

Article

Revising the Modern Moral Paradigm with the Book of Proverbs

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Abstract: The modern moral paradigm champions a codified format, where ethics is conceived of as and conveyed by means of law. Among the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible, the book of Proverbs offers an alternative to modern codified morality. I consider a concern shared by ancient and modern societies—communication ethics—to argue that through Proverbs’ focus on character, wisdom, and the Lord, the book could revise the way we think about, articulate, and act upon the modern moral paradigm.

Keywords: Proverbs; ethics; morality; communication; speech; wisdom; God

1. Introduction

Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise,
and apply your heart to my knowledge,
for it will be pleasant if you keep them within you,
if all of them are ready on your lips.
That your trust may be in the Lord,
I have made them known to you today, even to you.
Have I not written for you thirty sayings
of counsel and knowledge,
to make you know what is right and true,
that you may give a true answer to those who sent you? (Proverbs 22:17–21) [1].

The book of Proverbs is one of the most comprehensive and confident of the biblical wisdom literature. Although it centers on the theme of wisdom, Proverbs addresses topics ranging from family life, to community relationships, work ethic, and communication. It advises by stating positive correlations—humans reap the consequences that align with their character and behavior—and it portrays wise living as attainable. While not everyone accepts her, wisdom is available to all. Proverbs depicts wisdom calling in public centers (1:20–21; 8:1–3) and inviting even dolts to join her (8:4–5; 9:4–6). All teachable humans can acquire wisdom (1:32–33; 8:34) and enjoy her blessings of riches, honor, life, and security (1:33; 8:18, 35). Wisdom is the goal of education in Proverbs. The book focuses on the educational process itself and opens, “to know wisdom and instruction” (1:2). Proverbs, then, teaches, training its audience in the school of wisdom. It does not instill its students with educational values of our contemporary context, such as law or gentility, but with wisdom. While Proverbs today continues to instruct towards wise living, its love for wisdom informs how we approach ethics. The book offers an alternative that could revise the way we think about, articulate, and act upon the modern moral paradigm (MMP).

2. The Modern Moral Paradigm

The philosopher Charles Taylor describes “the modern conception of moral order” ([2], p. 703). He claims that it “has tended to focus precisely on codes, both moral codes on one hand, and sets of institutions and rules, on the other...It is taken for granted that the way to achieve certain important collective goods, like tolerance and mutual respect, lies in a code of behaviour” ([2], pp. 703–4). The MMP champions a codified format, in which morality is conceived of as and conveyed by means of law. Consider communication ethics, that is, determining the right and wrong ways of human communication. The ethic arises most popularly and publicly in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The 19th article in the UDHR reads, “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” [3]. The UDHR couches freedom of expression as a human right, but it meanwhile obligates a mode of communication through normative principles. The 19th article represents one in a series of such norms.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), signed in 1966 and enforced in 1976, affirms the UDHR but articulates twin restrictions: “(a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others; (b) For the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals” [4]. These restrictions are not indifferent to form but arrive “as are provided by law and are necessary” [4,5]. Hence not only the original UDHR claim to free expression but the maintenance of it stands as “law.” Both of these documents articulate a communication ethic as freedom of speech or expression in the form of a law code. The UDHR states a human right as a legal obligation. The ICCPR regulates the UDHR’s freedom of expression by means of additional law.

The National Communication Association published a Credo for Ethical Communication in 1999 with a list of nine principles for ethical communication. Like the declarations above, the Credo assumes that legal principles most adequately regulate communication. The first states, “We advocate truthfulness, accuracy, honesty, and reason as essential to the integrity of communication” [6]. The law code style of indicative regulations and direct imperatives reflected in these modern documents has been around for centuries. In 1689, England included a “free speech” clause in its Bill of Rights, intended for the Parliamentary context. Similar but more democratic statements appeared in the Declaration of Rights for Man and Citizen (1789) and the United States’ Bill of Rights (1791). Ethical communication is most prominently endorsed by law, with modern human rights documents reflecting a codified ethical system.

These documents reflect the “code fetishism” identified by Taylor that arises after the sixteenth century ([2], p. 707). I do not mean to oversimplify matters by underscoring this legal form. Prose arguments for free speech did arise during this period: John Milton’s *Areopagitica* in 1644; John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* in 1859. The UDHR and similar documents do not explain everything humans might wish to know about ethical communication, and the documents provoke much debate [7]. However, it is not too much to say that the MMP primarily appears as moral norms in legal form. Right communication is articulated and protected as ethical principle through codified law. This suits the universal aims of human rights documents, which encompass a variety of contexts and cultures.

