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A HERMENEUTICAL PROPOSAL

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Abstract

This article argues that virtue ethics among all ethical systems is the most able to translate exegetical insight into contemporary moral guidance and shows why virtue ethics needs to be appropriated. After offering a brief history of the influence of virtue ethics, the article turns to five of its common characteristics. Following this, it discusses the four dimensions of virtue ethics as categories for understanding the full yield that virtue ethics offers biblical ethics: Dispositions and character formation; practices and habits; exemplar; and, community and communal identity. These four categories allow us to see how virtue is teachable and formative, not only for persons but for societies. Next, the article turns to three issues concerning

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cultural and theological adaptation and raises the question of whether virtues are themselves too culturally relative and argues that though virtues are context sensitive, they are not ultimately relative to a limited context or culture but remain open to revision in light of new circumstances. It is centred on this view that the undertaking of bringing a virtue-based reading of Scripture into other cultural and religious systems becomes possible and shows that "Scripture not only reveals moral virtues, values and vision, it actually promotes them." The article attempts to demonstrate the superiority of virtue ethics as the hermeneutical method for bridging a scriptural text to the contemporary world.

Keywords: Aristotle, Biblical Ethics, Character Formation, Community, Context, Culture, Ethical Theory, Exemplars, Habits, Hermeneutics, Scripture, *Telos*, Thomas Aquinas, Virtue Ethics

A Hermeneutic of Virtue Ethics

The ethics of virtue is one of the oldest moral philosophies. It has gone through cycles of development, decline, and revival in the past two millennia.[1] Within the western world, for example, Plato was the first to utilize virtues in order to identify the highest good that an individual (and the state) can attain. He also enunciated the classical list of cardinal virtues. However, it was Aristotle who gave us the classic formulation of virtue:[2] it is a disposition that makes a person good and causes the person to perform her/his function well. All virtues are directed toward an end or *telos* — happiness in this life. Since one performs her/his function well only when the mean is observed, Aristotle developed the doctrine of the mean that seeks equidistance between deficiency and excess. He further placed virtue in the genus of habit — it is an irreversible and almost unchangeable condition, and becomes one's second nature over the course of time. Finally, early Greek philosophical reflections on virtues are concerned about not just the good of the individual but of the society as well.

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[1]For this background see Jean Porter, "Virtue Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed., Robin Gill, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 96-111; "Virtue," in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics,* ed. Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski, London: Oxford University Press, 2005, 205-19; William C. Spohn, "The Return of Virtue Ethics," *Theological Studies* 53, 1 (1992) 60–75; Joseph Woodhill, *The Fellowship of Life*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1998, 31-45.

[2]See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* trans. J.A.K. Thomson, London: Penguin Books, 1976, 39-49.

During the patristic period, both Western and Eastern Church Fathers offered their understandings of virtues and highlighted God as the ultimate *telos* for humanity: for Augustine charity is the ordering virtue for Christian life and all true virtues are basically different forms of charity. John Chrysostom and John Climacus (of the sixth century) further perceived the acquisition of virtue as central and fundamental to the believer's life.

Medieval scholastic Thomas Aquinas presented to us a systematic classification of virtues in the *Summa Theologiae* (*ST*) (I.II. 55–70): [3] intellectual and moral virtues; theological and cardinal/natural virtues; and infused and acquired virtues. Intellectual and moral virtues perfect the speculative intellect and the appetitive powers respectively. Theological virtues have God as their object while the cardinal virtues are directed to certain human goods as grasped by reason. However, Aquinas's infused virtues do not only include the theological virtues but also infused cardinal virtues as well. The infused cardinal virtues differ from the acquired cardinal virtues because the former are given by God, aim at the attainment of supernatural happiness, and their object is, indirectly but inevitably, God. Most contemporary scholars would agree that Aquinas framed his discussion theologically (rather than philosophically) and that his theory is basically Augustinian with Aristotelian modifications.

