09

Never Go Wrong: A Christian Hierarchy of Bioethical Principles in 2 Peter

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Introduction to the Ethical Terms of 2 Peter

Though any number of New Testament passages could inform the way Christians approach bioethics, the ethical terms found in the Second Epistle of Peter resonate with the language of modern bioethics in a way that other parts of Scripture do not. The writer of 2 Peter seems to anticipate modern conflicts among the moral principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, utility, and justice.[1] Then, by placing these principles along a logical progression, the writer gives these moral principles a foundation and a meaningful end, a *telos*. A philosopher who reads 2 Peter for the first time may feel like a chef who, being familiar with only a few ingredients of an enviable entrée, stumbles upon the original recipe with a step-by-step description of how to make precisely what is desired.

To demonstrate how the ethical list of 2 Peter 1:3–10 informs modern bioethics, it is helpful first to review the whole passage and then its individual ethical terms:

> Everything for life and godliness, his divine power has given us through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and virtue . . . By this then, earnestly strive to add to your *faith, virtue*; to *virtue, knowledge*; to *knowledge, self-restraint*; to *self-restraint, enduring resistance*; to *enduring resistance, reverence*; *to reverence, beneficence*; and to *beneficence, love*. . . for if you do these things, you will not go wrong, ever.[2]

Ethical lists were a common rhetorical tool among ancient Greco-Roman philosophers. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle places virtue at the head of an ethical list when he writes “It is not possible to be good in the true sense without Prudence, nor to be prudent without Moral Virtue (*arêtes*).”[3] Aristotle’s list adds to virtue, prudence; and then to prudence, goodness. The list is both logical and hierarchal.

Unlike Aristotle’s list, most ancient lists do not follow a rigid hierarchal format whereby one virtue is built upon another leading to an ethical climax. Especially among the Stoics, lists of vices and virtues were thematic; each served to highlight a particular topic. The lists were not all inclusive and did not usually exhibit a logical progression.[4] The inclusion of particular vices or virtues merely reflected a desired emphasis,[5] such as when Plato develops four virtues in no particular order—courage, prudence, self-restraint, and justice—and designates these as the cardinal virtues.[6] Many lists of the New Testament follow thematic style.[7]

Paul’s writings include collections of

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vices and virtues presented in no logical hierarchy. The works of the flesh when compared to the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:19–23 or the list of vices resulting from an untested mind in Romans 1:29–32 is not intended to be comprehensive or logically ordered. Like other ethical lists found in the New Testament, Paul's lists serve to emphasize a theme; and like other New Testament lists, the elements are not progressive. For New Testament writers, *euphonia*, the pleasant combination of sounds, rather than logic determines the selection and placement of a word in a list.[8] Second Peter provides the one exception. The writer of 2 Peter uses the language of Hellenistic ethical philosophy to convey a hierarchal list of virtues (1:5–7). The Petrine list is similar to Aristotle's in that it is logically ordered, but it is built on a Christian understanding, rather than a pagan or secular understanding, of moral terms. Based on the context, we can see that the foundation of the Petrine list is faith, particularly the firm conviction in the righteousness of God (2 Pet 1:1) and the truth of the power and coming of Jesus Christ (2 Pet 1:16). Upon this foundation is assembled a list of virtues capped by *agapē* as an end or a *telos*, the mature disposition into which human beings are intended to be transformed.

A teleological understanding of ethical concepts grows out of ancient Hellenistic philosophies, like those preserved in the works of Aristotle that inspired modern versions of virtue ethics.[9] Aristotle viewed human beings as "having a *telos*, a final end, goal, purpose, or true nature toward which they naturally tend."[10] The *telos* of the Petrine list is love, specifically *agapē*, or unconditional, sacrificial love. Using this focus on the ultimate moral virtue, *agapē*, around which Jesus centered the moral life, 2 Peter points us toward the one virtue from which every other virtue derives meaning.[11] Even after two millennia, this list of virtues, built on a foundation of faith aimed at *agapē,* informs a Christian approach to modern bioethics.

Second Peter's Ethical List as an Application of Virtue Theory

The Petrine list may be thought of as an application of virtue ethics that anticipates insufficiencies found in other major ethical theories. Virtue ethics in general provides a foundation of morality, moral virtue, found lacking in utilitarianism and deontological theories.[12] While consequential theories and emphasis on duty may speak to competence in the biomedical professions, virtue theory incorporates the essential prerequisite of character.[13] Second Peter provides an example of this point. By ordering a list of virtues aimed at *agapē*, 2 Peter incorporates ethical concepts first used by Hellenistic philosophers into a virtue-based stepwise building of character.

