

## Chapter 2: The Nature of Virtue Or: How to Attain Happiness

In the last chapter we saw what every human person craves, and what motivates all human action, namely, certain goods such as friendship, love, accomplishment, health, etc... Further, we saw that if we pursue all these goods in the right way, it will lead to our happiness, whereas if we pursue them through bad means, it'll lead to evil and suffering. We'll end up destroying certain goods instead of obtaining them.

So there is a definite relation between action and happiness. The desire for happiness is what originally motivates our actions, and our actions are what determine whether we obtain happiness or not. Consequently, we must perfect our actions and properly order them towards true happiness. Put simply, we need to learn how to do things the right way. This is the art of virtue.

### **What is Virtue?**

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter CCC) defines virtue as “a habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows a person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself.”<sup>1</sup> That’s a very good definition, but let’s see if we give one that’s a little simpler. For our purposes, a virtue is *the capacity and the desire to act well*.

Now, this capacity and desire to act well is a feature of a person’s character, it is a quality in the person which perfects action. Another way to say it is that a virtuous person is disposed to act well. A virtue allows you to spontaneously and easily do the right thing. It is both a skill and an inclination to use that skill properly.

Bach is a good example of a person with a virtue. He had a musical virtue. In choosing the notes for his compositions, his skills were so perfect and his taste so excellent that he would always choose good notes. He had both the ability and the desire to make beautiful music. That’s what virtue is: it’s the ability and the inclination to act beautifully, to make good choices.

### **How Does Virtue Work?**

On hearing that virtue is the both the capacity and the desire to act well, you may reflect that you sometimes have neither the capacity nor the desire to act well. Perhaps you don’t believe you can do the right thing, and even if you could, you wouldn’t want to. But that’s precisely what makes virtue so marvelous: virtue makes you *want* to do the right thing. When you have virtue, you *enjoy* doing what is good.

To explain how this is possible, we have to talk a little bit about the *passions*, which are basically the same as feelings or emotions. These passions propel us towards things which seem pleasing, and away from things which seem displeasing. There are eleven basic passions/feelings/emotions. If we are confronted with something which seems pleasing, we experience Attraction, Desire, Joy, Hope, and Courage. If we are confronted with something that seems displeasing, we experience Dislike, Aversion, Sorrow, Despair, Fear, and Anger.

The problem is that most of us sometimes experience the wrong emotion at the wrong time. We fear to do the good, or we desire what is evil. We may actually hope for

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<sup>1</sup> #1803.

something we know will bring about our own downfall. For example, a diabetic knows that cake isn't good for him, but he desires it anyway. Or, to take a moral illustration, a Christian knows that tithing is good, but he may dislike it very much. This disorder is the result of original sin; in our fallen state our emotions are often misdirected and try to lead us towards evil and away from good.

Yet virtue manages to take all these emotions and organize them. It directs the passions in an integrated manner to pull us towards what is truly beneficial for us and away from what is bad. When you have virtue, you "feel like" doing good and avoiding evil. Those with virtue wouldn't even enjoy sin, and they greatly desire the good. So basically, once you acquire virtue, doing what you're supposed to becomes natural. *A virtue enables you to do the good quickly, easily, and joyfully.* To put it another way, virtue makes attaining happiness easy.

### **So How Does One Acquire Virtue?**

Unfortunately, acquiring a virtue demands a great deal of effort and commitment. To look at the process of gaining virtue, let's take two examples from Servais Pinckaers' book, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*.

The first is that of a child learning to play piano. Clearly, the child must have some natural potential for music, he must have an ear for music, and the necessary physical skill to hit the keys. So his mother signs him up for piano lessons. At first, the child probably feels the piano lessons to be very restrictive, demanding, and unpleasant. He can't express himself through the piano yet, and besides, he is forced to do tedious drills and exercises which seem to him unrelated to the actual music. Of course, if he continues to practice, he will get better, and soon he will develop both a love for the piano and a true capacity to make beauty. His hard work has paid off, and now he is free to do things he never imagined before, like play a piece of music on sight, or improvise his own melodies. He now has a piano-playing virtue.

The second example is that of an adult learning a foreign language. At first the task is daunting; she must memorize a huge vocabulary and learn the rules of grammar. It is very taxing, and the student feels very confined by the complex of laws governing the new language. She cannot express herself clearly, and spends most of her time trying not to sound completely ignorant by using a wrong word, or putting a verb in the wrong tense. However, with enough practice, as well as exposure to those who have already mastered the language, she will soon begin to see improvement. She will be able to express herself better, to think, to tell jokes, to read novels and maybe even write poetry, all in the new language. Best of all, when she travels to the country where her newly-acquired language is native, she will be free to communicate with the persons there. She now has the language-speaking virtue.

These two illustrations show us the three basic elements needed in order to develop a virtue: a) natural potential, b) education and training, c) hard work and perseverance.

Regarding the first, we all have the potential for virtue imbedded within our very nature. Every human being is designed with a basic capacity for virtue and the happiness brought about by virtue. So don't worry, you've got what it takes to begin the virtue process.

