Choosing the Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World

Dennis P. Hollinger


In the preface to this book, Dennis Hollinger states two aims: (a) to survey “essential issues” and (b) to suggest a particular approach to Christian ethics (7).

In his introduction, he helpfully distinguishes ethics from moral life: Ethics is “the discipline that studies the moral life” (14); moral life is the behavior (13). He claims that this book “explores” both (23), but, as the subtitle indicates, the book seems mainly to be about “Christian ethics” as a discipline rather than how to live. As such, it is a work of metaethics—that is, a reflection on ethics. In keeping with its first aim, it is a “textbook” (7) rather than a scholarly investigation. Accordingly, this review will consider the book primarily with respect to its pedagogical value.

Choosing the Good has four parts, dealing with, respectively, foundations, contexts, decision making, and application. The first part surveys consequentialism (emphasis on results) and deontology (emphasis on duty and principle), as long-standing foundations for ethics. Finding them wanting, Hollinger looks to virtue ethics (emphasis on character) as an improvement but finally proposes a “Christian Worldview” as the most adequate foundation, since the Triune God revealed in creation, history, and Scripture is the ultimate basis for moral guidance in this approach.

Hollinger describes his second part as “primarily sociological” (88). Steering a midcourse between an absolutism that would recognize no role in ethics for context and a relativism that regards context as “determinative,” he assumes that context mediates between “transcendent” foundations and “moral universals” on the one hand,
or models are the essential content, might it be better to focus on those general features rather than on individuals whose thought is too complex to pigeonhole so summarily? Hollinger might reply that individuals, particularly impressive writers such as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin, serve to illustrate the types more memorably and more concretely than abstract generalities would. Yet Hollinger also uses vivid, well-presented stories or cases, often from his own experience, to introduce topics and problems. These are very effective in capturing the reader’s imagination. I suggest that replacing the authors with stories, even if fictional, would illustrate the types without the dangers of distortion and over-simplification.

To demonstrate the problem to which I refer, I offer the following example, which is Hollinger’s illustration of the deliberative motif (the first of Long’s three types).

For some Christians, reason is the source of moral judgments, and Christian ethics is “subsumed under the rubrics of philosophy.” For others, reason and philosophical reflection are employed to serve ... “In the first, a rationally autonomous philosophy is the master of Christian judgment; in the second, moral philosophy is the [my emphasis] tool of Christian ethics.” The first form has been most prominent in Roman Catholic moral theology, while the second form is found among assorted Protestant thinkers (128, citing Long).

Hollinger then cites two authors—Thomas Aquinas, as the representative of “the classic Roman Catholic Tradition” (129) and Richard McCormick, as a “more contemporary” representative (132). Although ... revelation and “religious assent” to the other teachings of the Magisterium are essential for ethical decision making (Catechism of the Catholic Church, nn. 891–892). The opinion of no theologian, not even Aquinas, has this standing.

So Hollinger misrepresents the Catholic position when he writes, “Aquinas’s use of natural law became a mainstay in Roman Catholic moral theology. All moral decisions could be made on the basis of reason ... ” (131, my emphasis). The first sentence is true, but the second is false.

In context, this seems to be a momentary lapse, however, since on the same page, two paragraphs earlier, he says that for Aquinas divine law “constitutes the portion of God’s designs and truth that cannot be known by reason or natural law” but also that “divine law encompasses some things that are known by reason” (my emphasis). If we substitute “includes a” for the italicized phrase, the contradiction is resolved, and the Catholic position is correctly stated.

Hollinger’s use of typologies is a key feature of the book. It is both a strength and a weakness. It helps him to survey an impressive number of authors (more than two hundred) and to organize his material with a clear structure. Insofar as this book is intended as a textbook, this clarity, organization, and structure are pedagogical virtues. He, himself, though, frequently acknowledges the limitations of typology. Many, if not most, of the authors he discusses do not fit very well into the types, so the question presents itself: Why study individual authors at all? If general types, tendencies, motifs,
or models are the essential content, might it be better to focus on those general features rather than on individuals whose thought is too complex to pigeonhole so summarily? Hollinger might reply that individuals, particularly impressive writers such as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin, serve to illustrate the types more memorably and more concretely than abstract generalities would. Yet Hollinger also uses vivid, well-presented stories or cases, often from his own experience, to introduce topics and problems. These are very effective in capturing the reader’s imagination. I suggest that replacing the authors with stories, even if fictional, would illustrate the types without the dangers of distortion and over-simplification.

To demonstrate the problem to which I refer, I offer the following example, which is Hollinger’s illustration of the deliberative motif (the first of Long’s three types).

For some Christians, reason is the source of moral judgments, and Christian ethics is “subsumed under the rubrics of philosophy.” For others, reason and philosophical reflection are employed to serve a religious end and “constitutes the portion of God’s designs and truth that cannot be known by reason or natural law” but also that “divine law encompasses some things ...” includes a “for the italicized phrase, the contradiction is resolved, and the Catholic position is correctly stated.

Hollinger’s purpose here is not a scholarly exposition of Aquinas or Catholicism but an illustration of “deliberative” ethical decision making based on reason alone. Because distorting actual authors or traditions to fit his typologies occasions such lapses, however, he would do better to omit the references.

