

PROVERBS AND THE CASE FOR TELEOLOGICAL ETHICS

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Some years ago this journal featured my article “Kingdom Ethics” where I sought to demonstrate that there was a need for the virtue approach to complement the law-based deontological approach long used as the main Reformed approach to ethics.¹ Our recent conference on Preaching Biblical Wisdom gave me opportunity to address a third approach which the former article only mentions in passing: the teleological approach. This approach measures the morality of an act by its outcome or consequences. One simplified way to differentiate the deontological from the teleological approach is to identify the first as upholding what is right, and the second as upholding what is good. By this distinction the Book of Proverbs marks the second approach, it teaches us how to be good.²

Derek Kidner uses different connotations of these words to express much the same thing. He opens his commentary on the Book of Proverbs with a line from a child’s prayer asking God to “Make the bad people good and the good people nice”.³ Making “good people nice” not only captures the emphasis of the book in question, but serves as a needed reminder that, indeed, God wants his people to be nice as well as righteous. As image bearers of God his people are to reflect his grace, mercy, benevolence and kindness, as well as his justice and righteousness. However, a look at Christian history shows that traditionally the Church has placed far more emphasis on reflecting God’s righteousness than on mirroring his benevolence, especially when it came to guidance in Christian ethics.⁴

Christ’s summary of the Law in terms of loving God and our neighbour embodies both righteous and kindly behaviour (Mt. 22:37-40; Lk. 10:29-37). In a similar way NT authors encourage their readers to grow in every fruit of the Spirit, and not just in holiness (Col. 3:12). Paul emphasises that such growth is part and parcel of crucifying the sinful nature with its desires (Gal.

¹ Bill Berends, “Kingdom Ethics”, *Vox Reformata* 72 (2007), pp. 7-27.

² See Ronald W. Duty, “Creation, History and the Ethics of the Book of Proverbs” in *Word and World* 7:3 (1987), pp. 261-271.

³ Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs; An Introduction and Commentary* (Belford Square: Tyndale Press, 1964), p. 13.

⁴ See below for some of the reasons for this one-sided emphasis.

5:22-23), while Peter points out that God’s call to participate in his own “glory and virtue” requires Christians to grow in “virtue” (Gk. ἀρετή, 2 Pet. 1:5-7 KJV). Peter then adds a teleological emphasis, observing that these virtues “keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 8).

Ethics in the early church

Despite these biblical injunctions, in the West the virtue and teleological approaches to ethics have not always received the same emphasis as the call to holiness based on the law. In the East John Chrysostom pictured growth in the fruit of the Spirit as a means to sanctification superior to the way of the law,⁵ leading to a virtue ethics approach that still marks Eastern Churches today.⁶ But in the West the Church on the whole has followed the lawyer Tertullian in emphasising the law.

Tertullian belonged to the growing second century school of thought which held that there was a limit to forgiveness when it came to post-baptismal sins. Early that century the *Didache* (XI.7) had taught that all post-baptismal sin, except the sin against the Holy Spirit, could be forgiven. But only a few years later *The Shepherd of Hermas* (II.1) began to voice a new teaching: that persistent sinners would not be forgiven because only the first confession of a sin after baptism was valid. Tertullian added that this one act of forgiveness could only follow where the genuineness of the confession and penitence were demonstrated in acts of debasement (*De Poenitentia*, XI).⁷ However, he limited this rule to what he identified as *mortal sin*, that is, direct infractions of the Decalogue. Thus sins like idolatry, blasphemy, murder, adultery, fornication, false witness, fraud and false witness could only be forgiven once, but lesser sins (*venial sin*) could be forgiven over and over again.

⁵ See John Chrysostom’s Commentary on Galatians, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, volume 13 (New York 1889), pp. 1-28.

⁶ The Eastern Church went more in the direction of virtue ethics, see Scaria Kanniyakonil, “The Ethical Perspectives of the Eastern Churches”, in *Duhkrana*, Nov. 4, 2013; <http://duhkrana.in/the-ethical-perspectives-of-the-eastern-christian-churches/>

⁷ Tertullian’s view that there could only be one post-baptismal forgiveness of a sin led him to reject infant baptism, arguing that this sacrament should be postponed till the passions of youth had faded (*De Baptismo*, XVIII, 4).