Unfortunately, for various reasons, interest in the virtues began to decline in the subsequent centuries, and the discussion of virtues was slowly replaced by principle and rule-oriented ethics. Within the Catholic tradition, for instance, the manualists of the seventeenth century began to treat Aquinas's theological and moral virtues as sources of obligations for moral living. It was not until the second half of the twentieth century that the retrieval of virtue ethics began to emerge from philosophical, theological, and public sectors.[4]

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[3]Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948.

[4]Some perceive the resurgence as a widespread dissatisfaction with and a protest against those rule-, duty-, and consequence-oriented ethics. Others understand virtue theory as offering a more comprehensive picture of moral experience and standing closer to ordinary life issues than other moral philosophies, for it offers a complete vision into the complexity of moral living in the real world. See Gilbert C. Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue*, Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984, 4–5.

Regarding attempts by philosophers, see Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Return to Virtue Ethics," in *The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of Vatican II: A Look Back and a Look*

Within the discipline of philosophy, the beginning of the revival can be traced back to the well-known article of Elizabeth Anscombe ("Modern Moral Philosophy") in 1958. Still, Alasdair MacIntyre's work has been most influential in this retrieval. In *After Virtue* MacIntyre argues for a multi-stage logical development of the concept of virtue: each stage requires a corresponding background account — namely, practice, narrative unity, and tradition — through which the complex conception of virtue can be understood. Subsequently, virtue is referred to as dispositions that not only sustain practices but also concern the unity of one's whole life and relate one's individual life to that of the community.

Theologians, in turn, engaged in the discussion of virtue ethics and various schools emerged based on different traditions and emphases. Among Protestant ethicists, Stanley Hauerwas is known for focusing on the notion of character: character is inseparable from one's self-determination and is the decisive factor behind one's doing and becoming. Hauerwas also argues for the primacy and interrelatedness of community and narrative in any moral tradition: the believing community as a moral community is a community of virtue; and virtues are acquired through involvement in the embodiment of the story in one's own community. Other proponents within Protestantism include Gilbert Meilaender and Joseph Kotva. Kotva is especially known for making a Christian case for virtue ethics. His understanding of Scripture in constructing a Christian account of virtue ethics is equally noteworthy. I will return to him in our discussion of relating Scripture with virtue.

Ahead, ed. Russell Smith, Braintree, MA: Pope John Center, 1990, 239–49; *After Virtue*, 3rd ed., Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007; Gregory Pence, "Recent Work on Virtues," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21, 4 (October 1984) 281-97.

For attempts from the theological sector, see Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics*, San Antonio, TX: Trinity Press, 1975; *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic,* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981; James F. Keenan, *Virtues for Ordinary Christians*, Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1996; "Proposing Cardinal Virtues," *Theological Studies* 56, 4 (1995) 709-29; "Virtue Ethics," in *Christian Ethics: An Introduction*, ed. Bernard Hoose, London: Chapman, 1997, 84–94; "Virtues, Principles and a Consistent Ethics of Life," in *The Consistent Ethic of Life: Assessing its Reception and Relevance*, ed. Thomas Nairn, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008, 48-60; Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue*; Pellegrino and Thomasma, *The Christian Virtues in Medical Practice*; Jean Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue*, Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990.

The Catholic counterparts are represented by William Spohn, James Keenan, and Jean Porter. Both Keenan and Porter follow the Thomistic approach to virtue although their views differ from one another. Porter claims that Aquinas's approach to virtue theory is not one of dichotomy — that is, a theory of virtue vis-à-vis a theory of rules — but one that takes up the moralities of both rules and virtues. Keenan, in contrast, sees virtue ethics as a comprehensive system in that in the pursuit of virtues we generate norms. He argues that "a virtue based ethics that generates its own norms and principles is more capable of guiding us in action than a simple normative ethics."[5] Along this line he further argues that all normative ethics inevitably find their origins in a virtue ethics. Moreover, Keenan engages virtue ethics with other areas of morality and proposes a contemporary list of cardinal virtues for ordinary life. And with Spohn he also tries to bridge moral theology and other theological disciplines (such as spirituality and Scripture) through virtue ethics.

