

HOW GRADED ABSOLUTISM MAY BE VIRTUOUS

By Paul R. Shockley¹

I. Abstract:

This personal on-going project considers the integration of virtue theory with evangelical deontological models of absolutism. Why? I propose that both virtues of character and fulfillment of moral obligations are needed in order to have a robust and holistic system of ethics, especially if we seek to imitate Jesus Christ in both character and action. My particular case study is the integration of graded absolutism and virtue theory into a complementary thesis which may be termed as “*aretaic* graded absolutism.” What I mean by “complementary” is that both biblical duties and Christian virtues compliment rather than compete with each other.² What is the upshot? By introducing the idea of integrating both graded absolutism and virtue theory I hope to not only explore how graded absolutism may further be developed as a system of moral theory, but to motivate discussions on how other models of evangelical absolutism such as conflict absolutism and non-conflict absolutism may be incorporated into a holistic system since both approaches are also within the realm of evangelical orthodoxy.

- A. What we “*ought to do*” is the question evangelical deontological ethicists seek to answer.
 - 1. Deontological ethics (DE): An action is right *iff (if and only if)* it is in accord with a moral principle or rule. A moral rule is one that is laid on us by God, required by natural law, required by rationality, would command universal rational acceptance, or would be the object of choice of all rational beings. What is essential is the link between right action, moral rule, and rationality.
- B. What we “*ought to be*” is the question the virtue ethicist attempts to answer.
- C. In view of the historical development of ethics, attention given among secular ethicists is mirrored, to some extent, in evangelical ethics. Hence,

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² In their examination of virtue ethics both J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig affirm the complementary thesis: They write:

Each position [pure virtue ethics; standard deontic view; complementary thesis] has had its share of advocates and there is no clear winner in this debate. However it may be that the complementary view best expresses the ethics of the Bible since Scripture seems to give weight and intrinsic value both to moral commands and virtues of character [*Philosophical Foundations for A Christian Worldview* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 458].

strong versions of deontological ethics give little attention to character-formation. Rather, the emphasis is on “*doing*.”

II. Juxtaposition of Virtue Ethics and Graded Absolutism: An Examination of Weaknesses as Separate Systems of Morality:

- A. Virtue ethics: An action is right *iff* it is what a virtuous agent would go in a given circumstance. A virtuous agent is one who acts virtuously, i.e., one who has and exercises the virtues. What is essential is to note is the conceptual link between virtue and *eudaimonia*. It is important to observe that virtue ethics is a self-standing un-derived alternative to other models of ethics. On the other hand, virtue theory is a *derivative* of virtue ethics.
1. Two Major Weaknesses of Virtue Ethics (VE) as a system of morality:
 - a. VE lacks clarity in resolving moral conflicts because the focus is on character, not specific action.
 - b. VE fails to give us any help with the practicalities on how one should behave.
- B. Graded Absolutism (GA), a deontological form of ethical absolutism, contends that there are higher and lower moral laws, unavoidable moral conflicts, and no guilt is imputed for the unavoidable.³
1. Three weaknesses of GA:
 - a. GA is too inadequate in order to handle “gray areas” where moral duties conflict;
 - b. GA lends itself to antinomian abuse.
 - c. GA neglects character-formation.
- C. Four Additional Considerations:
1. The criticism made by William Frankena against DE and VE as separate systems of morality: “*Principles without traits are impotent and traits without principles are blind.*”⁴

³ Norman Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 116-20.

⁴ William Frankena, “A Critique of Virtue-Based Ethics,” 266; *Ibid.*, *Ethics*, 63.

2. VT must ultimately be related to God otherwise the practices of virtues are nothing more but “natural impulses educated and disciplined by reason...the more dangerous because they seem good.”⁵ God is central to the nature and experience of virtue.
- a. I’m defining virtue as a habit of excellence, a beneficial tendency, a skilled disposition within the heart, the inner soul, that enables a believer to realize the vital potentialities that constitute godliness (our relationship with God) and righteousness (our relationship with others).

