

## Stages of moral development: In religion, morality can be childish or enlightened.

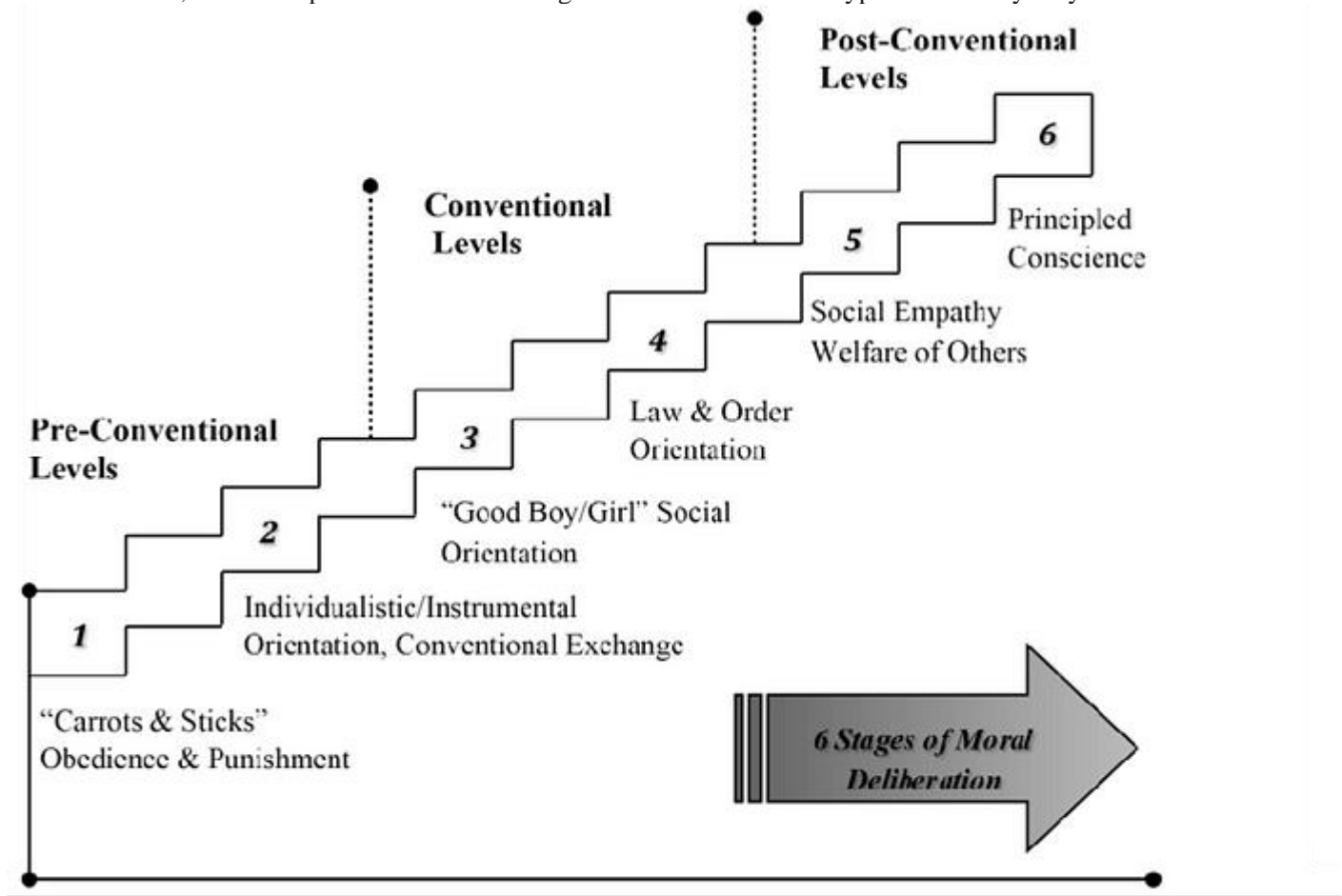
By David A. Palmer, The New Mindscape, March 23, 2021

The relationship between religion and ethics is not a simple one. Research has shown that we have the natural capacity to act morally or not and to make moral judgements, regardless of religion.

The question, then, is, can spirituality and religion strengthen or reinforce our natural moral instincts, and restrict our amoral ones? In other words, what role can spirituality and religion play in our moral development? The answer is not simple.

According to the psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, humans can potentially go through six stages of moral development.[1] Below is a chart of the six first stages. Later, Kohlberg also speculated on a possible seventh stage, of “Transcendental morality”, or “morality of cosmic orientation”.[2] From this chart, we can see that different forms of social and religious behavior correspond to each stage of moral development.

Kohlberg’s basic idea was that as human beings grow up, they go through different stages of moral development. As babies, little children, older children, adolescents and adults, we have different types of moral thinking at these different stages of life. These different stages have quite different ways of understanding morality. Of course, there is room to quibble about the specific details of these stages; for example, it may not be the case that we go through the stages that particular order. However, what is important is that Kohlberg does describe different types of morality very well.



