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**WEALTH, POVERTY AND ECONOMIC
INEQUALITY: A CHRISTIAN VIRTUE
RESPONSE**

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This dissertation argues that both wealth and poverty function as moral luck to impede the pursuit of virtue and that economic inequality worsens the problem.

Background

This dissertation is informed by two major concepts that have shaped Catholic ethics over the past decades: social sin and privilege. In Catholic theology, the category of social sin — sin embedded in social practices and structures, which affects individuals and to which individuals contribute through their actions — emerged from Latin American liberation theology in the 1970s and entered magisterial teaching in John Paul II's *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (1984). The term remains in widespread use and continues to be relevant and

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helpful for theologians. In the United States in the 1980s, scholars of education and women's studies began to discuss the concept of "privilege," a way of naming the benefits that systems of oppression deliver to those not oppressed, with or without their consent or participation. This concept has now achieved broad acceptance among many in the U.S. — although others reject it just as heartily — and shapes political, cultural and academic conversation and practice.

Both social sin and privilege continue to be relevant and vital categories. It will be many years before either term outlives its usefulness for understanding the world around us. Yet each concept is limited in particular ways. While social sin articulates that sin can exist as part of the structures of a society, there has yet been little work on how one's experience within those structures affects one's experience of sin — even though a particular person may be advantaged or disadvantaged by one social structure, and affected in complex ways by various overlapping structures. Privilege, for its part, allows us to make a particular, granular diagnosis of how one's location within society affects one's own experience. For example, I have white privilege. In the U.S., and many other countries affected by colonialism, this affords me many benefits based on how others treat me. People who are not white do not experience these specific privileges in the same way, although they may experience other privileges relevant to gender, national citizenship, wealth, etc. The ability to define and explain these differences in human experience makes privilege a useful tool. But privilege discourse as it currently stands in the U.S. lacks an understanding of the human good. It is mainly a diagnostic tool, lacking an anthropology and a telos.

Christian virtue ethics combines the best of these two concepts. Like social sin, Christian virtue ethics embodies a view of the human person as destined for union with God. It takes human flourishing as its goal. Like privilege discourse, virtue ethics allows us to give particular and detailed descriptions about how particular situations or practices affect our lived experience, as fine previous work on virtue ethics, from scholars on many continents, has conclusively shown.

Throughout the history of Christian thought, it was a commonplace understanding that wealth affected one's pursuit of virtue. Liberation theologians today embody this understanding in their work, but it is little discussed in the U.S. and long overdue for a systematic treatment. Any discussion of wealth and poverty in

today's globalized economy must recognize the existence of growing inequality, a constitutive factor in understanding how persons relate to one another within economies. This dissertation reclaims the longstanding Christian theological concern for the impact of wealth on the pursuit of virtue; pairs it with attention to what people in poverty say about their own experience and its virtue impact; and places this all in the context of today's extreme, global and growing inequality. It argues that wealth and poverty both affect the pursuit of virtue but in different ways, and inequality makes it worse.

Summary of Chapters

I begin with a chapter describing the state of economic inequality today. Many economists agree that economic inequality within wealthy nations is as high today as it has ever been, and possibly higher, after a decline in the mid-20th century. Economic inequality between nations is also a pressing problem, with 62 individuals owning the same wealth as half the world's population (as Oxfam reported in 2016). Yet, the case needs to be made that economic inequality is a problem distinct from poverty, as some have suggested the contrary. I conclude that it is, for three reasons. Inequality causes many social ills traditionally associated with poverty, including poor health outcomes, increased rates of crime and mental illness, and earlier death, and does so for people at all income levels within a society, not just the poor. Inequality self-perpetuates through intergenerational wealth transfer and through complex effects in the political process. Finally — the argument I advance throughout the dissertation — inequality functions as moral luck to harm virtue.

In Chapter Two, I argue for a Christian virtue account of moral luck. Moral luck is a term used by feminist philosophers, including Lisa Tessman and Claudia Card, to describe the impact of life circumstances on persons' ability to pursue virtue. I examine Scripture, Aquinas, and the work of womanist theologians, including M. Shawn Copeland, Melanie L. Harris and Rosita DeAnn Mathews, to propose a Christian virtue account of moral luck that acknowledges both the pervasiveness of sin and Christian hope for God's promised redemption.