The Petrine list may also fill in what is missing in principlism. Danner Clouser and Bernard Gert criticize the modern use of principles such as autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice because "the principles lack any systematic relationship to each other, and they often conflict with each other."[14] Conversely, 2 Peter orders the principles into a systematic relationship with the fixed, well-defined goal of *agapē*.

Virtue theory is not without its deficits. As Alasdair MacIntyre laments: "What is lacking . . . is any clear consensus, either as to the place of virtue concepts relative to other moral concepts, or as to which dispositions are to be included within the catalog of the virtues or the requirements imposed by particular virtues."[15] According to Edmund Pellegrino, this is the most serious conceptual task facing biomedical ethics: the development of a unifying system within which the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice can link principles with insights from other sources.[16] Rather than abandon the principles, Pellegrino argues that virtue theory, among other insights, provides a unified grounding for principle-based ethics.[17]

On this point, Pellegrino seems to do something similar to what 2 Peter does when compiling an ethical list. Pellegrino adopts the language of modern ethics to ground the medical profession in a *telos* which, though not exclusively Christian, is founded on a distinctively Christian concept of love.[18] In the same way, 2 Peter adopted language common to the first and second century—terminology used by Stoic, Epicurean, and Hellenized Jewish philosophers—to fashion a distinctively Christian catalog of virtues aimed at the Christian concept of *agapē.*[19]

Thomas Aquinas,[20] and Augustine before him,[21] reached the same conclusion. For each of them, *agapē*, also called charity, was the highest virtue. But the writer of 2 Peter went one step further. He not only named *agapē* as the destination virtue; he provided a roadmap to get there. Using the language of Hellenistic philosophers, he demonstrates how a person logically makes the stepwise progression from faith to love. In doing so, the writer does something uncanny. Though 2 Peter was written to a first- or second-century Christian audience, the letter's ethical catalog speaks across two millennia and touches a felt need in modern bioethics. The ethical catalog of 2 Peter, almost as if anticipating the terms used in modern bioethics, incorporates ancient forms of the modern ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice; but more than just list them, the writer aligns them along with other principles into a unified guide to action.

The Ethical List of 2 Peter

In 2 Peter, the word "faith" appears only two times (2 Pet. 1:1, 5). The second occurrence is contextually linked to the first. In both instances the term appears to carry the same meaning, common throughout the New Testament, of loyalty born out of trust within the setting of a relationship between human beings and God.[22]

The early Christian concept of *pistis* is distinct from other meanings of the term "faith" such as assent to creedal dogma or acceptance of a proposition despite a lack of evidence.[23] To early Christians, *pistis* meant a firm conviction in the truth of something precisely because of the evidence. Plato used *pistis* to mean proof for an argument and Aristotle develops the idea that rhetorical persuasion requires a mastery of the forms of *pistis*.[24] The term was used in this way by secular as well as religious writers of the early Christian period. *Pistis* meant evidence on which confidence in the truth of something was based.[25] It is in this sense that Paul, speaking with ancient philosophers, uses the term in presenting the case for God's judgment when he says that God "has supplied everyone with proof (*pistin*) of this by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31).

In the same way, 2 Peter begins with "to those who have received a faith (*pistin*), equal in value to ours, in the righteousness of our God" (2 Pet 1:1). Jerome Neyrey has pointed out that the entire letter is likely an apologetic response to the Epicurean charge that injustice is an argument against the providence of God.[26] The Petrine reply begins with a counter claim. According to the writer, it is precisely the justice of God upon which the confidence in the truth of God's providence can be based.

The subsequent ethical list is built on this understanding of faith. Faith is not the blind acceptance of creedal dogma nor assent to unfounded assertions; rather, faith is the firm conviction in the righteousness, or justice, of God. Upon this understanding of faith, the writer proceeds to the other moral dispositions, "Earnestly strive to add to your faith (*pistei*), virtue (*arête*)" (2 Pet 1:5).

Aristotle understood moral behavior to be the product of virtue, or *arête*, often translated as "excellence." For Aristotle, moral character is not something legislated; it is cultivated.[27] *Arête* is like a seed that, when nurtured by *phronesis* (prudence), grows into *eudaimonia* or human flourishing.[28] According to Aristotle, "excellence or virtue in a man will be the disposition which renders him a good man and also which will cause him to perform his function well."[29]

Propagated by Stoic teaching, *arête*, as used in the early Christian period, came to be applied most often within the domain of ethics.[30] The use of *arête* in 2 Peter reveals this shared moral grammar, resulting from an interaction between Stoic and early Christian world views.[31] The writer retains the ancient dimensions of virtue: "It is a character state, habit, or disposition; it involves a judgment of truth and choice of action; and it lies in a mean between excess and defect."[32] However, unlike the Stoic contention that moral excellence resulted from human achievement or the right actions of human beings, 2 Peter places *arête* on the foundation of faith in the righteousness of God.

