

VIRTUE: FROM PLATO TO WHITE

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THE world is falling apart. From the global warning to the conflict between nations, the degradation of the earth has always been a great issue because so obvious. However, what seems to bring more interest is the nature of man. Is the man good or bad? What does it take to make a good man? What are the characteristics of a good man? So many questions can be asked in relation to the values that need to be passed from generation to generation. In this, virtues are proposed as part of the solution. The field of education and its philosophers has been greatly influenced very early by questions related to virtue.

The literature has been offering a great range of terms (or group of terms) to label the important values in our society. One of the terms dominant in late 1950s was virtue ethics. Its emergence during the fifties was due to dissatisfaction from Deontology and Utilitarianism, previous basic theories and their variants that had long been dominating modern moral philosophy (Anscombe, 1958).

The difference between this virtue ethics and the other moral philosophy according to Pojman (2005) lies in the fact that the one who possesses moral virtue can be defined as a good person while the two other theories were strictly confined to the "judgment of acts or their consequences" and did not consider a person as a whole (p. 1). However, this emergence did not really help to grasp the concept virtue, up to now the questions remain. What is really the meaning of virtue, then? Sleutel (1997) defines virtues as the dispositions that we value somehow positively. In this case, he calls virtues also positive character traits while the negative ones refer to vices. Other definitions of virtue from Webster's New English Dictionary are "moral excellence," or "admirable quality," or even in a longer version "practical dispositions in conformity with standards of excellence" (p. 510).

All those definitions quite differ from the Christian point of view where virtue refers in two words to "Christ character." The word virtue seems as difficult to define as many of the concepts

that throughout the history have inspired great thinkers. Either in science, religion or philosophy, virtue seems to have a great impact on theories, but maybe not on practice. The reason could be related to the fact that virtues refer to moral qualities. Carr (1988) states that four qualities of moral character have long been considered as cardinal virtues: courage, temperance, justice and wisdom. We can find some of these defined by many educators and philosophers (Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas and other recent moral educators for example) as virtues.

However, the terminology given sometimes differs from one author to another. So, terms such as virtue ethics, moral education, value education, or even character education are more common in educators' writings but not always well defined (Steutel, 1997). The truth is that interests on virtue are increasing in contemporary philosophical debate. However, those different theories that we could read or talk about are not always practical. In other words, the discussion on virtue seems to be more philosophical and sometimes utopic to the point that the layman may not necessary connect it to his human experience (Nussbaum, 1987).

21st century Adventists definitely would wonder, what does it mean for them to be virtuous? What do the Bible and Ellen G. White say about virtue? This paper seeks to explore the philosophical and Adventist approach of virtue in the 21st century. In the first part of this work, three philosophers' views on virtue will be explored: Plato, Aristotle, and St Augustine. Then a discussion on the different meaning of the word virtue in the scripture will be done. Toward the end, the implication of virtue for Christians will be drawn.

1. Virtue: A Philosophical Approach

"There is but one pursuit in life which is in the power of all to follow, and of all to attain. It is subject to no disappointments, since he that perseveres, makes every difficult an advancement, and every contest a victory; and this is the pursuit of virtue" (Calton, 1924, XLIX). This section treats of virtue from the point of view of different philosophers: Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine.

1.1. Plato and his Idea of Virtue

According to Reed and Johnson (2000), Plato's writings are divided into 3 periods. At first he focused on what Socrates had done, then

in the middle period he mostly used Socrates just to give weight to his writings and finally during the last period, Socrates became a figure of ridicule for Plato. However, what made Plato's writings more interesting in his time and for our discussion is that Plato's dialogues "offer the earliest systematic and coherent treatment of the nature of virtue and morality in western philosophical thought and that treatment is almost exclusively focused upon an attempt to understand the four cardinal virtues" (Carr, 1988, p. 187). Carr (1988) goes further and states that Plato's writings offer some models of moral psychology which have influenced greatly the way to solve ethical and moral issues. It seems that Carr (1988) has great admiration or even love for Plato and his writings.

