

# Consistency and Christian Ethics

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## 1

There are many moral and political issues the churches need to address. For instance, by some estimates present worldwide consumption rates could mean within thirty to fifty years global environmental collapse.<sup>1</sup> How will we respond in order to avert a barren future? When—if at all—will we respond? Who is the relevant “we”? The challenges of our day seem much more perplexing and dire than matters of sexual preference. Still, it is good to reflect before rushing to judgment about any moral or political question. Richard Norris, in his “Notes,” furthers Christian reflection on the question of homosexuality. My tactic in this essay will be to isolate paradigms of moral and religious consistency and their significance for that question.

Richard Norris opens his “Notes” with a story of inconsistency. A churchwoman condemns homosexuality as a sin, yet holds that homosexuals are nice people.<sup>2</sup> This story poses the question of the form of consistency that can and ought to characterize a morally good life. A distinction must be quickly drawn. We can distinguish the consistency of judgment from the consistency of character or life, what I will call moral consistency. Of course these are deeply related, but they are not identical. Consistency of judgment requires that similar cases be judged similarly, so, in terms of Norris’s story, the woman, to be consistent in judgment, must judge every homosexual act a sin and every homosexual to be nice. (Given human lives, it is hard to see how she could sustain that conclusion!) In other words, the demand for consis-

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> One should note that good people are not always nice. But in our culture it is important to be nice rather than to be good! On this see Iris Murdoch’s novel *The Nice and the Good*.

tency of judgment is an attack on special pleading and hypocrisy, the attempt to exempt some case (usually one's own) or person (usually oneself or a loved one) from equal assessment. Consistency in this logical sense is what Immanuel Kant meant by the universalizability of maxims, which he believed defined the form of morality.

As noted, consistent judgments are related to but not identical with moral consistency, Kant's claim notwithstanding. Usually we expect the morally consistent person, that is, someone who embodies her or his convictions, or at least struggles to do so, to be consistent in her or his judgments. And we also often assume, rightly or wrongly, that the capacity to make consistent judgments rests somehow on the kind of person one is and the formation of one's character. Yet that is not always the case. A person might make a consistent judgment and yet be inconsistent in her or his actual life; an individual might be morally consistent as a person and find, through the dictates of wisdom, that she or he must bend the rules, as it were, in a specific judgment. In fact, wisdom is often depicted precisely as a capacity to see the moral and religious import of a unique situation, one that cannot be reduced to uniform judgment.

These distinctions let us grasp some important ideas about moral goodness and evil. With thanks to Dante, we can easily see why the "devil" can be absolutely consistent in judgment and incarnate pure evil, willing to make evil his good. Radical evil is logically consistent and embodies ideals consistently. The saint, conversely, is someone who embodies a consistent life as well, but who is (supposedly) infallible in judgment and act about what is truly good. A hypocrite, and that is most of us at least some of the time, has her or his life ajar; inconsistency in judgment and character are episodic, and so are instances of moral weakness or maybe even willful intent. And, finally, there are cases of moral error, even profound error, where one lives and judges consistently, but the values and norms judged by and embodied are in fact wrong and even evil. The Nazi doctor doing his duty consistently and faithfully in obedience to the *Reich* was nevertheless engaged in moral evil due to a profound lapse or coercion of judgment.

It would be possible to explore these forms of consistency, their interrelations and conflicts, the kinds of moral fault they bespeak, and how all of that bears on the question of homosexuality. Neither space nor time will allow that breadth of inquiry here. Given this, I want to focus mostly on the consistency of life. More specifically, I want, at

Norris's prompting, to explore the relation between motives and actions that should characterize a consistent life.

## 2

At least since St. Paul, Christians have insisted that motives and actions can conflict. The good that I know I ought to do, I do not do, as Paul puts it in Romans 7. That is the abyss of the will (as philosophers call it). But it is also true that Christians can and ought to struggle to reconcile motive and action under the norm of love. In this light, one can track in the history of Western Christian and philosophical ethics very different conceptions of the kind of consistency that ought to characterize a good life.

First, one can conceive a life's unity in terms of a hierarchy or single principle of overriding concern. As Søren Kierkegaard famously put it, purity of heart is to will one thing. The unity sought in a life is one in which all motives are subsumed under a dominant one. One is to love God in a categorically different way than one loves one's neighbor in order to avoid an idolatry of human affections. Our love of others (sexual and otherwise) could, on this account, be a form of sin and thus morally wrong if they, rather than God, capture the whole of one's heart and soul. Other similar accounts of unity are possible. Thomas Aquinas held a unity of virtues. The virtues have love (*caritas*) as their origin and end because God is love and God is the origin and end of all things. In the early church, St. Augustine famously showed in his *On the Morals of the Catholic Church* that virtues, insofar as they are genuine, are really forms of love (*caritas*) rooted in the love of God rather than love of self. On this paradigm—whether in Thomistic virtue discourse, Kierkegaardian voluntarism, Augustinian ideas about love, or some other form—the good person is the unified self where unity means strict adherence to one love or one principle which subsumes or overrides all others. In the truly good person's life the diversity of virtues, loves, or intentions masks their deeper unity. I will call this the *purity paradigm* of moral consistency.

