

Textauszug zur Vorbereitung auf den Workshop
„Achtsamkeit und ethische Urteilsbildung“

Ethische Prinzipien – Beispiel 5: Judeo-Christian persons as ends: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Ethical norms of nearly all kinds emerge from various religious traditions. The highest good in the Bhagavad Gita, for example, is enlightenment. Of all the options, however, the Judeo-Christian tradition has dominated American culture to the greatest extent, and its theological ethics have been the most influential. By studying a prominent religious perspective in terms of the issues and cases in this textbook, students should be inspired to take other religious ethics seriously as well. The intention here is pedagogical-to learn a system of ethical reasoning and ethical concepts within a familiar context. On that foundation, other frameworks can be added, and dilemmas in different cultural contexts can be addressed responsibly. As summarized above, Islam and Confucianism have developed sophisticated ethical traditions.

The ethics of love is not exclusively a Judeo-Christian notion. Already in the fourth century B.C., the Chinese thinker Mo Tzu spoke in similar terms: "What is the Will of Heaven like? The answer is - To love all men everywhere alike." Nor are all Judeo-Christian ethics a pure morality of love; some ethicists in that tradition make obedience, justice, or peace supreme. But the classic contribution of this religious perspective, in its mainline form, contends that ultimately humans stand under only one moral command or virtue: to love God and humankind. All other obligations, though connected to this central one, are considered derivative.

"Love your neighbor" is normative, and uniquely so in this tradition, because love characterizes the very heart of the universe. Augustine is typical in declaring that divine love is the supreme good. The inexhaustible, self-generating nature of God Himself is love. Therefore, human love has its inspiration, motive, and ground in the highest reaches of eternity. Humans are made in the image of God; the more loving they are, the more like God they are. At this very point the Judeo-Christian norm differs from other ethical formulations. Love is not only a raw principle, stern and unconditional, as in Kant's categorical imperative. Regard for others is not simply based on just a contract motivated by self-interest, as in John Rawls's theory. It remains personal at its very roots and, although rigorously dutiful, it is never purely legalistic. As Heinrich Emil Brunner noted in summarizing the biblical exhortations:

"Live in love." Or, still more plainly: "Remain in love." ... It is the summons to remain in the giving of God, to return to Him again and again as the origin of all power to be good and to do good. There are not "other virtues" alongside the life of love Each virtue, one might say, is a particular way in which the person who lives in love takes the other into account, and "realizes" him as "Thou."

The Old Testament already spoke of loving kindness, but the Christian tradition introduced the more dramatic term agape-unselfishness; other-regarding care and other-directed love, distinct from friendship, charity, benevolence, and other weaker notions. In the tradition of agape, to love a human being is to accept that person's existence as it is given; to love him or her as is. Thus human beings have unconditional value apart from shifting circumstances. The commitment is unalterable; loyalty to others is permanent, indefectible, in sickness and in health. It is unloving, in this view, to give others only instrumental value and to use them merely as a means to our own ends. Especially in those areas that do not coincide with a person's own desires, love is not contradicted. In this perspective, we ought to love our neighbors with the same zeal and consistency with which we love ourselves.

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Agape as the center of meaning in Judeo-Christian ethics raises significant issues that ethicists in this tradition continue to examine: the regular failure of its adherents to practice this principle; the relationship of love and justice, of the personal and institutional; the role of reason as distinguished from discernment; and whether *agape* is a universal claim or, if not, what its continuity is with other alternatives.

However, all agree that loving one's neighbor in this tradition is far from sentimental utopianism. In fact, *agape* is strong enough to serve as the most appropriate norm in Chapters 4, 5, and 14. Moreover, it is thoroughly practical, issuing specific help to those who need it. (*Neighbor* was a term for the weak, poor, orphans, widows, aliens, and disenfranchised in the Old Testament.) Even enemies are included. This love is not discriminatory: no black or white, no learned or simple, no friend or foe. Although *agape* does not deny the distinctions that characterize creaturely existence, it stays uniquely blind to them. Love does not first estimate rights or claims and then determine whether the person merits attention. The norm here is giving and forgiving with uncalculating spontaneity and spending oneself to fulfill a neighbor's well-being. Because of its long attention to understanding the character of humanness, the *agape* principle has been especially powerful in its treatment of social injustice, invasion of privacy, violence, and pornography.