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【書評】

Review of:

W. C. Mattison III, *The Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology: A Virtue Perspective*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2017, pp. xiii+279.

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The old yet new topic of “happiness” in the realm of morality has been a point of interest and debate in various branches of ethics, Christian ethics included. It suffices to think of the Dominican friar Servais Pinckaers (1925-2008) who made it his lifelong project to review and reconstruct the Christian science of morals based on his Thomistic critique of a long period of scholarly neglect of the very essence of every classical ethics – virtues, the natural striving for happiness, grace etc. In that way not only did he restore the Aristotelian-Thomistic basis for moral reasoning, parallel to what MacIntyre aimed at achieving in moral philosophy of the same period, but also returned to moral theology its attractiveness and vividness, which was not always apparent in the dry neoscholastic and/or Kantian reasoning. Yet, the project of concentrating on the positive side of human creatureliness and limitedness that yearns for perfection, on endeavors to acquire virtue rather than avoid sinning (understood predominantly in the sense of breaking some rules), and on cooperating with God’s helping and indeed deifying grace is still to date far from being accomplished. It seems that Jesus’ law has with time become just another moral law, universal or just one that is more perfect.

Mattison’s recent book is an attempt at re-defining moral theology in the

footprints of Aquinas, Pinckaers and others, which makes it not only a purely academic study for Christian believers but also proposes in Christian terms what moral theology has in common with most of the other forms of human morality. That is to say, on the basis of Christian ethics there is the same foundation as in Aristotelian or Stoic system of morality, i.e. the longing for happiness, which no human system of thought can easily ignore. For the ancient people there wasn't much radical difference in kind between hardly translatable terms such as *beatitudo* or *felicitas*. Secondly, it can be claimed that in the ears of every educated person in the time of Jesus the opening word of his Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:1-7:29) must have sounded like a beginning of a treatise in ethical philosophy. On the other hand, neither Mattison nor any of his spiritual masters do suggest that Christ's Sermon is just another proposal for ethically sound and humane life – it is more. The Sermon, which unleashed the avalanche of commentaries starting with Augustine, used to be and still is also the cornerstone of a particularly Christian morality.

The author's proposal is to read the Sermon on the Mount through the lenses of virtue ethics, as the title itself suggests. Moreover, he is trying to combine a profound Biblical research and patristic commentaries with predominantly Thomistic account of morality (thus working with concepts such as goal, object, intention, intrinsic evil). Further, his intuition, shared with Augustine or Aquinas, is that Christian morality not only continues and completes the universal ethical thought of Antiquity, bringing it further, but also builds up a well-ordered and unified system in itself, one that is rationally organized around the number seven. That is why in the past many have attempted to align sets of things with other sets of things of the same number. For example, Augustine has famously tried to align the Beatitudes (the programmatic statement of Jesus' public ministry) with the gifts of the Spirit in Isaiah 11 (although reversing their order) as well as with the petitions of the Lord's prayer

(Our Father...), and Aquinas in his turn has done a similar thing with pairing theological and moral virtues with the gifts of the Holy Spirit and beatitudes with virtues. In this fashion the whole system resembles a piece of art with parts fitting into each other. However, as Mattison aptly points out, the number seven is not magical or mystical, and one has to be wary of connecting different things only for the sake of connecting them. There does not have to be a beautiful organization at any cost. Fortunately, for the most part, the complementarity between virtues, gifts, beatitudes, fruits of the Spirit and the petitions of the Lord's prayer (the centerpiece of the Sermon on the Mount) seems to work fine also from the viewpoint of content, even though some authors at times offer an alternative numbering or ordering of those sets.

