Ethics and Spirituality:
Self-Sufficiency or Symbiosis?

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Christian faith, expressed through moral life and spirituality, cannot exist in separate spaces. Although the relationship between morality and spirituality is not always straightforward these two domains are not at odds. They are intimately connected in such a way that a person cannot fully develop his or her potential as a human being without integrating them into one reality. This, however, doesn’t mean that morality and spirituality are the same thing. In fact, equating moral and spiritual life is not helpful as it tends to confuse rather than clarify issues raised by the relationship between morality and spirituality. By making an inquiry into this relationship, without attenuating the distinctiveness of the two domains, this article will attempt to clarify some of the issues and make a few connections. The investigation will be two fold: first, it will examine the tie between moral and spiritual domains; secondly, it will explore the relationship between the two discourses, ethics (including theological ethics) and spirituality. Moral and spiritual domains (as implied in the former) and academic reflection on them (as implied in the latter) are influenced and informed by each other. Splitting the subject into two distinctions and thereby proposing four notions for inve-

1 Mark O’Keefe makes a similar point when he says that ‘although we commonly distinguish between a Christian moral life and a Christian spiritual life, in the daily existence of Christian men and women these “lives” are, of course, one’. Becoming Good, Becoming Holy: On the Relationship of Christian Ethics and Spirituality.
stigation may seem unnecessary or somewhat artificial. The split, however, has only one aim: a clarification of what is both obvious and complex. The 'obvious' is that morality and spirituality are like two sides of the same coin; the 'complexity' is the nature of the overlaps between them. For the purpose of this study we will distinguish between what William Spohn (inspired by Bernard McGinn) helpfully labels: 'morality', 'ethics', 'practiced spirituality' and 'reflective spirituality'. 'Morality' and 'practiced spirituality' are notions of the first order. They refer to concrete behaviours, practices, perceptions, etc. 'Ethics' (a study of morality) and 'reflective spirituality' (a study of practiced spirituality) are notions of the second order. We will undertake an exploration of the meanings, the uses and interrelatedness of these four notions. We hope to unveil some promising as well as problematic connections between ethics and spirituality.

1. What do the 'handbooks' say?

Looking through the literature on the subject, it becomes clear that morality and spirituality have usually (though not always) been treated as if they were separate entities. Reading some of the texts on either of the subjects, the single coin analogy to which we alluded above doesn't make much sense. The handbooks of moral theology rarely refer to spirituality nor does Christian spirituality material have any serious engagement with the discourse of ethics. This lacuna seems to be rooted in the preoccupation with sins in pastoral texts and in ministry as well as in the idea of confession, and related to it, the development of penitential books. At first these books, which began to appear in the sixth century (as work of the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon churches) did reflect the link between morality and spirituality. The link however got weakened by the development in the twelfth century of a new genre of literature known as summae deconfessorum (in response to the disciplinary decree of Pope Innocent II and the Fourth Lateran Council requiring the annual confession of sins). These works had a juridical character and tone. In this climate theology and spirituality began to go separate ways. The separation went even further in response to the Reformation and the Church's need to have a defensive posture. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) aimed at establishing a clear line between Protestant and Catholic. Theology became neatly divided into dogmatic and moral theology, the latter closely linked with canon law. Another genre of literature was also developed: Institutiones theologiae moralis (manuals of moral theology)

which seemed to widen the gap even further. The gap continued to grow over the next few centuries except for a short interruption in the XVIII century when a renewal of moral theology was attempted at the University of Tubingen, Germany, by John Michael Sailer, Bishop of Ratisbon and his follower John Baptist Hirsch. Apart from this attempt, the two discourses have hardly dialogued with each other. The writers and scholars from the respective disciplines have been mistrustful of each other. Until recently it has been almost impossible to find in a theological dictionary an entry that would seriously speak about morality and spirituality as linked with each other. When they did speak, as in the case of A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics, the tone was predominantly critical and not helpful towards establishing a positive relationship. An entry in this particular publication is entitled 'Mysticism and Ethics', most of which reads as a disapproval of mysticism and presents ethics as superior to it. Undoubtedly, there are forms of mysticism that are self-centred and not conducive to moral growth. Equally, there are ethical theories that are completely uninterested, due to their preoccupation with human acts, in the spiritual dimension of the actor. But, not all mysticism should be treated in a dismissive manner or all ethics seen as irrelevant to mysticism. The situation, thankfully, is changing, and there are good signs of interdisciplinary engagements. A glimpse of this change can be found in a very impressive essay 'Christian Spirituality and Theological Ethics' by William Spohn in The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality. Several contemporary authors, both ethicists and spirituality scholars, take on a task of exploring the relationship between ethics and spirituality, and, more specifically, between moral theology (theological ethics) and Christian spirituality. Some moral theologians such as Vincent MacNamara involve psychology in these discussions and attempt to make connections between ethics, spirituality and psychology; others, including Vigen Guroian, refer to literature in order to show the link between the spiritual and the moral.