For sure Plato's writings (Apology, Republic, Laws, etc...) greatly push the ideas of virtue as an ultimate good, but what specifically virtue means does not necessary appear as clear as Carr presents it. The following paragraphs analyze the meaning of virtue in both Apology and The Republic.

In Apology (ca. 399 BC), which is basically a narrative of Socrates' accusation and his defense, Plato seems to present effectively virtue as an ultimate good. It appears here that virtue or virtues are represented as certain good characteristics that should be part of each person to make him good citizen.

Wisdom and courage are named in this dialogue and appear to be the most important virtues. However, while reading through the lines, altruism and the "deny" of self also are some other virtues. It seems therefore that virtues are intrinsic and could not in any case be "given by money, but that from virtue comes money and every other good of man, public as well as private" (Plato, 1998, p. 15). Because of its importance and the impact that virtue has in every man life or reputation, Plato in this dialogue urges guardians to transmit virtue to their children at any price as stated in the last paragraph of the dialogue.

When my sons are grown up, I would ask you, O my friends, to punish them; and I would have you trouble them, as I have troubled you, if they seem to care about riches, or anything, more than about virtue; or if they pretend to be something when they are really nothing,—then reprove them, as I have reproved you, for not caring about that for which they ought to care, and thinking that they are something when they are really nothing (p. 25).

In *The Republic* (1998), Plato gives more examples of the virtues that a man could have. He therefore points beside courage and wisdom traits such as magnificence, apprehension, memory, and temperance which appear for the first three to be more academic strengths than moral traits and for the last one a general characteristic that could be seen in any area of a human life. According to Carr (1988), the dialogue in *The Republic* does give more scope in the understanding or the distinction of virtues. He argues that in the early dialogue, the Socratic view of virtue was quite restricted while in this dialogue, Plato takes a stand and therefore presents a more precise view where the virtues wisdom, courage, temperance, magnificence, apprehension etc...are much more well-defined.

On the other hand, in Broadie's (2005) point of view, the definition of the different virtues given by Plato in the book *Republic* sounds ideal because they are lacking of "daily practicalities." She believes that Plato in *The Republic* contrasts virtue and fault too much, such that in a certain way makes the definition of virtue difficult outside of that context. Both views can find a link in the way that the traits that are present as virtues by Plato have straight opposites. However, though a bit vague, what *The Republic* offers in addition to these two views is a holistic view of the person. It seems in his piece that the philosopher is not meant to be only an academician, but also a practical and spiritual individual. This balance needs to be seen in individuals and to reach a high standard of life; there is a need to carry the most important virtues such as some of those cited above.

1.2. Aristotle and his Idea of Virtue

As for Plato, virtue was also one of Aristotle's favorite topics or themes. However, Aristotle did not place virtue as the ultimate goal as Plato did. Rather, Aristotle placed happiness as the ultimate goal of our lives and virtue stands as the quality that should accompany a happy man. He truly believed that happiness does not result only in doing whatever it takes to feel good but rather the capability to always choose the good, the right thing to do (Aristotle, 1999). He anyway defines virtue as a state of character shaped by deliberate choices that aim at the mean between two extremes (avoiding excess and deficiency) relative to each individual's context guided by practical reason and exemplified by the person of practical wisdom.

The word temperance in this sense appears many times in the Book II of *Nicomachean Ethics* and in Book V and VI he adds a long list of other traits that characterize a virtuous person: Courage,

generosity, proper pride, gentleness, truthfulness, wittiness, friendliness, and modesty. These character traits, when practiced in a community in relation to others, constitute the virtue of justice and they need to be directed by the intellectual virtue including the ability to take in appropriate information, deliberate, make good judgments, and execute such decisions (Beabout & Johnson, n.d.). Thus, in Aristotle's writings, virtue takes an emotional, social, and above all rational dimension. The intellectual virtue seems to take a greater place than the moral virtue.

So, as it can be noticed in the previous paragraph, in *Nicomachean Ethics* two kinds of virtue appear in Aristotle's writings: The moral virtue which is the result of habit thus appears naturally, while the intellectual virtue can be learnt. In a way, education appears to be one of the means to teach people to perform what is right, to develop good character.

