# The Invisible Exemplar

## Logan Packer

When one considers the question, "What makes a person virtuous?" a perfectly reasonable response might be that there simply is no answer. Perhaps the concept of virtue is itself so fundamentally integrated within the human psyche that it is, as Nietzsche suggests, "ineffable" and "nameless" (Nietzsche 22). Nevertheless, the characterization of virtue as foundational, or ineffable, while intuitive to a certain degree, has drawn a variety of severe criticisms from academic philosophers in recent years. Philosophers who take issue with the ineffability of virtue suggest that, without a further description of what features constitute a virtue, virtue theory as an ethical system remains intellectually bankrupt. As Robert B. Louden puts it, "the difficulty is that we do not seem to be able to know with any degree of certainty who really is virtuous and who is vicious" (231). If Louden's assessment proves accurate, then it appears that virtue theory ultimately reduces to little more than a sophisticated form of ethical relativism.

In response to this onslaught of criticism, Linda Zagzebski has advocated a new form of virtue ethics that she terms "Divine Motivation Theory." In her reimagining of virtue theory, Zagzebski argues that God acts as the theological foundation of virtue. By placing God at the bedrock

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of morality, the concept of a virtue becomes intelligible by reason of its dependence upon Deity, or, in her words, "moral value is constituted by harmony with the divine" (Zagzebski, "The Virtues of God" 543). Zagzebski claims that after positioning God as the ultimate foundation of ethics, virtue theory circumvents general criticisms of relativity by appealing to a singular, unchanging foundation. In like manner, by means of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God serves as virtue theory's ultimate exemplar of virtuous living.

In this essay, I will discuss the problem of subjectivity within Zagzebski's virtue theory. To do so, I will outline the main objections levied against virtue theory as explained by Robert Louden. In turn, I will discuss the several ways in which Linda Zagzebski's "Divine Motivation Theory" side-steps Louden's criticisms. Ultimately, however, I will critique Zagzebski's virtue theory by demonstrating how it fails to overcome Louden's reproval. Since she does not effectively account for the divine hiddenness of God, Zagzebski's account subsequently fails to provide an adequate, entirely objective, moral exemplar.

## Louden's Objections to Virtue Theory

In his paper "On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics," Robert Louden suggests that virtue centered moral theories suffer from four major pitfalls: 1) virtue-based theories apply to agents rather than acts; 2) virtue theories encounter a degree of epistemic difficulty when assessing whether a person is vicious or virtuous; 3) virtue theorists are more concerned about the style of a theory than substance; and 4) virtue theories cannot support conflicting notions of human purpose. Ultimately, Louden believes that these four criticisms spell trouble for virtue theory. If virtue theory cannot supply a singular, reductive method to offer a realistic means of prioritizing different values, then virtue theory appears to lack any form of pragmatic usage as a moral system.

Louden's first criticism hinges on the fact that virtue ethics aim to evaluate the morality of internal character states rather than the morality of individual actions. He writes, "by focusing on good and bad agents, virtue theorists are thus forced to deemphasize discrete acts in favor of long-term, characteristic patterns of behavior" (Louden 229). This problem of focus manifests itself particularly in the field of applied ethics. Phillipa Foot, in her advocation for virtue theory, claims that any sound moral system must base itself upon a foundation of virtue and vice (xi). However, it remains unclear how a foundation in personal virtue will allow an ethical system to deal with moral dilemmas.

On the traditional account of virtue theory, virtues are more than simple psychological dispositions towards righteous action; instead, virtue requires a prior form of knowledge, or intelligence, that allows a virtuous agent to navigate successfully through any given moral context (Louden 229). However, this form of "intelligent virtue," as Julia Annas calls it, must be developed through experience in recognizing the relevant ethical factors that comprise any particular moral situation. Yet, intelligent virtue cannot be reduced to a concise moral maxim or decision procedure. Thus, when it comes to moral quandaries, virtue theory can offer only vague advice by recommending that one follow the example of a moral exemplar (Annas 35).