Secondly, the acquisition of virtue demands education and training. Education refers to the necessary principles, or general truths that are needed. That's what this book is all about, explaining to you the general truths you need to know about virtue and how to get it. Training refers to learning the ropes from someone who is knowledgeable and experienced with regard to virtue. Hopefully, many of us received our initial training in virtue from our parents as children, but that training needs to continue throughout our lives. If you know of a holy, virtuous person (ideally a holy priest), you might ask them for regular spiritual direction. Also of great value is reading the works of saintly persons, in order to benefit from their personal, intimate knowledge of virtue.

Thirdly, hard work and perseverance. The motto of virtue is: *practice makes perfect!* Virtue is not something obtained overnight; it takes repeated effort. The most deadly obstacle to gaining virtue is the temptation to despair, to give up because you don't seem to be making any progress. Remember that if you are determined to keep at it, you will acquire the skill of virtue.

A good example of such determination is the legendary basketball player, Michael Jordan, who was kicked off his high school basketball team because he was weak in shooting and defense. He resisted the urge to quit, and instead he and his coach continued to practice until he acquired the virtues. By the time he made it to college, he could shoot and defend very, very well. In fact, the last play of his last game of the Chicago Bulls sixth championship win, he stole the ball, went the length of the court, and made a long-distance shot to win the game and the championship. He had, by persistent effort, turned his weaknesses into strengths. He had, by persistent effort, gained virtue.

### **God and Virtue**

We must also remember, as we strive towards virtue, that that we are not alone in our struggles. God is the one who made us with the purpose of becoming virtuous and happy, and He will always give us His grace and help if we turn to Him. As Catholics, we know that we can invoke His aid most effectively through daily Prayer (especially Meditation and the Recitation of the Holy Rosary), and a frequent reception of the Sacraments (Confession and the Eucharist).

We cannot do this on our own; *perfection of virtue and happiness demands both our effort and openness to the grace of God through prayer and the sacraments.* He is there for us, waiting to strengthen us on our journey, if only we make use of the resources He has provided. Don't forget, He's told us that without Him, we can do nothing (Jn 15:5).

### **The Cardinal Virtues**

In this chapter we have so far spoken about virtues of music, foreign language, and basketball. Now, the virtues presented in the rest of this book don't just give the capacity to excel in these three areas; they give the capacity to excel at life. These virtues enable a person to gain all those goods which will fulfill him and make him happy.

For example, we saw in the previous chapter that we all desire the good of loving personal relationships. Yet these relationships demand that we give of ourselves to others. But without virtue, which allows us to carefully control and direct our emotions, we don't even possess ourselves enough to give ourselves (after all, you can't give what

you don't have). It's the same with the rest of the basic goods; you can't get them without the basic virtues we will discuss in the following chapters.

There are seven core virtues necessary for perfect happiness. These are: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance, Faith, Hope, and Charity. This list is then further specified into two groups. The first group consists of Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance. These four are commonly referred to as *the Natural Virtues*, *the Moral Virtues*, or *the Cardinal Virtues*. Faith, Hope, and Charity make up the second group and are called *the Theological Virtues*.

We will deal first with the Four Cardinal Virtues, since these are more naturally accessible to the human condition; that is to say, they do not in themselves require a personal encounter with and commitment to Christ and the Church. They are available both to the believer and to the non-believer, and so are somewhat more universal than the Three Theological Virtues. The Cardinal Virtues will be analyzed in depth in the next several chapters, but here it is worthwhile to provide a brief introduction to each one:

Firstly, *Prudence*. This is a virtue of the mind, a virtue of practical reason. Prudence lets us know the right thing to do in any given situation, at the right time, and in the right manner. It is the virtue that enables us to choose the proper way to reach a specific destination. Out of all the virtues, it is placed first because it shows us our goal, or purpose, and it orders everything else according to that goal. It tells us what the right end is, and what the right means is for attaining that end.

Secondly, *Justice*. Justice governs our relationships with other persons. It sees to it that we constantly give everyone what we owe them. Of course, we owe a lot of people; we owe God, we owe human individuals, and we owe various societies. This is what makes Justice so crucial: it enters every dynamic of our lives as interpersonal beings. Closely tied to Justice is the reality of Mercy, which supplements Justice as an indispensable compliment.

Thirdly, *Fortitude*. Also called "Courage," it is the virtue that strengthens us in times of difficulty. Fortitude allows us to overcome fear in doing what is good. It helps us do the right thing, even if we have strong feelings against it. Finally, it sees to it that we do not succumb to the vices of cowardice or excessive boldness.

Fourthly, *Temperance*. This is the virtue that grants us self-control. We are routinely tempted towards those things which are not good for us. Temperance is the ability to resist those temptations. To be temperate means not doing what is wrong, even when we have strong feelings for it. With Temperance, we appreciate the good things in life, but we do not allow ourselves to commit acts of overindulgence.

There's a bare-bones summary each of the Cardinal Virtues. In what follows, we'll see the dynamism of Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance, and how trying to put them into practice on a daily basis will radically transform your life in every aspect.