Another line of thought is that the unity of a life is a complex coherence which is not ordered top-down by some overriding virtue (Thomas) or willful devotion to God or single principle (Kierkegaard) or unity of form (Augustine). Those positions, on this second account, risk denying or demeaning aspects of a life for the sake of purity.

Ought we really love the neighbor only as a way to the love of God and thereby make others a means to our God-relation? Is it really the case that love of neighbor is a possible idol? What is sought on this second account is a reflexive coherence among capacities, needs, and goods of a life so that richness of existence is found. This too requires consistency between belief and action, but one does not understand that consistency in terms of a unity of the virtues, purity of conviction, or a single form of love, to stick with the examples given above. I coin the term *integrity paradigm* for this outlook.

There are many versions of this paradigm, from Plato and Aristotle in the ancient world to contemporary thinkers interested in a range of human goods and capacities.<sup>3</sup> On my account, human life is saturated with a host of differentiated yet interacting motives. Stated too briefly: pleasure and pain and thus the capacity for sympathy saturate our embodied existence; recognition and shame and so the capacity for benevolence permeate our social being; feelings of innocence and guilt and so an idea of justice (as Aquinas knew) arise because we are reflective creatures; participation and alienation give rise to the motive of empathy because human life is also located in some community. Because we are complex creatures, these sensibilities and motives interpenetrate and conflict with one another. Yet sensibilities are also ways of perceiving value, and that is why sympathy and empathy and the rest can and do arise within our emotional lives. This insight into perceptions of the value of others seems missing in Norris's "Notes" since he is so concerned, wrongly I judge, with the relation of the involuntary and the voluntary as defining morality. That is, since he is concerned to see the realm of the involuntary simply as naturally given desires and impulses, and so outside of moral evaluation, he seems not to have grasped how our emotions (desires and impulses) are also perceptions of value. This truncates, in my judgment, the complexity of his account of moral action and character. And, besides, Christians have always known that love is a form of perception and knowledge, even if Aristotle and the Stoics could never quite get this insight.

The task of integrating motives (e.g., sympathy, benevolence, justice, empathy) with respect to their constitutive emotions and feelings

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<sup>3</sup> See William Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). For other positions see the works of Amaryta Sen, Martha Nussbaum, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, John Finnis, and Protestant thinkers like Don S. Browning and Max L. Stackhouse.

is, on my thinking, the work of conscience. Yet conscience, despite what some theorists hold, is not a legislative power that sets up a hierarchy. Conceiving it that way conforms to the *purity paradigm*. Conscience is, rather, the capacity of the whole self to order the whole self.<sup>4</sup> It is a concept for the moral labor of our being. The conscience of a community is the whole community ordering the whole community with respect to social motivations and goods. The unity sought in life is called *moral integrity* because it is the integration—the right relating—of multiple capacities with and for others through the work of life, through conscience, when there is truthfulness of self and community, to the project of respecting and enhancing the integrity of all life. True integrity of life is, of course, an aspiration, a going on to perfection; it requires self-labor as a necessary but not sufficient condition. Our lives are only complete in grace and love. And insofar as genuine love is an integrative power—a power that does not mutilate but fulfills and completes—then love (human and divine) is the norm of the morally consistent life. Properly understood, love respects and enhances the complex coherence of oneself and others, human and non-human. On this account, the threat of disintegration arises with pain, shame, guilt, and alienation which make it impossible to assume the human labor of rightly integrating life.

The distinction between paradigms of consistency returns us to the opening story that Norris tells. The woman believes that homosexuality is wrong (in Christian terms a sin), but that belief does not motivate action. She is, to put not too fine a point on it, a hypocrite, just like the rest of us. Her statement is neither the ravings of the devil nor the utterance of a truly good person, a saint. Her life lacks purity as well as integrity, but those different paradigms of consistency suggest very different recommendations for her life. The idea of integrity fastens on perceptions of the value of others and organizes the complexity of life around that insight; it does not seek a top-down consistency for fear that purity might violate what is due others and oneself. This does not relieve one of the demand or ideal aspiration required by a robust understanding of moral goodness. The converse is the

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<sup>4</sup> In Anglican thought, one finds an analogous position presented by Bishop Butler in his *Sermons at Royce Chapel*. While Butler thinks that conscience tells us our duty, it is developed with respect to a rather complex, and we could say phenomenological, account of the self in which desire and middle level principles (self-love and benevolence) need to be harmonized or ordered.

case. Living with integrity is more demanding, more complex, than adherence to one overriding principle or norm. One is claimed by the demand to live with and for others in all of their distinctive and non-reducible complexity in the adventure of respecting and enhancing the integrity of life.