Kohlberg's stages of moral development. Graphic by Mark P. Pritchard

Kohlberg talked about three different levels of moral development: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. Some of these types, which are at what he called the 'Level I', the 'pre-conventional' stage, are actually a rather self-centred morality.

The 'conventional' here refers to social convention. The second level, i.e., the conventional level, simply means to follow the conventions of social behavior. The pre-conventional level refers to the stages at which we don't really care much about social conventions, but are concerned primarily with ourselves. We act morally to avoid punishment or to get rewards. At Level III, i.e., post-conventional morality, we become critical of social conventions from a moral perspective. We may find that social conventions are actually hypocritical; they are not necessarily moral. Therefore, to be a moral person does not necessarily imply following social conventions.

## Religion and the stages of moral development

Different types of religious behavior also match with these types of moral stages. For example, if we look at Stage 1 — “obedience and punishment-driven morality” — what is right or wrong is determined by what is punishable. Moral action is essentially the avoidance of punishment.

For example, little children cannot understand why they should act in certain ways. Therefore, we often train little children by means of punishment, because they don’t know how to reason morally. Likewise, it is a perfect way to train animals like horses and dogs, through reward and punishment.

This stage of moral development can also be found in religion. For example, the idea that if you do good, God will reward you; if you do bad, God will punish you. The purpose to be moral in this world is simply to avoid those punishments. In other words, why we should be good in this world is simply to avoid going to hell. “I don’t know why I shouldn’t do this, but I am afraid of going to hell, so I won’t do this thing”. That is a very widespread type of understanding of religion.

Advancing a little further in moral development, we also have morality driven by self-interest. Here, what is right or wrong is determined by what brings rewards, and what other people want. Other people’s wants and needs come into the picture, but only in a reciprocal sense, i.e., to obtain a certain type of reward from another person.

This is like the Chinese idea of *guanxi* or the Chinese way of using connections. I do something for somebody; but in my mind, I expect that person to do something back for me. This is self-interest-driven morality. People are good to others, but this goodness is driven by their self-interest. They are seeking for some kind of benefit from the people they are being good to.

We see this in religion too. For example, when people go to a temple, like Wong Tai Sin Temple or a Guanyin Temple, they often try to “make a bargain” with the god: “I buy the incense and worship you, and give a donation to your temple, so you should give me what I want.” First, I offer a gift to the god, like burning incense, donating money, offering animal sacrifices, and so on. But I’m giving that in the hope of receiving something in return. I want the god to make me healthy or rich, or to give me a good grade, or to succeed in a business deal. And so, if the prayer is answered — you actually get a very good grade or you make big profit from your business — you will return to the temple, and thank the god, giving more gifts back in return.

This is a self-interest-driven transactional relationship. You are being good to the person or the god, because you want something in return from that person or that god. That’s “pre-conventional” morality. Why do we call it pre-conventional? Because it is self-interested morality. You’re being moral simply because you are afraid of punishment or because you expect something from somebody.

Now let’s consider the “conventional” stage. This is the stage in which being moral means to follow the expectations of the group. What the majority thinks is morally right is right by definition. Last year, a student mentioned the example of giving our seats to the elderly or the pregnant in the MTR. He said this belongs to conventional morality because people assume that as teenagers, we are healthier so that we should help older people who need our seats. We are doing this not because we want to, but because we are under a certain pressure. So, when I see an elderly person standing there, I don’t want to stand up and give my seat to this person; I really want to keep this seat. However, if I don’t stand up, everybody is going to look at me, as if they were saying ‘Who do you think you are? You are so selfish. Don’t you care about others?’ Because I don’t want anybody to look at me like that, I’m going to stand up, and be a good person.

That is morality following social convention — simply doing what everybody in this society or culture considers to be moral. These are the things that you have to do, because if you don’t do them, people may think you are a bad or selfish person. However, in your heart, maybe you don’t want to do these things at all. In fact, maybe most people don’t want to do it. But most people are doing it, because that’s the convention.

There might be hypocrisy in this kind of activity. But at the same time, conventional morality does work for enforcing certain norms — so that the elderly can count on having a seat, even if most people are, secretly, not willing to give them a seat.

Another example is public charity. Everyone thinks that it is good. A lot of people do it, because it makes them look good. People do charity because it is what is expected, rather than what they want to do. Companies even do it for public relations.

We also see conventional morality operating in religion. For example, there are also people who go to church even though they don’t really believe in God or in the church teachings. Because in terms of social tradition and convention, in this neighborhood, village or family, everybody considers that a good person will go to church. Because of that, if you are following conventional morality, you will go to church, even though you don’t believe in God. On Sundays, at church, people may be dressing up their Sunday best — looking elegant, polite, civilized and kind. But as soon as they go out of the church, who knows what they’re up to in the rest of their life?

To give another example, in some Muslim countries, everybody prays outside, whenever there is a call to prayer. Many of those people, in their minds, are not thinking about their prayer at all. If they want to be seen as good people, they

need to publicly show that they are very pious. All these are examples of conventional morality — being moral simply out of convention.

