of virtue ethics frequently assert that moral consensus is impossible between different cultures and that fragmentation is inevitable even within a single culture. However, the thesis is more often asserted than proven and attempts at detailed documentation are both unconvincing and highly selective. Consider the second point first. Far from being compartmentalised, different moral traditions display a remarkable degree of agreement over central values in contexts which are both culturally and historically remote. Thus although love, justice, veracity and beneficence may take very different forms in different settings nonetheless paradigm cases of each attract consensus to a remarkable degree.

This point is strengthened when we reflect on the inconclusiveness of much of the evidence which attempts to document ethical diversity. Often the evidence of moral diversity is evidence only of variation in derivative rather than basic values; often it involves variation not in basic values but in the institutional expressions of those values; often it involves varying priority rankings of shared values rather than clashes between inconsistent values. These confusions have led to exaggerated conceptions of the fragmentation of morality and underpin the quasi-relativism of much contemporary virtue theory.

The inherent difficulties in traditional relativist approaches to

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<sup>24</sup> S. Hauerwas, 'Obligation and Virtue Once More', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 3 (1975), 27-44.

ethics, which would seem to be difficulties also for communitarian forms of virtue ethics, are another reason to hesitate before accepting this approach.<sup>25</sup> As is well known Plato considered all relativist approaches to be fundamentally incoherent, as being themselves examples of the very ahistorical and acultural theories whose intelligibility they were denying. It is because of such difficulties that recent writers who are attracted to virtue ethics have been consciously distancing themselves from the communitarian aspects of the thesis; and it seems to me that there is no reason why defenders of virtue ethics should necessarily adopt a communitarian perspective. The virtue ethic which Aristotle developed was not communitarian in the sense which we have been discussing and it seems strange to saddle virtue ethics with the relativist trappings which I have identified.

These difficulties, which seem to challenge the account at a purely philosophical level, seem all the more serious when placed in a Christian context. In what conceivable sense are Christian virtues internal to a tradition? In what sense are they peculiar to a community? In attempting to answer these questions it may be helpful to distinguish between a strong and a weak sense in which the communitarian thesis may be construed in a theological context. On a weak construal the communitarian thesis may be understood as holding that Christian virtues are fully understood only by reference to their paradigmatic expression in the life and death of Jesus, in the definitive records of them that the Christian scriptures provide and against the background of the theological beliefs which underpin the moral theory of the Christian faith. If this is how it is construed then the communitarian thesis is quite consistent with the universalistic elements of the Christian message and it is a thesis which may reasonably be accepted. However a stronger construal can be envisaged. According to it Christian virtues are intelligible only within the context of culturally or historically discrete communities. This is the particularist interpretation which many contemporary defenders of virtue theory have in mind when they speak of traditions and, as I have already made clear, I see no good arguments for believing that this is true if conceived either descriptively—that is, as an account of what Christians have actually believed about their faith, or normatively—that is, as an account of how Christians should think of their faith.

<sup>25</sup> These issues are explored in detail in J. Annas, 'MacIntyre on Traditions', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 18 (1989), 388-404; and J.B. Schneewind, 'Virtue, Narrative and Community', *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982), 653-63.

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If the line of argument that I have been developing in the later stages of this paper are correct then the search for foundations for Christian ethics should take the universality of morality rather than the particularity of morality as its starting point and should seek to give this universality both philosophical and theological expression. Very briefly I shall now sketch the broad outlines within which such accounts might most profitably be developed.

Materials from which the project may readily gain philosophical expression are to be found in Nussbaum's construal of Aristotle's account of the virtues.<sup>26</sup> Theory construction as conceived by Nussbaum is a threefold procedure. Firstly, we isolate a sphere of human experience which figures more or less in any human life, and in connection with which any rational human being must be considered to have an interest. This constitutes a grounding experience for the relevant value. Secondly, we describe what it is to respond or perform well in this sphere, the description constituting an empirically 'thin' account of the value in question. Finally, we go on to explain how in a given social context this thin account can be given a more concrete specification, resulting in a full or empirically 'thick' account of the value.

