I am indebted to Philip Quinn for putting me in a new predicament. Usually I am accused of being a radical Christian voice that overemphasizes God’s redemption so that the created order is undervalued. My emphasis on the distinctive character of Christian ethics is alleged to make impossible any attempt to benefit from non-Christian wisdom. But according to Quinn the problem is exactly the reverse as I come close to domesticating the radical nature of the gospel of Christ by making Aristotle part of the Christian tradition. Caught between these unhappy characterizations I can only think I am either very confused or, given the intellectual options of modernity, what I am about is not easily understood. I suspect there is some truth in both characterizations, but I am going to try to clear up some of the confusions by responding to Quinn.

I must begin by rejecting Quinn’s own self-description as a “splitter.” The very distinction between “lumpers” and “splitters” is one generated by one well initiated into intellectual practices of lumping. I do not say that in criticism, for as Quinn points out, any significant attempt at ethical theory—which is not the same thing as attempts to illumine how we should live as Christians—will entail a genealogical narrative that inevitably lumps. My problem is not that Quinn is a lump, but rather that I find his narrative unbelievable.

His story goes something like this: Things were going well for Christians as long as they followed God’s commands and asked for forgiveness when they disobeyed those commands. This lasted for approximately the first four centuries of Christian history and climaxed in the thought of Augustine. However, Christians became attracted to pagan thinkers and the result was a terrible loss of Christian insight. While there was some hope in later scholastic sources, the decisive rediscov...
covery of Christian morality occurred in the Reformation and climaxxed in the eighteenth century with Kant. This renewal of Christian ethics, however, has not fared well in modernity. It now becomes our task as Christians to preserve ethics of duty in a liberal culture based on utilitarianism.

To begin, I think it extraordinary that Quinn seems to believe that the great alternatives are between something called “paganism” and “Augustinian Christianity.” Does he really believe that Augustine represents Christianity that has not already been shaped by pagan influences? Augustine, after all, was not exactly innocent of Platonism. Why is Platonic paganism good but Aristotelian paganism bad? Moreover, the very appeal to Augustine as the great hero of Quinn’s story is odd since Augustine’s display of the Christian life in The Morals of the Catholic Church is in the language of the virtues—admittedly all as forms of love, but still a long way from Kant’s ethic of duty qua duty.

I confess that I prefer Aristotle’s account of the virtues to that of Plato because, as I tried to show in my articles, Aristotle’s account of the virtues as habits inextricably requires an account of temporality. (It may well be true, as MacIntyre argues, that the difference between Plato’s and Aristotle’s account of the moral life has been overdrawn. Yet certainly the Plato that Augustine learned through neo-Platonism was far from Aristotle’s account of the virtues.) Such timefulness, I think, at least provides an opening for Christian appropriation of the virtues now determined by the story we tell of Jesus of Nazareth. Platonic accounts of Christianity always tend toward gnosticism as Jesus simply becomes an exemplar of prior existing truth. Interestingly, it is Aristotle that allows for a decisive reconstitution of the virtues as well as their individuation as determined by faithfulness to Jesus.

So, ironically, my attempt to use the “pagan” Aristotle was in the interest of my more determinative theological interest in displaying how the Christian conviction that Jesus is God’s messiah requires a radical revision of Aristotle’s understanding of the virtues. Yet such a radical revision is still a revision as God does not redeem us in the abstract but as people who are constituted in and by concrete histories. It is my sense that Aristotle’s account of the virtues, and in particular how the virtues are interrelated to happiness and friendship, can help Christians understand better how we are called to live as disciples of Jesus.

Yet I must acknowledge that there are other, equally possible, accounts of how we should live as Christians that make no mention of Aristotle and/or the virtues. It is not as if the New Testament is devoid of the language of virtue, 1 but discipleship is surely a more prominent category. The crucial issue is not whether virtue or command is more determinative, but rather whether whatever conceptual alternative we use helps us as Christians to be more faithful disciples. What must be acknowledged, however, is that there is no “pure” Christianity anywhere—particularly in the New Testament and/or Augustine.

Of course Quinn is right that Aristotle has no conception of sin, but the problem with Quinn’s way of putting the matter is that it makes it appear that sin is the first word Christians have to speak about the moral life. Our first word is not sin, but that Jesus is the Christ. Our sin can only be known in the light of Jesus’
cross. That is why the gospel is good news and proclamation. Christ did not come to condemn the world, but to save it—we are only condemned because we are first saved.

Ironically, Quinn’s understanding of sin, as well as the status he gives it, is not unlike Protestant liberal theology’s attempt to make sin a form of natural theology. No longer believing that all creation is intelligible only as it manifests God’s glory, Protestants retreated to sin as a natural category that could be known abstracted from Christ. Of course the great paradigm of this is Quinn’s hero—Immanuel Kant. I suspect that Quinn thinks he can have Kant’s account of duty and sin without having Kant’s account of Jesus in Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone. If so, he certainly owes us an account of that neat trick. For Kant, sin is a more determinative reality than the Jesus who is, for Kant, but the exemplification of the archetype already present to reason. Kant and Plato alike have no place for truth that is historically contingent.