The return to virtue theory is, however, not without challenges and criticisms.[6] For example, some philosophers note that virtue theory's conceptual commitment to the moral agent leads to several shortcomings, especially regarding the place of actions. They are concerned that virtue ethics is structurally incapable of saying much about what one ought to do and hence is impractical and inadequate for our complex society. They also charge that such commitment to, and over-focusing on, the agent could lead to self-centredness. Moreover, there is the challenge of identifying the virtuous person, as well as a kind of over-optimism within virtue theory regarding changing complex society. Theologians further complain that virtue ethics encourages a false sense of one's own good and self-reliance rather than on God's grace, obedience, and self-sacrifice. Those who seek a middle way thus claim that virtue theory is not a complete alternative to moral principles; rather, both are needed should ethics be practical. Despite these criticisms

[5]Keenan, "Virtues, Principles," 50.

[6]See also Robert B. Louden, "On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics," in *The Virtues: Contemporary Essays on Moral Character*," ed. Robert B. Kruschwitz and Robert C. Roberts, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1987, 66-73; Gregory Jones and Richard Vance, "Why Virtues are not Another Approach to Medical Ethics: Reconceiving the Place of Ethics in Contemporary Medicine," in *Religious Methods and Resources in Bioethics*, ed. Paul F. Camenisch, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994, 203–16.

reflections on the role of virtue ethics continue to flourish within contemporary Christianity.[7]

We need to be mindful that the revival of virtue ethics has produced a bewildering variety of claims made in the name of virtue by contemporary philosophers and theologians, such as consequential and non-consequential virtue ethics.[8] In the case of Christian virtue ethics, Porter similarly reminds us that we cannot simply assume that the Aristotelian or Thomistic tradition is the only option either. She writes, "[T]heologians today are turning to virtue ethics out of a variety of different concerns. For this reason, it would be a mistake to assume that there is one definitive form of virtue ethics, or even that all virtue ethicists would agree about the meaning and implications of the concept of virtue."[9]

In the following pages, I look at the contemporary understanding of virtue theory in a particular way that is fitting to our schema. First, I identify five common characteristics of virtue ethics. Second, I introduce four important dimensions of virtue ethics that emerge from these characteristics. Third, three related issues regarding the implication and adaptation of virtue theory in our discussion of biblical ethics are presented. Fourth, I explore how two Christian virtue ethicists relate Scripture and virtue and from there I present my own approach of relating Scripture and virtue ethics, an approach grounded in those four dimensions of virtue.

Common Characteristics of Virtue Ethics

Grounded in the above-mentioned historical development, there are certain essential features shared by many proponents of virtue ethics (although different proponents have different emphases). I identify five common characteristics that allow us to acquire a contemporary understanding of virtue ethics. First, virtue ethics is a teleological ethics. In general, the ethics of virtue that is based on Aristotelian and Thomistic understanding of virtue is "an ethic

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[7]See Justin Oakley, "Variety of Virtue Ethics," *Ratio* 9, 2 (September 1996) 128-52; James F. Keenan, "Virtue and Identity," in *Creating Identity, Concilium* 2000/2, ed. Hermann Häring, Maureen Junker-Kenny, and Dietmar Mieth, London: SCM Press, 2000, 69-77; Joseph J. Kotva, *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics,* Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996.

[8]The former treats rightness as what the agent promotes while the latter regards rightness as what the agent honours and exemplifies. See Oakley, "Variety of Virtue Ethics," 144-51. The following brief discussion partially relies on Oakley's work, as well as Keenan's "Virtue and Identity," and Kotva's *The Christian Case*.

[9]Porter, "Virtue Ethics," 107.

premised on the notion of a true human nature with a determinate human good or end or *telos*."[10] This *telos* or good is originally defined as performing well whatever is characteristic of the subject, such as its function, purpose, or role, and upon which its evaluation lies. When applied to human persons, it implies that who we are and what we do can be evaluated "against our true nature or *telos*, against the excellent performance of the functions and purposes characteristics of human." [11] Aristotle, for example, famously proposed that the ultimate human end is *eudaimonia* (happiness) in this life.