Furthermore, for the Christian *arête* was not understood as an end in itself. This is an important distinction from Stoic thought. As MacIntyre has argued well, wherever the concept of a teleology—an intended kind of human life—is abandoned, philosophers revert to some form of Stoicism where *arête* serves as its own end.[33] However, 2 Peter has in view something beyond mere virtue. *Arête* is not an end but a foundational link between faith and a series of greater dispositions beginning with knowledge.

Knowledge (*gnōsis*) is a logical extension of *arête*. This again borrows ethical language common among philosophers of the time. Stoic philosophy is built upon an inseparable link between *arête* and *gnōsis*.[34] As with the term "virtue," or *arête*, 2 Peter incorporates the term "knowledge" into the ethical list in a way that shows both an intersection with and a distinction from the Stoic writers.

The Stoic philosophers viewed knowledge as entailing logic, physics, and ethics.[35] According to Stoic teaching, knowledge in any of these three areas is futile unless the knowledge is put into practice.[36] Just as the New Testament epistle of James links faith and works, the Stoic philosophers would say that knowledge without works is disgraceful. The Stoic Epictetus, writing in the same period as 2 Peter, insists that those who learn philosophy must put it into practice: "Show us these things that we may see that you have in truth learned something from the philosophers."[37]

Unlike the Stoics, however, the Petrine writer views knowledge as an extension of faith and virtue, not the foundation by

which virtues are acquired. Furthermore, the term *gnōsis* in 2 Peter has a focus beyond logic, physics, and ethics. For example, the letter ends with a charge for recipients to increase in the knowledge of Jesus Christ (2 Pet 3:18). The desired result is not acquisition of information about a person; it is the strengthening of a relationship. In this way, 2 Peter uses the term "knowledge," a virtue going beyond mere cognitive ascent, to show two things: first, that in a Christian sense, virtuous knowledge extends from a faith in the justice of God and expands in a knowledge of Christ; and second, in a shared connotation with the philosophical grammar of the time, that knowledge progresses to something more, a practical application of knowledge, which in this case is self-restraint.

Stoics held self-restraint, *egkrateia*, as a cardinal virtue, largely following the understanding of Socrates and Aristotle.[38] In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle contrasts *egkrateia* with its opposite vice, unrestraint, writing that "the unrestrained man does things that he knows to be evil, under the influence of passion, whereas the self-restrained man, knowing that his desires are evil, refuses to follow them on principle."[39] Aristotle thus describes self-restraint as the ability to refuse to follow desire. This ability to impose a law upon oneself, in spite of pressure from the passions, is what led to the modern concept of moral autonomy.[40] Though the term "autonomy" has an alternate, popular connotation, often alluding to personal independence, the term as used by Kantian and utilitarian philosophers more closely aligns with the ancient understanding of self-restraint.[41] Autonomy, in the sense of a self-law, became the cardinal focus of Kant's moral imperative.[42]

The Petrine writer would not disagree with Kant's definition of autonomy, because it aligns with the ancient variant, *egkrateia*, but whereas Kant makes autonomy the basis of moral decisions, 2 Peter makes self-restraint an extension of faith, virtue, and knowledge in the progression toward something higher. Similarly, the power and motivation of the Petrine use of *egkrateia* is distinct from its Stoic counterpart. The law to which one restrains oneself is not self-made but providentially established. As Daryl Charles has pointed out: "Law to the virtuous pagan is autonomic, while law for the Christian is theonomic."[43] Nonetheless, the Petrine and Stoic understandings of self-restraint share common ethical ground.[44] In fact, much of 2 Peter addresses the moral depravity of the period from which readers are instructed to remain on guard (2 Pet 3:17). This clarifies why the logical next virtue in the Petrine list is a form of brave resilience. Whereas self-restraint is a form of internal resistance; it is incomplete without *hypomonē*; a resistance against the effects of external pressures.

Often translated as "patience," "endurance," or "perseverance," the term *hypomonē* in its classical usage meant "honorable resistance."[45] For the Stoics, *hypomonē* was the virtue that underpins heroism or courage.[46] In Christian writings, the term referred to the quality of bearing up under persecution or trial without being moved. *Hypomonē* was not a passive virtue, as when inactively resisting a social trend. On the contrary, it called to mind the active performance of the right action in the face of resistance.[47] Jeffery Meyers argues that the term should be translated in the New Testament as "enduring resistance."[48] The context of 2 Peter fits this understanding of *hypomonē*. It is enduring resistance against pressure to bend to societal trends that results from a firm conviction in the truth of God's justice.