The Church did not follow Tertullian in limiting forgiveness to one infraction per commandment, but it did adopt his concept of *mortal sin* as well as his emphasis on penitence. At first such penitence only required acts of debasement, but in time stiffer penalties were prescribed to demonstrate true remorse. By the 7th century *penitentials* began to appear, manuals prescribing specific penalties for specific sins.⁸ At first such penitentials were only for use in monasteries. But as penance came to be viewed as a sacrament, the Church similarly began to prescribe specific acts of contrition for specific sins.⁹ With this use of penitentials the deontological approach to ethics remained dominant.

It was not until the thirteenth century that Thomas Aquinas introduced the teleological approach to ethics into the Western Church. Following Aristotle, Aquinas taught the *Natural Law Theory*, which held that the moral purpose of things could be known by studying their nature. Moral living involved living in harmony with this moral purpose (Greek *teleios*). As this approach did not seem to require supernatural guidance, the ability to behave in a God-pleasing way was not limited to those who followed Scripture. The teleological approach was open to everyone prepared to study natural law.

The adoption of Natural Law as something shared by all mankind also meant that the Church could follow Aristotle, who was not part of the biblical tradition, in encouraging the four natural virtues: *prudence, justice, fortitude* and *temperance*. Since these virtues were deemed to belong to the *Realm of Nature*, they were not regarded as adequate to make up for humanity's fall from the realm of grace with the loss of *Original Righteousness*.¹⁰ In order to be saved humans needed to be linked to the *Realm of Grace* through baptism. Baptism cleansed recipients of all former sin and graciously endowed them with the three supernatural virtues of *faith, hope* and *love*. Only these virtues allowed one to do the good works required for salvation.

⁸ One of the earliest is known as *Theodore's Penitential*, named for Theodore of Tarsus, the bishop of Canterbury.

⁹ The fourteenth century *Angelica* may represent the fullest catalogue of sins and punishments, with sins listed in alphabetical order.

¹⁰ Thomistic dualism (the dualism of Thomas Aquinas) saw humanity's creation in the *image* and *likeness* of God as enabling them to exist in two spheres, the *Realm of Nature* and the *Realm of Grace*. Humanity's loss of original righteousness, what Roman Catholicism saw as the *likeness* of God, left mankind in need of new divine grace to function in the Realm of Grace.

Some centuries after Aquinas, the Jesuits began to champion a second “teleological” approach to ethics, one where the end justifies the means. Because of the secrecy of the Jesuit oaths it is difficult to demonstrate that this was already part of Loyola’s teachings, but later Jesuit writings make it clear that the atrocities perpetrated in the Counter Reformation were sanctioned as means justified by their end. *Cum finis est licitus, etia media sunt licita* was the Jesuit rule, “When the end is lawful, the means are also lawful”.¹¹ Later Jesuits sought to give this approach some deontological support by appealing to a rule called *probabilism*. This rule holds that it is permissible to follow any course of action approved in the past, even where the opposing view is more credible.¹²

Ethics Following the Reformation

Protestantism rejected these Roman approaches to ethics, mainly because of their association with a dualistic worldview and salvation by works theology. Following Luther, Protestants preached a message of grace based on Christ meeting the demands of the law for his people. But both Luther and Calvin stressed Christ’s fulfilment of the Law did not annul it, so that the Law continued to serve firstly, as a guide to ethical living in society and secondly, as a schoolmaster to lead people to Christ. Calvin added to that the “third use” of the law: as a rule of gratitude for those who have been saved by grace.

With these emphases it is not surprising that most early Protestant works on ethics were strongly deontological, based on the laws of God as revealed in the Scriptures. While it was recognised that the doctrine of sanctification embraced full spiritual development, ethical guidance was directed at behaviour rather than character or motivation. Protestants who followed an antinomian approach tended to be more open to alternative approaches, which may explain why groups like Mennonites and Quakers sometimes followed a more benign social morality.¹³

¹¹ J. Beaufort Hurlbert, *The End Justifies the Means; Proven, from Jesuit authors, to have been taught for 350 years* (Montreal, 1890), p. 7. Numerous other examples are cited.

