

## Unholy Compromise

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As a virtue, is helpfulness a compromise between neglectfulness and paternalism? Or, Is cooperation a compromise position between solicitousness and combativeness? Is courage a compromise between rashness and cowardice? How about resilience with inflexible and pliable? Secure with recklessness and invincibility? Patience with impulsiveness and over-enduringness? In general, are the virtues mere behavioral compromises between two extreme positions that are considered vices?

Notice the virtues listed in the above paragraph—helpfulness, cooperation, courage, resilience, secure, patience—all have two particular vices that border them. We can err in two directions—excess and deficiency—not just one.

\_\_\_\_\_Deficiency (vice)\_\_\_\_\_Mean (virtue)\_\_\_\_\_Excess (vice)\_\_\_\_\_

This is an important realization. Often people see the virtues as two dimensional, rather than three. Patience will be contrasted with impulsiveness (or something similar); courage with cowardice; helpfulness with neglectfulness; cooperation with combativeness; secure with recklessness; and resilience with inflexible. And so on with all the other virtues. This is a mistake that can lead to moral and spiritual extremism. Virtue and vice are seen like this:

\_\_\_\_\_ (vice) / (virtue) \_\_\_\_\_.

The danger with this approach is that one of the extremes, or vices, is overlooked, or undervalued. Concerning the six virtues above, the overlooked, or undervalued, vices are paternalism, solicitousness, rashness, pliable, invincibility, and over-enduring. Can you see how any one of these can lead to trouble? Yet, since each would be on the other

end of the three dimensional paradigm (the other vice position), they are often included in the virtue side of two-dimensional thinking. And this is how extremists err. This is how terrorists and ideologues (such as Marxists, Nazis, and Islamic terrorists) justify their murderous brutality against innocent people.

“Totalitarian philosophies of the class (Marxism), the nation (Fascism), and the race (Nazism) demand that the individual sacrifice himself absolutely and totally to pseudo ideals concerning the class, the nation, and the race” (Reardon, p. xi). By placing each “ideal” above all else in importance, these collective philosophies have formed new norms of morality, the class, the nation, or the race. These are forms of “corporate” selfishness (Reardon) that tend to dominate the lives of individual men and women. These philosophies do not attempt to balance different ambitions or values that serve to make physical cruelty difficult (Shaklar), but will use cruelty to further their ideal causes. Witness the activities of Vladimir Lenin. A book by Russian historian Dimitry Volkogonov portrayed Lenin in an unfavorable light. Lenin is accused of initiating the terror that Stalin continued to kill millions. Lenin’s main quality was his enormous, fanatical belief in the Communist utopia. To achieve this goal, Lenin was willing to do anything: terrorism, lies, hostage-taking. Lenin was recorded in discovered documents to have disdain for his countrymen and referred to them frequently as “fools” and “idiots.” Lenin ordered the destruction of 70,000 churches and, on one occasion, ordered a public hanging of 100 peasants to retaliate for a local revolt. “This needs to be accomplished in such a way that people will see, tremble, know and scream out,” Lenin wrote. The choice of one overarching value for his life cost Russia 13 million lives (Volkogonov). This overvaluing led to an “end justifies the means” mentality that is still reaping negative consequences in Russia and former Soviet Union countries today.

Can the Christian fall into the same moral trap? Can Christians commit vicious acts (acts that are characterized as vices) while believing they are following a just cause? Anyone who does not have a balanced view of the virtues can commit vicious acts. Anyone who kills an abortion doctor in

defense of a pro-life, anti-abortion, position has committed a vicious act in the names of holiness and paternalism! Anyone who ignores Scriptural and natural admonitions to the contrary, and accepts homosexuality as just another lifestyle is committing a vicious act in the names of tolerance, acceptance, and love! Anyone who covers up gross sin by church leaders to protect the 'church' is committing a vicious act in the name of loyalty! Yes, Christians can fall into the same moral trap as Lenin, and many others who have followed a 'sacred' cause into deceit, treachery, and brutality.

How can extremism be avoided? One practical solution is given by James O'Toole. O'Toole teaches that it is necessary to adopt a "process of creating a moral symmetry among those of competing values" (p. 258). It is a values-based, or virtue-based, approach to problem solving. It is not viewed as a competition of values to see whose is the best or most valuable or most just or most anything, with the 'winner' taking all. By 'all' I mean, the exclusive ordering effects on a personal life or community that pursuit of isolated values, or virtues, will have. Aristotle used the Spartans as an example of a people who sought to build their society around a single "excellence". The single excellence of the glories of war. They experienced short-term success and gained wealth as they accumulated the goods of fortune through force. Because of this solitary focus, virtues such as courage and self-control of physical pains and deprivations were exalted. These values are valuable during times of war but less needed during times of peace (Salkever). The Spartans were a stern people and Aristotle criticized them for their lack of joy and wholesome pleasures. Because of their commitment to this single excellence, they lost their empire because they were incapable of managing peace and enjoying life (Aristotle).

Whatever you list as your supreme virtue will lead you to sinful and harmful acts if it is understood in isolation from the other virtues. If you pursue holiness and understand it as merely separateness from sin, you might end up in asceticism. If you define God's holiness as the love He has for His own goodness (Traherne), and thus goodness in general, you are more likely to avoid asceticism while you are pursuing godliness. It is the premise of the values-based, mean approach to life that everything works best

when all the relevant parameters for each subject area reside in their intermediate (mean) ranges, bounded by deficiency and excess. Keep in mind that there is no mean for that which falls in the excess and deficient ranges. There is no mean for unjust, immoral, and self-indulgent type behaviors or lifestyles. There is no mean for that which God explicitly identifies as sinful and against His design. There is no compromise with vice! Compromise should refer to only two types of conflicting situations—personal preference issues or conflicts concerning which virtue has a greater, but not total, influence on a situation based on the needs of the situation.

The present state of many American and European Christians, and their churches, shows that much compromise with commercialism, materialism, and sensuality has taken place. As our cultures move further away from righteous ideals and practices, many churches follow in the name of relevance and evangelism. This kind of compromise will do, and has been doing, long term harm to the church. Several church denominations seem to be nothing more than liberal social clubs with a Christian name. They do not resemble anything close to a church where Christ or the apostles John or Paul could be pleased. These churches are where they are spiritually because they have engaged in unholy compromise. They have sought middle ground with worldliness, materialism, and sensuality. These things are the enemies of biblical Christianity. They are to be avoided, not embraced. Christianity is openly rejected by many in American and Europe. Christians must not respond by letting them intimidate or influence us. We must protect our churches and our children by pushing their ideas and ways away. We must not embrace them! We must not engage in unholy compromise for the short-term goals of personal acceptance and cultural relevance. We do so at our own spiritual and moral peril. Virtue is not a compromise position between two vicious extremes. Virtue is what it is only if the extremes can be avoided. We do not come to godliness by way of worldliness or idolatry. We come to be godly by understanding and imitating Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Old and New Testaments, by the power of the Spirit of God.

## References

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