- b. Archibald Alexander’s definition:

Virtue may be defined as the acquired power or capacity for moral action. From the Christian point of view virtue is the compliment, or rather the outcome, of grace. In the Christian sense a man is not virtuous when he has first appropriated by faith the new principle of life. He has within him, indeed, the promise and potency of all forms of goodness, but not until he has consciously brought his personal impulses and faculties in the serve of Christ can be called virtuous. Hence the Christian character is only progressively realized. On the divine side virtue is a gift. On the human side it is an activity.⁶

3. We have a number of motives when it comes to developing a godly character. Most attention seems to be given to the motivation that is derived from our deliverance from the penalty of sin; we are the recipients of God’s grace; He is our God who saved us in spite of ourselves.
- a. Other external motivations may include the examples of Christ, apostles, & committed followers, the desire for heavenly rewards, evangelism by word and deed, the good of the community, the avoidance of God’s chastisement, and fear of consequences such as bearing shame before others. We also have the opportunity to experience a growing intimacy with Jesus Christ.
- b. Internal motivations may include conviction of sin, illumination, guidance, and other ministries of by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

⁵ Friedrich Paulsen, *A System of Ethics*, 66.

⁶ Archibald Alexander, *Christianity and Ethics: A Handbook of Christian Ethics*, 184.

- c. It very well could be that there is a “network “or “web” of motives in various qualities and one whereby some sort of interplay (perhaps in a *prima facie* way) occurs in view of differing contextual settings whereby some motives will be emphasized over others (appealing to insights of Sir David Ross).
4. The integration of VT with other models of absolute ethics is significant for the following reasons:
- a. GA may not be the best model (e.g., guilt imputed for the unavoidable).
 - b. GA is often accused of possessing a utilitarian nuance.

III. Advantages of *Aretaic* Graded Absolutism (AGA):

Since AGA is a trait-deontological complimentary system, it emphasizes holistic worship before God as a way of life. These traits are not mere theoretical abstractions isolated from everyday life.

- A. A balanced emphasis on both obedience to biblical commands and possessing a requisite disposition that reflects Jesus Christ.
 - 1. The recognition of moral obligation from Scripture should provide sufficient motivation for action. Yet, the integrated model enhances GA in terms of motivations in view of purposefully cultivating a virtuous disposition that honors God.
 - 2. At salvation one is placed in a “position of ethical normality” states C.F. H. Henry. Chafer observes, “The believer is in Christ and Christ is in the believer. The believer is in Christ as to positions, possessions, safe-keeping, and association; and Christ is in the believer giving life, character, and dynamic for conduct.” As Ron Allen asserts, “In Christ there is the rediscovery of what it truly means to be human.”⁷
- B. A two-fold motivational component whereby one positively delights in pursuing and developing godliness. Said differently, a proper character of moral excellence will be able to better resist sin and bring inward motivating glory to God even though the knowledge of Scripture should provide sufficient motivation for obedience.

⁷ Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, 384; Lewis S. Chafer, *Grace: God's Marvelous Theme*, 305; Ronald B. Allen, *The Majesty of Human: The Dignity of Being Human*, 179.

- C. A two-fold focus on both the development of habits that promote human excellence and obedience to moral obligations-all unto the glory of God as an individual and as a member of the community (s)
1. It is necessary to develop God-honoring habits:
 - a. We are creatures who possess habituated ways of “*seeing*” and “*doing*.”
 - b. Missional: As one magnifies Christ by the choices one makes both inwardly and outwardly, people will be attracted to Him (Phil. 1:20).
 - c. Disregard the formation of character and one does not seriously deal with habitual frailties of the flesh.
 - d. One is called to live one’s utmost for the glory of God both individually and corporately.
 2. Imitation of Jesus Christ includes both character formation and commitment to fulfillment of moral obligations: it is missional at its core.
 - a. Christ embodied both virtue and deontology. In fact, as Douglas Groothuis observes, one cannot easily make the division between deontology and virtue in the teachings of Jesus Christ.⁸
 - b. Following Christ involves more than obedience, but an inculcation that leads to a full-orbed imitation (1 Cor. 11:1). Said differently, while God’s gift of grace and obedience to God’s commands should motivate one to right action, the cultivation of virtuous disposition enhances that motivation.
- D. The chronic problem of indeterminacy, compromise, and imprecision in decision-making diminishes in certain cases.
1. Integrating VE with GA might perhaps shed light in determining which moral law is higher, especially in gray cases where one lacks the time to investigate or the ability to acquire all the contextual information needed to make the right moral decision.
 - a. By combining an informed disposition with a tri-perspectival model of normative claims, existential needs, and situational setting, perhaps hard case scenarios might be better handled.⁹

⁸ Douglas Groothuis, *On Jesus*, 69.

⁹ John and Charles Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 31.