In Conventional morality, being a good person consists in doing one's duty, showing respect for authority, and maintaining the social order. Unquestioning acceptance of authority is considered to be the moral thing to do. This is something we see in most traditional societies and religious communities.

Finally, we advance to "post-conventional" morality. This is a kind of morality that is actually critical of social convention and thus does not necessarily follow social convention. On the contrary, it might even consider social convention to be hypocritical or immoral. The idea of this stage is that moral action is driven by inner conscience, which may not be in agreement with the public opinion or the law. People at this stage may actually consider that the convention is actually immoral. Society is hypocritical, as customs or social conventions are morally wrong, including religious customs and conventions. Therefore, people follow their own conscience, trying to apply universal ethical principles. They follow these principles because they believe that the principles are right, and we should do what is right.

It is not because I want to have a contract with somebody, or to find a way to negotiate my self-interests with somebody — it's because I have a deep conviction that equality is right and must be upheld. It is right not because other people think it is right, and not because it brings me benefits, but simply because it is right, and so, I'm going to do something about it.

For example, I may believe that justice and freedom are right. Hence, I'm going to fight for that, because I firmly believe in it. I don't do it because other people want me to respect justice or freedom. I will follow these principles, even when people disagree with me. So this is no longer conventional morality. It is not about following conventions, and it may even be about breaking them.

Later, Kohlberg added an additional stage – Transcendental Morality, or the "Morality of Cosmic Orientation". He added this stage later in his life, when he realized that there is another stage, which is deeply spiritual and even deeply religious [3]. The reason for being moral is not that people believe in abstract principles of justice, equality or freedom, but that people have an inner love for all humans or for all living beings, which he called 'agape'. This is the inner feeling that makes you suffer when other people suffer, and gives you joy when other people are joyful. It comes from inside of your heart. It is an expression of love and compassion for all of humanity and even all of creation. Such is the teaching of Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, and Baha'u'llah. The teachings of these great religious figures tried to bring humanity to that transcendental level of morality.

This is very important in the history of religions. Some of the world's most influential religious figures broke the social, cultural and religious conventions of their time. Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad and Baha'u'llah all went against the conventional morality of their day. For that reason they were attacked and rejected by most people of their time.

Gautama Buddha broke all the conventions about building a successful family and being a good prince. He also rejected most religious conventions of his day, which were focused on ritual and extreme asceticism. Jesus broke the religious laws of the Sabbath as well as many other religious laws and custom, and he ignored the moral conventions against associating with prostitutes, tax collectors and members of other ethnic groups. Mohammad broke the moral conventions of the Arab people in which the supreme moral good was to advance the interest and honor of one's own patriarchal clan in competition and war against others. Instead he advocated equality and justice for all, and improved the rights of women, slaves and religious minorities. Baha'u'llah broke the religious, racial, sexual and class prejudices of his day, to emphasize that all humans are equal citizens of the world. All of these figures broke the conventional morality of their society to establish a higher morality based on universal ethical principles.[4]

[1] Lawrence Kohlberg, *Essays on Moral Development*. San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1981–1984.

[2] Kohlberg, L., & Ryncarz, R. A. (1990). Beyond justice reasoning: Moral development and consideration of a seventh stage. In C. N. Alexander & E. J. Langer (Eds.), *Higher stages of human development: Perspectives on adult growth* (pp. 191–207). Oxford University Press.

[3] Fernhout, Harry, and Dwight Boyd. "Faith in autonomy: Development in Kohlberg's perspectives in religion and morality." *Religious Education* 80, no. 2 (1985): 287–307.

Nidich, Sanford I., Randi J. Nidich, and Charles N. Alexander. "Moral development and higher states of consciousness." *Journal of Adult Development* 7, no. 4 (2000): 217–225.

[4] Vasudev, Jyotsna. "Ahimsa, justice, and the unity of life: Postconventional morality from an Indian perspective." *Transcendence and mature thought in adulthood: The further reaches of adult development* (1994): 237–255.

**Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development**, a comprehensive stage theory of moral development based on Jean Piaget's theory of moral judgment for children (1932) and developed by Lawrence Kohlberg in 1958. Cognitive in nature, Kohlberg's theory focuses on the thinking process that occurs when one decides whether a behavior is right or wrong. Thus, the theoretical emphasis is on how one decides to respond to a moral dilemma, not what one decides or what one actually does.

Kohlberg's theory, though extremely influential, was based on research that used only boys as subjects. In the 1980s the theory was criticized by the American psychologist Carol Gilligan for universalizing patterns of moral development exhibited by boys and ignoring the distinct patterns characteristic of girls.

**Theoretical framework:** The framework of Kohlberg's theory consists of six stages arranged sequentially in successive tiers of complexity. He organized his six stages into three general levels of moral development.