2 This analogy is borrowed from Michael Barnes' Editorial, see "The Way Supplement" 88(1997), p. 4.


8 See, for example, V. Guroian, Raising the Really Human Thing: The Moral Imagining in Ethics.
A very good theological study of this link can be found in Richard Gula's *The Call to Holiness*. Another inspiring publication is a selection of essays dedicated to the morality-spirituality debate in a British journal of Christian *spirituality: *The Way* published in 1997*. An unusual (excellent) philosophical treatment of the spiritual dimension is presented by John Cottingham in his *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value*. Philip Sheldrake, Daniel Maguire and Peter J. Paris are amongst a growing number of spirituality scholars who write about the distinctive interconnection of spirituality and ethics.

2. Morality and Spirituality: A Lived Experience

Morality is what we do or should do, how we behave or ought to behave, how we respond to different values (including our ultimate value), and what we see as our duty or obligation. It reflects the customs, norms and codes of conduct that prevail in our society, all of which reflect our understanding of right and wrong, good and bad. Morality refers to a lived experience of this understanding. Ethics is a study of morality. In other words, it is a study of the lived experience of what we understand as right, wrong, good and bad; it is a reflection on human behaviour in the light of this understanding. Gula defines morality as being about ‘acquiring those virtues and doing those actions that enhance the full flourishing of human life in community and in harmony with the environment’ and ethics as the ‘common way of referring to the disciplined way of thinking about who is a good person and what are right and wrong actions’.

Spirituality (or lived spirituality) seems to be a more difficult notion to define. For some, in popular usage, it may be associated with meditation courses, New Age movements, yoga or tai chi. For others, it may evoke certain religious practices, usually the more ‘sophisticated’ or unconventional ones, which we can find in most world faiths. For example, in Judaism, it is Kabbala; in Islam, Sufism; in Christianity, amongst others, Carmelite tradition. Spirituality, in our contemporary world, unlike religion, is a safe and largely tolerant concept. Non-religious people care about it and, most likely, would agree that the loss of a spiritual dimension would leave our human existence impoverished. The idea of spirituality doesn’t seem to provoke the kind of (polarised) reaction we find in the case of religion. Although there is a connection between religion and spirituality, they are distinct. It will be beyond the scope of this study to explore the religion-spirituality link except pointing out that in cognitive developmental theories, the spiritual stage is higher than the religious stages; however, in order to reach the higher stages one usually goes through the religious stages. Another interesting point is that while the content of the lower stages includes reference to the role of specific religious doctrines in a person’s development, the spiritual stage no longer refers to such doctrines; this stage is sometimes labeled as the ‘universal faith’ stage. James Fowler’s theory of faith development is an example of this approach. For him, individuals such as Mother Theresa and Mahatma Gandhi represent the ‘universal faith’ stage—they not only moved beyond what was ‘doctrinal’ in their faith growth but also successfully integrated the spiritual with the moral. Sandra Schneiders sees spirituality as connected with religion. She defines it as ‘religious self-transcendence that provides integrity and meaning to life by situating the person within the horizon of ultimacy’. A simpler yet more telling definition is offered by Philip Sheldrake: ‘spirituality is how we stand before God in the context of our everyday lives’.

It seems that ‘spirituality’ is associated with ‘everyday life’ activities and attitudes which are irrespective of metaphysical commitment or doctrinal allegiances. Although there is more than one type of spirituality, there are at least three elements that the different types have in common: (1) a recognition that there is something deeper to human life than what is externally obvious. There is a deeper level of experience, deeper self, deeper reality (related to God, the supernatural spirit, etc); (2) a search for ways that could enable us to touch, realize, and articulate this ‘deeper’ domain; (3) concrete activities which fill the creative and meditative space in us and fulfill the search; for those who believe in the supernatural they make the relationship with it more direct and alive. This last element stresses an important aspect of spirituality: spirituality is more concerned with ways of living rather than doctrines subscribed to, with activities rather than theories, with praxis rather than belief even if the belief system has an important role to play in the search. It is not surprising that St Ignatius of Loyola didn’t call his training manual ‘spiritual theories’ but ‘spiritual exercises’.