In brief, according to Aristotle, the end or goal of life is happiness, which is attained through the cultivation of an exercise of moral and in a greater degree of intellectual virtues.

At this point, Aristotle seems to deviate from Socrates and Plato's views of moral virtue as the most important good. Broadie (2005) sharing this point of view explains that "in the penultimate chapters of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we are suddenly given to understand that the happiness associated with this sort of virtue—moral—belongs at best to the second rank, whereas happiness in its highest form is found only in the godlike activity of an utterly different sort of virtue, that of purely theoretical wisdom (*sophia*)" (p. 97). Another author who supports this point of view is Varner (1999) who argues that teaching, research, and writing are highly contemplative activities. Thus teachers, professors have the highest of callings and the highest aspirations. Though Aristotle clearly defends the highness of God, his writings are not as much as impregnate of God's ideal. God appears here much more like a standard to reach.

1.3. St Augustine's Idea of Virtue

St Augustine was a fourth century philosopher who tries to reconcile philosophy and religion. It may not therefore be a surprise to find in Augustine's writings much more similarities with the gospel than in others philosophers' writings. Though Augustine acknowledged his particularity from the other philosophers, he was as much as fascinated as the other by the pursuit of happiness and virtue (Wetzel, 1992). According to Augustine, for

Christians and non-Christians alike, while happiness is the ultimate end of human life in general and intellectual activity in particular, virtue, however, is the disposition of the soul, the consequence of the soul following after the supreme good: Happiness (Dermer, n. d.). Augustine's writings show also the closeness that virtue and vice share together though according to Harding (as cited in Carr, 1988), Augustine clearly shows in his writings that "vice ... is not the opposite of virtue but rather the turning inward of the lust for domination" (p. 641).

However, this aspect gives very little of what virtue meant to Augustine. Matthew (2002) gives a more precise idea of virtue in Augustine's point of view. He first explains that Augustine was strongly interested by the problem of ethics. This is why concepts such as sin, vice, and virtue were recurrent in his writings and not necessary because of his desire to contrast virtue and vice. Matthew (2002) also notes that Augustine follows Ambrose in adding the Pauline virtues of faith, hope, and love, to the classical virtues of Plato and Aristotle such as temperance, courage, wisdom and justice. But more interesting is the fact that as a Christian, he follows the apostle Paul in assigning first importance to love. In fact Matthew (2002) explaining Augustine's Idea of virtue says

He offers an interpretation of each of the seven virtues that makes it an expression of the love of God. Thus temperance is love 'keeping itself whole and incorrupt for God'; fortitude, or courage, is love 'bearing everything readily for the sake of God', and so on (*De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* (On the Morals of the Catholic Church) 15.25). Virtue, he says, is nothing but the perfect love of God. In this way Augustine provides a Christian analogue to Plato's idea of the unity of the virtues (para. 5).

In conclusion, from the Philosophers point of view, two trends seem to appear. Plato on one hand and Aristotle and Augustine on the other hand. Plato's idea of virtue seems to be oriented by its love for academia. Virtue in one word for Plato will therefore be knowledge (Carr, 2012) with wisdom as the main attribute. Meanwhile, Aristotle and Augustine approaches are more sacerdotal: virtue is character (Carr, 2012). While, the attributes of Aristotle still sound close to that of Plato, faith, love, and hope of Augustine definitely make a real bridge from Plato's academic attributes. However, they all failed to be more precise on the implication of virtue on the conduct of men.

2. An Adventist Approach of Virtue

After having an idea of what some philosophers hold on virtue, a look upon the Book seems to be necessary, as it has been noted above that virtue has to do with moral traits. This section discusses the biblical view of the meaning of virtue as well as a more practical approach in the light of the writings of E. G. White.