This leads to Louden's second criticism, "how can one know if someone is actually a moral exemplar?" The typical answer to this question has been that, by evaluating the conduct of any given person, one can draw an inference about said person's moral character. However, this response appears to contain a significant err: there is no necessary connection between a virtuous person and virtuous actions, the relation is only contingent. This problem seems to arise out of virtue theorists' insistence that "being" is not reducible to "doing" (Louden 233). That is, a person's moral character cannot entirely come as a result of the actions they commit. Indeed, a virtuous person may act out of character and commit a wrong action, similarly, a vicious person can do the same by performing righteous actions. However, the problem remains, there does not appear to be any sort of objective moral standard to distinguish between a virtuous person and a vicious one.

Louden's third criticism follows in a similar vein by identifying another problem with virtue ethicists' commitment to "being" over "doing." By prioritizing one's internal states over external consequences, virtue ethicists appear to be committed to the style of a theory rather than the substance of the theory's implications. That is, on virtue theory, if one emulates the style of a virtuous person in a particular moral context, if one can sucessfully parrot the virtuous qualities of an exemplar, then one is *de facto* a virtuous person; regardless of the results of their actions. William Frankena summarizes this point well when he writes, "today many people go so far as to think that in morality it does not matter much what you do; all that matters, they say, is how you do it" (Frankena 52–53). This commitment to the emulation of  virtuous character traits seems problematic in that it may be possible for one to act virtuously whilst still permitting the commission of immoral actions.

Louden's final critique aims at the contextual heart of virtue theory. He claims that the society for which Aristotle intended his ethical theory to apply is radically different from the state of affairs that obtain today.

Modern society comprises a multitude of cultural, religious, racial, and political factions that stand in stark contrast to the relatively uniform society envisioned by Aristotle. The manifold of differing opinions, and cultural backgrounds, present in contemporary society seems to be more conducive to a legalistic ethical theory that promotes tolerance amongst differing viewpoints rather than dictating that all persons ought to pursue a singular, teleological end (Louden 235).

## Zagzebski's Divine Motivation Theory

Linda Zagzebski recognizes many of the same issues that Louden does with virtue ethics. She concedes that while theories of virtue are often practical, they all suffer from a lack of a strong theoretical foundation. Indeed, it seems that if theories of virtue ethics are ever to become as popular as deontological or utilitarian ethics, then virtue ethicists need to develop a strong theoretical background to support their systems (Zagzebski, "The Virtues of God" 539). In her paper "The Virtues of God and the Foundation of Ethics," Zagzebski attempts to do just that. By postulating God as the theological source of all ethical value, she formulates a theory of ethical virtue to rival other rigorous, action-based theories of morality.

As mentioned above, one of the greatest issues contemporary philosophers take with ethical theories of virtue is the inability of those theories to articulate why a particular virtue is a virtue. Zagzebski's theory confronts the problem of virtue's ineffability by defining virtue in terms of something more fundamental—motivation. That is, all moral concepts are ultimately derived from the concept of a good motive, a good motive being "an emotion that initiates and directs an action towards a [good] end" (Zagzebski, "The Virtues of God" 539).

While the addition of the concept of motivation adds explanatory value to Zagzebski's theory, motivation alone cannot provide a sufficient foundation for a theory of morality. Indeed, by defining virtue in terms of motivation, our initial question just gets pushed back a level. Rather than asking, "what makes something a virtue or a vice?" the question becomes, "what makes something a good motive or a bad motive?" Instead of pushing the question back yet another level, the problem can be resolved by making a direct appeal to the nature of God. In the theistic tradition, God is understood as being the only person who is "virtuous and pure in an unqualified sense" (Zagzebski, "The Virtues of God" 544). If one accepts this understanding of God, one can then distinguish a good motivation from a bad one by analogy. A good motivation is any motivation which resembles or reflects the motivations of God, a bad motivation is, by

negation, any motivation that is not possessed by God. Zagzebski puts it simply by saying, "God's motives are perfectly good and human motives are good insofar as they are similar to the divine motives" ("The Virtues of God" 539–540).