Michael Downey notices two recurrent themes in the multiple varieties of spirituality – the first corresponds to what we have suggested above regarding recognition, the second connects more directly with the moral domain: ‘first, and most importantly, there is an awareness that there are levels of reality not immediately apparent [...]. Second, there is a quest for personal integration in the face of forces of fragmentation, and depersonalization’. 17 Since this quest is usually directed to the highest value in the person’s system of beliefs, spirituality has a direct allusion to morality.

In the Christian context the most often quoted definition of ‘Christian spirituality’ is one put forward by Bernard McGinn: ‘Christian spirituality is the lived experience of Christian belief in both its general and more specialized forms [...]. It is possible to distinguish spirituality from doctrine in that it concentrates not on faith itself, but on the reaction that faith arouses in religious consciousness and practice. It can likewise be distinguished from Christian ethics in that it treats not all human actions in their relation to God, but those acts in which the relation to God is immediate and explicit’ 18. This definition as well as Downey’s second point are useful to our study. They help us identify several generic connections and differences between spirituality and morality: spirituality and morality are a lived experience of a belief; they are neither doctrines nor theories but rather practical reactions to what is understood as being or having the highest value in our lives; only immediate and explicit actions in the relation to God are the subject of Christian spiritual enquiries while ethics is interested in all human actions. This last point requires some attention as it is not clear how exactly McGinn’s distinction between the two types of actions works. Perhaps what is confusing is the term ‘action’ which in ethics pertains more to one’s external behaviour while in spirituality this term has a much wider meaning and use.

Spohn can be helpful in clarifying this point. He explains that lived spirituality ‘refers to the practice of transformative, affective, practical, and holistic disciplines that seek to connect the person with reality’s deepest meanings. It is concerned not primarily with isolated experiences such as visions or insights, but with a way of life that consciously seeks to live in tune with ultimate or comprehensive realities’ 19. ‘Reflective spirituality’ seems to be about the ‘interpretation and communication of this particular experience as experience’ 20. Actions or activities mentioned in McGinn’s definition may mean disciplines which are supposed to engage the whole person so that their way of life can be understood as transformative journey towards ultimate realities. Undoubtedly, this transformation is expressed in the daily living out of our relational lives. It is visible in our practical responses to claims that life makes on us. In other words, it is visible in the moral life. Morality and lived spirituality overlap in the sense that a true inner transformation (the subject of lived spirituality) results in the way of life that promotes goodness and rightness (the subject of morality). Disciplines or devotional practices often seek to instill virtues or good traits of character.

Although we can now see more clearly the links between the moral and the spiritual, it is also becoming clearer that there are aspects of each domain that are unique: spirituality often addresses regions of experience that seem to be beyond the reach of ordinary morality. When looking, for example, at the stories of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Sophie Sholl (both of whom stood on the side of the oppressed and actively participated in the resistance movement in the Nazi Germany) it is hard to know what sort of inner movements took place within them; what sort of internal processes unfolded so that they were able to situate themselves against the conventional. Ethics wouldn’t seem to have appropriate disciplinary tools to grasp this reality. What we do know is that Sophie’s and Dietrich’s spiritual status resulted in their most courageous behaviours. We also know that their actions for the good of others and a certain ‘mystical’ union with the (ultimate) Good (which for Bonhoeffer was represented in his love for Christ; for Sholl, in her love for humanity) generated some powerful contemporary spiritualities.

It is probably fair to say that morality does not emphasize personal transformation and holistic integration to the degree that lived spirituality does. On the other hand, spirituality cannot offer precision in working out what moral behaviour requires of us in a concrete situation. Moral skills and spiritual skills are somewhat different and they require different ways of learning. Perhaps spirituality should be the starting point; it is spirituality when we begin to explore individual values as well as ultimate value. Spohn suggests that many accounts of lived spirituality are more pedagogical than versions of morality: ‘they inculcate a way of life by practices of study, meditation, and compassion that develop certain intellectual, moral, and religious capacities’ 21. He goes on to explain that ‘with the help of a guide or director, these practices help the person break with an unauthentic way of existence in order to embrace a more authentic level, usually through contact with more radical level of reality’ 22.