What is then Mattison's contribution to this debate? Unlike traditional interpretations, he not only treats the Beatitudes as a closed set of values, comparable to gifts or virtues, but as a prologue to the whole Sermon, in which case the same values and – in his case – the same virtues will be reflected in the later parts of this Matthean Sermon. Indeed, based on Biblical research of not only Catholic authors, Mattison strives to interpret the Sermon as having the same structure as the Beatitudes, and at the same time having a symmetrical and concentric structure. His proposal is to ethically read the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-16) as the perfect acts of someone who qualifies for and indeed anticipates the happiness of the Kingdom of heaven (i.e. union with God in a loving vision) and as equivalent to the virtues of faith (*Happy are the poor in spirit...*), temperance (*Happy are those who mourn...*), fortitude (*Happy are the meek...*), hope (*Happy are those who hunger for righteousness...*), justice (*Happy are the merciful...*), prudence (*Happy are the clean of heart...*), and charity (*Happy are the peacemakers...*) (p. 47). Even though some alignments are at the first sight paradoxical and not straightforwardly obvious, which is not to say they are forced either, they can be very useful in explaining how – for example – justice needs to be

complemented with mercy. The next step is then to try to read the rest of the Sermon as a treatise on a virtuous, good and happy life, rather than life in accordance with some new and more perfect precepts. Mattison's wish is that Jesus' moral vision and virtue ethics might be read in a mutually enlightening way, which by no means implies that either of them is incomprehensible without the other one. With this general project in mind, he reads the next section of Mt 5:17-48 as a paraphrase on the virtues of fortitude and temperance – the former instantiated in the first, fifth and sixth antithesis and the latter in the second, third and fourth antithesis between the Old and the New Law in Matthew (chapter 2). In chapter 3 with the exact same structure he examines Mt 6:1-6.16-18 concentrating on the notion of intentionality and, skipping the Lord's prayer for now, he tries to connect it to the virtue of charity. In chapter 4 while dealing with the interpretation of Mt 6:19-7:12 containing the injunction "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness!" (Mt 6:33), which is so to say the very peak of the whole Sermon, he reflects on the meaning of the virtues of prudence (Mt 6:19-34) and justice (Mt 7:1-12). Chapter 5 is dedicated to Mt 7:13-29 and read in the light of the virtue of hope. Although the virtue of faith is not assigned any particular paragraph or chapter, it is treated neatly with that of hope and also it is the point of departure of the whole Sermon and an underlying attitude of its addressees. In the sixth and last chapter the author goes back to the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6:7-15), which in his view is a microcosm that itself reflects the structure of the whole Sermon and as its centerpiece keeps the Sermon unified. At the same time, it shows that what Jesus is preaching about is not an acquired virtuosity but an infused level of virtues that cannot be achieved without God's grace asked for in prayer. An obvious conclusion seems to be that the Lord's prayer itself should have a structure or can be read as an explanation of virtues, which according to Mattison has not been emphasized sufficiently at all in the past research. Hence, this alignment represents his own insight. In other words,

in the Our Father the disciples of the Kingdom are taught to pray for faith (*Hallowed be thy name*), hope (*Thy kingdom come*), charity (*Thy will be done*), prudence (*Give us this day our daily bread*), justice (*Forgive us our trespasses*), temperance (*Lead us not into temptation*) and fortitude (*Deliver us from evil*) respectively (p. 252). Or better, they are not only praying for possession of virtues, but virtue is the prerequisite of the one who prays and, at the same time, the prayer increases the virtues already owned as a result. Again, as was the case with other alignments, there is no absolute necessity here for the singular petitions of the Lord's prayer to correspond precisely to the classical list of virtues in the exact same order (in fact, the last two virtues are inverted compared to the traditional order, even though the rest interestingly stick to the order). However, the image evoked by aligning the two sets is more than suggestive and persuasive, as for example we can see in the case of perfect love (charity) that is prayed for and enkindled ever more by the petition "Thy will be done...". The reason for it is that the infused virtue of charity is the peak and perfection of the triad faith–hope–charity and the prayer asks for the realization of the will of God who is to be loved above all things (and to love means to fulfill the desires of the beloved one) not only *on earth* but also *in heaven*, exactly in the same manner as about charity it is fittingly said that it alone will remain until the life to come (cf. 1Cor 13:8). In this way, seeing virtues in connection with other virtues and with other aspects of the moral thought rather than a random set of arbitrary duties can be indeed enlightening. What remains unclear, on the other hand, is why the comparison between Beatitudes and virtues, between the rest of the Sermon (as a musical variation on the theme of the Beatitudes) and the virtues, and the Lord's prayer and the virtues result all in a slightly different order of the seven virtues (all of which have certainly their advantages). This fact perhaps only shows that these kinds of distinction are not some equivalent mechanical structures or mathematical equations. Although such recapitulation