Such a law code format, even with a universal scope, nevertheless inadequately addresses ethical communication. For instance, in early 2016 Facebook launched its “Online Civil Courage Initiative,” funding non-governmental organizations to eradicate material from the website that promotes xenophobia. This builds upon the website’s regulations against bullying and harassment. However, such rules assume acumen from NGOs and common users: what constitutes “online extremism” or “hate speech”? Such questions provoke debate. Objectors to the Initiative claim that Facebook has violated free speech; proponents claim that Facebook is limiting free speech in order to defend other human rights. These questions and debates demonstrate that communication and ethical judgments depend upon people and, consequently, character.

Alasdair MacIntyre notes the connection between law, character, and ethical judgment: “knowing how to apply the law is itself possible only for someone who possesses the virtue of justice. To be

just is to give each person what each deserves" ([8], p. 178). Any notion of right and wrong requires discernment from the persons involved. Hence, character comes into play. Philosophers such as MacIntyre have advanced virtue ethics within scholarly circles, but human rights documents and the Facebook initiative demonstrate that the MMP still relies upon law while failing to account for character. This popular rather than scholarly context is what I wish to focus on, asking how biblical wisdom could contribute to the contemporary discussion of ethics. In sum, codified regulations neither adequately account for the personal dimension of communication ethics nor address all situations of, for example, xenophobia on Facebook, and therefore need revision. The book of Proverbs offers an alternative approach.

3. The Book of Proverbs and Communication Ethics

The Bible is not averse to law. The Decalogue, the ethical bedrock of ancient Israel, appears in listed, codified form: "You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:13–15; see 20:1–17). One of these laws directly concerns communication ethics, the ninth commandment: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exod. 20:16). The New Testament does not stray from imperatival form either: "you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth" (Colossians 3:8); "let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger" (James 1:19). Even the book of Proverbs forwards norms with a legal flavor: "Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you" (Prov. 4:24).

These codes and direct imperatives, however, do not exhaust the Bible's ethical system. Proverbs offers a compendium of ethical advice but not as codified law. This advice primarily takes the form of proverbs. As a literary form, the definition of a proverb is debated. In the book of Proverbs, though, they are primarily literary objects defined by their book-wide context. Proverbs, broadly, reflect parallelism, a thoughtful authorial intent, indicative rather than imperative statements, and a didactic nature that requires interpretive effort. These proverbs are epitomized by the literary bicola in Prov. 10:1–22:16. The distinction of proverbs and laws merits its own discussion, but here I will focus on three aspects that characterize the book's teaching on communication: character, wisdom, and the Lord.

3.1. Character

Speech, according to the book of Proverbs, is inseparable from character. The following proverbs link types of people to types of speech:

The tongue of the wise commends knowledge,
but the mouths of fools pour out folly (15:2).

The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer,
but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things (15:28).

An evil man is ensnared by the transgression of his lips,
but the righteous escapes from trouble (12:13).

These proverbs contrast different types of people and demonstrate that who a person is determines how he or she speaks. In Prov. 15:2, the wise "commend" or, possibly translated, "make knowledge good." The reference to their tongue implies that the wise commend knowledge by means of their speech. Fools, however, do not sanctify knowledge with their mouths but rather pour out folly. The verbal economy and cultivation of the wise person contrasts with the unrestrained and polluted outflow of the fool.

Prov. 15:28 sets the righteous person at odds with the wicked: "the heart of the righteous" versus "the mouth of the wicked." The "heart" often signifies the mind or cognitive "sense" in Prov. (6:18, 32; 12:8; 17:16; 18:15; 19:8). Thus, Prov. 15:28 distinguishes the cognitive faculties of two types of people and the influence of these faculties on communication: the righteous ponders how to answer; the wicked

pours forth evil. Michael V. Fox points out that the wicked do think about their speech ([9], p. 603). Prov. 6:14a claims that the wicked man, with his crooked speech (6:12) and perverted heart, “devises evil.” He may still “pour out evil things,” as in Prov. 15:28, but the wicked person can “ponder” in a crafty, devious manner. Regardless of how thought relates to speech, Prov. 15:2 and Prov. 15:28 link communication and character: “the speech that people ‘pour forth’ exposes their real character,” writes Fox ([9], p. 603). Communication discloses character.

