

## THE FAMILY AS AN INSTITUTION FOR CULTIVATING VIRTUES AMONG THE YOUTH

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### ABSTRACT

There is a dichotomy between the cognitive dimension of education and morality in the learning process that leads to the gap between learning and living/acting. But virtue ethics escapes such a dichotomy because it presents practical wisdom as a guide both to our moral acting and reasoning about the good. It is unfortunate that most education institutions many a time have paid little attention to holistic education that cultivates virtues that enable learners to have proper moral understanding. These institutions pay only lip service to the moral upbringing of people since their main focus is on profit maximization. This makes education to be market driven. The encyclical *Amoris Laetitia* notes that parents rely on schools to ensure the basic instruction of their children but not their moral formation. There is therefore the need for an active role for the family in cultivating intellectual and moral virtues in order to deal with the challenges of today's global society.

**Key words:** Virtue ethics, Family, *Amoris Laetitia*, Aristotle, Education

### Résumé

Il s'observe une dichotomie entre la dimension cognitive et la moralité dans le processus d'apprentissage qui produit l'écart entre la connaissance et le vécu/l'agir. Mais l'éthique de la vertu échappe à cette dichotomie dans le sens où elle représente la sagesse pratique comme ligne directrice pour notre agir moral et notre raisonnement à propos du bien. Malheureusement, la plupart des institutions de l'éducation ne fournissent pas assez d'efforts pour offrir une éducation holistique qui pourraient cultiver chez les apprenants, les vertus nécessaires pour une bonne appropriation morale. Ces institutions ne contribuent pas suffisamment dans l'éducation morale des gens, leur tâche essentielle étant de maximiser les profits. Cela fait de l'éducation un terrain de marché à profit matériel. L'Encyclique papale *Amoris Laetitia* fait remarquer que les parents comptent sur les établissements scolaires pour la formation élémentaire de leurs enfants mais non pas pour leur croissance morale. Par conséquent, il y a besoin d'une implication active de la famille dans le développement des vertus morales et intellectuelles afin de faire face aux défis de la société contemporaine au niveau global.

**Mots-clés:** Ethique de la vertu, Famille, *Amoris Laetitia*, Aristote, Education

## 1. Introduction

A closer look at African societies reveals the need for moral uprightness and virtues. For instance, in these societies, there is *interalia* a high incidence of corruption, irresponsibility, fraud, murder, greed for power, terrorism, drug abuse, lack of self-discipline and domestic violence. These societal vices indicate the lack of moral values and virtues among the citizenry. Therefore, this paper argues that in order to reclaim moral values and virtues, the family should be a basis and fountain for the cultivation of virtues and moral values. The paper suggests that parents, the extended family and elders are instrumental in the moral formation of children. The concept of moral formation suggests that human beings are not born morally mature but rather they are morally formed (Bansikiza, 2003: 7).

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part explores the neglect of moral education and moral formation in our education system. The second part focuses on the key tenets of virtue ethics in contemporary ethical debates by philosophers and theologians. Finally, the paper argues for the need of the family as the fountain of virtues. This part shows three ways of engaging the family in the cultivation of virtues among youths.

## 2. The Neglect of Moral Education

This section reviews literature from ethicists, moral philosophers and educationists on the neglect of moral education in today's education system. Their major claim is that education institutions have put more focus on developing the professional skills of learners rather than value education. Aquiline Tarimo(2014) in his article "African Natural Resources and Corruption" argues that training for moral values is portrayed as a less important dimension in academic formation (53). Tarimo adds that moral values are the most important components of a socio-economic organization characterized by efficiency, integrity and accountability (53). Tarimo proposes that learning institutions ought to incorporate the element of training people to be duty-conscious and responsible citizens.

Pope Francis in the encyclical *Amoris Laetitia* notes the danger of parents relying fully on schools to ensure the basic instruction of their children. Pope Francis sees this trend as harmful. He argues for the family to take an active role in the moral formation of children and the youth.