¹² This approach, first advocated by the Spanish Dominican theologian Bartolomé de Medina, was taken up by Jesuits like Luis de Molina. See “Probabilism”, in *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Probabilism>

¹³ The Quaker opposition to racism and slavery has been well documented.

The first significant promotion of a teleological approach to ethics following the Reformation was along the lines of the *Greatest Happiness Principle* of Jeremy Bentham. The approach was modified by John Stuart Mill to give rise to Utilitarian Ethics, which promoted the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Utilitarian ethics became the main approach for dealing with social issues. The lack of precision, both about what constitutes utility and the identity of the body that should benefit, made the principle a flexible tool in politics. The fact that the utilitarian principle could be upheld without a transcendental reference point also made it popular for secular use.

A further impetus towards teleological ethics came with the so called *New Morality*, promoted in the 1960's. Two widely read books, *Honest to God* by Bishop Robinson and *Situation Ethics* by Joseph Fletcher, began to advocate an approach that recognised only one moral imperative, that of love.¹⁴ Since love dealt with motivation, it was used as a "teleological" as well as a deontological principle. All other commandments were seen as mere rules of thumb that could be broken to meet the goal of love.

The New Morality caught the interest of many who were dissatisfied with traditional western ethics. Included here were many young people who took the books' examples of love being met in sex outside of marriage as a cue to a sexual revolution. The emphasis quickly changed from loving others for their sake to simply acting out of love, an interpretation that did little to impede the ethical egoism that has become so prevalent today. Ethical egoism promotes self-love and holds that every individual has the right to pursue their own happiness and utility provided they do not thereby encroach on the rights of others to do the same.

A number of ethicists welcomed the debate stimulated by the works of Robinson and Fletcher,¹⁵ though there was more support for the recognition that contextual circumstances should be taken into account than for the teleological method promoted by these books.¹⁶ The idea that means were

¹⁴ J.A.T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (SCM Press, 1963); Joseph F. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1966).

¹⁵ A collection of different reactions can be found in Harvey Cox (ed.) *The Situation Ethics Debate* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968).

¹⁶ For example, Edward Leroy Long, in *A Survey of Christian Ethics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), picks up on the "Relational Motif" (pp. 117-166), but only mentions the teleological method in passing.

justified where they met the end of love found little support, and at least one reviewer likened this approach to the position of the Inquisition.¹⁷

Despite the general lack of support for the teleological approach there was one emergent situation where a form of consequentialism was regularly followed. With the advance of medical science, decisions in health care frequently began to appeal to the *Principle of Double Effect*, as when a pregnancy was terminated in order to save the life of the mother. This principle can again be traced to Thomas Aquinas, who argued, contrary to the standing opinion of Augustine, that in matters like self-defence one was allowed to take a life to protect a life.¹⁸ It is interesting that even an ardent deontologist like Robert Rakestraw will appeal to this principle to solve ethical dilemmas involving a single commandment (as a non-conflicting absolutist he holds that a true dilemma can only involve a single commandment). In fact, like Aquinas he is quite open to taking a life to defend a life, though he does not approve of bribery or telling a lie to meet this purpose.¹⁹

Though there is not much traditional Reformed and Evangelical support for a teleological approach to ethics we need ask whether there are Scriptural reasons for taking this approach more seriously. We will do so mainly with reference to the book of Proverbs, which has frequently been identified as teaching a teleological or consequentialist approach to morality.²⁰ But before we do this we must unpack some of the terminology that marks the teleological or consequentialist approach, as there is little consensus on how these terms should be used.

¹⁷ Robert E. Fitch, "The Protestant Sickness", in *The Situation Ethics Debate*, p. 118.

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (II-II, Qu. 64, Art.7)

¹⁹ Robert Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-conflicting Absolutism", in D.K. Clark and R.V. Rakestraw, *Readings in Christian Ethics. Volume 1: Theory and Method* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), pp. 118-124. Rakestraw argues that the application of this principle requires that the action must be good in itself, the motive must be directed to a good effect and the resulting good must precede or accompany the resulting evil.

