

THE NICOMACHEAN ETHICS AND THE ENEMY WITHIN

Cherish Nelson on Horror, Power, and Self-
Control

In his *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle suggests that right knowledge, right character, and right choice are enough to produce wholly moral persons. In his calls to act virtuously, Aristotle clearly prizes self-awareness and self-control. It remains possible, however, that we may not have as much control of ourselves as we might like to believe. Our knowledge and desire of goodness are not always enough to produce goodness within ourselves. Christians find this truth played out in the Gospel narrative — sin holds us captive, and we are freed not by our own merits, but by the redeeming power of Christ's death and resurrection. We also see this lack of self-control played out imaginatively in literature, television, and film through the 'enemy within' trope. We've seen all kinds of creatures struggle with virtue:

Jekyll and Hyde, vampires with souls, the Incredible Hulk, and even characters possessed by demons. Demon possession is perhaps the trope that is most similar to the Christian battle with sin. Examining Aristotle's *Ethics* alongside a film like *The Conjuring* can help us recognize our limitations in power and self-control.

Aristotle asserts that virtue comes through right action informed by right desires. He writes, "What affirmation and negation are in thinking, pursuit and avoidance are in desire; so that since moral virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, and choice is deliberate desire, therefore both the reasoning must be true and the desire right, if the choice is to be good."¹ To act rightly, then, we must know what we ought to desire and then desire it. However, even if we come to know what we ought to desire, and thus choose, we may still find ourselves somehow unable to act virtuously. In *When Athens Met Jerusalem*, John Mark Reynolds expands on Aristotle's *Ethics* and suggests the reason people desire good but do not act virtuously is laziness. He states, "After all, some people may know and desire goodness but may be unable to do it through lack of

¹ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W D. Ross and Lesley Brown, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 103.

willpower.”² This claim illustrates the obvious truth that right desire alone cannot produce a moral person.

Is it, though, a mere lack of willpower that always prevents us from doing good when we desire to do so, or could it be something more insidious? The apostle Paul digs into this dilemma in his letter to the Romans:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of

² John Mark Reynolds, *When Athens Met Jerusalem: An Introduction to Classical and Christian Thought* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 213.

the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am!³

Here, Paul acknowledges that desire is not enough to produce moral action. He longs to do good — that is, the will of God — but he does not. In Aristotelian terms, Paul has right desires, but he does not have right actions. This portion of Paul’s letter to the Romans illuminates what Aristotle’s ethical teaching does not: sin corrupts our moral virtue.

In *The Conjuring*, an evil spirit named Bathsheba corrupts the Perron family, the mother Carolyn, in particular. The family then seeks help from Ed and Lorraine Warren, a married couple who investigates the paranormal in the name of God and the Catholic church. Aristotle may liken Carolyn to a madman, but he would not ultimately excuse her behavior. Of madness, Aristotle writes that “no one could be ignorant unless he were mad, and evidently also he could not be ignorant of the agent; for how could he not know himself?”⁴ Carolyn, however, was not mad. In *The Conjuring*, we see a real, grotesque evil wreak havoc on this family. From early on in the movie, the audience is aware that the evil presence

³ Rom. 7:15-24, NIV.

⁴ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 40.

is real. When Carolyn plays a game called hide-and-clap with her daughter, we see a pair of ghostly demon-hands emerge from a wardrobe behind a blindfolded Carolyn and clap, pretending to be her daughter. We see these same hands later — and so does Carolyn, this time — when Carolyn is locked in the basement by the evil spirit. In perhaps one of the most grotesque scenes of the film, Bathsheba, with pale green skin, dark eyes, and a disfigured face, floats above Carolyn as she sleeps, then possesses her by vomiting blood into her mouth.⁵

When we see the face of evil, we cannot be like Aristotle, who denies any supernatural influence on behavior. Aristotle writes that “there are three things in the soul which control action and truth — perception, reason, desire.”⁶ In saying this, he eliminates supernatural factors that may influence action, like sin or even the Holy Spirit. A film like *The Conjuring* can help us acknowledge the possibility that evil — and therefore sin — is real and relentless. Ed Warren describes the relentless power of evil to the Perron family when they try merely to hide from it. He tells them with firm urgency, “Sometimes

⁵ *The Conjuring*, directed by James Wan, (New Line Cinema, 2013), Netflix.

⁶ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 103.

when you get haunted, it's like stepping on gum. You take it with you."⁷ When we are captives to sin, it is a part of us — truly a beast within.

Like the apostle Paul, Carolyn desired what was right, but she had something else living inside her, waging war against her mind and holding her captive. Carolyn's repeated cries and calls for help to her husband indicate that she did not want to enact Bathsheba's will, which was to kill her children.⁸ Despite this inward battle and encouragement from her husband, Ed Warren, and Lorraine Warren to fight off the demon, Bathsheba overcame Carolyn's will. It was not a lack of willpower, wrong desires, or wrong reason that caused Carolyn to be overtaken. It was Bathsheba's beastly power. Watching a powerful demon overcome an average woman like Carolyn can help us recognize that our own power to choose goodness is limited. Aristotle describes choice as "deliberate desire of things in our power."⁹ Carolyn, having lost all power over herself, does not have freedom of choice, which suggests that, according to Aristotle, she does not have the capacity to desire or choose virtue. This beast, or

⁷ Wan, *The Conjuring*.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 45.

demon in the case of Carolyn Perron, therefore, cannot be slain or expelled by our own will or right desires. For Carolyn, it took Ed's supernatural power to perform an exorcism and Lorraine's supernatural power to vividly awaken a loving memory in Carolyn to expel the demon.¹⁰ The same is true for us. Our attempts at virtue are not enough to bring us all the way to goodness. We, too, need a savior to conquer and expel the evil within us.

As we have seen, Aristotle's discussion of ethics is not sufficient for making a moral person. He does not acknowledge the beast within — the power sin has over our desires, choices, and actions. Though his ideas do suggest Christian living and can offer us insight into becoming more virtuous, Aristotle does lead us to a fundamental truth of Christianity: our need for a savior. Before we grow in virtue, we must be set free from the captivity of sin. Just like Bathsheba to Carolyn, sin is real and seeks to destroy us. We cannot save ourselves, no matter how much we may desire to live virtuously. Ed and Lorraine helped provide freedom for Carolyn, and Christ provides us freedom from sin.

¹⁰ Wan, *The Conjuring*.

Bibliography

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