The righteous man reappears in Prov. 12:13 but this time with the evil man. These characters no longer only produce a certain quality of speech; their words take on an instrumental nature. Words entrap or liberate: for one is “ensnared by the transgression of his lips” as the other “escapes from trouble.” These functions depend upon the type of person speaking. The evil man is ensnared; the righteous person escapes. In Prov. 12:13, the power of communication occludes its quality, but in each of these passages talk stems from the person. Character governs communication.

Proverbs uses character types not only to describe communication. Its sayings serve an ethical purpose by attracting the interpreter towards one way of being and away from another. All of the character types listed in Proverbs—the wise, fool, righteous, wicked, diligent, sluggard—represent only two fundamental kinds of people. Heim calls this “co-referentiality,” where each of the positive types of people refers to a single wise exemplar, and each of the negative types refers to the foolish character [10]. The different types within these two categories demonstrate shades of wisdom or foolishness. For instance, the sluggard models foolishness in the context of labor, but he ultimately refers to same the overall negative character type.

How do these character types function? The wise characters attract interpreters—we want, or should want, to be like them—while the foolish ought to repulse us. Prov. 15:2 simply states, “the tongue of the wise commends knowledge.” But it also encourages the interpreter to commend knowledge by becoming wise. Prov. 12:13 portrays an evil man ensnared by his lips. This prompts us to examine and root out our wicked qualities and so speak in ways that deliver rather than ensnare. According to William Brown, like the rest of the wisdom literature, Proverbs “conveys or models the contours of normative character through literary characterization...[the character types’] task is to deconstruct and reform traditional contours of ethical character—in short, to bring about transformation” ([11], pp. 15–16). The indicative proverbs harbor imperative force and achieve this by means of character types rather than law. In sum, the book of Proverbs embeds communication within character, and its ethical system favors character formation more than legal codification.

3.2. *Wisdom*

Communication also depends upon wisdom. Good speech in Proverbs is wise speech:

On the lips of him who has understanding, wisdom is found (10:13a).

The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom (10:31a).

The very speech of the righteous and understanding person is labeled “wisdom,” for on his lips “wisdom is found,” and his mouth “brings forth wisdom.” Prov. 10:13a and 10:31a plus all of the maxims regarding communication noted so far are prefaced by the ultimatum to attain wisdom. So the teacher claims: “Get wisdom; get insight: do not forget...The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get insight” (Prov. 4:5, 7). Proverbs centers on wisdom, and it is wisdom that flows from the mouths of its exemplars.

Prov. 1–9 personifies wisdom and folly as females and contrasts them. Of folly, Prov. 5:3–4 claims, “the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil, but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword.” The speech of the foolish woman is seductive and smooth but deadly. Lacking wisdom, she might not babble in ignorance, but her words do lead to death. They beget regret, pain, and public shame for those who heed them (5:9–14). The words of lady wisdom are true and upright: “To you, O men, I call, and my cry is to the children of man.

O simple ones, learn prudence; O fools, learn sense. Hear, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right" (Prov. 8:4–6). The tongue of wisdom bestows wealth and honor, facilitates social benefits and personal comfort (8:15–21). Wisdom nurtures right communication. The paragon of wisdom in Prov. 31 "opens her mouth with wisdom" (31:26). The ethic of Proverbs centers on Wisdom—the companion, the characteristic that produces good words. Wisdom does not distill into law. While "wisdom" can refer to principles of advice, it more fundamentally names a non-codified, personal attribute. She constitutes an art by which her possessors navigate and succeed in life.

3.3. *The Lord*

By linking communication to character and wisdom, Proverbs does not dramatically differ from other ancient Near Eastern literature. In *The Instruction of Ptahhotep* from the third millennium BCE, the Egyptian vizier comments: "One has great respect for the silent man: [A] man of character is [a] man of wealth" ([12], pp. 66, lines 167–68). In the milieu of Hellenistic Judaism and close to 200 BCE, Ben Sira remarks, "Those who are skilled in words become wise themselves, and pour forth apt proverbs" (18:29). Likewise, Greek philosophers such as Aristotle related ethics to character and wisdom. Wisdom is a virtue, and both concepts furnish ethical success: "virtue makes us aim at the right mark, and practical wisdom makes us take the right means" ([13], 6.12). Virtue identifies the good, while wisdom gets us there. By relating wisdom to virtue, Aristotle roots wisdom in character. He states that "moral virtue is a state of character concerned with choice" ([13], 6.2). Ancient Greeks and Near Eastern thinkers connected ethical living, even communication, with character and wisdom. Proverbs, however, departs from this ethical literature by including the Lord.

