

The Tree of Virtues and the Tree of Vices in Beinecke MS 416

By: Matthew Aleksinas

The triumph of the virtues over the vices was a standard allegorical construction from Late Antiquity through the Medieval Period. As the genre developed, two representations of the antithetical forces emerged. First, images of the virtues and vices drew from late-Roman battle scenes, depicting a dynamic struggle. However, by the ninth century, static representations of the virtues and vices began to permeate religious texts. Elaborated by medieval theologians, theoretical insight into the essential nature of the virtues and vices and their relationship to one another developed into structured allegorical forms, such as trees and wheels. The trees of virtues and vices in Beinecke MS 416 create a systematized schematic illustrating the attainment of divine grace through humility, distinguished from damning earthly passions rooted in pride.

From their early stages, representations of virtues and vices functioned as guides to help monks avoid sin.¹ Trees of virtues and vices offered images of correct and incorrect spiritual paths. They displayed a spectrum of morality progressing from the basest earthliness (capital vices) to heavenly righteousness (cardinal virtues), in which monks could interpret and contemplate the associations between each abstraction.² In the trees of Beinecke 416 chief virtues and vices are linked to subordinate traits, helping the viewer to explain the connections between good and evil qualities. In this framework, minor sins were associated with greater vices and good qualities with principal virtues.

¹ Phyllis B. Roberts, "The Treatise on Vices and Virtues in Latin and the Vernacular," *Speculum* 71 (1996): 473.

² Morton W. Bloomfield, "Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Medieval Art from Christian Times to the Thirteenth Century," *Speculum* 16 (1941): 495.

Beginning in the depths of human error, the tree of vices in Beinecke MS 416 has pride at its root. An inscription in the tree's pot declares "pride is the root of the vices." For medieval theologians almost no positive value could be attributed to pride, which became a "sin to be avoided at all costs."³ Another inscription below the pot proclaims in verse: "The tree of sadness produces bitter fruits, which make those knowledgeable of evil drink from the brine of the Stygian dregs." This statement cautions the viewer that a life riddled with vices leads to eternal damnation. The trunk of the tree announces the moral lesson of the diagram that a life rooted in pride signifies the way toward death. The four chief vices heralding this calamity include avarice, anger, vain glory, and envy.

As vice allegory developed, avarice took center stage in monastic thought. Monks in the Late Middle Ages were particularly critical of the values of merchants.⁴ In our tree avarice is given a significant position as the first category of vice after the root of pride. Above the lower branches, the trunk proclaims that the top three shoots comprise the fruits of the flesh. The main headings are: gluttony, lust, and sloth. Lust is made the pinnacle vice in the tree diagram. This was a daunting vice for monks, whose celibate vocation and physical isolation from the rest of society made imperative the struggle against sexual impulses.⁵

Each major vice is connected with subsidiary immoral qualities. Under avarice are: rapine, treason, perjury, simony, usury, fraud, and theft; under envy are evils deeds,

³ Richard Newhauser, ed. *In the Garden of Evil: The Vices and Culture of the Middle Ages* (Toronto, 2005), 294-5.

⁴ Roberts, "Treatise on Vices and Virtues," 473.

⁵ Katzenellenbogen, *Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Medieval Art* (London, 1939; reprint Toronto, 1989), 67.

slander, muttering against someone, homicide, conniving, pleasure in the suffering of others, and resentment of the prosperity of others; under anger are yelling, blasphemy, assault, hatred, rage, indignation, and bombast; under vain glory are disobedience, discord, singularity, hypocrisy, obstinacy, bragging, and presumption; under gluttony are enjoyment of the senses, scurrility, inappropriate jollity, drunkenness, inebriation, talkativeness, and uncleanness; under sloth are wandering mind, indifference, error in faith, desperation, sadness, not doing good deeds, and cowardice; under lust are affection for the world, blindness of mind, instability, love of oneself, haste, hatred of god, petulance, inconsiderateness, and lack of self-control.

Such categorical organization allows the reader understand the hierarchical relationship between minor sins and the greater vices. It reflects Aristotelian thought, the foundation of learning in the fourteenth-century universities, using the species/genus relationship in the field of ethics. The goal, however, is not at all academic. Rather, it is to inspire reflection on the habits that, if cultivated, could result in damnation.

The tree of virtues in Beinecke MS 416 is identical in structure to the tree of vices but inspires hope rather than fear. The inscription below the diagram proclaims, “The tree of joy does not bear bitter fruit but, extending itself abundantly, bears the knowledgeable to celestial things.” The inscription on the tree’s pot claims that “humility is root of the virtues.” Humility was the most important of monastic values. In his *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae*, the twelfth-century monastic visionary Bernard of Clairvaux outlined the twelve steps of perfecting humility in the Benedictine Rule. He contrasted the ascent to God that became possible through the cultivation of humility with pride that

led down to damnation.⁶ The Benedictine mystic Hildegard of Bingen expressed a similar idea in her late twelfth-century play *Ordo virtutum*. Like Bernard, Hildegard gives precedence to humility, “the highest step on the ascending stair of virtues,” contrasting it with pride. For Hildegard as well as Bernard the soul’s journey out of sin rooted in human pride begins with humility.⁷

Moving up from humility, the inscription mid-way up the trunk asserts that the first four branches signify the way toward life. The four theological virtues (prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude) provide the categories under which subordinate virtues are arranged. Mirroring avarice on the tree of vices, prudence is given the first position on the tree of virtues. Following humility, prudence was viewed as an essential virtue in monasticism, as monks connected careful forethought with God’s divine plan.