Living in a ‘deep’ way requires ongoing transformation, a conversion from inauthenticity to authenticity, practices of study, meditation, openness to ultimate realities and identification of the highest value. It also requires

19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
a mature recognition that we are moral beings in a multitude of relationships (with others, close and distant ones, and with ourselves), all of which make different demands on us. MacNamara states this quite neatly: ‘we experience ourselves as moral beings’ \(^23\). In other words, we know from our own experience that we have responsibilities and duties towards others and towards ourselves – we know that life makes claim on us. Holistic integration of our experience as moral beings takes place in the spiritual space in us and, as MacNamara puts it, ‘becoming moral is a long, delicate and difficult journey inward’ \(^24\). It is a journey of interior practices and disciplines through which we not only hope to learn spiritual skills, discover that we want to be moral but what a true expression of this desire is. ‘Not to be alive to the moral call is to have an undeveloped heart’ \(^25\) and it suggests that there is something fundamentally lacking in us as human beings. The issue of lacking, failure and the need for personal transformation are precisely the issues which spirituality can address and from which morality can benefit. Gula takes this point (on spirituality benefitting morality) even further and helpfully clarifies: ‘spirituality can never be separated from morality as some external aid that helps the good [...] Spirituality is the wellspring of the moral life. That is to say that morality arises from, rather than generates, spirituality [...] Morality reveals one’s spirituality’ \(^26\). This means that all we do, how we live, how we relate to others, ourselves and the whole environment reveals how we are internally, what we genuinely value and how we organize our life experience around what gives us ultimate value. Our life history is the reflection of our spiritual history; it tells us where our heart has or hasn’t been regarding this value.

Morality without spirituality is narrow and in danger of losing access to some profound moral truths. Some moral truths we discover through spirituality. Morality without spirituality can be perceived as a code imposed by an outsider or Creator-God under threat of punishment. We are too familiar with the consequences of this understanding. Our history (social, religious, national, etc) offers us countless examples of what happens when morality does not respect the interior nature of the human life and inhibits the spiritual dimension. One of the ways of preventing this from happening is a proper inter-disciplinary engagement: spirituality can safeguard ethics from being viewed as imposed codes under the threat of punishment while ethics can safeguard spirituality from becoming an isolated discourse removed from the social praxis.


\(^{24}\) Ibid.

\(^{25}\) W. C. Spohn, *Spirituality and Ethics*.

\(^{26}\) Ibid.
for effective action, joy as the victory over suffering, spiritual childhood, radical dependence on God as the requirement for commitment to the poor, and community born out of solitude." The encounter with God that occurs in identifying with the poor in Christian faith is the most powerful motivation for becoming the kind of person one is called to be by Christ. Identity is the region of the moral experience that is central to both spirituality and ethics (especially to virtue or character ethics). According to Spohn, "spirituality usually adds a transformative urgency to the question of identity. When the self overidentifies with external goods like success, power, and pleasure, it is bound to be inauthentic. Spirituality insists on conversion and dedication to worthwhile sources of meaning in order to forge a genuine identity." These days the question of identity lies at the heart of discussions about the environmental crisis or the current economic downturn. Spiritual practices and disciplines (especially, meditation) can contribute to a reinterpretation of personal identity in the light of what is going around us: "by accepting and yielding to [...] groundlessness I can discover that I have always been grounded not as a self-contained being but as one manifestation of a web of relationships which encompasses everything."  

So far we have concentrated primarily on the contribution of reflective spirituality to ethics. However, reflective spirituality remains incomplete without reference to ethics. Amongst other things spirituality can learn from ethics how to reflect on spiritual experience in a disciplined and normative way. More importantly it can help to set parameters for what is acceptable within spiritual life and what genuinely promotes the moral good and not narcissistic good feelings; the former fosters flourishing while the latter contribute to self-deception. Another place where ethics can complement spirituality is the sphere of sacredness. Sometime reference to and contact with the sacred can be employed as an instrument to advance a particular ideology and social program. Critical ethical reflection can help to detect the problem. 