Egyptian wisdom literature does mention the divine in a way similar to the book of Proverbs. Prayer, piety, and worship characterize the human stance, while an epistemological and volitional gulf lies between the gods and humankind. The gods disapprove of certain activities, and humans should ultimately submit to them ([14], pp. 272–74). A key factor, however, distinguishes Egypt from Israel: "While the corpora display close affinities, their disparities cannot be overlooked," writes Nili Shupak. "These stem primarily from their different religious frameworks—polytheism *vs.* monotheism" ([14], p. 290). Proverbs parts ways from its sapiential peers on a theological level.

The phrase "the fear of the Lord" appears at the outset of Proverbs: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Prov. 1:7). It then concludes the first section of the book (9:10) and reappears in the middle of the largest collection of proverbial sayings (15:33). Proverbs ends with a depiction of an exceptional wife, the wise woman *par excellence* (31:10–33), who "fears the Lord" (31:30). When viewing the book as a whole, the fear of the Lord stands out as a feature of ethical living, from moral infancy to maturity.

Some interpreters distinguish between the meanings of "fear" and either emphasize its ethical nature or its devotional and subjective sense¹ [15–18]. Yet "fear" usually receives a vague meaning, often spiraling into a complex one. Rather than underscoring piety or ethics, Arndt Meinhold claims that fear means that the human "subordinates himself in reverence, paired with confidence, love, longing, and obedience" ([19], p. 51; [20,21]). Most simply, though, in Proverbs the "fear of the Lord" denotes a relational knowledge of Israel's God.

Prov. 1:7 and 1:20–33 focus on the receptive attitude of the one who fears the Lord. The posture precedes wisdom, and constitutes the essential and necessary condition for Proverbs' education. Fools fail to discover wisdom because they reject its starting point.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge
fools despise wisdom and instruction...
Because they hated knowledge

¹ For the ethical understanding, see [15,16]; for the devotional sense, see ([11], p. 37).

and did not choose the fear of the Lord,
 would have none of my counsel
 and despised all my reproof,
 therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way,
 and have their fill of their own devices (1:7, 29–31).

By distinguishing Wisdom's reproofs from the fear of the Lord, Prov. 1:29–31 suggests that "fear" includes a sense of relationship rather than content. The speech (1:20–33) places this fear as the root explanation for retribution. It also features emotional unease, an alternative object of trust, and the security enjoyed by those who listen (1:32–33). Prov. 2:5 shows that the Lord stands above humans and wisdom. The fear of the Lord constitutes the prime encounter on the wisdom journey and, when accepted, it mirrors a relational knowledge of God. So, referring to wisdom and understanding, "if you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God" (2:4–5; cf. 9:10). This monotheistic relationship undergirds the instructions of Proverbs.

Passages that explicitly address communication also mention the Lord.

Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight (12:22).

Prov. 12:22 considers human communication from the perspective of the Lord's affections. To God, lies are an abomination. By mentioning speech in 12:22a ("lying lips"), communication is implicated in the second line, among "those who act faithfully." These faithful people, then, include those who speak faithfully. Such people are the Lord's delight. Prov. 6:16 clarifies that "There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him." Three of the seven involve communication (6:17–19). In Proverbs, the Lord does not distance himself as an impersonal arbiter over human action. He rather harbors affections towards the ethical decisions of humans. Wicked communication he abhors; upright speech he delights in. According to Proverbs, the Lord relates to ethics emotionally.

The eyes of the Lord keep watch over knowledge,
 but he overthrows the words of the traitor (22:12).

Prov. 22:12 accentuates the sovereignty of the Lord. The Lord's eyes "keep watch over knowledge," and he "overthrows the words of the traitor." The latter line means that God "thwarts the claims and schemes of the treacherous" ([9], p. 701). The mention of speech here ("the words of the traitor") clarifies the vaguer statement in 22:12a, where the Lord's eyes "keep watch over knowledge." It suggests that the Lord recognizes or validates not only knowledge, but knowledgeable speech. Both lines relate the Lord and communication from the standpoint of power. He sees it and holds the power to overthrow it. Prov. 5:21 extends the Lord's sovereignty over all the actions of humans: "For a man's ways are before the eyes of the Lord, and he ponders all his paths." This assures interpreters that nothing escapes his purview, not even human words. In addition to his affections, the Lord oversees communication with his power.

