



The Liberal Arts Tradition

with Dr. Kevin Clark and Ravi Jain

Lesson 14: Moral Philosophy

Outline:

Moral Philosophy

- Moral philosophy encompasses social science but is not reducible to social science.
 - The goal of the social sciences is to reduce human phenomena down to law-like interactions.
 - Even the simplest formulations of the laws in social sciences do not seem to be without exceptions (Alasdair MacIntyre).
 - *What is at stake if we allow social science to be what she is, and we do not explore the larger discourse of moral philosophy?* Everything is at stake.
 - If we just leave the idea of moral philosophy, everything is at stake because humans are not simply particles bouncing along by deterministic laws.
 - Models of human behavior may have insight at one level, *none of them capture what it means to live a prudent life.*
- Moral philosophy and theology ordered the principles of piety, gymnastic, music, and the liberal arts unto formation so that when the student was old enough to recognize them, they could recognize the truths of moral philosophy.
- It takes someone who is brought up well with good habits and good morals to reason clearly about ethical matters. We have to understand that different discourses operate differently.
- What kind of rationale is present in moral reasoning? You get the first principles for moral reasoning by means of experience. You do good things and that gives you the capacity to understand moral reasoning (Aristotle).

What are some important ways that we learn to make decisions?

- Descartes looks to geometry, forgetting the experiential basis, he says there are indubitable first principles and all rational people agree on findings and conclusions. For moral reasoning, principles are asserted, systems are built off the principles, and all rational people do not agree.
- All rational people might not agree over moral systems. That is the first indication that there is a different kind of rationality taking place. Aristotle identifies it as judgement, the ability to know what to do in contingent situations.
 - This ties into rhetoric's connection with moral philosophy. Rhetoric builds up the art of seeing the available means of persuasion in a concrete situation.



- The social sciences want to deliver us from these contingencies. You can ground moral principles in mathematical reasoning and find an empirical scientific basis of human action or:
 - I have to live in continuity with tradition.
 - I have to be shaped by piety.
 - I have to have my character formed morally by people who are able to speak and say, “You don’t understand why this is the right way to live, but you need to live this way.”
 - You have to start by believing someone else.

How ought we to teach the social sciences in the Christian classical schools?

- We have to approach it as Christian moral philosophy, not a neutral moral philosophy.
- What if we did not think of humans as self-interest maximizers, but what if thought of humans as fundamentally beings in community?
- Moral reasoning after the Enlightenment has thought of human beings as rational and autonomous. *In actual human life, we start and end in dependency. Our life is continually punctuated by sickness, frailty, and by necessity.*
- Moral reasoning and moral philosophy needs judgement and it needs to receive its starting points from outside of itself.
- How would we discover the starting points? How do you know if you are falling into habitual errors (errors of our time)?
 - Look back through the tradition, shoulder to shoulder, with those who have gone before you.
 - Reappropriate the role of history for the discussion of moral philosophy.
- What does it mean to live out Christ’s calling seriously?
 - We can look back at how people have been trying to do this.
 - We need to get more wisdom, and stop assuming the way it is given in the modern version is the best.
 - There is a problem when we consider modern insights (economics, psychology, and ethics) above those of the Church fathers.
- Imagine the state of science in a situation where we have half-burned books and instruments for which the use is unknown (Alasdair MacIntyre). That is precisely the state of moral discourse in modernity. It is bits and pieces from a tradition that has been exploded and destroyed intentionally for 300 years.
- The modern moral philosophers do not have an account for a moral system that we can all agree on.
 - Maybe the problem is trying to ground moral reasoning on reason alone.
 - The only way to live is in the tradition of inquiry, living in communities of practice.
 - Philosophy itself needs to be informed by outside perspective, and proceeded by years of formation that is specifically directed by theology.