James Keenan (2011) in «The Lack of Professional Ethics in the Academy» notes the lack of ethical training of administrators and professors in the academy. Keenan identifies a series of academic, social, and administrative issues which pose ethical questions to the academic institutions at all levels. These are: the objectivity of tenure hire, academic confidentiality, grading, and university investment budgets. Keenan therefore argues for constructing a sustainable professional ethics for the academy so as to make academic instructors and administrators mirrors of morality and integrity in the society.

Derek Bok, a former president of Harvard University, in his book *Universities in the Market-Place: the Commercialization of Higher Education* criticizes the way higher education is increasingly geared towards satisfying the needs of business as opposed to focusing on the learning dimension associated with outstanding ethical standard formation.

Mary Evans contends that universities have distorted the values of the academy. She argues that the university has shifted “from a collective world at which independent and critical thought was valued, to a collective world in which universities are expected to fulfill not their values but those of the market place and the economy”. (Evan 34). In other words, higher education and universities are taking the direction of the neo-liberal economy that is driven by profit margins, rather than becoming centers for moral formation and cultivation of virtues.

Therefore, based on the foregoing reviewed literature, it is right to argue that education institutions only pay lip service to moral education and the cultivation of virtues among learners. Moreover, education training today does not foster or develop the desire to know and pursue moral questions in order to arrive at sound moral decisions. It is worthwhile to pose a question here: if education does not aim at searching for the ultimate truth, then of what use is it to the society? The increased cases of corruption in Africa that involve the educated show the dissociation of ethics from education. Therefore, because education institutions have not played an active role in cultivating moral virtues, there is need for the family as the basic unit of society to undertake the duty of cultivating virtues in family members especially children. Before exploring the role of the family in fostering virtues, this article explores the key tenets of virtue ethics.

### **3. Understanding of Virtue Ethics**

#### **a. Ethics**

The word ethics is derived from the Greek “*ethos*” which means customs: a habitual way of acting (Finance, 1991: 7). Msafiri (2016) highlights five essential elements of ethics, namely: good habit, good attitude, good behaviour, good relationship, good conduct and responsible living(2). Another study conducted by ChristophStückelberger, Cui Wantian, TeodorinaLessidrenska, Wang Dan, Liu Yang, and Zhang Yu (2016: 24) defines ethics as a strive to answer questions such as: What should I do? How should I act? How should a community of people act? In other words, ethics strives to answer the question as to what is good behaviour and just action. Also, Paul Ricoeur (1992) defines ethics as “aiming at the ‘good life,’ for and with others, within the framework of just institutions (202). Thus, ethics concerns all areas of life. It concerns individual integrity aiming at both personal and community well-being in the just society.

## **b. Virtue Ethics in Contemporary Theological and Philosophical Perspectives**

Virtue ethics is one of the oldest moral philosophies and has gone through development, decline and revival in the past two millennia (Chan, 2015: 9). Virtue ethics has attracted many thinkers in various societies throughout history. These have included Confucius in Ancient China, Gautama Buddha in Ancient India, along with Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in Ancient Greece. These thinkers emphasized principles of goodness of character and conduct which lead people towards moral excellence. During the patristic period, both Western and Eastern Church Fathers, like Augustine and Athanasius of Alexandria, offered their understanding of virtues and highlighted God as the ultimate *telos* for humanity ((Chan, 2015: 9). Aquinas then presented a systematic classification of virtues from which theological, cardinal, infused, and acquired virtues are defined.

Virtue comes from a Latin word, *vir* which means man. Thus, virtue means humanness. The corresponding Greek concept is *arête*, which means excellence. Thus, virtue is excellence in a given quality. Virtue is a quality that helps one to perform his/her functions well and thereby acquire well-being or happiness. Aristotle provides the most classical description of a virtue; for him, a virtue is a “disposition to act righteously in a balanced way, without deficiency nor excess” (Aristotle, Translation, 1923, 34). This definition provides three elements: virtues are dispositions, which for Aristotle means that virtues are natural and intrinsic tendencies or inclinations of the character towards good that lead human beings to act in a righteous manner. Secondly, virtues are not external or superficial moral attitudes but internal dispositions of the moral character. Also, according Aristotle, virtues are related to action and they express the moral character through the practice of those good or righteous actions. Virtues develop through the practice of virtuous actions and also those virtuous actions display the true character. The moral character develops through the practice of virtue. Finally, the third element from Aristotle’s understanding of virtues is that virtues lead to the process of moral discernment through practical reasoning or the exercise of practical wisdom. Thus, virtues are traits that lead to action through the exercise of moral reasoning. Here, growing in virtue means growing in the ability to choose the desirable middle between the extremes without deficiency or excess.