2. Combined measures against temptation and moral compromise (committed to obedience and being a certain type of a believer).

IV. Three Potential Misunderstandings of *Aretaic* Graded Absolutism:

A. A de-emphasis on our propensity for evil.

1. Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost states:

Things just don't go as planned. We realize that we're living in an upside-down world, and we wonder sometimes if we can make things come out as we plan or desire. We recognize fully well that we are living in an unredeemed body, in an unredeemed creation, with an unredeemed nature within us.¹⁰

AGA is expecting too much for our bodies our too corrupted by sin to cultivate a God-honoring disposition.

2. Three-fold Response:

- a. The very fact that "we are living in an unredeemed body, in a unredeemed creation, with an unredeemed nature within us" reveals the desperate need to enlarge our reasons for obedience to include character formation so that we may better resist the temptations of the flesh, the world, and the devil. In fact, we should never be shocked at the evil in another for we recognize in our thought and works the every-present seed of potential ruin. In fact, purposefully fostering a God-honoring disposition assumes the need for both mortification and vivification.
- b. Jesus repeatedly concentrates on matters of the heart (e.g., the Beatitudes in Matthew 5; the account of the poor widow in Mark 12:41-44; the harsh criticisms of hypocrisy in Matthew 23; the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5). His instruction and illustrations imply the possibility to go beyond what one ever thought possible, especially when abiding in fellowship with Christ (John 15).
- c. Since AGA integrates both duties and character formation, this model offers a robust anthropology that involves design, tendencies, motivations, and actions (non-reductionistic) in contrast to GA model which focuses on compliance to moral obligations.

¹⁰ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Man's Problems-God's Answers*, 37.

- B. Negligence regarding the ministry of the Holy Spirit to formulate compliance to biblical norms and development of a God-honoring character.
1. Response: The Holy Spirit is assumed. One should always look to Jesus Christ to see how one ought to be and look to the Holy Spirit to make it so. This model assumes more than “let go and let God” approach. Rather, this model assumes an “undergoing and doing” whereby the inward enablement, conviction, guidance, and illumination of the Holy Spirit to glorify God is in cooperation with one’s responsibilities to allow Jesus Christ to be reproduced in one’s lives by means of the Holy Spirit. Both divine enablement (divine side) and human responsibilities to yield to God are needed in order to holistically reflect Jesus Christ by thought and deed (Romans 12:1-2). Though fragility of life is central to anthropology, unlike VE, no believer is hostage to luck (e.g., certain external good) in order to become virtuous for the Holy Spirit is given to all at salvation.
- C. Misplaced priority on the role of Scripture. One may think that AGA misplaces the priority of Scripture in favor of character formation.
1. Quite the contrary since there is a correspondence between biblical commands and the inculcation of those commands into God-honoring habits. For example:

Duty (obligation)	Virtue (inculcation):
Command to tell the truth (Exod. 20:14):	Be Truthful
Command to be faithful (Exod. 20:1-5):	Be Faithful
Command to love neighbor (Mark 12:31):	Be Benevolent
Command to be Holy (1 Peter 1:16):	Be Holy
Command to contend for biblical truth (Jude 3)	Be Vigilant
 2. How to develop habits that shape one’s character is by repeated actions of obedience in dependence unto the Holy Spirit with the larger goal in mind than obedience for the sake of obedience. Under submission to the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5; Galatians 6:15-26) strive to be repeatedly obedient till it becomes ideally “second nature.” But I realize like one old theologian once said to me, “The sins of my youth still haunt me today but as I’ve walked with the Lord they have lost their attractiveness.” Yet, the Holy Spirit “prompts willing conformity” and we are called to yield.¹¹

¹¹ Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, 412.

V. Conclusion:

My attempt is to integrate VT and GA together in such a way that focuses on both outward obedience (obedience to commands) and inward conformity (inculcation of virtue) to Jesus Christ.

Receiving everything from Christ. Seeing everything in Christ. Doing everything for Christ. This is life in its simplicity, sufficiency, and satisfaction. This is ministry in peace, power, and progress. Away from this is disappointment, depression, discontent, despondency, and despair. But when Christ is our life, ministry becomes a privilege, a joy, a delight; an ever-deepening experience, and ever-heightening to glory to God. So let us sum up all by saying that for life and ministry Christ is always necessary, Christ is always available, Christ is always sufficient. ~ W.H. Griffith Thomas.