The Lord relates to communication through his sovereignty, but, like character and wisdom, he also stands as a source of speech:

Every word of God proves true;
 he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.
 Do not add to his words,
 lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar (30:5–6).

These verses occur in the context of Prov. 30:1–9, the "words of Agur" who laments the pursuit of wisdom. He claims himself "too stupid to be a man...I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One" (30:2a, 3). Agur admits human failure in the pursuit of Proverbs' ethical

goals. This drives him to admit the claim above: “Every word of God proves true.” The Lord’s words need no supplement. These comments suggest that the word of the Lord is the final and most pristine of all speech. His words determine the communication of Proverbs. For he is the source of wisdom: “the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Prov. 2:6). In relation to him humans cultivate that character that produces wise speech: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight” (9:10). So like wisdom and character, the Lord is a source of right speech. But unlike wisdom and character, he is the final and unquestionable source of words [22]. The book of Proverbs blends the power, authority, and personality of the Lord. Israel’s singular God, unlike others in the ancient world, determines and maintains the ethical paradigm of Proverbs.

4. Conclusions

The modern moral paradigm focuses on law. Popular formats evince legal codes designed to regulate the actions of human beings, especially communication. But the MMP does not account for the ethical judgment and personal character that situations depend upon. Among the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible, the book of Proverbs offers a compendium of instruction on speech and an alternative paradigm to the MMP. The book reveals, in the case of communication, that right living requires right character, it demands wisdom, and ultimately derives from and matures through a relationship with the Lord. Proverbs, then, stands apart from most ancient and modern moral systems, especially in its theological perspective [23]. Thus, for many Jews and Christians, the book of Proverbs revises the MMP in the ways that I have specified here. For those who do not view the Hebrew Bible as ethically authoritative, Proverbs confronts them first not with advice on communication but with the starting point of wisdom—the fear of the Lord. In Proverbs, the good life is the wise life, and all of life is theological.

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References and Notes

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5. See the Human Rights Committee’s General Comment No. 34, number 25: “For the purposes of paragraph 3, a norm, to be characterized as a ‘law’, must be formulated with sufficient precision to enable an individual to regulate his or her conduct accordingly and it must be made accessible to the public. A law may not confer unfettered discretion for the restriction of freedom of expression on those charged with its execution. Laws must provide sufficient guidance to those charged with their execution to enable them to ascertain what sorts of expression are properly restricted and what sorts are not.” See ICCPR. “General comment No. 34: Article 19: Freedoms of opinion and expression.” 12 September 2011. Available online: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/docs/gc34.pdf> (accessed on 27 January 2016).
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7. See, e.g., Tarlack McGonagle, and Yvonne Donders, eds. *The United Nations and Freedom of Expression and Information: Critical Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

8. Alasdair MacIntyre. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007. While MacIntyre's paradigm corresponds in some respects with that of Proverbs, the Hebrew Bible's wisdom tradition offers an alternative not only to the MMP but contemporary virtue ethics also. Proverb's theological perspective brings the sharpest contrast.
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17. Cf. Tremper Longman. "The 'Fear of God' in the Book of Ecclesiastes." *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 25 (2015): 13–14.
18. For a thoughtful approach to the phrase's meaning across the Bible, see Daniel Castelo. "The Fear of the Lord as Theological Method." *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2 (2008): 147–60.
19. Arndt Meinhold. *Die Sprüche*. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1991. ("Wenn von ihm [the Lord] alles Geschaffene stammt, dann kann der Mensch, der erkennen will, eigentlich gar nicht anders, als sich ihm in Ehrfurcht, gepaart mit Vertrauen, Liebe, Sehnsucht und Gehorsam, unterzuordnen.").
20. See also Leo Perdue. *The Sword and the Stylus: An Introduction to Wisdom in the Age of Empires*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008, p. 85.
21. Christine Yoder. *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries: Proverbs*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009, p. 8.
22. The book of Proverbs sees no conflict or tension of authority between the teacher's and God's wisdom. Wisdom comes from God (Prov. 2:6) but is mediated through the teacher (2:1–2) and, ultimately, through the text (see also 15:33–16:9). Rather than human versus divine authority, the conflict is between human postures towards God—pride versus humility (3:5–7).
23. While virtue ethics draws attention to character and has attracted academic discussion, incorporating biblical wisdom literature might advance the conversation and implications of the discipline. See note [8] and, e.g., John Barton. "Ethics in the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament." In *Perspectives on Israelite Wisdom: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*. Edited by John Jarick. London: Bloomsbury, 2016, pp. 24–37.



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