### **Level 1: Preconventional level**

At the preconventional level, morality is externally controlled. Rules imposed by authority figures are conformed to in order to avoid punishment or receive rewards. This perspective involves the idea that what is right is what one can get away with or what is personally satisfying. Level 1 has two stages.

**Stage 1: Punishment/obedience orientation:** Behavior is determined by consequences. The individual will obey in order to avoid punishment.

**Stage 2: Instrumental purpose orientation:** Behavior is determined again by consequences. The individual focuses on receiving rewards or satisfying personal needs.

### **Level 2: Conventional level**

At the conventional level, conformity to social rules remains important to the individual. However, the emphasis shifts from self-interest to relationships with other people and social systems. The individual strives to support rules that are set forth by others such as parents, peers, and the government in order to win their approval or to maintain social order.

**Stage 3: Good Boy/Nice Girl orientation:** Behavior is determined by social approval. The individual wants to maintain or win the affection and approval of others by being a "good person."

**Stage 4: Law and order orientation:** Social rules and laws determine behavior. The individual now takes into consideration a larger perspective, that of societal laws. Moral decision making becomes more than consideration of close ties to others. The individual believes that rules and laws maintain social order that is worth preserving.

### **Level 3: Postconventional or principled level**

At the postconventional level, the individual moves beyond the perspective of his or her own society. Morality is defined in terms of abstract principles and values that apply to all situations and societies. The individual attempts to take the perspective of all individuals.

**Stage 5: Social contract orientation:** Individual rights determine behavior. The individual views laws and rules as flexible tools for improving human purposes. That is, given the right situation, there are exceptions to rules. When laws are not consistent with individual rights and the interests of the majority, they do not bring about good for people and alternatives should be considered.

**Stage 6: Universal ethical principle orientation:** According to Kohlberg, this is the highest stage of functioning. However, he claimed that some individuals will never reach this level. At this stage, the appropriate action is determined by one's self-chosen ethical principles of conscience. These principles are abstract and universal in application. This type of reasoning involves taking the perspective of every person or group that could potentially be affected by the decision.

**Basic tenets of Kohlberg's theory:** The numerous studies investigating moral reasoning based on Kohlberg's theory have confirmed basic tenets regarding the topic area. Cross-sectional data have shown that older individuals tend to use higher stages of moral reasoning when compared with younger individuals, while longitudinal studies report "upward" progression, in accordance with Kohlberg's theoretical order of stages. In addition, studies have revealed that comprehension of the stages is cumulative (e.g., if a person understands stage 3, he or she understands the lower stages but not necessarily the higher stages), and comprehension of higher stages is increasingly difficult. Moreover, age trends in moral development have received cross-cultural support. Lastly, data support the claim that every individual progresses through the same sequence of development; however, the rates of development will vary.

**Measurement of moral development:** Since the development of Kohlberg's theory, a number of measurement tools that purport to measure moral reasoning have been constructed. Kohlberg's Moral Judgment Interview (1969) is a rather lengthy structured interview requiring trained interviewers and scorers. Another instrument is the Defining Issues Test developed by James Rest (1974). These measures, ranging from projective tests to structured, objective assessments, all consist of a set of hypothetical stories involving moral dilemmas.

# **Morality**---excerpted from the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*

## **Made in the Image of God**

The most basic principle of the Christian moral life is the awareness that every person bears the dignity of being made in the image of God. He has given us an immortal soul and through the gifts of intelligence and reason enables us to understand the order of things established in his creation. God has also given us a free will to seek and love what is true, good, and beautiful. Sadly, because of the Fall, we also suffer the impact of Original Sin, which darkens our minds, weakens our wills, and inclines us to sin. Baptism delivers us from Original Sin but not from its effects—especially the inclination to sin, concupiscence. Within us, then, is both the powerful surge toward the good because we are made in the image of God, and the darker impulses toward evil because of the effects of Original Sin.

But we should always remember that Christ's dying and rising offers us new life in the Spirit, whose saving grace delivers us from sin and heals sin's damage within us. Thus we speak of the value, dignity, and goal of human life, even with its imperfections and struggles. Human life, as a profound unity of physical and spiritual dimensions, is sacred. It is distinct from all other forms of life, since it alone is imprinted with the very image of its Creator.

## **The Responsible Practice of Freedom**

The second element of life in Christ is the responsible practice of freedom. Without freedom, we cannot speak meaningfully about morality or moral responsibility. Human freedom is more than a capacity to choose between this and that. It is the God-given power to become who he created us to be and so to share eternal union with him. This happens when we consistently choose ways that are in harmony with God's plan. Christian morality and God's law are not arbitrary, but specifically given to us for our happiness. God gave us intelligence and the capacity to act freely. Ultimately, human freedom lies in our free decision to say "yes" to God. In contrast, many people today understand human freedom merely as the ability to make a choice, with no objective norm or good as the goal.

## **The Understanding of Moral Acts**

Another important foundation of Christian morality is the understanding of moral acts. Every moral act consists of three elements: the objective act (what we do), the subjective goal or intention (why we do the act), and the concrete situation or circumstances in which we perform the act (where, when, how, with whom, the consequences, etc.).