Above this level, the trunk states that the upper three branches denote the fruits of the Spirit. The three cardinal virtues (faith, hope, and charity) serve as the overarching categories for this upper tier. Charity, the most important virtue in Benedictine monasticism, is given the highest station on the tree of virtues. Thought of as bringing goodness to the soul, charity signifies God’s gift to the world, Christ, who sacrificed his life to redeem his followers.

Like the tree of vices, the tree of virtues features subsidiary qualities to the seven major virtues. Along with prudence are memory, reason, providence, fear of God, intelligence, discretion, and diligence; accompanying fortitude are perseverance, stability,

⁶ Bernard, *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae*, in *Virtue and Ethics in the Twelfth Century*, eds. Istvan P. Bejczy and Richard G. Newhauser (Boston, 2005)

⁷ Gunilla Iverson, “Hildegard of Bingen’s Vision of the Virtues,” in *The Ordo virtutum of Hildegard of Bingen: Critical Studies*, ed. Audrey Ekdahl Davidson (Kalamazoo, 1992), 93.

tolerance, repose, patience, silence, and fidelity; with justice come observance of the law, correction, law, truth, judgment, severity, and rectitude; along with temperance are morality, observance of religion, fasting, discretion, tractability, contempt of the world, and sobriety; faith incorporates benevolence, simplicity, continence, virginity, purity, moral cleanness, and chastity; hope contains discipline, joy, patience, contemplation, contrition, confession, and penitence; going along with charity are concord, pleasantness, indulgence, peace, forgiveness, piety, clemency, compassion, and mercy.

Though the schematic representation of vice and virtue developed independently, with no exact correlation between the two, the creator of the trees in Beinecke MS 416 finds equality in the two principles. He makes the two diagrams strictly symmetrical, providing lust in the tree of vices and charity in the tree of virtues with an additional pair of subsidiary qualities. These categories end up with a total of nine qualities.⁸ The rest of the divisions of virtues and vices have seven subheadings. This employment of the number seven is not accidental. Rather the seven fruits of each category can be associated with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit found in Galatians 5.22.

The tree diagrams also accord with Jesus' parable in Matthew 7.17, which states that "a good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit." Thus, "the tree of joy" bears virtuous fruits to signify the gifts of God's glory. In our diagram this is symbolized by the turning upwards of the fruits of the tree of virtues. The fruits and branches of the tree of virtues point to toward Heaven. On the other hand, the withering branches of the tree of vices droop down, signifying the trajectory downward to Hell of those who wallow in sin.

⁸ Katzenellenbogen, *Allegories of the Virtues and Vices*, 66.

The diagrams in Beinecke MS 416 represent a middle stage in the development of tree allegories. The mature form of the genre can be seen in the Psalter of Robert de Lisle, produced before 1339.⁹ The examples in the de Lisle Psalter contain more suggestive imagery than is found in our schematically outlined fruits. Small, dull leaves sprout from the branches of the tree of vices suggesting an unhealthy state of the tree and those with immoral souls. In contrast, trees of virtue grow hearty leaves signifying the religious strength of pious souls.¹⁰ Representations of pride, such as Adam and Eve with a serpent, as well as a proud pauper and a greedy rich man, each accompanied by a demon are depicted by the de Lisle artist at the root of the tree of vices. Creatures such as the owl and the moth, symbols of the underworld are also integrated into the composition. At the root of the de Lisle tree of virtues, the Annunciation is represented as the ultimate example of humility accompanied by personifications of the virtues. Meanwhile, angels replace vile beasts in the branches of the tree.¹¹

Another divergence between the trees of vices and virtues in Beinecke MS 416 and that of the de Lisle Psalter and later tree diagrams lies in the fact that our diagram employs nine subordinate traits of the most important virtue (charity) and vice (lust) in our diagrams. In the de Lisle example, by contrast, charity and lust have only seven subcategories, but are aided by crowning images. The category of charity is accompanied by an image of Christ in the tree of virtues, while the tree of vices is surmounted by a moth.

⁹ See Sandler, *The Psalter of Robert de Lisle in the British Library* (London, 1999), 50-54.

¹⁰ Sandler, *Psalter of Robert de Lisle*, 50.

¹¹ Sandler, *Psalter of Robert de Lisle*, 50 and 52.

The content of trees of virtues and vices may have varied according to audience taste or artistic ambition. However, tree diagrams such as those in Beinecke MS 416 were all conceived of as means for viewers to reflect on the paths to salvation or damnation. Trees of virtues and vices offered an easily remembered, hierarchically organized moral code. They provided viewers with a preview of how St. Peter might assess their lives at the gates of Heaven. These diagrams also offered their users a set of guidelines by which, in preparation for the judgment, they could reform their behavior or persevere in virtue.