Virtue ethics is concerned with being (agent-based ethics), centred mostly on the moral character of moral agents so as to attain goodness and well-being both to themselves as individuals and to the society as well (Kuhumba, 2007: 65). Virtues are “excellences of character that are objective goods, of worth to others [and the self],” and their manifestation is the actualization of qualities that are originally potentialities within a person (Norton, 1988: 181-182). Thus, virtue ethics calls for our continual growth in our character. Joseph Kotva, a contemporary virtue ethicist, notes that much of modern ethical theory has concentrated on developing rules, principles, goods and exact methods for determining the status of specific acts. In contrast, virtue ethics is more agent-centered and less concerned with the analysis of problematic actions. Virtue ethics moves

the focus away from specific acts to background issues such as character traits, personal commitments, community traditions, and the conditions necessary for human excellence and human flourishing (Kotva, 1996: 5).

James Keenan as a moral theologian notes that there is interplay between virtues and an anthropological vision of human identity: virtues provide practical guides to the right realization of identity, while the anthropological vision of human identity guides us in our pursuit of the virtues (2000: 69). Keenan develops distinctive characteristics of virtue ethics. He states that virtues are not ‘things’ growing inside of the person, but what human being are. Virtues are expressions of the self. The focus in Keenan’s study is the sort of the person that people become through virtues. He proposes that virtues connect especially with the relational dimension of the self during the process of becoming virtuous because “virtues don’t perfect powers of ‘things’ inside of us, but rather ways that we are,” (Keenan, 1995: 723). In other words, virtues perfect or develop the way that humans are in relation to others, the other and to themselves. Virtues for Keenan perfect the relational dimension of the self by developing through virtuous actions the just, faithful, caring and prudent version of oneself.

Keenan in his article “Character Formation and Virtue Ethics: A Moral Theologian’s Point of View,” offers seven reasons why virtue ethics is a worthy method for teaching character formation (2018: 7).

I. Virtue ethics uses familiar, ordinary and fairly specific language. Here virtue ethics is basically concerned with virtues that are ways of being, practices and actions that are integral to the good life of any culture. The familiar virtues are justice, prudence, charity, faith, hope, fidelity, wisdom, temperance, courage, honesty, friendship, generosity, gratitude and piety (Keenan, 2018: 8-10).

II. Virtue ethics deals with ordinary life. Here Keenan finds Thomas Aquinas’ argument regarding the ordinariness of virtue very relevant. Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae* I. II. 6) makes a distinction between a human act (any deliberate action) and an act of a human (which means that human action can be morally indifferent). So Aquinas claims that every human action is inevitably a moral action; “every individual action is either good or bad.” In *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas uses an example of a moral act, the simple human act of going to bed, an act that parents try endlessly to teach their children how important an action it is. So, virtues can be taught to moral agents.

III. Virtue ethics is a very active ethics. The human life is filled with opportunities and spaces for moral formation. We live in families with parents and family members with lots of activities enabling us to grow in virtues. Also, schools and societies enable us to become very active in terms of practicing virtues. For instance, virtue of friendship is very necessary for us to live well with others in the society.

IV. Virtue ethics is a fairly comprehensive system. Here virtue ethics tells us not what to do but rather how to be. Rather than giving us principles that tell us “do this,” “don’t do that,” virtues

tell us how to be: “be just,” “be faithful,” “be loving,” “be generous,” “be courageous,” “be temperate,” and “be honest.” Thus, virtues tell us to adopt certain kinds of character traits or dispositions (Keenan, 2018: 13-14). It is here that the role of the family is important in the moral upbringing children into good characters and dispositions.