For an individual act to be morally good, the object, or what we are doing, must be objectively good. Some acts, apart from the intention or reason for doing them, are always wrong because they go against a fundamental or basic human good that ought never to be compromised. Direct killing of the innocent, torture, and rape are examples of acts that are always wrong. Such acts are referred to as intrinsically evil acts, meaning that they are wrong in themselves, apart from the reason they are done or the circumstances surrounding them.

The goal, end, or intention is the part of the moral act that lies within the person. For this reason, we say that the intention is the subjective element of the moral act. For an act to be morally good, one's intention must be good. If we are motivated to do something by a bad intention—even something that is objectively good—our action is morally evil. It must also be recognized that a good intention cannot make a bad action (something intrinsically evil) good. We can never do something wrong or evil in order to bring about a good. This is the meaning of the saying, "the end does not justify the means" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1749-1761).

## **The Reality of Sin and Trust in God's Mercy**

We cannot speak about life in Christ or the moral life without acknowledging the reality of sin, our own sinfulness, and our need for God's mercy. When the existence of sin is denied it can result in spiritual and psychological damage because it is ultimately a denial of the truth about ourselves. Admitting the reality of sin helps us to be truthful and opens us to the healing that comes from Christ's redemptive act.

## **The Formation of Conscience**

The formation of a good conscience is another fundamental element of Christian moral teaching. "Conscience is a judgment of reason by which the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.1796). "Man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. . . . His conscience is man's most secret core, and his sanctuary (GS, no. 16).

Conscience represents both the more general ability we have as human beings to know what is good and right and the concrete judgments we make in particular situations concerning what we should do or about what we have already done. Moral choices confront us with the decision to follow or depart from reason and the divine law. A good conscience makes judgments that conform to reason and the good that is willed by the Wisdom of God. A good conscience requires lifelong formation. Each baptized follower of Christ is obliged to form his or her conscience according to objective moral standards.

The Word of God is a principal tool in the formation of conscience when it is assimilated by study, prayer, and practice. The prudent advice and good example of others support and enlighten our conscience. The authoritative teaching of the Church is an essential element in our conscience formation. Finally, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, combined with regular examination of our conscience, will help us develop a morally sensitive conscience.

### **The Excellence of Virtues**

The Christian moral life is one that seeks to cultivate and practice virtue. “A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1803). An effective moral life demands the practice of both human and theological virtues.

Human virtues form the soul with the habits of mind and will that support moral behavior, control passions, and avoid sin. Virtues guide our conduct according to the dictates of faith and reason, leading us toward freedom based on self-control and toward joy in living a good moral life. Compassion, responsibility, a sense of duty, self-discipline and restraint, honesty, loyalty, friendship, courage, and persistence are examples of desirable virtues for sustaining a moral life. Historically, we group the human virtues around what are called the Cardinal Virtues. This term comes from the Latin word *cardo* meaning “hinge.” All the virtues are related to or hinged to one of the Cardinal Virtues. The four Cardinal Virtues are prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.

There are a number of ways in which we acquire human virtues. They are acquired by frequent repetition of virtuous acts that establish a pattern of virtuous behavior. There is a reciprocal relationship between virtue and acts because virtue, as an internal reality, disposes us to act externally in morally good ways. Yet it is through doing good acts in the concrete that the virtue within us is strengthened and grows.

The human virtues are also acquired through seeing them in the good example of others and through education in their value and methods to acquire them. Stories that inspire us to want such virtues help contribute to their growth within us. They are gained by a strong will to achieve such ideals. In addition, God’s grace is offered to us to purify and strengthen our human virtues, for our growth in virtue can be hampered by the reality of sin. Especially through prayer and the Sacraments, we open ourselves to the gifts of the Holy Spirit and God’s grace as another way in which we grow in virtue.

The Theological Virtues of faith, hope, and charity (love) are those virtues that relate directly to God. These are not acquired through human effort but, beginning with Baptism, they are infused within us as gifts from God. They dispose us to live in relationship with the Holy Trinity. Faith, hope, and charity influence human virtues by increasing their stability and strength for our lives.

Each of the Ten Commandments forbids certain sins, but each also points to virtues that will help us avoid such sins. Virtues such as generosity, poverty of spirit, gentleness, purity of heart, temperance, and fortitude assist us in overcoming and avoiding what are called the seven deadly or Capital Sins—pride, avarice or greed, envy, anger, lust, gluttony, and sloth or laziness—which are those sins that engender other sins and vices.

### **Love, Rules and Grace**

Our culture frequently exalts individual autonomy against community and tradition. This can lead to a suspicion of rules and norms that come from a tradition. This can also be a cause of a healthy criticism of a legalism that can arise from concentrating on rules and norms.

Advocates of Christian morality can sometimes lapse into a legalism that leads to an unproductive moralizing. There is no doubt that love has to be the essential foundation of the moral life. But just as essential in this earthly realm are rules and laws that show how love may be applied in real life. In heaven, love alone will suffice. In this world, we need moral guidance from the Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, the Precepts of the Church and other rules to see how love works.