Hollinger is similarly balanced and cautious about the role of experience in determining ethically relevant facts: “We need to be aware of the social mores, ideologies, vested interests, and personal dispositions that tend to inform our empirical judgments in ways that distort our understanding of the reality surrounding an issue.” Even so, “there is a reality within the world that can be grasped (in part) by all human beings if they seek it with integrity, self-awareness, and a bracketing of their own biases” (186).

Hollinger then cites two authors—Thomas Aquinas, as the representative of “the classic Roman Catholic Tradition” (129) and Richard McCormick, as a “more contemporary” representative (132). Although Pope Pius XII is also quoted as an example of “traditional Roman Catholic thought” (131), as well as the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace later in the book (262), no explicit distinction is made between the Magisterium (official Catholic teaching) and individual theologians. For a Catholic Christian, “the obedience of faith” to divine revelation and “religious assent” to the other teachings of the Magisterium are essential for ethical decision making (Catechism of the Catholic Church, nn. 891–892). The opinion of no theologian, not even Aquinas, has this standing.

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I have already praised this book for its clarity, organization, and structure, as well as for its use of stories and cases. Even though I object to its use of some of its sources, there is a wealth of bibliographical information here. Such information would be more helpful if it were collected into an explicit bibliography instead of scattered about the endnotes and the index (which is thorough and useful). Typographical errors are rare, and the running heads are helpful. Both parts and chapters are introduced in the manner of Aquinas with a clear explanation of the logic for the divisions and topics. There is a recurring structure of survey, evaluation, and conclusion, including strengths and weaknesses of the various positions. All these features make this an easy text to study and a useful roadmap for exploring a complex field.

—David H. Carey

Whitman College

Habits of the High-Tech Heart:
Living Virtuously in the Information Age
Quentin Schultze
Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002 (256 pages)

Much like the work of Robert Bellah, et al., which its title evokes, Quentin Schultze’s Habits of the High-Tech Heart offers a strong critique of trends in contemporary culture that threaten to undermine the deeper, more noble capacities of the human spirit. Hearkening, as Bellah did, to de Tocqueville’s observation on the significance of “habits of the heart” cultivated in community, Schultze proposes six virtuous habits to counter the particular moral challenges that we face in the twenty-first century.

As a professor of Communications at Calvin College and author of several works on high-tech communications media (Internet for Christians; co-author of Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture, and the Electronic Media), Schultze focuses his critical eye on modern information technologies and the cyberculture that they generate. While he affirms that “there is much worth celebrating” in the cyber-world, Schultze devotes most of his analysis to the more troubling aspects of the Information Age.

The reasons for this approach become clear as Schultze sets about the task of identifying the specific moral challenges that confront us. First priority is given to “informationism,” our pseudo-religious faith in the power of information technologies to solve global problems and to bring us into a new era of high-tech happiness.

Not only are information technologies incapable of ushering in this utopia, Schultze insists; they are quite capable of generating a cyber-driven dystopia. Cybertechnology, as the author paints it, is shallow and vacuous, bereft of the transcendental realities of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness. Instead, the world created by high-tech information systems is filled with … information.

Data. Facts. Current events. Consumer trends. Late-breaking news. The world Schultze describes is filled with all things measurable but without meaning; these things represent the sheer facticity of life without the moral weight of oughtness. The result of this ever-mounting tide of cyber-data is an increasingly shallow and moorless engagement with reality. A distant and disengaged knowing about replaces more intimate forms of knowing; we neglect the personal, participatory kinds of knowledge that require more of us than the click of a mouse as we sit, in mass isolation, at our computer screens. “Surfing the Web,” Schultze avers, “becomes one of the most relevant metaphors for conducting our everyday lives.”

To counter the threat of informationism, Schultze proposes the virtue of moral discernment. We must cultivate the habit of discernment if we are to evaluate cyberculture truthfully, recover our moral telos, and recognize the proper subordination of instrumental technique to authentically human ends.

Schultze goes on to identify five other problem areas in cyberculture and the specific habits of the heart that they call for. We need moderation to temper our insatiable desire for information; humility as an antidote to pride in our technological genius; wisdom—especially the wisdom of Jewish and Christian religious traditions—to counteract the shallow, cacophonous confusion of the cyberworld. Finally, we need to cultivate authenticity and “cosmic diversity,” to offset the disingenuousness and elitism of cybertechnology.

Schultze concludes by asserting the utter necessity of organic—as distinct from cyber—communities. Cybertechnology, Schultze argues, tends toward individualism, libertinism, and commercialism. It allows us to enter and exit online communities at will, with no tie to bind us but the sheer power of our own interests.

Instead, true community requires geographic proximity, where bonds of place supersede individual interest, and face-to-face communication engenders communion. Like de Tocqueville, Schultze regards local religious associations as one of the most important institutions in American society, where genuine community develops and virtuous habits are nurtured and passed on.

The habits of the heart that Schultze commends are certainly worth cultivating, and readers who have been pulled into the cyber-undertow that he describes may find the book a prophetic wake-up call. But what “we” actually believe, as he describes in detail what “we”—the undifferentiated and undiscriminating—think and do.

Schultze’s argument about real community may be compared profitably with The City of God (the text of which is available on-line), where Augustine writes: “A people is an assemblage of reasonable beings bound together by a common agreement as to the objects of their love … in order to discover the character of any people, we have only to observe what they love.”

Here we find intimations of a deeper problem in Schultze’s work. If people agree to the objects of their love, it is not the objects (cybertechnologies) that determine their