²⁰ See e.g. Gordon J. Wenham, *Psalms as Torah* (Studies in Theological Interpretation): Reading Biblical Song Ethically (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), p. 164; Ted Hildebrandt, "Motivation and Antithetic Parallelism in Proverbs 10-15", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, vol. 35.4 (December 1992), pp. 433-444.

Teleological and Consequentialist Ethics

There is considerable confusion about the terms *teleological* and *consequentialist* as descriptors for ethical approaches. Here we can distinguish at least three positions. The first equates the two terms on the basis that judging an action by its *consequence* or *telos* (end) amounts to the same thing. The second position employs one of the terms as a sub-set of the other, while the third treats the two terms as representing two distinct ethical systems.

David Clark and Robert Rakestraw are among those who equate the two terms, observing that teleological ethics is “often called consequentialist”.²¹ Similarly the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*’s entry on *teleological ethics* states that this approach is “[a]lso known as consequentialist ethics.”²² Both Robin Gill, who favours the term *consequentialist*, and Stanley Grenz, who mostly uses the term *teleological*, use the two terms interchangeably. Dennis Hollinger also uses the terms synonymously, but adds the footnote: “There is a teleological ethics (i.e. Aristotle and Aquinas) that focusses on the end toward which humans were made and builds the moral framework around those natural ends.”²³

In the second usage, where one of these terms is seen as marking a subset of the other, there is no agreement as to which is the major set and which is the subset. In the *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* the “consequentialist theory of utilitarianism” is listed as a type of teleological theory.²⁴ Conversely Stephen Layman lists his “Christian teleological view” as a kind of consequentialism.²⁵

The third use of these two terms assumes they indicate distinct methodologies. Here the teleological approach is usually identified with the

²¹ Clark and Rakestraw, p. 27. Their glossary also defines consequentialist ethics as a term “often used as another name for teleological ethics”, p. 63. See also pp. 25 and 68.

²² *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, online at <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/585940/teleological-ethics>. The 1991 printed fifteenth edition omits this identification.

²³ Dennis P. Hollinger, *Choosing the Good* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), p. 27, fn. 1, p. 273.

²⁴ See “Teleology”, in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, edited by David J. Atkinson & David H. Field (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 835.

²⁵ C. Stephen Layman, *The Shape of the Good, Christian Reflections on the Foundation of Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), pp vii, viii.

classical ethics of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, while the term consequentialism is reserved for more recent approaches. D.C. Jones observes:

The ambiguity of the term *teleological* is the source of confusion in ethics. Its classic use for the perfection of human nature in conformity with right precepts should be distinguished from the modern use for the view that the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined only by its consequences.²⁶

Similarly Michael Hill insists that only the classical approach should be identified as *teleological*, and that later approaches should be labelled *consequentialist*:

Whereas teleological theories are concerned with the task of recognizing and responding to the purposive order detected in creation, consequentialist accounts of morality focus on the fact the individual agents have needs and desires that anticipate fulfilment.²⁷

While common usage may not (yet?) recognise this distinction, it is useful. The classical approach of Aristotle and Aquinas, who based their ethics on the perceived end or purpose of humanity and creation, needs to be differentiated from approaches that evaluate the outcome of moral actions by other criteria. The term *teleological* for the classical approach is particularly fitting, as it does not directly come from the Greek noun *telos*, as is often presumed,²⁸ but the derived adjective, *teleios* meaning “perfection”, as that term was used by Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. For them it marked something that had reached its intended moral *telos* (goal), resulting in *eudaimonia* (bliss).²⁹ Aristotle believed this *telos* could be discerned in the nature of the object concerned. Thus the classic teleological approach measures actions by the created purpose of the objects involved.

²⁶ David Clyde Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), fn. 5, p. 18.

²⁷ Michael Hill, *The How and Why of Love, An Introduction to Evangelical Ethics* (Kingsford: Matthias Media, 2002), p. 38.