Love alone, set adrift from moral direction, can easily descend into sentimentality that puts us at the mercy of our feelings. Popular entertainment romanticizes love and tends to omit the difficult demands of the moral order.

In our permissive culture, love is sometimes so romanticized that it is separated from sacrifice. Because of this, tough moral choices cannot be faced. The absence of sacrificial love dooms the possibility of an authentic moral life.

Scripturally and theologically, the Christian moral life begins with a loving relationship with God, a covenant love made possible by the sacrifice of Christ. The Commandments and other moral rules are given to us as ways of protecting the values that foster love of God and others. They provide us with ways to express love, sometimes by forbidding whatever contradicts love.

The moral life requires grace. The *Catechism* speaks of this in terms of life in Christ and the inner presence of the Holy Spirit, actively enlightening our moral compass and supplying the spiritual strength to do the right thing. The grace that comes to us from Christ in the Spirit is as essential as love and rules and, in fact, makes love and keeping the rules possible.

# Catholics Need to Stand by These 3 Pillars of Morality

by Dr. Andrew Swafford, Nov. 27, 2018

I'm finishing up a course on Christian Morality, and it dawned on me that there are a few powerful first principles guiding and governing the Christian moral outlook—such that if one steadfastly latches on to these, many otherwise controverted topics fall neatly into place.

These three are: the importance of virtue, the inviolable dignity of every human life (and in connection here, man's nature as a body-soul unity), and the normativity of the natural order as the embodiment of divine wisdom (and therefore one of our first cues for the moral life). A bonus fourth might be what Pope St. John Paul II has called the "personal" order, to which we'll turn at the end.

## 1. The Importance of Virtue

Virtue ethics connects two very important things: first, virtue is about fully actualizing the capacities of human nature in order to live a fully human life—that is, virtue ethics is about attaining true and objective happiness (not merely a subjective state of contentment). People seldom think about morality this way; but for the ancients, living a good life was about becoming a truly happy person. Second, a virtue ethic shows how all of our actions are not simply external to us; rather, they are *modifying and shaping our character in the process*. We are becoming a certain kind of person in and through each and every decision we make.

This second feature of a virtue ethic has many points of contact with athletics; take any kind of skill (e.g., pitching in baseball, shooting mechanics in basketball, or a golf swing): at first the process is awkward and clumsy; but over time and with practice, the execution of the skill gets smoother and more fluid. Conversely, practicing the skill incorrectly likewise inculcates bad habits, which over time become hard to break.

The point is this: the moral life—acts of virtue *and* vice—create ingrained habits over time. That is, we are *becoming* a certain kind of person along the way, ultimately, one who is free to be truly happy, or someone enslaved to vice.

## Virtue Requires Training

I press this with my students because the youth (especially today) are prone to think something like the following: “*Deep down*, I'm a good guy—despite what I did last weekend.” In other words, our culture has a tendency to dissociate our actions from *who* we are. In reality, this is preposterous: over time, our actions determine who we are—because each and every action is making us into a certain kind of person.

The moral question, then, is not simply “what do I do right now?” but rather *who do I want to be*. If we thought of every moral decision as an answer to that question—*who do I want to be*—we'd probably live with a lot less regrets.

This is to say then that what we're doing now is *directly* related to who we'll be in five years. As I said, this is important for high school and college students to hear, since they often think they'll “live it up now” and settle down later, and then just magically become a good husband or wife when the time comes. That is, they often don't fully take into account the preparation—the necessary training in virtue—that it will take to make that happen.

## A New Kind of Freedom

As already implied above, the practice of virtue gives rise to a deeper freedom. In teaching about this, I'll often ask my class if they are free to speak French. Amused, they respond in the affirmative. Then I ask them to do it—to which many of them respond by informing me that they haven't taken French.

In other words, they are free to speak French in a superficial sense—I'm not going to stop them. But they aren't ultimately free to speak the language until they have mastered the skills which enable them to express any given thought fluently in the French language.

Similarly, *virtues are the skills needed to live a life with excellence*—the skills which give one the freedom to be the person they truly want to be (to be the father, husband, mother, wife, friend, doctor, businessman, etc. they want to be); that is, the freedom to be truly happy.

## You Play How You Practice

Great examples of this deeper freedom are: learning a foreign language, a musical instrument, getting in shape, or any athletic skill that must be practiced over and over again before it becomes second nature.

A great player in any sport (or musician) is reliable and consistent; anybody can hit a lucky shot—whereas, someone who truly has the particular excellence can do such an action on demand. And such mastery makes the performance of the act more and more joyful.

So too with virtue: a virtuous act is at first arduous and difficult; but as one practices, say small acts of courage, over time they get easier and easier. One becomes more free to be the person they truly want to become. To be the hero

when it counts, one must first have fought the small battles along the way. After all, what do coaches constantly say—you play how you *practice*.