Zagzebski's suggestions for virtue theory, while simple, prove to be powerful alterations. In her view, all moral properties, including virtues and vices, are grounded in their relation to good motives. More specifically, these values are grounded in their relation to the internal motivations of God, whose nature provides the bedrock for all moral value (Zagzebski, "The Virtues of God" 540). These virtues are ultimately demonstrated to humankind by means of God incarnate, or Jesus Christ. Christ provides the ultimate example of virtuous living. By mimicking the life of Jesus, one can learn the proper motivations to cultivate a more virtuous character.

## Exposition

Zagzebski's virtue theory represents an impressive step forward in the field of virtue ethics. By providing a solid foundation for ethical values, she avoids many of the criticisms advanced by Louden. In particular, Zagzebski's theory, while still primarily focused on the internal states of moral agents, provides a reasonable mechanism for judging actions. Since actions are a derivative of virtue, roughly speaking, an action would be considered right insofar as it is the type of action that a virtuous person would have done in a given situation. Conversely, a wrong action is something that a virtuous person, characteristically, would not have done (Zagzebski, "The Virtues of God" 542). Similarly, Louden's third and fourth criticisms do not seem to hold against Zagzebski's Divine Motivation Theory. Her theory, while concerned with the style of a virtuous person, also appears to generate desirable consequences. That is, if one follows her theory in its entirety, then one would, *ex hypothesi*, be acting like God, a perfect being. Acting as a perfect being, it seems, would surely bring about positive consequences. Likewise, while Zagzebski does not specifically speak about the specific teleological implications of her theory, by grounding virtue in the nature of God, she seems to leave room for persons who have conflicting ideals concerning the purpose of life. Indeed, it is possible that God, in his providence, endowed differing people with differing purposes.

While the Divine Motivation Theory effectively sidesteps a number of Louden's criticisms of virtue ethics, it seems that there is a final point that was overlooked: Zagzebski's theory does not appear to provide an objective foundation necessary for a robust conception of virtue. In other words, the Divine Motivation Theory does not provide any clear means

by which one can distinguish between motivations that are virtuous, and motivations that are vicious.

As has been mentioned, one of the greatest concerns with virtue ethics is that virtue is supposedly ineffable. The reason this point comes across as troubling to a number of philosophers is because, if virtue is ineffable, then there is no way to explain why one moral property is virtuous while another is vicious.  The inability to distinguish between virtuous moral properties and vicious ones remains disconcerting because, ultimately, it leads one to suspect that virtue, as a moral conception, is entirely relative. It seems that without the ability to objectively distinguish between virtue and vice, the concept of a virtue could potentially shift from culture to culture, or from era to era. Without any form of objective mooring, there is nothing to effectively deter one culture from calling a property virtuous while another culture calls the same property vicious.

Zagzebski attempts to circumvent this issue by anchoring her virtue theory in the nature of the Christian god. By defining God as the ultimate possessor and exemplar of virtue, the Divine Motivation Theory appears to gain a element of objectivity. That is, Zagzebski seems to believe that questions regarding the moral nature of any given property can be resolved through an argument by analogy. As she writes, "all moral properties are attributed primarily to God and only analogously to humans" (Zagzebski, "The Virtues of God" 544).

However, a problem arises when one questions how one can know what types of virtuous actions God would make in a given situation. It seems that one could effectively discern what virtues God possesses, as Zagzebski demonstrates, however, it is not entirely clear how one should utilize these virtues within a moral context (Zagzebski, "The Virtues of God" 544–547). How can one transition the knowledge of a virtue into a practical moral situation?

The traditional answer to this question has its roots in Aristotle. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle explains that the way one learns to act virtuously in practical situations is by following the lead of a moral exemplar. By modeling the example of an already virtuous person, one can come to develop virtuous habits while, at the same time, recognizing how to act rightly in a given moral context (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1148*b* 4–28).

Zagzebski recognizes the important role that a moral exemplar plays in the proper development of virtue. She goes so far as to claim that, "We do not have criteria for goodness in advance of identifying the exemplars of goodness" (Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* 41). As mentioned above, Zagzebski maintains that God is the ultimate exemplar of personal virtue; however, this assertion seems to carry with it a significant problem—how can God serve as the perfect moral exemplar if he is hidden from humanity's view?