In the third chapter, I draw on Aquinas and contemporary virtue theorists to provide rich descriptions of the eight virtues I will consider throughout the dissertation. I describe a new virtue taxonomy: cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, and humility;

“daughter” virtues of solidarity, fidelity and self-care (the latter two are virtues that James F. Keenan has proposed as cardinal); and helper virtues of temperance and fortitude.

To understand how inequality functions as moral luck, we must first understand how wealth and poverty affect our pursuit of virtue. I continue with a chapter describing the impact of wealth, which I define as “having more than we need,” on the virtues in my taxonomy. I choose to define wealth this way because this definition can be applied in any context, unlike more precise definitions relying on a particular dollar amount of income. Blending resources from psychology, sociology and theology, I conclude that wealth impacts the pursuit of virtue in two major ways: by endowing the wealthy person with *hyperagency*, or greater power, freedom and choice than that enjoyed by others (a term I borrow from sociologist Paul Schervish); and by becoming an end in itself. This does not mean that wealth has a unilaterally negative impact on the pursuit of virtue; for example, I argue that wealth can help in pursuing the virtue of self-care.

In Chapter Five, I assess how poverty functions as moral luck. In keeping with the practice of theologians from Gustavo Gutiérrez to Mercy Amba Oduyoye, I define poverty as being unable to meet one’s needs, or meeting them only through constant and precarious struggle. I consult social science, liberation theology, and memoirists and journalists who write about poverty, including the U.S. writers Rick Bragg, Linda Tirado, and Jesmyn Ward. I show that key issues in poverty’s impact on virtue include scarcity, which impacts cognitive processing and can limit access to certain virtuous practices, and diminished self-regard. This does not mean that poverty has a unilaterally negative impact on the pursuit of virtue; for example, a variety of evidence suggests that poverty encourages the virtue of solidarity.

My final chapter shows how inequality exacerbates the impact of wealth and poverty on virtue in terms of hyperagency, wealth as an end in itself, scarcity and self-regard. I offer suggestions for future Christian ethical work on moral luck and responses to the impact of economic inequality on virtue. These include practical economic solutions to reduce inequality and theological solutions including encounter, conversion, satisfaction with contentment — a virtue proposed by Lúcas Yiu Sing Chan — and dependence on God. I suggest that the Christian community can respond to the impact of economic inequality on virtue through political action; a renewed

approach to tithing and aid; and creating sites for encounter between the rich and the poor.

Contributions

This dissertation accomplishes two goals. As the first full-length work on economic inequality by a Catholic theologian writing in English, it uses resources from the Christian tradition to make the case that wealth, poverty, and inequality affect virtue. Secondly, it makes a methodological contribution when it provides a language for this process, moral luck, and an example of its use. As such, it contributes to literature in Christian economic ethics and to work in ethical method, particularly virtue ethics.

Previous theological work on inequality has often focused on inequality's consequences in the political realm or conflated its harms with those of poverty. My work highlights another reason to be concerned about inequality: the way it functions as moral luck to impact virtue. Furthermore, theologians gain in understanding of the virtuous life when we hear the voices of poor writers and how they say their poverty affects their virtue. For wealthy people, I hope this work will encourage them to reflect on how their wealth affects their virtue in ways they may not have considered. I locate my work within two strands of contemporary Catholic feminism as delineated by Lisa Sowle Cahill.¹ In its exhortation to consider the personal spiritual life and practices, my work is neo-Franciscan; in its conviction that we can learn from the social sciences and work within public life to build a better world (as well as its explicit use of Aquinas) it is neo-Thomist.

This work both draws from and speaks back to the long Christian tradition on wealth and poverty. A virtue approach to wealth, poverty and inequality should help rout the excessively spiritualized view of wealth that has long lurked in the Christian tradition. If I am right about wealth's impact on virtue, Christians can no longer claim that the proper attitude to wealth can make it morally neutral, or in Augustine's phrasing, that it's possible to "have wealth as not having it." Wealthy people — all those of us who have more than we need — must face and acknowledge the ways that our wealth affects our virtue and recommit to practices that resist its impact.

¹Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Catholic Feminists and Traditions: Renewal, Reinvention, Replacement," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 34, 2 (2014) 27–51.