For early Christians, the result of *hypomonē* was logically a life characterized by actions that show a reverence for God and his will. The virtue behind this laudable behavior was called *eusebia*. The term *eusebia* is not distinctively Christian, nor is it inherently religious. In late Hellenism, it expressed a general piety or reverence in both religious and nonreligious settings.[49] It is important to clarify that while *eusebia* itself did not refer to the acts of religious observance, it referred to an inner reverence for God that resulted in distinctively right behavior in 2 Peter.[50] Second Peter includes *eusebia* as a logical link between the unflappable nature of Christians, *hypomonē*, and the active expression of care for other human beings encompassed in the distinctively Christian form of love for the family of God, *philadelphia*.

The term *philadelphia*, or its synonym *philanthropia*, is linked to *egkrateia* and *eusebia* by Philo;[51] the term *philadelphia* is otherwise unknown outside ancient Christian literature.[52] It is interesting then how the principle grew, albeit under a different name, to become a fundamental concept in secular ethics, one held to be central by Hume, Mills, and Kant. In contemporary terms, the principle is known as beneficence, which according to Tom Beauchamp means "a normative statement of a moral obligation to act for the others' benefit, helping them to further their important and legitimate interests, often by preventing or removing possible harms."[53] This is precisely the meaning of *philadelphia* when used in 2 Peter. But unlike Beauchamp, the ancient writer anchored beneficence in another principle, justice, specifically the justice of God. Though *philadelphia* means affection toward family members and others in general,[54] it takes on its fullest meaning when, in a Christian context, the recipient of a beneficent act is one for whom Christ died (Rom 14:15; 1 Cor 8:11). Therefore, the virtue of *philadelphia* logically progresses to the final and highest virtue, *agapē* (cf. 1 Pet 1:22).

For early Christians, *agapē* came to mean "a love that does not desire but gives."[55] Augustine writes that any known virtue, be it justice, fortitude, temperance, or prudence, is a manifestation of this form of love: "I would say that virtue is absolutely nothing but the highest love of God."[56] It is this virtue, *agapē*, that distinguishes a Christian moral system from all others. This has been true since antiquity. Philip Esler, in comparing Paul's writings to the Stoic philosophers, says "Paul's paramount concern with the nature of face-to-face contacts between Christ-followers, who must treat one another with *agapē* and put the interests of others ahead of their own, is so radically different from anything in Stoic thought that it brings into sharp focus his distinctive vision of moral life in Christ."[57] Whether or not it is on this term *agapē* that Christian writers diverge from the Stoic worldview is debated.[58] However, it is clear from the context of 2 Peter that the Petrine ethical list is designed to distinguish the *telos* of a moral system built upon faith from the catastrophic *telos* of a morality founded on false teaching. The former progresses to *agapē*, the latter to utter ruin (2 Pet. 3:7). According to Charles, in achieving a climax in *agapē*, the Petrine list sets the Christian ethos apart from all other systems: "Christian morality is distinctly the morality of charity."[59]

Discussions

Second Peter presents an ethical list that is both logical and hierarchal; the list is also distinctly Christian. Though it is largely derived from language of the Stoics, the author of the Petrine catalog orders common ethical terms so as to show how virtue founded on faith in the justice of God progresses to the highest virtue of all, *agapē*. The image is that of a jigsaw puzzle completed only when each piece, lowered into the rightful place, reveals the greater picture. The greater picture, from an ethics perspective, is *agapē*. As Pellegrino points out, "the Gospel could not anticipate every possible moral dilemma that might arise in the history of mankind. But it gives us something more valuable. It teaches that Charity is the form of all the virtues, that Charity is the ordering principle of discernment in moral choice."[60]

Consider how the Petrine catalog might be used to frame a contemporary issue. In November of 2018, Chinese biophysicist He Jiankui reported using gene surgery,[61] CRISPR/Cas9, to perform genetic edits of human embryos resulting in the birth of two girls endowed with at least partial immunity to the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).[62] A critical response to the He Jiankui experiment was nearly universal. Bioethicists and scientists were appalled at the lack of respect for bioethical principles. Jennifer Doudna, a co-discoverer of CRISPR/Cas9, expressed concern about unknown risks of editing hereditable traits and lack of informed consent.[63] Jennifer Gumer argued that, even if all safety concerns could be eliminated, this application of CRISPR was unethical under the principle of justice; for, as she explains, diversion of attention and resources toward germline engineering creates an unjust monopoly of resources resulting in a reduction in efforts to address the primary, non-genetic, contributors to disease.[64] Arthur Caplan pointed to a lack of adequate knowledge regarding the effects of genetic editing of human embryos: "A deep understanding of the mechanisms and potential side effects of embryo editing is an absolute prerequisite to any further discussion on its implementation."[65] Julian Savulescu and Peter Singer also call He Jiankui's experiment unethical, "not because it involved gene editing, but because it failed to conform to the basic values and principles that govern all research involving human participants."[66] Troubled by the apparent indifference to the principle of beneficence, they contend that He Jiankui exposed the genetically edited girls to great risk, without a proportionate benefit.[67]

