

Actions reveal moral development

EDITORS' NOTE: This is the first in a new bimonthly column addressing questions of morality in everyday life.

By Dr. Patricia Schoelles, SSJ
Courier columnist

My graduate-school adviser and thesis director, Dr. Stanley M. Hauerwas, often reminds his students that the main business of ethics and moral theology is character formation. For Dr. Hauerwas, currently of Duke University and formerly of Notre Dame, the moral decisions we make are actually dependent on the state of our characters.

I agree with this idea for many reasons. For one thing, I know that I don't really have much trouble recognizing the right thing to do. My problem is wanting that right thing enough to make my actions conform to it. I know, for example, that I could spend the money available to me in ways that would benefit more people. But I still spend in ways that are often selfish and not representative of the call to live a responsible economic life.

Thus, my problem is not in the area of right decision — my problem is that my wants and desires remain untrained; I don't want the right thing enough to do it.

The matter of training our goals, wants and desires is a matter of character and virtue. St. Thomas Aquinas, probably the greatest genius of the moral life, taught that there are three moments in the process of right action: deliberation, judgment and command.

One of my complaints about contemporary moral theology and ethical thought is that we have focused too much on the first two moments, and not nearly enough on the third.



THE MORAL LIFE

We have given great attention to how to think about our decisions — especially those involving such quandaries as when to disconnect respirators or how to conduct medical experiments in a humane manner.

But we have given far too little attention to the matter of character formation, which both precedes and follows our deliberations on a moral question. We have failed to devote our energies to questions about what sort of persons we should be striving to be, and what sort of persons we should be encouraging our children to become. We have not reminded ourselves or our children that we can actually train our wants and desires; we can shape the way in which we see the world — which we must do before we can act rightly in the world.

In recent years, we have heard a great deal about conscience formation and the exercise of conscience. This is certainly a good and necessary aspect of moral thought, but the formation and exercise of conscience is

only a part of coming to right action and right character.

In fact, the exercise of conscience is very much dependent on the sort of characters we have shaped for ourselves. Conscience, I think, represents the thought process by which we weigh reasons for and against a proposed course of action. The reasons we list in support of or opposition to a given decision depend on how our characters have been shaped.

I often tell my classes about an incident in which two friends and I take a trip to the drug store. Upon arriving, we discover that someone has knocked over a display of pantyhose. While one companion and I lunge across the scattered packages to begin our shopping, we realize that our third companion has stopped to put the display back together!

This simple incident points out that something makes one person "see" a given situation far differently from the way others see it. Why did one of us act so differently from the other two?

Surely this is not a "textbook" example of a major decision to be made in the course of one's lifetime. But to my way of thinking, it typifies what much of the moral life represents: actions we undertake and perform simply because we see a situation in a certain way.

In fact, Dr. Hauerwas used to tell us that the best indicator of a person's moral development is the decisions he or she *doesn't* make — the good and bad actions taken without much formal decision making at all. Such actions are the products of character — not necessarily the result of formal conscience decisions. And they are enormously important for the conduct of one's own moral life and the conduct of society itself.

The formation of character is tremendously important for all that we become and do. When asked how to form our characters and how to help our children to do so, I often answer that the best method of character formation is performing concrete acts.

The acts we perform shape our very selves. If, for example, I want to become an honest person, I can work on this objective by engaging in concrete acts of truth telling. If I want to become a trustworthy person, I can do so by keeping my promises. Becoming good and knowing the good are products of concrete action.


I attribute my friend's helpful behavior at the drug store not to acute decision-making capacities, or to the possibility that she may have had a better course in moral theology than I had. Instead, I attribute her action to the likelihood that a lifetime of helping people shaped the way she "saw" the situation. Her character — not her conscience — makes her a person who habitually makes things better for other people, without need for deliberation.

In summary, then, I believe that moral theologians and educators — which we all are to some degree — need to focus more attention on the matter of character formation. We cannot even describe our actions rightly until we have shaped our characters rightly to some degree.

By focusing so much of our "moral energy" on decision-making, we have neglected a much more basic aspect of the moral life, and have left an enormous vacuum in the moral formation of ourselves and our children.

Dr. Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

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