

Cardinal Virtues

Written by K B Napier
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'Cardinal virtues' have slipped into Christian-speke, along with many other unbiblical concepts. These virtues, four in number, are said to be the "hinges upon which the door of moral life swings" (Wikipedia). Is this true? And should we use the term 'cardinal virtues'?

The Cardinal Virtues

('Cardinal' in Latin means 'hinge')

Prudence: the ability to judge what should be done in any particular situation.

Justice: deciding how to balance one's own self-interest and needs with the interests and needs of others.

Temperance/Restraint: Self-control, pleasure-moderation and abstention.

Fortitude/Courage: enduring, forbearing, confronting fear, intimidation and uncertainty.

The Root

These virtues did not, as you might have suspected, arise from Roman Catholicism, but from Plato. His 'Protagoras 330b', which includes 'piety', was used by Ambrose, Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas. So, if you believe in these virtues as the key to morality, you are associating with a disparate range of people! The four cardinal virtues are even depicted on the tomb of pope Clement II in Bamberg Cathedral. So, Rome used the virtues, but did not invent them.

For Plato the virtues were more of a class identification than about morals as such. In His 'Republic' prudence was the province of rulers; justice transcends all classes, binding them together; temperance was also common to all, but primarily to those who produce goods and have 'animal appetites'; fortitude was for the warrior class.

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The same ideas were taken by Jewish philosophers and written into Wisdom 8:7 (Apocrypha). Later, Augustine of Hippo used them to describe Christian morality. However, he redefined what they were:

“For these four virtues (would that all felt their influence in their minds as they have their names in their mouths). I should have no hesitation in defining them: that temperance is love giving itself entirely to that which is loved; fortitude is love readily bearing all things for the sake of the loved object; justice is love serving only the loved object, and therefore ruling rightly; prudence is love distinguishing with sagacity between what hinders it and what helps it.”

These are not to be confused with the ‘three theological virtues’ of faith, hope and charity (1 Corinthians 13). But, many join them all together as the ‘seven virtues’, and these, combined, are often called the ‘theological virtues’! Confused? The ‘three theological virtues’ are associated with the qualities of character associated with salvation. Even Roman Catholicism recognises that the three theological virtues cannot be worked-for, but are ‘infused’ – the Christian would say they are gifts of God’s grace, and are fruit of the Spirit.

We can see that the four virtues of Plato are philosophical conclusions. As one who did not believe in the Jewish God (our God) Plato’s ideas can be classed as the ‘philosophies of men’ that God warns against. It is not that virtues are wrong, but that they are defined by unbelievers, so we must beware. Even Augustine’s definitions are personal and not particularly scriptural. Where such words appear in scripture, we can attribute different meanings to those of Plato and Augustine. We may not legitimately refer to them when they appear in the Apocrypha (e.g. 4 Maccabees). The first use of the term ‘the cardinal virtues’ appears in the work of Ambrose.

Symbols of the Four Virtues

Usually, the four cardinal virtues are depicted in sculpting and painting as females, each of whom adopts the name of the virtue. These figures are even found in churches, showing that they easily mixed with the philosophies of men:

Prudence has a book, scroll, mirror (occasionally attacked by a serpent); *Justice* is shown with a crown, sword, balance and scales (also seen above the Law Courts in London);

Temperance

has a wheel, bridle and reins, vegetables and fish, cup, water and wine in two jugs;

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Fortitude

- armour, club, with a lion, palm, tower, yoke, broken column.

Whatever the depictions and whoever the one defining the virtues, they have nothing in common with scripture, but are human attempts to define what is moral from an human stance. The 'virtues' may well be included in what we call morality, but our starting-point must always be scripture, not the ideas of men... it does not matter if we are referring to a pope, a philosopher, or notables such as Augustine of Hippo.

Interestingly, Jewish oral tradition concerning the ladder seen by Jacob (Genesis 28:10-22), says the bottom three rungs are 'faith, hope and charity (love)', as found in 1 Corinthians 13.

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