However, in the case of human *telos* one needs to know the sort of capacities, traits, and interests the person has that allows one to pursue the good.[12] Also, the human *telos* is not a narrowly defined or restrictive one but rather a comprehensive and inclusive one. While specific *teloi* are needed for the provision of guidance for acquiring virtues, this does not mean that one is guided by certain narrow visions of the human good only.

Second, virtue ethics has a particular, dynamic structure. An ethical theory as such is concerned with not just who we are but also who we could become, and is thus a teleological ethics with a particular structure. Keenan refines MacIntyre's tri-polar structure of virtue ethics into three fundamental questions.

First is the question of who one is — "Who am I?" In the language of virtue ethics, this question is equivalent to asking oneself how virtuous one is. The answer to this question lies in the standards of measurement and the fairness of such measurement. The former refers to the naming of the basic virtues while the latter implies critical self-knowledge of one's spontaneous actions.

The second question asks, "Who ought I become?" It points to our vision and hence invites us to set our personal goals and articulate our *teloi* by means of speculative reason. The key insight here is that one has to pursue them and seek improvement.

The third and last question asks what actions will move one from the present self to one's future self — "What ought I to do?" It focuses on both the tension between "who we are" and "who we

[10]Kotva, *The Christian Case*, 17.

[11]Kotva, *The Christian Case*, 18.

[12] James D. Wallace, "Ethics and the Craft Analogy," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy XIII Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue,* ed. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988, 223.

could be," and how we move from the former state to the latter. It points to those transformative virtuous acts (i.e., practices) and their effectiveness depends on the virtue of prudence through which one not just articulates one's realistic ends but also sets to attain them.

Furthermore, based on the important presupposition that the kind of person one will become tomorrow is shaped by one's action today, it is argued that virtue ethics is historically dependent and has a dynamic structure. The real world in which one lives is a necessity for the tri-polar structure because without it virtue ethics could become narcissistic.

Third, virtue ethics is concerned about human good. Although different ethicists propose different understandings of the qualities of the human *telos*, they generally agree that it is largely constituted by the exercise and practice of various virtues. However, virtues are not simply means or instruments to, but also constituted elements and essential components of, the human good. This twofold view of virtue can be understood as follows. A virtue is "an acquired human quality the possession of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods."[13] It is thus an instrument and means to the human good. Yet, Spohn rightly claims that it is also a constitutive element of the human *telos* because the values one seeks would characterize the way that one pursues them. Virtues, then, are human goods in themselves. We act hospitably, for instance, because it leads to the human good and is virtuous itself.

Fourth, virtue theorists are interested in moral character and thus give priority to being over doing. Virtues are acquired dispositions that include both "tendencies to react in characteristic ways in similar and related settings... [and] all those states of character or character traits that influence how we act and choose."[14] This understanding is drawn upon Aristotle's view that virtues are character traits that are needed to live flourishing lives. For example, virtues such as benevolence and justice feature among those intrinsic goods without which one cannot have a flourishing life. Subsequently, virtues are states of character that have long ranging impact in us.

Apart from giving primacy to character, virtue theory actually attends to the development of character and the practices of the

[13]MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 190.
[14]Kotva, *The Christian Case*, 24.

person and the community. As seen in its tri-polar structure, virtue ethics is concerned with "who we ought to become." However, it is important to remember that virtue ethics, like any ethics, recommends action, but first recommends the kind of persons we should become and then informs the choices and actions. As we have seen, Aristotle taught that virtue makes persons good and causes them to act well. In this sense virtue ethics gives priority of being over doing. Still, we become a more virtuous person only by performing intended virtuous actions. In other words, one's being is formed in and through "doing," and while "being" paves the way for "doing," "doing" shapes "being."

Fifth, the ethics of virtue bears a kind of perfectionism. Such perfectionism has to be understood in the sense of "viewing all aspects of life as morally relevant and in calling everyone to growth in every area of life."[15] Virtue ethics as such is seen as a pro-active ethical system that encompasses one's entire life, for each knowingly performed moral action affects the kind of moral person one becomes. It engages the commonplace and concerns what is ordinary rather than those exceptional moral dilemmas. In addition, since virtues are teleological by nature, they are heuristic and collectively aim for the right realization of human identity.