V. Virtue ethics gives us guidelines in our life.<sup>1</sup> Virtues are not only concerned with individual disposition and character, but form us at the depth of our being, for example, love, faith, charity, justice and fidelity.

VI. Virtue ethics is fairly easy to teach. Virtue ethics acknowledges traits and characters from different cultures, and personalities who have lived virtuous life. So, while attending to character, virtue ethics also appreciates the role that exemplary figures play in the development of virtue and formation of character. This appreciation is built upon the fundamental presupposition that virtue is teachable (Chan, 2015: 11). Regarding exemplars, Athanasius claims that “the practice of imitating the exemplars of the faith is fundamental to the acquisition of Christian virtue ... [and] transformation by way of the imitation of the mentor’s life of virtue may result in communion, in a sharing of vision” (Woodhill, 1998: 31). Lucas Chan offers two reasons for the necessity of mentors and guides in developing characters and dispositions. First, the virtues as skills need examples to show what they mean practically. Second, as examples they teach and encourage us to act likewise (Chan, 2015: 12).

VII. Virtues never stand alone. Virtues are related to one another. We need more than one virtue. For instance, a just person not only has a just mind but also a prudential judgment through virtue of prudence, a courageous spirit and a moderate or temperate disposition (Keenan, 2018: 20). Also, virtues of intelligence have to be developed along with moral virtues. Developing only intellectual capabilities might enable the society to have a big number of experts such as managers, scientists, medical doctors, engineers and technocrats. But these experts need as well moral dispositions and characters to execute their activities with integrity.

In the philosophical field, Alasdair Macintyre’s work has been influential in retrieving virtue ethics in contemporary ethical debates. According to Alasdair Macintyre (1992: 45-56), Aristotle’s virtue ethics constitutes four main features.

- a) Virtues are dispositions not only to act, but also to judge and to feel, in accordance with the dictates of right reason. The practice of the virtues is required for the life of happiness, the achievement of which is the human end. Accordingly, to have virtue is to be disposed to function well as a human being.
- b) There are two categories of virtues, namely intellectual virtues and moral virtues. Intellectual virtues are those excellences which inform the activities specific to reason, and are acquired only through education. On the other hand, moral virtues are those excellences of the non-rational parts of the soul when they are obedient to reason, acquired only through habituation and training. In other words, there is a connection

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<sup>1</sup>Emphasis is mine. Here Keenan does not use this title, but my reading of his work. I rather adopt this position regarding virtue ethics.

between the moral virtues and the intellectual virtues. This connection consists in practical intelligence (*phronesis*)

- c) Moral virtues direct us to the ultimate end while practical intelligence (or wisdom) selects the right mean and orders to it to the good. But each particular virtue is ordered to this good. Thus, in their relations to practical intelligence, virtues are a unity in so far as they contribute to the achievement of the same good.
- d) The fourth feature is a communitarian understanding of moral virtues. It is only within the *polis* (society or city state or political community) that the life of happiness can be achieved and lived out. In other words, it is in and through the life of the *polis* that the virtues are exercised. Aristotle argues that human beings are incapable of the rationality required for virtue only within a better kind of *polis* or society. Aristotle's claim here seems to be that morality depends also on the kind of society in which one lives.

Alasdair Macintyre postulates that virtue ethics is grounded within the following characteristics:

- a) It is teleological and paves the way for human good.
- b) It is interested in moral character and thus gives priority to being over doing.
- c) It also bears a kind of perfectionism that sees all aspects of life as morally relevant and urges one to moral growth.

Subsequently, these characteristics pose three basic questions for the moral agent: 'Who are we?' 'Who ought we to become?' and 'How are we to get there?' (Quoted in Chan, 2015: 10). In answering the first question 'who are we?' it is necessary to focus on the standards and the criteria with which we are measuring ourselves. Regarding the standards, Aristotle gives us eleven different virtues that are necessary for citizens to engage in such as justice, practical wisdom and courage among others. These virtues help us to answer the question of self-understanding whether we are just, or prudent or temperate. Regarding the criterion with which we answer the question objectively. Aristotle suggests that we can know ourselves by considering how we act in the unplanned world of ordinary life. To know that we are just persons is demonstrated by how we act in the unanticipated concrete situation (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a30).