A virtuous life is about discipline, about attaining self-mastery. And this self-mastery enables us to enter into life most fully—to give the best of ourselves, ultimately to God and neighbor. And perhaps paradoxically, only in such self-mastery—which leads to self-gift—can we find true and abiding happiness.

## 2. The Dignity of Every Human Life

It is certainly reasonable to treat human beings differently than any other creature. After all, we *are* different not just in degree, but in kind. For example, we're interested in the DNA of other animals—not the other way around. Several of our distinctive activities indicate something fundamentally different in our nature (i.e., a spiritual soul):

- We study science and philosophy (which depend upon distinguishing between appearance and reality);
- We write literature, languages, and poetry (animals communicate, but they don't use grammar and syntax—they don't distinguish simile and metaphor);
- We create fine art (the Sistine Chapel doesn't exactly further interests of immediate survival);
- We have religions (only man asks the ultimate questions);
- We make laws (e.g., traffic laws, tax laws);
- We have a variety of dwellings (whereas, a wren builds its nest year in and year out based on its kind—in contrast to the variety of human dwellings now and throughout history, a variety which is due to reason and free will).

### You'll Never Not Exist

That said, what Christians teach about the dignity of every human life was not something taken for granted in the ancient world, even among the likes of great virtue teachers like Aristotle and Plato. In other words, we should not underestimate the power of Genesis 1:26-28—that every human person is made in the image and likeness of God (nor should we underestimate how the Incarnation elevates and crystallizes our sense of the inviolable dignity of every human life).

One of my graduate professors (Bishop Robert Barron) used to say that if you took the Catholic Faith and blew it up and scattered pieces of it around in various disconnected places, then you'd have modernity. A case in point is the modern world's preoccupation with human rights. This is no doubt a legacy of our Christian heritage—but removed from its proper context, it often gets distorted (e.g., a human right to abortion).

Every person who's ever lived still does, *somewhere*. Therefore, the conception of every human life brings about a person who will never not exist.

### Importance of the Body

Important here is the inherent connection between *me* and my body. That is, when the human organism comes to be, the *person* comes to be.

There are several pro-abortion academics who will acknowledge that the human being comes to be at conception, but that the “person” comes to be much later. Here, they identify the person—who alone is said to be the seat of moral and human rights—with things like consciousness, self-awareness, and the ability to communicate. As such, this is something that develops later, even well after birth.

For this reason, some thinkers (e.g., Peter Singer of Princeton) have expressed support for infanticide up to age two (after all, how “self-conscious” is a six-month-old?). Such a view is repulsive to most people, but it is consistent with the above outlook in terms of what constitutes “personhood.”

### The Body Is the Person

If we take a baby a week before birth and a week after, not much has changed except for its location. What we want is to find the point at which a substantial change has taken place—that is, when a new entity has come about, not just some degree of development of the individual organism.

There really is no serious candidate other than conception. The gametes (the sperm or ovum) are genetically and functionally parts of mother and father. The embryo, on the other hand, at its earliest stages is genetically distinct from father and mother. Further, a difference in potency (or developmental capacity) implies a difference in nature. That is, a sperm taken by itself will not self-develop into a mature human being; a sperm, therefore, is a *potential* human being. An embryo, on the other hand—if provided nutrition and environment—will self-develop into a mature human being. This radical difference in potency or capacity between the newly conceived embryo on the one hand, and the sperm by itself on the other is enough to indicate that a new individual has come about with the completion of fertilization. Therefore, in contrast to the sperm by itself, the newly-conceived embryo is a *human being with potential*.



Further: *when the individual organism comes to be, the person comes to be*. We must resist this supposed dualism that sees the person as one thing and the body as another—as if the person were “trapped” inside the body. Ironically, here it’s the pro-abortion side that is pointing to a fuzzy dualism as to when the “person” comes to be, while the pro-life side is focused on the scientific beginning of the bodily organism (in other words, I didn’t have to appeal to the infusion of the soul at any point in the above to make the pro-life case; but ironically, the pro-abortion side’s appeal to “personhood” is a subjective notion disconnected from the scientific beginning of the individual organism).

### **Human Rights Don’t Depend on Human Traits**

Euthanasia advocates argue from the same premises as the pro-abortion advocates above. For example, when dementia has set in, at a point the “person” is supposedly no longer present even though the human being remains alive. At a point, this thinking would allow one to dispose of the “human being” precisely because they have ceased to be a “person”—since on this view, only persons have moral rights.

The fundamental problem with using such things as “consciousness” or “self-awareness” as the seat of human rights is that it’s so fluid: what exactly is the threshold one must cross to preserve one’s moral rights? What if a person’s IQ is below 40? What about the severely mentally-handicapped?

The only real basis for human rights (and human equality, for that matter) is that *human rights flow from simply being human*. Conversely, if we tie human rights to the development of some human trait (e.g., consciousness), the necessary threshold for human rights becomes *arbitrary* and is subjectively chosen by those in power.