2.1. Virtue in the Bible

The concept virtue never appears in the Old Testament (OT) in its original Hebrew language, although sometimes it can be associated to the word wisdom. However, in its Greek version, the word virtue is used six times in the OT but not in an ethical sense, as it is the case in non-Christians' writings. In those six appearances the word has the older and more general meaning of "praise, majesty," "praiseworthy deeds". This shows that from a Christian perspective, virtue denotes the manifestation of divine power by which Christ (or, less likely, God) calls Christians into "life and godliness" (Donalson, 1979). Because the New Testament (NT) shares much of the worldview of Greek world, the notion and the concept is slightly different from that of the OT. So, in the NT the term occurs only five times in the Revised Standard Version (RSV) but has two different meanings. Twice it is translated from the Greek word *areté* in 2 Peter 1:5 and the three others times (2 Tim 1:9; Tit 3:5; Phil 4:8) it is translated from the Greek word *kata*. The word *areté* has the sense of "moral virtue" only in Phil. 4:8 and 2 Pet. 1:5, where it appears in the context of ethical lists that are strikingly different from other NT lists—though not from those in later Christian literature—in their Hellenistic tone. In 2 Pet. 1:5–7, however, *areté* is given specifically the meaning of some fruit of the spirit being associated with terms such as "faith" and "love" (Lightfoot, n. d.).

In order words, virtues in the NT are understood as not only excellent behaviors but also as wonderful deeds. The former meaning marks the slight connection between the NT and the Hellenic world where it was understood as an ethical behavior as stated in previous sections while the latter is close to the idea that is promoted in the OT. It therefore appears not to be mistaken to define virtue in a Christian perspective as a quality of excellence or the renown that such excellence duly gives. But this could sound like limiting the concept because there is more to explore on this in Donalson (1988) point of view.

Donalson (1988) argues that Paul's choice of the use of the word *areté* in Phil. 4:8—his only use of the term—probably results from his desire to be as inclusive as possible in his description of the Christian ideal. He thinks that in that sense, virtues demonstrate the inner characters that support the system of beliefs of someone. Such a definition however, gives a kind of relativity to what really virtue could be because it requires one to be morally or spiritually conscious of his lack of inner virtues and what I may consider virtue may not be the same for someone else. Though the word *areté* is not necessary used in reference to the term love, it seems that—considering the definition of virtue in the Old and New Testament and avoiding stretching the thinking as far as Donalson did—Paul summarizes Christian virtue in one word, “love,” when he says, 4 “love is patient, love is kind, it is not envious. Love does not brag, it is not puffed up. 5 It is not rude, it is not self-serving, it is not easily angered or resentful. 6 It is not glad about injustice, but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. 8 Love never ends” (1 Cor 13:4-8).

Finally, the word virtue was also used in reference to God's attributes in Christian literature. It sometimes referred to mighty deeds or manifestation of His power. In this Holy sense, the Greek word *areté* again was mostly used in Hellenistic Judaism literature, especially in writings with an apologetic tone (Philo, Wisdom of Solomon, 4 Maccabees). This could have probably been caused by the fact that the word in its first meaning connotes “moral excellence” and who can reach excellence if not God Himself? White (1981) however, tried to explain the word virtue in a simpler way and presented it as a requirement for those who confess Christ.

What appears here is that the understanding of virtue from the philosophers seems to lack a particular element: A godly element. If it seems that both the philosophers and the Bible clearly denote that there are a couple of characters that follow virtue, they distant in the source through which those characters are reached.

Plato (1998) clearly defends that virtue can be taught, while Aristotle and Augustine in a weaker extend also argue that virtue can be passed through education. The Bible however through the use of the word virtue for referencing God's attributes seems to show that God is the source of everything. Though virtue can be taught, its accomplishment in one's life firmly depends upon one's relationship with God. The next section may help building better understanding on the practical aspect of virtue.

2.2. Virtue in E. G. White's Writing

Three main points in relation to the practical aspect of virtue in Christian life appear in E. G. White's writings. She considers virtue as one of the most precious treasures Christians should strive for. It is a fruit of the Spirit as meekness or lowliness. This is closely related to the definition of virtue of Augustine with its triad faith-love-hope. However, she goes further and defines it also as a spiritual piety. This means that besides expressing faith to God, love for others and hope for the new earth, it seems that many other characters of holiness should accompany a Christian life. White therefore sees characteristics such as forbearance, humbleness, simplicity, and purity as things that once entwined in one's life will show consistency in the person's character.