²⁸ E.g. by Jeffrey Wattles in *Zygon: A Journal of Religion and Science*, vol. 41, no. 2, June 2006.

²⁹ See R. Schippers, “Goal” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), pp. 59-66.

Later approaches, such as Mill's utilitarianism, used other means to identify the *telos* of moral action. These were also termed "teleological" before the term *consequential ethics* was coined. Since this latter term has become available it is not unreasonable to again reserve the term *teleological* for the approach that gave the word its original meaning.³⁰ The label *consequentialist* can be used for other approaches that measure moral acts by their consequences. While some of these consequentialist approaches may also judge the moral value of an action by the purpose or motivation of the agent, and not simply by its result, this motivation is not necessarily based on God's *teleios* or purpose in creation, as in the classical teleological approach.

For Aristotle and Aquinas the *teleios* was identified with the purpose for which the objects involved were created. An action was deemed moral when the agent acted in accord with the created purpose of these objects, and immoral when the action went against this purpose. For example, Aquinas argued that, as human sexuality was given for the procreation of the human species, it should not be used in a fashion that prevented conception (this position still represents the official Roman Catholic approach to birth control).

As noted earlier, both Aristotle and Aquinas held to the *Natural Law Theory*, which presupposed that the purpose of things could be found within the realm of nature. This implied that humans could know and do what is right without supernatural guidance. Aquinas did not recognise that mankind's fall into sin and subsequent bondage to Satan prevented people from acting in a God-pleasing way, nor did he allow for the noetic effects of sin on nature, which hampered accurate human knowledge of the purpose of things. The Reformers, who taught mankind's total depravity and the corruption of creation, therefore rejected this approach and again sought their ethical guidance in the laws recorded in the Scripture. Yet it may well be asked whether they threw out the baby with the bathwater when they rejected any ethics based on consequences, because it is difficult to explain

³⁰ The *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* credits Elizabeth Anscombe with coining the term "consequentialism" in her article "Modern Moral Philosophy"; see Ted Honderich (ed.), *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.154. The article appeared in *Philosophy* 33, No. 124 January 1958.

some Scripture passages without reference to this approach. In particular this is true for the ethics of the Book of Proverbs.

Proverbs, a Teleological Approach.

There are a number of stories in the Bible that suggest the use of a teleological or consequentialist approach, including the stories of the midwives in Egypt, Abraham passing off Sarah as his sister, Rahab hiding the spies, Husai giving false advice to Absalom and Elisha misleading the Aramean soldiers (Ex. 1:19-20; Jos. 2:4-6; 1 Sam. 22:13; 2 Sam. 16:17f.; 2 Ki. 6:18, 19). The difficulty with these accounts is that they are descriptive, and lack any clear statement identifying these acts as moral in themselves. Some accounts may imply divine approval, as when God blesses the midwives, or when he smites the Aramean soldiers with blindness at Elisha's request.³¹ But there are no propositional affirmations stating that the morality of an act may be judged by its consequences.

The Book of Proverbs represents a different approach to the question. It encourages its readers to right behaviour, attitudes and virtues on the grounds that this will result in desirable outcomes. Good behaviour, attitudes and virtues will bring God's promised *shalom*, but misbehaviour, bad attitudes and vice will lead to a disruption of this *shalom*. We noted already that Proverbs is frequently identified as presenting a consequentialist ethics, because it points out that where people follow certain attitudes, behaviours or actions they can expect certain consequences. But in view of our previous analysis of the terminology, we need ask whether the ethics of this book is better identified as teleological. Do the proverbs in the book by that name present the consequences of right behaviour as something God purposed or merely as something humans desire?