is missing in the book itself, the meta-alignment would look like this:

<i>The Beatitudes</i>	<i>The Sermon on the Mount</i>	<i>The Lord's prayer</i>
<b>faith</b>	temperance	<b>faith</b>
temperance	fortitude	hope
fortitude	<b>charity</b>	<b>love/charity</b>
hope	<b>prudence</b>	<b>prudence</b>
<b>justice</b>	<b>justice</b>	<b>justice</b>
prudence	hope	temperance
charity	faith?	fortitude

The words in bold are cases in which there is a coincidence or overlap between the three sets. Even though it is not addressed in Mattison's reflections and conclusions, it almost seems as if the Lord's Prayer were asking for the various virtues in the exact opposite order when compared to that of the Sermon and to that of the Beatitudes, its prologue. Perhaps fixing the gaze on and praying for the goal first helps with achieving and dealing with the more immediate matters. On the other hand, temperance and fortitude always appear together and in the same order, while justice–prudence–charity of the Beatitudes, of which they are the pinnacle, are encountered in the reversed order in the rest of the Sermon as well as in the Our Father.

The study is well documented with lots of quotations mostly from Biblical scholars as well as from Patristic literature and Aquinas' writings pertaining to the Sermon on the Mount, which makes it particularly worth reading. It is highly illuminative for the renewed moral theology, which has not yet escaped the curse of rigidity and legality, and instructive for theological ethicists, of whose

younger generation Mattison himself is representative. Reading the Sermon on the Mount as Christ's moral instruction and nourishing Christian ethical thought by such scriptural material is doubtlessly mutually enriching. After all, Christian life should be also about virtues (be they different, similar or the same as secular virtues), because virtues are about a happy life (may it mean a successful, flourishing, good, meaningful or blessed life) and Christians' happiness consists in the promise of God's friendship and its full enjoyment in the Kingdom that is at hand. As Mattison takes pains to emphasize throughout the work, Jesus' words are more than recommendations or suggestions for some spiritual elites, and the life of poverty, meekness, mercy etc. in their various forms enabled by the habitual possession of virtues and gifts is a necessity for every disciple. What is called for here are not attitudes or feelings but rather actions, of which the Beatitudes are the foremost example and which not only lead towards (a future) happiness but inherently participate in it. What this reader would have appreciated more is if the author had offered more visual and schematic representation of various relations (lists, charts, comparative tables etc.). Also, it would have been very helpful if the quotations from the Bible at the beginning of every chapter were not just long block quotations but a structured text (as parallelisms are explained at some places in the respective chapter) with numbered verses (since when constantly referring to a verse by number one has to look up by himself or herself which verse exactly is meant).

Be that as it may, the overall idea — with its conclusions to be pursued in more depth in the future — is groundbreaking. Reading the Sermon as a Christian treatise on virtues can serve to emphasize a more rational and convincing purpose, making it less of a spiritual catechesis and, conversely, interpreting the theological as well as cardinal virtues from a Christian perspective as habits advancing meritorious actions that participate in the promised reward of heaven means to understand the whole ethical life as more than a human project and

morality as more than an ethical theory. In the Sermon Jesus indeed proposes a genuinely humane conduct understandable and acceptable by any person, even though the Beatitudes continue to represent a scandal and the human person (have become a new being in Christ) needs to be assisted by the grace of God.