The Four Dimensions of Virtue Ethics

Besides acquiring a contemporary understanding of virtue theory, we need to ask ourselves if the virtues help us to appreciate better the fullness of the moral life? For instance, do the virtues help us to look beyond the self to the community and other people? I say yes precisely because virtue ethics has extensive dimensions to its overall thesis. I hereby introduce four of them: (1) dispositions and character formation; (2) practices and habits; (3) exemplar; and (4) community and communal identity. They not only help us understand better the moral life but also make virtue a fuller ethical framework by serving as reference points to the task of hermeneutics.

Dispositions and Character Formation

Some proponents of virtue ethics would define the ethics of virtue as "ethics of character." They claim that character ethics "does not altogether neglect rules, but subordinates them to the development of moral character and views them instrumentally with reference to the

[15]Kotva, *The Christian Case*, 39.

end."[16] It refers to "a way of thinking about and interpreting the moral life in terms of a particular vision of and a passion for life that is rooted in the nurture, formation, and socialization of a particular self-conscious community."[17]

Hauerwas, in particular, rediscovers virtues through his ethics of character. He sees character as inseparable from one's self-determination and as the decisive factor behind our doing and becoming. Hauerwas further asserts that "character is not just the sum of all that we do as agents, but rather it is the particular direction our agency acquires by choosing to act in some ways rather than others."[18] Interestingly, this emphasis on character can be found in Burridge's own thinking: he points out that the depiction of character is often implied within a biographical narrative. In the case of the New Testament, the gospels as biographical narrative aim to characterize Jesus by looking at his authority, integrity, and service of others.

Nevertheless, I claim that character formation is an important dimension of virtue. In classical virtue theory, the question of the good life leads directly to the development of moral character, because "any adequate description of a good human life will necessarily include attributes that are not manifest in persons in the beginning of their lives, but are developmental outcomes."[19] Virtues are "excellences of character that are objective goods, of worth to others [and the self]," and their manifestation is the actualization of qualities that are originally potentialities within a person.[20] Moreover, since virtue ethics is concerned about "who we could become" and the transition from "who we are" to "who we could become" (that is, the movement toward the human *telos*), it calls for continual growth in our character.

In addition, the acquisition and development of virtue demands our understanding of the self as a self-forming and determining agent

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[16]David L. Norton, "Moral Minimalist and the Development of Moral Character," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy XIII Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue,* ed. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988, 180-81. I am in debt to Norton's own discussion here.

[17]Brueggemann, "Foreword," in *Character Ethics and the Old Testament*, ed. M. Daniel Carroll R. and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007, vii.

[18]Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*, 117.

[19]Norton, "Moral Minimalist," 181.

[20]Norton, "Moral Minimalist," 181-82.

who shapes her or his own: our choices and actions help form our tendencies and dispositions, which in turn help inform and direct our subsequent choices and actions. One thus plays a role in the formation of one's character. For example, the practice of hospitality makes us hospitable persons, which in turn directs us to act hospitably. What is central to the development of moral character is the achievement of integrity — by which all the dimensions of a person, such as faculties, desires, dispositions, and roles contribute to the chosen end. In this fashion, the ethics of virtue is all about moral formation.

On the other hand, since a person's character is "the integration of [one's] life into a relatively coherent unity" and the identity of a person is formed when this integrated self is conscious, virtue ethics thus, as Spohn claims, inevitably considers identity.[21] In line with Spohn's view Keenan further notes that there is interplay between virtues and an anthropological vision of human identity: virtues provide practical guides to the right realization of identity while the anthropological vision of human identity guides us in our pursuit of the virtues.

Practices and Habits

The ethics of virtue is more interested in the ordinary than in neuralgic moral dilemmas or extremely grave actions. It is concerned about what one ought to do in daily life as one moves from "who I am" to "what I ought to become." These concerns can best be handled by developing practices. Regarding practice, MacIntyre writes,

> By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.[22]

Simply put, practice is a regular activity that forms us in such a way that certain dispositions to act in particular ways are developed. For MacIntyre virtue belongs to the concept of practice.