Rabbi Michael Fox has argued that Proverbs follows a Socratic approach to ethics. Socrates based his approach on three principles, "(1) virtue is knowledge; (2) no one does wrong willingly; and (3) all virtues are one." In a

³¹ NT passages like Heb. 11:31 and Jas. 2:25 approve of the moral agents, but give no explicit sanction to the method used.

similar way, Fox argues, the first ten chapters of Proverbs shows “wisdom and moral virtues are bound as cause and effect.”³² He concludes:

In sum, the principle that human knowledge is a sufficient precondition for virtue allows Proverbs to provide a comprehensive guide to individual behaviour without recourse to the divine Torah or other communication.³³

In response to this it could, of course, be pointed out that the book does direct readers to the Torah as a necessary and flawless guide (28:18; 30:5-6), but Fox would probably dismiss these as passages written by another hand. It could also be countered that the theme of the book is set when it states: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline” (1:7). The phrase *fear of the Lord* also occurs at the end of the book by way of an inclusio (31:30). Proverbs repeats the phrase 10 times in all, compared to only 4 OT occurrences outside of wisdom literature. But for Fox the “fear of Yahweh” is not the **beginning** of wisdom, but its **result**: “Seeking wisdom (Prov. 2:1-4) will bring one to fear of Yahweh and knowledge of Yahweh (2:5), because it is he who gives wisdom (2:6).”³⁴

The position Fox ascribes to Socrates is similar to that of Aristotle, except that Aristotle objected to the second principle, pointing out that weakness of the will (*ἀκρασία*) could prevent people from doing what they knew to be right.³⁵ It is also similar to that of the Catholic Church where it follows Aristotle and Aquinas. Rome upholds the Natural Law Theory because it accepts nature and human wisdom as an accurate guide to ethics. We have already noted the Protestant rejection of this approach. But does the Protestant rejection of Natural Law as an accurate and sufficient guide to morality entail that the classic teleological approach must be similarly rejected?

Lutheran author Ronald Duty has questioned this. In a paper dealing with the salvation history approach to interpreting Scripture he contends that “the ethics of the wisdom tradition appeals more to the moral order

³² Michael V. Fox, “Ethics and Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs”, *Hebrew Studies*, vol. 48 (2007), pp.75-88. Fox regards the first ten chapters as the most recent in the book.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

³⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1145b, 25-8.

inherent in creation and generally revealed through it without much reference to salvation history.” He goes on to explain:

The book of Proverbs generally conforms to a model of creation theology in which the symbol of the order implicit in creation is used to construe the action of human beings in history as conforming or failing to conform to a moral order inherent in creation. Accordingly, creation is used in the broad sense inclusive of both nature and history. The ethical, seen as wisdom (practical moral knowledge), consists of conformity to the order inherent in creation. The ethical task is to discern this order, and the moral task is to follow in the way indicated. This requires knowledge of God and God's doing. The wise, the righteous one acts in conformity to, or follows, the way of the righteous; the fool, the wicked one acts in opposition to it and follows the way of the wicked. The corresponding notion of God is of the one who graciously creates and sustains the order of creation.³⁶

Because God made and sustains the order of creation, Proverbs treats nature and events as guides to God's purpose which may be discovered by way of empirical observation. There are many examples, and we will look at two. The first is Prov. 7:6-10 –

At the window of my house I looked out through the lattice
I saw among the simple, I noticed among the young men,
a youth who lacked judgment.

He was going down the street near her corner,
walking along in the direction of her house at twilight,
as the day was fading, as the dark of night set in.
Then out came a woman to meet him,
dressed like a prostitute and with crafty intent...

As the passage goes on to describe what happens to the youth lacking judgement the conclusion is drawn. It is a warning, based on what can be observed in everyday life. Another example is found in in Prov. 24:30-34 -

I went past the field of the sluggard,
past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment;

³⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 261, 262.

thorns had come up everywhere,
the ground was covered with weeds,
and the stone wall was in ruins.
I applied my heart to what I observed
and learned a lesson from what I saw:
A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest--
and poverty will come on you
like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man.

This passage shows the teacher learning from what he sees and observes and applying these lessons to his heart.

