

Ethics of Mercy: From Being Perfect to Being Merciful

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Ethics, in general, is defined as the science of voluntary human behaviour based on accepted customs and norms of conduct of a particular context. This is self-explanatory in its etymology. In the course of history, this term has been used to indicate three interrelated ideas, namely, (i) the general patterns of human living, (ii) a science that formulates rules or moral codes of human conduct (normative science based on pure reason), and (iii) philosophical description of human behavior (descriptive science based on practical reason). Hence, we can say that the goal of ethics is not merely to know objectively what one ought to do and avoid in general but also to know how to make practical moral decisions in concrete situations.

Philosophers developed normative aspects of ethics. Plato presented good as the resemblance of the pure/universal form of good - the perfection. For Aristotle, right actions and virtuous characters are the means of achieving personal happiness and social welfare. Theologians laid emphasis on descriptive aspects of ethics. For St. Augustine the final goal of human life is happiness. It is found only in God and cannot be achieved by merely living a so-called perfect life. It is attained only through the union of love. St. Thomas Aquinas adopted Aristotelian and Augustinian ethics and in him both speculative and practical aspects of ethics are bound together. For Aquinas, ethics is not just a science of purely theoretical knowledge (know how human beings ought to behave) but a practical science of becoming good (know how to make correct moral decisions).

The pure reason tells every rational being that they can meditate on objective truth/objective moral laws. However, the practical reason, the experience tells them that every moral agent is in tension, conflict, limited, finite ... sinful. The concretization of the objective moral principles in a moral context is a difficult process, a difficult journey that every sinful moral agent has to make through constantly making morally right decisions. Hence the sinful moral agent can reach only the 'excellence that is humanly possible'. Hence, contextual ethics must be based on realism and not on idealism.

The followers of Jesus Christ are invited to understand this moral struggle and be merciful with everyone who is in the struggle. The Gospels witness to Jesus' merciful approach to the sinners who are struggling in their moral journey inviting all to be merciful: 'be merciful just as your Father is merciful'.

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