

Medical Ethics in the Judeo-Christian Tradition

I. Vices and Virtues: Empiric Ethics

Lists of Vices

Everyone has heard of the Seven Deadly Sins. That list originates in the 4th century Christian tradition. There are other lists of sins, or vices.

The 613 Mitzvot

The rabbis compiled a list of 613 commandments (mitzvot) from their study of the Torah. Some are positive (“thou shalt”) and others are negative (“thou shalt not”). One common version by Rabbi Maimonides can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/613_Mitzvot, along with Scripture references.

Proverbs 6:16-19

The things that YHVH hates; seven that are an abomination to His soul.

1. Haughty **eyes**
2. A deceiving **tongue**
3. **Hands** that shed innocent blood
4. A **heart** that devises plans of wickedness
5. **Feet** that make haste to run to evil
6. A false witness who pours out lies
7. A person who sends out strife between brothers.

Mark 7:21-22

The longer list of things that come out of the heart and defile a person.

1. Evil thoughts
2. Sexual immorality (*porneia*)
3. Theft (*klope*)
4. Murder (*phonos*)
5. Adultery (*moicheia*)
6. Greed (*pleonexia*)
7. Wickedness (*poneria*)
8. Deceit (*dolos*)
9. Licentiousness (*aselgeia*)
10. The evil eye
11. Blasphemy

Vices and sins? Is this really a good way to start off, or is this a better topic for Lent?

There are lots of interpretations of 613. One of them is $6+1+3=10$; these are “expansions” of the 10 commandments.

Maimonides is called “Rambam;” 12th century.

Note references to the organ systems. Think about how these organs might be used in a contrastingly virtuous way.

Matthew 15:19

A parallel list, but shorter. Note that there are 7 items.

1. Evil thoughts
2. Murder (*phonos*)
3. Adultery (*moicheia*)
4. Sexual immorality (*porneia*)
5. Theft (*klope*)
6. False testimony
7. Blasphemy

12. Pride (*huperephania*)
13. Foolishness (*aphrosune*)

Galatians 5:19-21

This is a longer list of the “works of the flesh,” including

1. Sexual immorality (*porneia*)
2. Impurity (*akatharsia*)
3. Licentiousness (*aselgeia*)
4. Idolatry (*eidololatria*)
5. Sorcery (*pharmakeia*)
6. Acts of hatred (*echthra*)
7. Discord (*eris*)
8. Jealousy (*zelos*)
9. Thumos (*anger*)
10. Strife (*eritheia*)
11. Dissension (*dichostasia*)
12. Heresy (*hairesis*)
13. Envy (*phthonos*)
14. Drunkenness (*methe*)
15. Excessive feasting (*komos*), and the like.

The Seven Deadly Sins

Various lists have been proposed since the 4th century. Dante lists them in the Divine Comedy. The Roman Catholic catechism now lists them as:

1. Pride
2. Avarice
3. Envy
4. Wrath
5. Lust
6. Gluttony
7. Sloth

Transform Vices Into Virtues

Part of the Christian life journey is diligent self-examination for vices, and asking God in prayer to help us renounce the vices and transform them into virtues. Throughout history, philosophers and others have made lists of virtues. Here’s a list of “fruits of the Spirit:”

Galatians 5:22-23

This list has obvious relations to the lists in Mark and Matthew. Analysis of the different shades of meaning of the Greek words would be an interesting project some Lent.

For the time being, think about how these things might affect your medical practice, and form the basis of ethical principles of the “thou shalt not” type.

Do you see any of these in the characters found in medical TV shows?

Are any of these things that you would be willing to accept in your personal physician?

Time to stop negative thinking. Each of the vices has a corresponding opposite, called a virtue. The list of virtues:

1. Humility
2. Charity
3. Kindness
4. Patience
5. Chastity
6. Temperance
7. Diligence

Note how the virtues correspond to many of the attributes of professionalism. These are things that society values.

1. Love (*agape*)
2. Joy (*chara*)
3. Peace (*eirene*)
4. Patience (*makrothumia*)
5. Kindness (*chrestotes*)
6. Goodness (*agathosune*)
7. Faith (*pistis*)
8. Gentleness (*prautes*)
9. Self-control (*egkrateia*)

Virtue Ethics

If everyone in a society has transformed vices into virtues, then we wouldn't need complex religious or civil law. People would instinctively do the right thing.

What about health care workers? Does a surgeon need to be virtuous in order to be technically competent in the OR?

Obviously, the answers to these questions do matter.

The academic field of ethics studies the choices that people make in certain situations, in particular situations involving moral dilemmas.

Morality deals with discernment of what is "right" and what is "wrong" in a given situation.

The United States is a pluralistic society, with diverse cultures and religions. Most medical school curricula respect this fact, and teach medical ethics from a secular viewpoint.

Things get dicey when an ethical opinion offered by a virtuous person (with "virtue" being defined culturally or religiously) comes into conflict with secular opinions or secular law.

For Christians, ethics and morality are branches of theology.

We can use this list of values for discussion of medical ethics.

One approach to ethics is empirical, called virtue ethics. It's based on the assumption that a virtuous person who faces a moral or ethical dilemma will make a good choice.

However...

Make a short list of situations in which virtue ethics might not be helpful.

What's more important to you? Finding an intelligent physician who can figure out what's wrong with you, or finding a virtuous one who might not be as smart?

Life is a constant series of decisions.

If something "feels" wrong in your heart, chances are good that it's wrong. However, something that feels "right" might not be.

However, the sacred writings of the world's religions address concepts of right and wrong, and the choices that people make.

Take a moment to make a short list of "hot button" issues illustrating this point.

Simply put, theology is the practice of thinking about God, as well as the

In the next few sessions, we will discuss how to examine moral and ethical dilemmas from a theological viewpoint. We will use Holy Scripture as a primary source of norms governing moral choices. The other sources are Holy Tradition, human reason, and human experience.

Theology: Thinking about God

1. What does Holy Scripture say? This is exegesis. Does Holy Scripture directly or indirectly address the question being asked.
2. Read what seems to be a relevant passage in its entirety. Better yet, also read the passage before and the passage after.
3. Scripture rarely says something important only once. How do various passages come together to give the big picture?
4. How were these things thought of in the past?
5. What does it mean today?
6. What are the implications for conduct?

outcome of that thought process.

The student of exegesis has to learn how to avoid eisegesis, or at least recognize it when it happens. This is the introduction of one's own thoughts, opinions, and ideas into the text being studied. It's easy to do.

Watch out for proof-texting. Here's the classic joke:

Matt 27:5b
 Luke 10:37b
 John 13:27b

In other words, is there a metanarrative? For example, how many sets of dietary laws are in Scripture?

This might require consulting a good commentary.

There will be more than one contemporary interpretation.

Moral theology.

Virtue Ethics in Current Medical Literature

1. Gardiner P. A virtue ethics approach to moral dilemmas in medicine. *J Medical Ethics* 2003;29:297-302
2. Jansen, Lynn A. The virtues in their place: Virtue ethics in medicine. *Theoretical Medicine* 2000; 21:261-276
3. Parker, Malcolm. Two concepts of empirical ethics. *Bioethics* 2009;23:202-13
4. Pellegrino ED. Professionalism, profession and the virtues of the good physician. *Mount Sinai Journal of Medicine* 2002; 69:378-84.