It is not the intention of the teacher of Proverbs that students should discover all these truths for themselves, rather they are to listen to others who have gone before them, particularly their parents (1:8; 4:1; 5:1; 23:22; 31:1) and the wise (1:6; 13:14, 20; 14:3; 22:17). Proverbs play a specific role in the transmission of their wisdom, in that they summarise these wise teachings in pithy and easily remembered ways.³⁷

The Book of Proverbs' appeal to what we call *general revelation* helps us understand why there is so much similarity between passages of this book and other wisdom literature of the Ancient Near East, such as the *Wisdom of Amenemope* from Egypt.³⁸ Scripture itself points to the pursuit of wisdom in other nations (Gen. 41:8, Ex. 7:11; 1 Ki. 4:30; Is. 19:11, 12), and testifies to Solomon's readiness to collect and share the works of their sages (1 Ki. 4:34; 10:1-13, 24; 2 Chron. 9:23; Eccl. 12:9). While Solomon is identified as the primary human author of Proverbs, there are other contributors, identified as "the wise", Augur and Lemuel (Prov. 22:17; 24:23; 30:1; 31:1, 4).

It is in the way Proverbs appeals to general revelation, and is ready to borrow from the insights of others, that the book demonstrates that there is common ground for ethical discussions between worshippers of God and

³⁷ Sixteenth century Spanish novelist Miguel de Cervantes characterised proverbs as "short sentences, drawn from long experience." Cited by Roy B. Zuck in *Learning from the Sages, Selected Studies on the Book of Proverbs* ed. by Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), p. 15.

³⁸ See John Ruffle, "The Teaching of Amenemope and Its Connection with the Book of Proverbs", in *Learning from the Sages*, pp. 293-331.

unbelievers. Sadly today an appeal to the commandments of Scripture carries little weight in defending morality in the public domain. But an appeal to ancient and modern wisdom based on empirical data allows us to point to a deeper purpose of social institutions and traditional mores. Here the teleological approach can often get a positive response where the deontological approach is dismissed. As Christians we must be ready to support moral arguments upholding family structures, the proper use of sex, the sanctity of human life and similar values with firm empirical evidence. In answer to the fabricated statistics of those who seek to undermine God's created purpose for life, Christians must be prepared to respond with solid indicators based on concrete research.

Such a teleological approach does not require us to postulate a secular realm, where Christians and non-Christians find equal guidance. Nor does it entail acceptance of the Natural Law approach as a sufficient or even accurate guide to morality. Interpretations of nature without the use of Scripture can lead us astray. The theodicy debate reminds us that we cannot always count on nature alone to lead us to the right conclusions. Nature may be a helpful guide, but it is not an infallible guide. We need God's Word to help us discern God's purpose and know right from wrong.³⁹ The Book of Proverbs itself reminds us that there is a greater authority than our own wisdom and insights, one it identifies as Lady Wisdom.

There is a lot of debate about the identity of Lady Wisdom. More liberal authors will look for her source in mythology or explain her as the personification of human wisdom.⁴⁰ Other interpretations hold that she represents a preacher, a teacher, a counsellor or a prophetess.⁴¹ Roy Zuck accepts these descriptions, but also identifies Lady Wisdom as "a divine mediatrix, closely related to Yahweh, who reveals his fixed order." While he likens this relationship to Yahweh to that of the Messiah to the Father, he stops short of fully identifying Lady Wisdom with the Christ. Instead he concludes:

³⁹ David's last words to Solomon were that he should "Walk in his [the Lord's] ways, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and requirements, as written in the Law of Moses", 1 Ki. 2:3.

⁴⁰ See R.N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs, The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9; Studies in Biblical Theology, No. 45* (London: SCM Press, 1965). Whybray himself maintains "There is no doubt that in Prov. 1-9 in its present form this wisdom is an attribute of Yahweh", p. 78.

⁴¹ Roy B. Zuck, pp. 192-193.

In sum, Lady Wisdom's speech contains forms and motifs that did not originally belong together. She brings together into a new speech form elements that were originally diverse and thus creates a form that expresses divine revelation with the highest authority.⁴²

A similar interpretation is given by John Kitchen, who writes:

Truly, in Christ, we have embodied all that Proverbs sets forth as Wisdom. While the personification of wisdom in Proverbs should not be read as a description of the Second Person of the Trinity per se ..., from the vantage point of the New Testament's progressive revelation we find such wisdom fulfilled perfectly in our Savior.⁴³

We concur that Lady Wisdom, whatever her exact identity, must be seen as representing divine wisdom, and as such, divine revelation. In this way the Book of Proverbs points us to Special Revelation as a higher source for knowing God's will. Lady Wisdom fulfils the same function as the Torah, she is a necessary and flawless guide to understanding God's design in nature (29:18; 30:5-6). To use the metaphor coined by John Calvin, the Scriptures are the spectacles through which God's revelation in nature can be clearly discerned.