### **Err on the Side of Life**

This is precisely what John Paul II meant by the “culture of death”—*as a war of the powerful against the weak*; for the weakest are most vulnerable—especially the unborn who can’t even cry to defend themselves, but also the handicapped, disabled, and elderly.

Even if there were uncertainty regarding the beginning of life, the issue is so important—so much is at stake—that we should err on the side of life. If we were hunting and thought some movement in a bush was an animal but realized that it *might* be a person, we would be obligated not to shoot. So, too, here: the mere probability of the presence of human life is so crucial that we should err on the side of life.

### **What about the Transgender Issue?**

Our unity as one thing—a body-soul composite—is enough to throw up an immense caution flag regarding transgender issues. For *our bodies are integral to who we are*. Therefore, it simply can’t be the case that someone could be, say, a boy trapped inside a girl’s body.

Further, the natural order is “always or for the most part,” as Aristotle taught long ago. It doesn’t have the necessity of mathematics—that is, genetic defects and the like sometimes occur. In other words, just because there are rare occasions of a person with mixed chromosomes (or mixed genitalia) does not mean that sex and gender do not have a basis in the natural order. We first recognize the order of things (i.e., always or for the most part), which then allows us to recognize something as a *disorder*. Just because some people are born blind doesn’t mean that eyes are not *for* seeing.

### **3. Natural Order as Normative**

Here is where Pope Francis’ ecological thinking and Catholic sexual morality coincide (a point Francis alludes to in *Laudato Si*). The created order is God’s gift to us and bears the imprint of his divine ordering. We should seek to work *with*—not *against*—the inherent grammar of the natural order. That is, we shouldn’t view nature as a blank slate which we can manipulate at will, as if the only restriction upon us were expediency. Freedom, in other words, must be subordinated to truth.

We must first recognize the order inherent within nature and seek to cooperate with it. Here, the same thinking that would exploit the natural environment with no concern for its intrinsic grammar and purpose is exactly the same that fuels the transgender movement: in both instances, we seek to make nature conform to our subjective desires, with no regard to its objective meaning. Rather, we should conform our desires to the objectivity of nature’s inherent order.

In the order of nature, the sexual act is both unitive and procreative—it’s about babies and bonding. Contraceptive acts, homosexual acts, and masturbation all either attempt to thwart the order of nature (e.g., contraception), or act in direct contradiction to the purpose of the sexual act (e.g., same sex acts, masturbation). Sex is like fire—a powerful force; it’s intended by the Creator for a certain purpose, within a certain context (i.e., the marriage union). Employed outside of its intended context and against its intrinsic purpose, it’s like taking fire outside the fireplace—which all too easily brings the house (and our lives) down in flames.

### **A Bonus 4th: The Personal Order**

We are embodied persons, who are ultimately called to make a gift of ourselves in love. For St. John Paul II, this love is antithetical to simply using someone as an object for my own ends—something that all too easily happens in the sexual context.

It was Karol Wojtyla's (St. John Paul II's) conviction (and I think rightfully so) that whenever someone engages in premarital sex (or contracepted sex) that it necessarily becomes an act of using—because the whole accent of the act is now placed upon physical pleasure. In other words, it was Wojtyla's conviction that only by maintaining the natural order (i.e., the procreative aspect of the sexual act) that we also maintain the personal order (a call to love and not use). A sexual act that is inherently not open to life all too easily becomes an act of mutual masturbation—that is, an act of sexual using.

### **A Test Case with NFP**

When confronted with the allegation that natural family planning and contraception are the same thing, I usually respond by asking, “Then why not just use NFP?” The response I get is usually, “That would be totally *different!*” To which I usually say: “Wait, I thought you just said they were the *same* thing.”

It's true that they bring about the same *end*, but the *means* are different.

NFP is morally superior to contraception for at least two clear reasons: it works *with* (not against) the natural order; and it better fosters self-mastery (i.e., virtue) and true love (as opposed to using). In other words, NFP works with the natural order and is more consonant with the building up of the personal order.

### **Calm in the Storm**

Is the moral discussion today often very chaotic? Yes, of course. But I have seen in my students over the years that they appreciate a sound and reasonable presentation. Even when they disagree—which is often due to divergent first principles—it's still good for us to be clear on our first principles and how Catholic teaching flows from them.

Catholic teaching is reasonable and liberating. But often one has to take the plunge and live it out before it resonates most deeply. Sometimes I've resorted to saying, “OK, you've tried it one way; how about an alternative?” Often, young people haven't really thought about it—they've just been swept up by the culture.

It was St. John Paul II's conviction that these principles are also exactly what's needed to build a free and just society in the modern age. After all, a democracy is only as good as its citizens. If virtue is held in esteem and the dignity of every human life is safeguarded from conception to natural death, then we would be well on our way to forming a culture of life and true love.

### **A Life of Excellence**

Lastly, we should remember that we are not a political party; nor are we a school of philosophy. We are disciples of the Lord Jesus—we *should look different*.