Jean Porter suggests that, of the different schools of ethics, virtue ethics in particular can be of service to spirituality. It can, for example, help to identify what is common to the Christian life, in contrast to the distinctive characteristics of particular spiritualities. Porter, a theological ethicist and a follower of Aquinas, explains the implication of Aquinas' theory of virtue for spirituality. She suggests that any authentic Christian life incorporates the theological and cardinal virtues. Since the practice of the virtues requires the cultivation of certain perceptions and sensibilities, as well as the performance of certain kinds of actions, the practice of charity with other Christian virtues involves the cultivation of awareness of God's love and reflection on what it means to act in response to that love. She explains the basic link between virtues and spirituality as follows: "for the Christian, the cultivation of the virtues will normally take the form of the practice of a spirituality. At the same time, the forms which the Christian virtues take will vary in accordance with the circumstances and the vocation of the individual." Using an example of a soldier and a mother Porter says: "both the soldier and the mother of a family are often called on to show a charitable courage, but the particular actions which express that courage will most likely be quite different, even if in each case recognizably the acts of courage." Porter makes an important point here which enables us to see spirituality in a more flexible way: while the practice of the Christian virtues requires the individual to practice spirituality, there is no one spirituality associated with the virtues. Each Christian, perhaps through the use of prudence (practical reason), needs to implement or discover a set of spiritual practices which are appropriate to his or her own situation, and, as Porter stresses, for that matter, his or her own temperament. 

Accounts of Christian virtues, which Porter and other contemporary theological ethicists offer us, can help find a way to justify new and unfamiliar forms of spirituality. Ethicists can help spiritual scholars to formulate the criteria by which they can distinguish legitimate and healthy forms of the spiritual life from those which distort the message of the Gospel or are in some way destructive or unhealthy. Porter makes a very direct point when she says: "Since the life of Christian virtue is essentially the life of charity, that is to say, a life of love for God and neighbour, then any form of spirituality which involves hostility or contempt towards other persons, or to God and the good creation that God has given us, is ruled out as a valid Christian spirituality." Ethics can help to work out what valid spirituality means; it is certainly the spirituality based on the love of God, one's neighbour and oneself (including one's own body). Spirituality can expand ethics beyond its usual concerns about actions and decision making. In the end, so much of our moral life takes place before we make moral decisions. Spirituality reminds us that the quality of our lives in their totalities determines our ability to discern. 

34 Ibid.
This study brings us to conclude that the interests of reflected spirituality and ethics overlap considerably. The subject of both is the human agent in search of the ultimate end with a desire to respond to it in an appropriate way. Although spirituality cannot do the work of ethics nor ethics can do the work of spirituality, nevertheless the two discourses can work together. We may even stretch this point and say that the two discourses are insufficient on their own. At their best, their relationship is symbiotic. We hope we have succeeded in showing some of the benefits of this interdisciplinary symbiosis. From the point of view of ethics, it is clear that cooperation between the two discourses is most fruitful when we engage agent-based schools of ethics like virtue ethics (rather than deontological or consequentialist theories). Overall, ethics can encourage the study of spirituality to move beyond historical, psychological, and sociological description to normative reflection. Spirituality can expand the scope of ethics beyond a strictly formal or impartialist accounts. Richard Gula is convinced that ‘spirituality without morality is disembodied; morality without spirituality is rootless’.

Obstacles in interdisciplinary cooperation arise when, on the one hand, ethics becomes cut off from an adequate and holistic view of morality, and, on the other, when a lived spirituality is cut off from an adequate reflective spirituality, that is, from traditions and communities that are empowered to provide normative ethical categories. Spohn points to other problems that arise in the relation of lived spirituality to ethics: ‘some practitioners want spiritual practices to “do the work” of ethical reflection by immediately and intuitively grounding their preferred way of life. Conversely, some ethicists consider the practices of spirituality to be sectarian because they are not accountable to public criteria of truth and meaning’.

When we bring ethics and spirituality together, our debates on what constitutes good life, what holiness and wholeness mean, how holiness and rightness relate to each other, can be promising and fruitful. When these two discourses interact there is no need for us to be overwhelmed by rules, norms and actions nor to deny their role in order to acknowledge that other human dimensions (which spirituality takes on board) such as the emotions, the way in which one construes a situation, tendencies to react in certain ways and, in short, all the indefinable factors which make up one’s character, are also important. The two discourses flourish when their relationship is of the critical-dialogical type.

38 Spohn, p.172.

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For the Christian it is not just the spiritual moral life that matters nor is it just the moral life. It is one’s entire life ‘as understood, felt, imagined, and decided upon in relationship to God, in Christ Jesus, empowered by the Spirit’ that matters. MacNamara articulates this so well when he says that for the Christian the spiritual quest arrives at a sharing in the faith of Jesus Christ which is that the source, ultimate meaning and final destiny of all existence is the one whom he called ‘Abba’. One who has found that has found life. The Christian is to live moral life in the explicit light of this faith. In the context of this, everything, and not least moral life, is linked to God. God is known as the answer to the question that we are. Faith through spirituality gives a vision that bears on the moral situation. It seems that in the end the distinction between ethics (morality) and spirituality is a distinction without a difference.