This brings us to the religious depth of thinking about the moral life.

## 3

The paradigms just noted imply different ways of inhabiting the Christian faith. The insight of the purity paradigm is that faith in the one, true living God can have no rivals; monotheistic conviction *seems* to require purity. Even love of neighbor, the second great command, is never to rival love of God. God and God alone should be loved with heart and soul and mind. The neighbor, as both the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus teach, is to be loved *as* one loves oneself. Neighbor love is reciprocal among individuals; the love of God is not. The purity paradigm speaks to the deep religious longing for the sovereignty of the divine. Truth be told, I imagine that when folks appeal to “what the Bible says,” the concern is the religious longing for purity.

However, one needs to grasp the deep seduction of the idea of purity. It bespeaks a heroic ideal of exclusive fidelity. That is why it has been the position of existentialists, like Kierkegaard, and is too often the default position in Christian communities. No doubt, this is because of the centrality the great command has in Christian piety. Yet this vision of moral consistency can breed hypocrisy (come what may, we live in an impure world) or a kind of religious self-obsession and so the desire for utter authenticity unmoored from constitutive bonds to, with, and for others. In this way, the religious relation to the divine with heart, soul, and mind can actually threaten the sustaining relations we have to others, including sexual relations. Little wonder that most religious violence is driven by a conception of “purity” that must be imposed on others, individually and politically. It is a form of moral madness.<sup>5</sup> Thus, purity threatens to tear asunder the religious and moral life, the danger Jesus saw when he insisted, after healing

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<sup>5</sup> On this see William Schweiker, *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics: In the Time of Many Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) and Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

someone, that the Sabbath was made for human beings and not human beings for the Sabbath. The woman of Norris's story says that homosexuality is a sin (religious relation) and yet homosexuals are nice people (moral relation) and thereby enacts a profound contradiction within Christian living.

Is there scriptural warrant for the integrity paradigm and also a way beyond the possible contradiction in Christian life between the two great commands? Can we integrate love of God with love of neighbor? Yes, under scriptural warrants. The insight is found, again, in Jesus' claim that the Sabbath was made for humans and not humans for the Sabbath. It is seen in the letters of John where anyone who hates the neighbor and claims to love God is called a liar. It is part of the prophetic denunciation of cultic purity when used to trample the poor, the weak, and the outcast. The integrity paradigm is rooted in the insight that the lives of others make a claim, a demand, to respect and enhance the integrity of their lives and one's own.<sup>6</sup> That claim is the call of conscience; at the same time it is, religiously, an utterance of the divine. The space of the moral life is not simply the relation between me and my God, me and my intention, or me and my principle/virtue. It is defined by relations that claim respect and enhancement required for integrity. Immoral actions are ones that thwart the integrity of life and aid forces of disintegration, which in their tired and horrible ways reduce the living to the dead. The integrity paradigm means, to use another biblical trope, learning to walk in the ways that lead to life.

From this ethical perspective the important issue in our sexual lives is whether actions and relations respect and enhance the integrity of life with and for others. The claim to integrity arises within perceptions of value that saturate desires and emotions factored through the moral labor of our being, conscience. Sexuality is, in this ideal respect, a perception of the value of the other and the integrity of life, a perception that arises, as Norris rightly says, with the first genuine occasion of desire for another. My contention, then, is that what matters morally and religiously is the exercise of one's sexual embodiment so that the integrity of life in and with others is respected and not demeaned, enhanced and not destroyed. Sexual desire is neither a simple good (Norris) nor good only when between

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<sup>6</sup> David E. Klemm and William Schweiker, *Religion and the Human Future: An Essay in Theological Humanism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

heterosexuals (common Christian morality), nor a threat to the purity of the religious life (rigorism), nor necessarily ordered under a single virtue (Augustine), nor a means only of procreation and thus a bulwark against lust and a sacrament (traditional Christian teaching). Rather, sexuality is a moral space, a field of interrelations, among many others in which we are called and challenged to live integral, responsible lives.

The claim of responsibility is neither a respecter of persons nor the possession of a single sexual orientation. It is, rather, the full meaning of moral freedom and so the joy and burden of our lives. The real task, then, is to live responsibly within the moral space called “sexuality.” It is that challenge that ought to engage the energy and concern of the churches on questions of sexual ethics and the many other questions we face in these global times.