The second question of 'who ought we to become' embodies a vision of the type of persons we are supposed to become. Here, the virtues become our guide for us to act morally for the good of the society as our ultimate end. For, instance, if we want to act fairly and justly, we ought to set up certain goals. Thus, moral education becomes necessary mainly dealing with cultivation of our personality, regarding issues related to justice and fair treatment of others in the society. Finally, 'how are we to get there?' requires our practical actions guided by both intellectual and moral virtues.

We conclude this section by contending that virtue ethics presupposes character traits which are acquired through practice in our daily lives. Thus, becoming a virtuous person or adopting virtues requires well established moral institutions such as families. So, the next section dwells on the family as the basis for the cultivation of virtues in the youth.

#### 4. The Family and the Cultivation of Virtues

The encyclical *Laetitia Amoris* affirms that the family is the first school of human values (Pope Francis, 2016: 231). Pope Francis adds that certain inclinations develop in childhood and become so deeply rooted that they remain throughout life, either as attractions to a particular value or a natural repugnance to certain ways of acting (Pope Francis, 2016: 231). The encyclical further contends that many people think and act in a certain way because they deem it to be right on the basis of what they learned from their earliest years (Pope Francis, 2016: 231).

Family thus ought to be the cradle of virtues and values. The family serves as the school of visual learning in the initial years in the ethical development of a child (Kochappilly, 2013: 343). Family is the first place where ideally all human beings experience life. Moreover, it is the authentic place for basic human development because parents nurture children, provide material support and give moral guidance to their children in the context of the family (Kambona, 2017: 91-92). Since the family is the fundamental building block of society, it is also the fountain of ethics. While ethical imagination, motivation, and action begin at home, their principles and precepts are operative in a community as a whole.

##### a. Family as an Engine for the Cultivation of Virtues

In cultivating virtues, the family becomes the cradle of virtues. The family as a fountain of virtues encounters three basic questions: 'who are we?' 'Who ought we to become?' and 'How are we to get there?' In answering the first question 'who are we?' it is necessary to focus on the standards and the criteria with which we are measuring ourselves. Regarding the standards, Christoph Stükelberger (2014: 40) gives eight virtues that are very relevant. These virtues are:

- *Integrity* (honesty, openness, transparency)
- *Modesty* (free from greed, arrogance)
- *Servant* (courage to serve the common good and common cause)
- *Forgiveness* (being able to accept own mistakes and forgive others)
- *Empathy* (ability to empathise and care for others)
- *Faithfulness* (faithful to values and promises)
- *Carefulness* (prudence in the management of resources and people)
- *Ethical Courage* (courage to defend and implement ethical values against resistance).

I find these virtues very important in our global society. For instance, we need not only skilled engineers but also engineers with the sense of integrity, modesty, common good and ethical courage among others. Also, we not only need competent and skilled managers but also managers with the sense of prudence in the management of resources and people. So, the family as the fountain of ethics and the cradle of virtues ought to form children to have the sense of integrity, to be moderate, to be forgiving, to be empathetic, to be faithful, to be careful and to have the sense of ethical courage.



The second question of ‘who ought we to become?’ embodies a vision of the type of people we are supposed to become. Here, the virtues aforementioned become our guide for us to act morally for the good of the society as our ultimate end. Thus, ethical and moral education in the family becomes necessary mainly dealing with the cultivation of our personality as virtuous people. Finally, ‘how are we to get there?’ This question focuses on how to be virtuous moral agents. Attaining this requires our practical actions guided by moral virtues. So, the family ought to guide children into practical moral actions.

### **b. The Family as the Ground for Moral Rules Leading to Virtue**

Virtues offer us guidelines. They direct us to become persons with certain character traits and therefore the virtues must teach us not only who we ought to become but also how we are to become that type of person (Keenan, 2018: 15). Thus, virtues must provide us with guidelines or directives for acquiring the virtues we aim to have. It is here that the role of parents or elders in the family is indispensable in putting in place guidelines and directives to enable children to live virtuous lives or to practice virtuous character traits. For instance, in families elders and parents generate family rules and regulations so as to guide their children not only to right conduct but also to becoming responsible and virtuous people. That is to say, parents give rules to their children simply to help them to grow in virtue (Keenan, 2018: 16).