Further, she believes that virtue could be the representation of a sound mind or/and a controlled appetite—the concept of temperance highly developed by the philosophers— as they both represent self-denial in Christian life. In that sense, it seems to be something all Christians should strive for (White 1869, 1972, 1981).

The second point that White presents in her writings is related to how one could develop those virtues in him. She proposes that in order to develop Christian virtue, the believer needs to be totally consecrated to God. Likewise, the disciples in need of the Holy Spirit prepared themselves for the reception of God's gifts for their mission. Therefore, Christian virtue is not static but dynamic. It is a lifelong experience, and it is essential to influence others to accept and live by God's doctrines. White (1973) explains: "There must be a constant development of Christian virtue, a constant advancement in Christian experience . . . Every individual must realize his own necessity. The heart must be emptied of every defilement and cleansed for the indwelling of the Spirit" (p. 333). One more time, White brings something new to the debate on virtue. It goes beyond some traits. It is a daily experience, a lifelong experience. This seems to mean that one can be virtuous today and not tomorrow. It seems to contradict the view of the early philosophers who equated a virtuous man to an educated man or a man who have reached the ultimate good. Plato in instance as discussed above seems to argue that once virtuous traits have been inculcate to a man, he may never leave them since he has reach the ultimate goal of his life. However, White here brings the perspective of the battle between good and evil by expressing the fact that seeking God every day is primordial in cultivating virtue.

Lastly, White stresses on the particular need for Christian leaders to be virtuous because of the great field of influence that they can have on others. So, for White (1948), it is by virtue that ministers bring godly influence for molding the character of others. This means that the ministers of gospel reproduce only what they are. She says:

If the minister is indolent, if he is not pure in heart and life, and if he is sharp, critical, and fault finding, selfish, independent, and lacking self-control, he will have these same unpleasant elements in a large degree to meet and deal with among his people, and it is hard work to set things in order where wrong influences have made confusion. What is seen in the minister will make a great difference in regard to the development of Christian virtue in people. If his life is a combination of excellences, those whom he brings to the knowledge of the truth through his labors will, to a great degree, if they truly love God, reflect his example and influence, for he is a representative of Christ. (p. 421)

In conclusion, White presents virtues as certain characters that our relationship with Christ will nurture on us. Because of this, there is a need to constantly grow in Christ as it is a lifelong experience that will certainly impact other people's lives. Thus, a virtuous Christian life is an example for others. White seems to summarize in two words the meaning of Christian virtue. She equates Christian virtue with "sanctified life," or at least, allowing God's work into every phase of human life. She believes that it is the only mean to be hid in Christ, "become instruments in God's hands for the development of Christian virtue" (para. 21).

3. Conclusion

Defining and understanding the concept virtue from different perspectives was what this paper sought. However, it appears that the word virtue is quite difficult to define in a practical sense, though different great thinkers have greatly disseminated it in their writings. The fact is that morality is something that matters for all human beings over the centuries and virtues stand as moral standards. Some philosophers have enumerated several virtues which have been presented throughout the paper.

Among them are Wisdom, temperance, justice and courage but also, magnificence, apprehension, memory, generosity, proper pride, gentleness, truthfulness, wittiness, friendliness, and modesty. The list can be longer as each one can think of traits that can make one close to perfection. However, though Christian philosophers and the Scriptures acknowledge most of them as important traits of a believer, the definition of virtue takes a greater sense, a holy sense since defined as the expression of God's love in a Christian life. Saying this, it can therefore be concluded that, the world virtue is more important in a Christian perspective than in a philosophical or secular perspective. This definitely should mean a lot for Christians. Christians are called for a Christ like character in order to be a model of virtue for people around them. So, though it was introduced in this paper that the philosophical view of virtue lacks of practicality, its understanding in Christian circle shows its practicality. Christians are attempted to develop Christ's Character and to produce the fruits of the spirit that basically represents the cardinal Christian virtues. By doing so, they will pour on others a perfume of grace that would influence them. It should be only hope that Christians around the world could really grasp the real meaning of virtue through Christ, and follow that example of the ultimate virtuous life.

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