Although many persons claim to have a close spiritual or supernatural connection with God, the fact remains that the God of Christianity is unobservable to the entirety of the human population. This problem, a relative to the problem of divine hiddenness, seems to interfere with Zagzebski's entire moral project. According to the dogmas of Christian theology, God is invisible, having neither "body, parts, or passions" (*Book of Common Prayer*, Articles of Religion Art. I). He is immaterial, incorporeal and, consequently, entirely invisible. Indeed, God's hiddenness is probably best articulated by the Old Testament prophet Isaiah who writes, "Verily thou art a God that hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour"(*KJV*, Isaiah 45:15). Given, then, the hiddenness of the Christian God, a question necessarily arises: "How can one relate to God, the highest moral exemplar, if He, by virtue of His nature, is hidden?" I submit that, on account of God's hiddenness, Zagzebski's Divine Motivation Theory ultimately fails to provide an objective mechanism whereby one might determine how to act in any given moral context. Given the absence of an objective method to determine or suggest moral action, Zagzebski's theory ultimately falls sway to criticisms of relativity.

It is possible that Zagzebski would respond to this objection by saying that there is indeed a way around the above-mentioned problem. While it is true that one might experience difficulty emulating God the Father on account of his hiddenness, God has, however, revealed himself in the form of His son, Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, Christ is depicted in a variety of human circumstances. Not only does he teach through dialogue with his followers, but he also teaches through his actions. Christ exemplifies personal virtue in the way that he resists temptation, confronts conflict, deals with enemies, and aids the lowly. Thus, by means of the Incarnation, Zagzebski could argue that God has indeed revealed himself to humanity, and, in so doing, has provided humanity with a perfectly virtuous example.

While this response may be sufficient for some, I do not find it entirely compelling. Even if one grants that Christ was the perfect moral exemplar, the fact remains that his example is largely inaccessible to the vast majority of the human population. While Christ's virtuous example may have been entirely visible to those who surrounded him during his mortal ministry, his life is now far removed from us by the centuries that have passed since he once walked the earth. While some accounts of his life have persisted to the present day, these accounts are incomplete at best and fictitious at worst. Indeed, all this goes without accounting for the millions of people who lived before the time of Jesus, and those who lived after his time but who had no knowledge of His teachings nor record of His example. Must we conclude that these people had no possible method

to determine which actions were virtuous and which were vicious? It seems that on Zagzebski's account this must be the case, for if one cannot "have [the] criteria for goodness in advance of identifying the exemplars of goodness," then those who did not know Christ could not have known the criteria for goodness (Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* 41). Such a conclusion, however, appears to be patently false. Indeed, it seems that there have been many virtuous people who, although ignorant of the life of Jesus, knew how to act virtuously when presented with a given moral context. Thus, *via reductio*, we must conclude that, given the hiddenness of God, Zagzebski's virtue theory cannot provide an objective foundation for determining how to act in a virtuous manner.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it appears evident that Zagzebski's theory contains some critical flaws. Indeed, her Divine Motivation Theory still falls subject to Louden's criticism that virtue ethics cannot provide a useful maxim or decision procedure to help one know how to act virtuously in a given moral context. However, I do not suggest that this issue spells doom for Zagzebski's moral project. On the contrary, her decision to attach the concept of virtue to the nature of God is perhaps one of the greatest innovations in the field of contemporary virtue theory. This method allows one to disambiguate the concept of virtue while also providing an objective foundation for the source of morality. It seems to me that, if nothing else, this amounts to a step in the right direction.

In order to create a more comprehensive theory of virtue, Zagzebski's moral theory simply needs to devise a mechanism to explain how one can know how to act virtuously in any given moral situation. Personally, I believe that there are several ways that this might be accomplished. A Catholic might resolve this problem by appealing to the saints as additional moral exemplars who, like Christ, also provide a model of virtuous living. For others though, who might not be inclined to accept Catholic orthodoxy, it would be interesting to see if one could reject the univocity of moral principles by seeking a synthesis between action-based and virtue-based moral theories. This method, at least in principle, could open the door to creating a moral theory that equally concerns itself with the outcomes of moral actions as well as the quality of a person's own moral character. Whatever the approach may be, with the development of Linda Zagzebski's Divine Motivation Theory, we find ourselves one step closer to creating a complete and comprehensive system of personal virtue..

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