This account of ethical method provides a framework within which a plausible and distinctively Christian ethic can be worked out. For Christians the basic value is love, of God and of His creatures; and the principles of morality are those commanded by a perfectly loving God, gaining their supreme exemplification in the life and death of Jesus.

The account of ethics which I have given is neutral between a deontic and a virtue ethic. Indeed if the argument of the present paper is correct this distinction is itself a questionable one since virtues and rules are intimately interconnected. It should be noted that Nussbaum develops this account of ethical method in the form of an explicitly virtue ethic thus showing that there is no necessary connection between virtue ethics and the quasi-relativism which characterises many Christian and philosophical expositions of virtue ethics. A virtue ethic, then, can be invoked to provide

a rational critique of existing traditions and practices from the point of view of virtues which are ahistorical and transcultural.

The distinctively theological expression of this account of ethics

<sup>26</sup> M.C. Nussbaum, 'Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988), 32-53.

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takes the form of reviving the ancient and time-honoured doctrine of common grace,<sup>27</sup> according to which universal basic moral truths are available to humans naturally, that is independently of the revelation to be found in Scripture or in the life of Christ.

As is well known the theory of common grace has given rise to immense theological controversy. When Pelagians defended the theory by pointing to the virtues of the heathen who were often merciful, chaste and temperate, Augustine emphasised human inability to achieve virtue and argued that since the heathen actions in question were the acts of unregenerate and sinful persons they were without merit. Others interpreted the doctrine as claiming that Christ by His atoning blood merited certain blessings for the impenitent and reprobate; a view which others denied with equal conviction. I shall not explore these issues. When I refer to common grace I mean merely a minimal epistemological thesis to the effect that Scripture and human experience amply testify to the fact that certain basic moral truths are immediately and spontaneously known by any rational human mind. It is this form of common grace which Paul speaks of when he says of the Gentiles, who do by their nature the things of the law, that 'they show the word of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness therewith, and their thoughts one with another accusing or else excusing them.' And this is again indirectly affirmed when Paul says, speaking of those who give free vent to their wicked lives, that though they knew the truth of God and His nature they hindered it by their unrighteousness and exchanged it for a lie. This epistemological view concerning the scope of rational human endowments is independent of the other moral and motivational theses concerning common grace which I have mentioned.

An ethic can be invoked, therefore, along the lines which I have suggested, which will provide a rational critique of existing traditions and practices

from the point of view of virtues which are ahistorical and transcultural and in no way dependent on the quasi-relativism which characterises contemporary virtue ethics.

## V. Conclusion.

In this essay I have identified three theses—a priority thesis, a

<sup>27</sup> For a recent restatement of this doctrine see for example L. Berkhof *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1984), pp. 432-46.

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perfectionist thesis and a communitarian thesis—which are central to contemporary virtue ethics. These theses, as has been shown, have been appropriated and defended by advocates of specifically Christian versions of virtue ethics. I have contended that the arguments for this radical departure from traditional ethics are unsustainable. Most importantly, I have challenged the independence thesis, the thesis that aretic and deontic moralities are distinct and irreducible. If this argument is successful then the attack on traditional deontic ethics collapses and philosophical reflection can return, undistracted, to its proper object, namely the study of the basic principles of Christian ethics, their structure and their relationship to other theological doctrines. This is not to say that a study of moral virtue may not enlighten Christian ethics in important ways. It may, but the enlightenment will be of a very different kind than that envisaged by contemporary writers in the field of Christian virtue ethics.

Finally, the implications of this argument for an understanding of the history of ethics should be noted. One of the most unfortunate features of much virtue ethics has been a tendency, resulting from oversimplification, to construct an unbridgeable gap between Aristotle, the representative of virtue theory, and Kant, the representative of the deontic tradition. On the position defended in this paper the views of virtue which these writers take are remarkable similar; which is what one would expect once one's confidence in the independence thesis has been undermined.