As an example, let us think of the basic rule in most African village families, setting the time for a child to return home. Imagine a parent or elder saying to a 15 year old, ‘Henry, be back from Joel’s by 6:00 pm so as to participate in the family activities such as fetching water, chopping firewood and feeding the pigs.’ Here the parent or elder, in formulating such a rule, is definitely teaching the child to engage in socialization and developing friendship and social bonds beyond the family household, and at the same time to realize the responsibility to participate in family life and activities. Here, the parent or an elder is aware of the fact that growth toward greater maturity means assuming forms of self-governance. This particular rule is training Henry to engage in a variety of virtues like friendship and responsibility.

Let us think of the staunch Catholic Christian family and its basic rule that the family must pray together in the evening from 9:00 pm and attend mass on Sunday. If a member misses the night prayers, he/she is subjected to rigorous punishment such as going to bed on an empty stomach. Also, if a member misses Sunday mass he/she is not allowed to have lunch and dinner. These rules train young children to be responsible in terms of spiritual growth and family cohesion.

Family rules are the paradigm for moral rules. Families engage in practices and activities which help children to develop and maintain relationships, to come to degrees of self-understanding and self-guidance, to study and to learn, to articulate goals and dreams for the realization of self,

relationships, and to appreciate the world, the neighbor, the needy and the Lord (Keenan, 2018: 16). All these practices come with rules and the engagement of these practices helps children to grow into a more virtuous way of living (Keenan, 2018: 16).

### **c. Parents and Elders as Exemplars to the Children in the Family**

Virtue ethics appreciates the role that exemplary figures play in the development of virtue and formation of character (Chan, 2015: 12). Good examples by parents play a greater role than instructions and admonitions in molding the child's mindset (Kochappilly, 2013: 343). The exemplars act as mentors and guides in moral formation. These exemplars are needed in two ways. First, the virtues as skills need examples to show what they mean practically (Chan, 2015: 12). Second, as examples, they teach and encourage us to act likewise (Chan, 2015: 12). Here, the parents and family elders are required to be exemplars and mentors in terms of virtuous living. The family is crucial because parents form through examples particular ways of living an authentic life (Kambona, 2017: 92). Parents and family elders should live exemplary virtuous. For instance, parents should practice mutual love amongst themselves as parents and show love to their children. The parents ought to live exemplary lives and by showing their children that the family is built on love. Thus, children are most likely to mature in mutual love through learning with examples from their family elders and parents. Also, parents ought to exercise other virtues like humility, charity, generosity, fortitude, wisdom, friendship, modesty, kindness, gratitude, respect, self-control and patience. By doing so, parents and family elders will become exemplars to their children. Thus, children may grow up in virtue and become generous, humble, patient, faithful, honest, charitable, altruistic, courageous, wise, kind and friendly. Yet if parents and family elders engage in vices such as constant fights, late coming, impatience, selfishness, lack of self-control then as a matter of fact children will be exposed to these vices which may hinder their ethical development.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper has tried to contend that the family is the foundation of ethical or character formation or cultivation of virtues for children and youths. Currently, education seems to be mere instruction without the transmission of human and moral values (Tunu, 2018: 67). Yet moral education is a foundation for societal development and wellbeing. Thus, moral formation is a requirement for the family. The experience in the family becomes necessary for the character formation of moral agents. The family becomes a nursery for the cultivation of virtues. Negligence of moral formation and cultivation of virtues in formal education brings the family to the forefront of the moral upbringing of children. However, moral formation and cultivation of virtues among children is not only the work of the family but also the church and the society at large. As John Paul II insists, changes experienced in almost all modern societies demand that not only the family but also the society, and the Church should be involved in the effort to properly prepare young people for their future responsibilities (John Paul II, 1981: 66).

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