There is another angle we must explore on the relevance of the approach of Proverbs for Christian ethics. The proverbs of Solomon presupposed a covenant society living in the kingdom of Israel, where God blessed his people with his shalom. For New Testament people this earthly kingdom has been replaced with the Kingdom of God, and it is here God's purpose for creation comes to fulfilment. It is, therefore, primarily in the Kingdom that we must look for our teleological direction.

What a teleological ethics based on the Kingdom would look like has been explored by Stephen Layman in his book, *The Shape of the Good*. Here he writes:

We may sum up the Christian teleological view as follows:

... An act is right if and only if it promotes the Kingdom of God.⁴⁴

He then proceeds to make three observations: 1) in this approach the end "determines the means", it does not justify the means; 2) "much of the

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 204.

⁴³ John A Kitchen, *Proverbs, A Mentor Commentary* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2012), p. 19.

⁴⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 53.

working out of the Christian teleological view is an empirical matter”; and 3) it recognises that God’s “ethical rules and principles are not designed to frustrate human nature, but to fulfil it”.⁴⁵

It will be seen that Layman’s approach closely parallels the approach of the Book of Proverbs, and also has much in common with the teleological ethics of Aristotle and Aquinas. Where the three approaches differ is in the quality of their measuring rod. For Aristotle and Aquinas this is God’s creation, which testifies to God’s purpose. Regrettably these men make no allowance for the fact that this testimony is often obscured by the ravages of sin. For the author of Proverbs God’s purpose can be discerned in God’s providential care and guidance of his covenant people. Where they follow his ways they can expect his shalom, but where they follow sinful ways this shalom will be withheld. To discern God’s purpose his people must study his world, but are also directed to the Torah and Lady Wisdom. For Layman the measuring rod is the Kingdom of God, preached by Jesus Christ and his apostles. The purpose of the world cannot be fully measured by what it is today, but only by what it is meant to be.

It is not my purpose here to unpack the implications of the Kingdom approach to ethics, other than to note it is a useful supplement to deontological and virtue ethics. For further studies readers are referred to Stephen Layman’s book, *The Shape of the Good*. The book provides a good example of a Kingdom focussed teleological approach. It is particularly helpful in dealing with issues where other approaches give little guidance, like how to divide one’s time between one’s occupation and other demands, or how to use one’s resources in a God glorifying way. For our purpose it is enough to note that the teleological approach should be recognised as a legitimate model to be used alongside other God-given methods to discern his will.

Conclusion

We began this article with the observation that there was little in the way of a teleological ethics in the early church. While the Eastern Church championed virtue ethics, in the West all the emphasis in the liturgy and

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 56, 57.

theology of the church was on the Law as a guide to both moral and spiritual life. We saw how Thomas Aquinas introduced the teleological approach of Aristotle with an appeal to Natural Law Theory. The Reformation rejected this theory, and with it the teleological approach. It again concentrated on deontological ethics, lifting it to a new standard.

When the teleological approach resurfaced it differed from the classic approach in that it failed to evaluate the consequences of moral actions by God's purpose for creation. The ends pursued were ends based on human values, and often these ends were used to justify the means. While such models may have discouraged Christians from using ethical systems that judge actions by their outcomes, we have argued that the Bible itself is open to a form of the teleological approach. This is the approach of Proverbs, which has much in common with the classic approach of Aristotle and Aquinas. We noted that this approach can be especially useful in defending Christian ethics in the public square.

Lastly we briefly examined a teleological approach based on Kingdom ends, observing that it is here that Christians may find guidance on issues where other approaches are less helpful. Let us therefore be prepared to make use of all three approaches God has given us: the deontological approach based on his law, the virtue ethics approach based on our image of God, and the teleological approach based on God's purpose for his creation.