

Cardinal Virtues

The cardinal virtues mean simply the pre-eminent or principal virtues. They were declared by Socrates and Plato 400 years before Christ, as they are by us today, to be Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice. This list has been criticized as being arbitrary, as not covering the entire field, and as overlapping each other. In the light of the broadening influence of modern ethical and religious ideas the justice of these criticisms must be conceded. But reflection will disclose to us that these four virtues cover a surprisingly large part of the moral realm of human life.

Temperance means moderation not only in drink but in diet, not only in diet but in action, not only in action but in speech, not only in speech but in thought, not only in thought but in feeling.

Fortitude implies, it is true, a physical bravery that leads one to resist insult or attack with force, but more especially that moral courage that enables one at the risk of incurring the sneers of others, to refrain from a resort to violence except where the necessity is imperative. When, however, this necessity arises it is not deterred by pain or circumstance be it ever so appalling or threatening.

Prudence, as the critics have pointed out, enters to some extent into the last named virtue. It signifies also to meet every situation, however dangerous or difficult, with common sense and reason. It is a virtue which is lacking in a surprising large proportion of the human race.

Little need be added to what is said of the virtue of Justice in our monitors. It is truly the “very cement and support of civil society.” This conception of justice evidences a distinct advance by mankind. To be able and willing to mete out exact justice to every one, even one’s self, in every relation of life, in thought, word and action, very nearly sums up the total of all possible human virtue. In a system of moral philosophy, such as Plato’s (as distinguished from a religious philosophy such as we now have,) justice very nearly covers the whole field.

What a multitude of evils and mistakes the full possession and practice of these virtues would enable us to avoid!

But with the birth and development of theology the Platonic scheme seemed, and doubtless was, incomplete. It took little or no account of those higher speculative virtues which we class as religious. There was absent from it the conception of that charity or love which has entered so largely into modern sociological thoughts and movements. The later philosophical and religious teachers, therefore, added to the cardinal virtues what they termed the theological virtues, namely, Faith, Hope and Charity. These three were believed to include anything omitted from the other four, and together were supposed to cover the entire field of the moral thought and conduct of man.

Street, Oliver Day. Symbolism of the Three Degrees, Cedar Rapids, IA: National Masonic Research Society, 1922.