None of this is meant to deny that sin is a crucial issue for how we think of these matters. As Quinn notes, Martha Nussbaum, in her recent review of MacIntyre’s Whose Justice? Which Rationality?, criticizes MacIntyre for taking seriously the Christian doctrine of sin. Nussbaum’s account of Augustine’s understanding of sin as sexual desire is badly off target as well as how she understands the relation of sin, rationality and authority. Nonetheless she has put her finger on one of the fundamental issues between Christians and the ethos of modernity. For her it is quite right to suggest that the project of modernity to secure moral agreement through the construction of common norms requires the suppression of the Christian confession of sin. Yet she, like Quinn, seems to assume that sin is intelligible separate from the more determinative witness we make as Christians that our existence is determined for the enjoyment of God forever made sure through the resurrection of Christ.

What I find so troubling about Quinn’s appeal to a “morality of duty” is his failure to see that there is no “divine command tradition of Christian ethics.” Indeed I think we would be hard pressed to discover such a tradition in Christianity before Kant. To be sure, there are commands of all kinds and types through the Christian Scriptures, but they are never assumed to be intelligible separate from the story of what it means to be Israel and/or the Church. Commands, like virtues, require a narrative context for their intelligibility. I, along with many others, have argued this time and time again, but it seems to have no effect for those determined that the Scriptures are best read through Kantian eyes.

In that respect I think Quinn is right to see the Reformation as playing a decisive role. But it is not as he would have it, namely that the Reformers liberated Augustinian Christianity from pagan influences, but rather that the Reformationigan the process that handed the authority of the Church to the secular state. This was certainly not what the Reformers intended, but it was the inevitable result of the divorce of scriptural authority from the magisterial authority of the church. The ethics of duty becomes the theological necessity for assuring the obedience of the individual to state control. That Protestant ethics was so shaped but a manifestation of the inability of Protestantism to challenge the idolatry
intrinsic to the rise of the modern nation state. That the moral life of Protestants, particularly in the United States, has been degraded into forms of bourgeois self-fulfillment is ironically the result of the development of duty-formed ethics abstracted from any account of goods necessary for our flourishing. So if Quinn is unhappy with liberal modernity, I suggest he ought to remember the immortal words of Pogo—"We have met the enemy and he is us."

Quinn cannot, of course, be held accountable for failing to intuit the political agenda that is the background to my articles on Aristotle, since I certainly did not make that explicit. Yet the very way I tried to interrelate happiness, the life of virtue, and friendship was meant to suggest why those themes are so destructively separated by our current political arrangements. I should have thought that Quinn might have noticed how Aristotle's understanding of the relationship between politics and friendship is a decisive challenge to liberal political regimens that thrive on the Kantian presumptions that the primary moral issue is how to secure fair relations between strangers. To be a community capable of fostering friendships, as I believe the Church is and should be, is a significant political witness in such a world.

I must admit that Quinn's general argument about the necessity to provide a genealogy of "ethics" does raise a challenge to which I am unsure how to respond. He rightly associates me with the narrative MacIntyre tells of the Christian appropriation of Aristotle. What concerns me is not whether this is a paganization of Christianity, but rather whether grand narratives such as MacIntyre constructs do not remain committed to some form of Constantinian Christianity and, thus, legitimate forms of dominations antithetical to Christian friendship. This remains a challenge to me. I am convinced there is no way around such narratives if we are to resist the powers of modernity. Yet I fear those very narratives may become the master rather than the servant to the gospel. That is why MacIntyre's argument about Aquinas's method of disputation is necessary for any account of Christian truth is so important. That "method" makes clear that Christians believe that "reason" is an ongoing process in which even the weakest member must have a voice.

That is why I find Nussbaum's critique of MacIntyre's account of practical rationality as authoritarian so bizarre. In After Virtue where MacIntyre used the example of chess, Nussbaum suggests he still has a place for critical reason, but by employing the hockey player example in Whose Justice? Which Rationality? MacIntyre allegedly wishes people to be characterized by unthinking conformity. Nussbaum's argument not only betrays a shocking ignorance of the skill required to pass a hockey puck at the right time and in the right manner, but even more she does not appreciate how rationality but names the process by which a community discovers the goods in common. In spite of her illuminating account of Aristotle, Nussbaum, in some of her work, continues to hanker after an account of "critical reason" more characteristic of Kant than Aristotle. It may be that MacIntyre's account of rationality is too "rationalistic," but at least he begins the process of helping us recover an account of rationality as relative to social process. For Christians this at least means that our convictions will, of course
appear arbitrary when we are less than a people formed to be friends of God and one another.

The issues Quinn raises concerning the relation of friendship and love are not easily sorted out. I certainly would not want to suggest that the Christian obligation to love the neighbor is the same as becoming the neighbor's friend. However, I think it equally important to resist construal of Christian agape in terms of the Kantian notion of disinterestedness that has been so prevalent in modern theology and ethics. Impartial love is not love but false egalitarianism that threatens the being of one so "loved."

In terms of Quinn's more particular criticism of the position I tried to develop, I am content to let the articles speak for themselves. I am grateful to him for providing me the opportunity to at least suggest the larger agenda behind them. Though I am unhappy with the current disciplinary distinction between theology and philosophy, I suspect behind this disagreement between Quinn and myself lies the difference between the theologian and the philosopher.  

Notes


4. Quinn, I think, fails to appreciate how Kant's account of autonomy manifested as well as spawned the kind of individualism that has made the growth of the authoritarian state inevitable. Ironically, the more autonomy we have as individuals the more we need the 'command' of the state to produce any semblance of order.

i. I am indebted to David Matzko and Philip Kenneson for their suggestions for how I might respond to Quinn. I am, in particular, indebted to Mr. Matzko for the title of this response.