

From chapter 12, 'Virtue Ethics':

APPLICATION OF VIRTUE ETHICS TO AN ETHICAL DILEMMA – SEXUAL ETHICS

Virtue Ethics encompasses our entire lives, and sees every moment as a possibility for acquiring or developing a virtue, including sexual relationships. A virtue based approach to sexual ethics does not give a choice of action from alternatives, nor does it tell us how to respond in a particular situation, such as when a person seems to go against a particular sexual moral norm. However, Virtue Ethics asks how a person acts virtuously over an extended period of time with regard to their sexual relationships. Virtue Ethics is not about decisions, but about the person making those decisions, and the skills and habits that enable the person to act rightly under pressure. As far as sexual ethics is concerned, Virtue Ethics aims to shape what we desire as well as what we do, and so presumes there is a right and wrong in sexual conduct - it is not just private choice.

Virtue Ethics would consider what kind of sexual practices would make a person more virtuous, and would consider that sex expresses human union - a sharing, giving and commitment. It would, therefore see that the sexual practices that use others for one's own end, or that harm others as not being virtuous.

Virtue Ethics implies that an action is right if it is what a virtuous person, who exercises the virtues, would characteristically do in a situation. Aristotle talks about practicing virtues, and a mature person continually growing in virtues.

One approach to sexual ethics from the point of view of Virtue Ethics might consider the application of certain virtues, such as justice and fairness in sexual ethics which treats each person with dignity. This could be used to discuss the commercialisation of sex, from prostitution to internet pornography, and the question of the equality of women.

Alternatively, virtue ethicists such as Michael Slote, emphasise the ethics of care in relationships and as far as sexual ethics are concerned this requires a sort of three-way balance: care for those who are near to us (intimate care); care for other people in general (humanitarian care); and care for our own well-being (self care). This enables us to balance justice which asks us to treat all people with impartiality, with fidelity which asks us to consider our specific interpersonal relationships. Finally self-care allows the person to be accountable for oneself, and not let oneself be taken advantage of in sexual relationships - responsible for ourselves as well as others.

This view implies tolerance towards others' approaches to sexual ethics, while accepting that we are responsible for our character and the choices we make. Virtue Ethics also urges us to rediscover balance in human sexuality and in our sexual relationships.

From chapter 16, 'Sexual Ethics':

CONTRACEPTION

A further issue is that of contraception, which in modern times has seen a vast variety of Christian views. Roman Catholic teaching goes back to Augustine's views that marital intercourse was morally justified as procreation was right and necessary and somehow cancelled out all the sinful sexual desire. The story of Onan (Genesis 38:9) was interpreted as teaching that any form of contraception was wrong, whereas Onan's misdeed was his avoidance in producing an heir by his dead brother's wife, not the actual avoidance of pregnancy.

Papal encyclicals stressed that the chief purposes of marriage were procreation and the bringing up of children. *Humanae Vitae* the encyclical of Pope Paul VI in 1968 reaffirmed this position, but did allow the use of the 'rhythm method' and other natural methods, as well as periods of sexual abstinence. It considered that the natural end of sexual intercourse was conception and anything that interfered with this was against the precepts of Natural Law and so unlawful.

As recently as 1997 the Vatican's Pontifical Council for the Family said that contraception was an

intrinsic evil, 'gravely opposed to marital chastity', as not only did it stop procreation, but harmed true love between the couple and took away from God his role in the transmission of human life.

However, in practice many Catholics have ignored the official Church position. The Canadian Catholic Bishops Conference issued a dissenting document called the Winnipeg Statement, in which they reasserted the primacy of conscience in making ethical decisions. Arguments against the Catholic position include the fact that most acts of intercourse do not lead to procreation and so it cannot be the primary purpose of sex. Also it is argued that the distinctions between natural family planning and contraception have no morally significant differences as both are ways of ensuring that pregnancy does not take place. As the Catholic Church accepts natural family planning, it seems inconsistent in rejecting contraception.

However, the use of condoms to prevent sexually transmitted infections is not addressed by Catholic teaching and in 2006 a study on the use of condoms within marriage to combat AIDS was ordered by Pope Benedict XVI.

Protestant churches used to have the same view as Catholics on contraception: that it went against God's purpose for marriage. Then in 1930 the Lambeth Conference issued the first statement in favour of birth control, and since then the views of Protestants have steadily changed, so that contraception is no longer regarded as a sin, and that the use or non-use of contraception is up to the individual conscience. Among Protestants, however, there is still ongoing discussion about which forms of contraception are allowed, with many rejecting any form of abortifacient contraception. In general, Protestants allow 'prudent family planning' so as to lead to responsible parenthood where each child is loved and wanted.

Until the 1970s the Eastern Orthodox Church also opposed contraception, but now holds that contraception is acceptable within a Christian marriage if the method of contraception is not abortifacient, it is used with the blessing of a spiritual leader and children are not completely excluded from the marriage.

Most Christian denominations do not accept the use of contraception outside of marriage, as this is seen as simply encouraging or permitting promiscuous behaviour. As far as pre-marital sex is concerned most Christians see it as wrong, and so abstaining from sex would be morally better than having sex and using birth control.