

THE NECESSITY OF VIRTUE

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
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The most dismaying aspect of Nicholas Kristof's new book about the oppression of women around the world isn't what's in the book. Titled *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, Kristof wrote the book with his wife Sheryl WuDunn, also a Pulitzer Prize-winning author. Make no mistake: some of what's in the book is horrific—story after tragic story illustrating the grim truth that planet Earth is a dangerous place to be female.

The book argues that the oppression of women—Kristof and WuDunn focus on sex slavery, gender-based violence, and maternal mortality—is the great moral issue of the twenty-first century, as slavery was in the nineteenth and totalitarianism in the twentieth. They amply make their case on both counts: that the oppression of women is a vast problem, and that it's a moral problem.

For example, Kristof and WuDunn note that far more women and girls are shipped into brothels each year than African slaves were shipped to plantations each year. They conservatively estimate that at least 3 million women and girls worldwide are enslaved in the sex trade; some put the number as high as 12 million. An essential part of the brothel business model, they add, "is to break the spirit of girls, through humiliation, rape, threats, and violence."

"Decades from now," they write, "people will look back and wonder how societies could have acquiesced in a sex slave trade in the twenty-first century that...is bigger than the transatlantic slave trade was in the nineteenth. They will be perplexed that we shrugged as a lack of investment in maternal health caused half a million women to perish in childbirth each year."

Despite the scale of the problem, Kristof and WuDunn insist that oppression can be turned into opportunity, which it can. And we should be part of the solution. Unitarians and Universalists were a formative part of the abolitionist movement during the nineteenth century, and we should be equally engaged in abolishing the oppression of women today.

Kristof and WuDunn make clear that their goal is to describe the oppression of women and explore how women can find their freedom. The book is not intended to explain why the problem exists in the first place. For me, that's the most dismaying part of the book—the part that's not there.

The problem of male sexual violence and perversity is pervasive, and thus far it has proved intractable. Boys will be boys, and men will be men, and girls will suffer, and women will die. Thus it has always been; the question is whether it shall always be thus. At some point, men must confront the truth about what we are capable of. The horrors described in *Half the Sky* are not isolated experiences. They reveal how most women live in some parts of the world and how some women live in every part of the world, even ours.

Whenever we confront human wickedness, whether in our own hearts or in the world around us, we ask about standards of human conduct. What standards should we

set for ourselves? Where should those standards come from? Over the course of human history, several ways of answering the question of what we ought to do have emerged.

One answer is that we ought to do what we are required to do. In other words, we should look up to the heavens. For much of human history, people believed that the god or gods who created the earth and its people had also given us rules to live by—commandments to obey, a covenant to carry out, a testament to follow. God sets the standards, and our duty is to obey. Over time, people began to realize that these rules are neither infallible nor, in the strict sense, divine. Rather, they are occasionally inspired human words cloaked in divine garb. Some of the rules foster justice, but others encourage bigotry and enforce oppression.

As divine commandments began to fade as a standard of conduct, at least in some parts of the world, a second answer began to emerge: we ought to do what yields the best outcome. In other words, we should look out into the world of our experience. In the late 18th century, German philosopher Immanuel Kant proposed a standard known as the categorical imperative. For everyone who belongs in the category of rational people, Kant said, it is imperative that they act only on principles they believe should become universal law. In other words, what would happen if everyone acted in the way you propose to act? If the overall outcome would be good, then the action is morally commendable. If not, then it's not.

A century later in England, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill developed a similar standard that came to be known as utilitarianism. Based on the view that an action is right if it promotes happiness and wrong if it produces the reverse of happiness, they articulated the rule of utility: the good is whatever brings the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people.

While standards based on outcome have much to commend them, they seem unwieldy and unsatisfying. It's almost always hard to calculate the greatest good for the greatest number, and there are many things in life that are fine if a few people do them but a disaster if everyone does.

There remains but one final place to look. The third answer is that, in any given situation, we ought to do whatever an ethical person would do in that situation. In other words, look within—within the heart and mind of an ethical person. This approach, while more relevant to the modern world than the other two, also happens to be the most ancient.

In his major treatise on ethics, Aristotle states that both things and people can be judged successful if they achieve their ultimate purpose in life, which is to realize their full potential. The question of potential, in Aristotle's way of thinking, has to do with what is distinctive or unique about something. A knife, for example, has the distinctive ability to cut things, and thus a sharp knife, well used, has achieved its full potential. The distinctive capacity of human beings, Aristotle observes, is the capacity to reason. Our purpose as humans, therefore, should be to develop our rational powers and live in accordance with them. If this happens, we will achieve the state of being that Aristotle calls happiness or blessedness.