Notice how in each critique the application of genetic editing is described as unethical because, from a particular point of view, the research violates this or that ethical principle: one ethicist says the research is unjust; another says the research is not beneficent; or still another says the research does not guard the participants' autonomy. These conclusions are not wrong; each correctly highlights a lapse in bioethical judgment, but they do seem incomplete. If the foundation of a house is crumbling, pointing out how the roof line sags is not incorrect; however, it misses the underlying issue. Treating an ethical list as a simple collection of virtues whereby each principle is given equal weight relative to the others is not wrong, but selective critique using only this or that virtue increases the risk of missing the foundational issue.

The Petrine list does not allow for the narrow use of individual principles. Rather, 2 Peter makes it clear that certain virtues are characteristic of a growing individual, each quality aimed at acquiring the highest virtue, *agapē*. In a warning against treating ethical lists in the New Testament as mere formulae for morality, Burton Easton reminds us that "Jesus' ethical achievement was his centering the moral life around the supreme virtue of love, from which all other virtues derive their meaning."[68] The Petrine list provides just this sort of centering. Virtues in 2 Peter are listed not as options in a moral buffet, but as steppingstones in a hierarchal progression from faith to the supreme virtue of love.

Pellegrino has taken the same approach with the principles of modern bioethics. He argues that moral virtues such as justice, beneficence, and autonomy can be ordered under "an agapeistic ethic"[69] in which charity, or *agapē* love, is the "ordering principle of discernment in moral choice."[70] The Petrine list provides a prototype of Pellegrino's approach. In fact, the writer of 2 Peter demonstrates the logical conclusion of Pellegrino's argument by placing ethical principles upon one another in a rational order much as a mason lays brick. Upon justice, he places autonomy; upon autonomy he places beneficence; and then upon this foundation of virtues he places *agapē*.

If the gene surgery performed by He Jiankui should give us pause, it is in the recognition that he used the technology on two human beings who are of such unimaginable worth that Jesus Christ, the only-begotten son of God, would die to redeem them. From a Petrine perspective, the sacrificial manifestation of *agapē* or divine love for those human beings acts as a standard. If the results of the research are not agapeistic, then we can expect examples of corruption throughout the entire endeavor. We might expect to find motives that violate beneficence (*philadelphia*); we might expect actions that fail to show reverence (*eusebia*); we might expect actions which want for enduring perseverance (*hypomonē*) and self-restraint (*egkrateia*); we would expect experiments that expose a lack of knowledge (*gnōsis*), or that foundationally demonstrate a deficit in virtue. All this we could expect when the entire endeavor is built upon a firm conviction (*pistis*) in something *other* than the justice of God.

Notice how this application of the Petrine catalog is not merely a devotional application of scripture. The Petrine list does not endorse a particular action as ethically permissible or forbidden. In fact, the principles do not apply specifically to research at all. The principles apply to the person doing the research. What differentiates science as an instrument for good from technologies used for evil or selfish gain are virtues such as those listed in 2 Peter: integrity versus deception; wisdom versus imprudence; perseverance versus impatience; and compassion versus avarice. These virtues cannot result from scientific inquiry; they precede and supersede the appearance of scientific inquiry in human history. For all the wonders of science as a discipline, science remains dependent on the integrity of the hand into which it is laid.[71]

In this sense, 2 Peter provides the scientist, as well as all humankind, with a recipe for the formation of good character. This is not to say that the Petrine ethical catalog serves as a universal or secular code of ethics; the Petrine catalog remains distinctively Christian. Secular ethicists will find common ground with several of the principles, but it is Christians who will find in 2 Peter a refreshing ordering of the familiar ethical principles into a logical sequence which informs and gives depth to ethical deliberation. Justice underpins autonomy which underpins beneficence. Virtue, knowledge, perseverance, and reverence are the mortar that hold the principles together. And each of the principles point to *agapē* as the *telos*, the goal. In this regard, like all things God-breathed, the Petrine list is timeless.

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