If Aristotle were writing his book of ethics today, he might title it something like "Think Your Way Happy." Happiness is the result of living as a human being ought to live. The key to happiness, Aristotle insists, is virtue. Virtue is a state of character. It lies along what the Greeks called a Golden Mean between two extremes.

Confidence, for example, lies midway between recklessness and cowardice. Truthfulness lies between boastfulness and false modesty. After Aristotle has completed his table of moral virtues, he concedes that “it is no easy task to be good.” Anyone can act—get angry, give money, speak to friends—but “to do something to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, that is not easy.”

In a culture that champions the individual at every turn, an ethic based on virtue seems exactly right. Capitalism, democracy, and Protestantism emerged as the individual became the point of fulcrum in the realms of economics, politics, and religion. Virtue emerges as an ideal when the individual becomes the point of fulcrum in the ethical realm.

The problem, however, is that virtue has fallen out of favor over the centuries since Aristotle. As the Christian tradition developed, it lost its confidence in the human ability to do good. For several hundred years after Jesus’ death, the Christians maintained the view, shared by both Jews and Greeks before them, that men and women could govern their own actions. Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth-century Christian bishop, expressed the freedom of the will this way: “Preeminent among all is the fact that we are free from any necessity, and not in bondage to any power, but have decision in our own power as we please; for virtue is a voluntary thing, subject to no dominion.”

Soon thereafter, one of Christianity’s most influential leaders mapped out a radically different approach. Instead of continuing the emphasis on freedom of the will, St. Augustine insisted that humanity had been irreparably damaged by the fall from original perfection, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden. Because of that “original sin,” Augustine believed humanity had been rendered sick, miserable, and hopelessly enslaved to sin.

Why did Augustine conclude that humanity had lost its capacity to govern its own actions? Because he was unable to exert rational control over his own sexual impulses. Over time, Augustine came to believe that spontaneous sexual desire was proof that original sin had implicated the entire human race. He insisted that humanity, ravaged by sin, lies helplessly in need of outside intervention. In other words, virtue became impossible.

Now that we’ve seen the humanity of the commandments and the fallacy of the fall, it’s time for a renaissance of virtue. In a culture that champions the individual, virtue is an approach to ethics that individuals can believe in. And it gives us a way to respond religiously in a world where so many people act so horribly.

The language of human rights is a vital political tool in our efforts to extend the domain of civilization and the rule of law. And the language of virtue is a vital religious tool in our efforts to extend the domain of morality and the rule of character.

In my catalog, there are seven necessary virtues: wisdom, courage, compassion, justice, temperance, transcendence, and hope. Each virtue, in turn, is made possible by two or more character strengths that support it. The virtue of wisdom, for example, is a combination of curiosity (the acquisition of knowledge in the service of the good life) and discernment (the use of knowledge to make decisions about the good life). The virtue of courage stands on four pillars: bravery, perseverance, integrity, and vitality. Occasionally in upcoming sermons, I will focus on these essential elements in the periodic table of virtues.

This approach to ethics has been described by the philosopher Richard Taylor as the ethics of aspiration, which emphasizes the kind of people we aspire to become, rather than the ethics of duty, which emphasizes rules that have been laid down by someone else. To be sure, there are rules we must follow in life. But even animals can be taught to follow rules. Human beings, in contrast, have the ability to develop character—to fulfill our potential as human beings.

Virtue is to human as sharp is to knife or pungent is to pepper: it's the state of being everything we possibly can be. Each of us has the capacity to be wise, courageous, compassionate, just, temperate, transcendent, and hopeful. The Greeks held up these qualities of character as the epitome of human endeavor. To exemplify these virtues was to be a hero, a champion.

We need more heroes today as well. There are heroes in *Half the Sky*—women who overcome horrors and men who help. Read the book: it will both make you angry and give you hope. Yet the great moral issue of our time is not, in fact, the oppression of women. This is indeed the great moral catastrophe of our time. But the great moral issue of our time is the dearth of virtue—which allows misogyny continually to oppress so many women around the globe.

In response, we need virtuous men and women, whose strength of character instills conviction in those who follow their lead and heaps shame upon those who do not, to rise up. As the great Unitarian educator and abolitionist Horace Mann once said, “Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.” Even today, suffering ones cry out for our help and wicked ones count upon our indifference. My prayer is that we too will be looked upon as heroes.

Amen, I love you. And may God bless us all.