When we continuously adopt practices in our ordinary life, we form habits. Habits in turn "become deeply ingrained in and

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[21]William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics,* New York: Continuum, 1999, 163.

[22]MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 187.

constitute particular dimensions of our lives... and make us who we are."[23] Aristotle understands habit as a kind of irremediable condition that is like a "second nature" for the individual. Aquinas adopts this basic view and further perceives habits as qualities or principles of action that employ the will and are in relation to the definition of virtue (*ST* I.II. 49.1–3). In this fashion, he seems to understand virtue as a habit (*ST* I.II. 55.4). Spohn, however, argues that by treating virtues as practices rather than as habit, one is able to "appreciate the social formation of the virtues and enable [one] to consider the regulative internal norms [such as motive, roles and other virtues] of the virtues."[24]

Nevertheless, we acquire virtues by habitually acting virtuously. For instance, if we want to become hospitable as a person and as a community, we have to act hospitably. At some point we so condition ourselves to this way of acting that we become hospitable. Once we acquire hospitality then, like a second nature, we act hospitably easily and almost naturally whenever we meet someone new. In this way, we will be more ready to welcome the stranger than if we have not practiced hospitality.

The above interpretation, in one way or another, helps us understand Verhey's emphasis on the notion of practice as a core element of Christian ethical framework, and that remembering Jesus requires participation in the practices of the church community. Indeed, practices both develop the characters of the moral agent and in turn express them. It points us back to the previous dimension of virtue — the formation of character.

Exemplar[25]

Besides attending to character, virtue theory also appreciates the role exemplary figures play in the development of virtue and formation of character. This appreciation is grounded in the fundamental presupposition that virtue is teachable.[26] Historically,

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[23]Keenan, *Virtues for Ordinary Christians*, 5.

[24]Spohn, "The Return of Virtue Ethics," 67.

[25]Two relevant works are specifically consulted here: Robert Adams, "Saints," in *The Virtues*, ed. Robert B. Kruschwitz and Robert C. Roberts, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1987, 153-60; Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," in *The Virtues*, ed. Robert B. Kruschwitz and Robert C. Roberts, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1987, 137-52.

[26] A very new book that advocates for integration between scientific understanding of moral cognition/behaviour and philosophical (and theological) virtue ethics, turns to modern cognitive science in order to understand the role of exemplarity in how we learn. See James A. Van Slyke et al., ed., *Theology and the*

according to Meilaender, Plato made it clear that examples of moral virtue are transmitted only through story-telling that provides an "inborn affinity" for the knowledge of the good. However, Plato also suggested that the teaching of virtue can be achieved by "the study not of ethics but of other disciplines."[27]

Burridge also points out that, although ethical instruction may not be the primary concern of ancient biography, the idea of imitation, in which one imitates, follows, and practices the good example's virtues, is common to such literature. Within Christianity, Eastern Church Father Athanasius claimed that "the practice of imitating the exemplars of the faith is fundamental to the acquisition of Christian virtue... [and] transformation by way of the imitation of the mentor's life of virtue may result in communion, in a sharing of vision."[28] Climacus was further convinced that a guide or a mentor who has struggled on the ladder of virtue would have the vision and critical discernment needed for guiding others. These claims and convictions affirm that the idea of imitation and the need and role of a mentor are closely related.

Mentors, guides, and exemplars are needed in two ways. First, the virtues as skills need examples to show what they mean practically. Second, they teach and encourage us to act likewise. Spohn explains that virtues "have to be displayed concretely to convey their tactical meaning. In order to grasp, [for example,] how courage and integrity operate, we need accounts of persons who have shown these virtues in the tangle of circumstances. We are more likely to learn these lessons from literature than philosophy."[29] For instance, in the Hebrew Bible, Judith has been viewed as a model for liberation and the embodiment of the virtue of courage; Ruth and Naomi also illustrate the values of loyalty and love of family.

In our contemporary society, Andrew Flescher points out that there are two notable types of exemplar. The first type is heroes, such as rescuers. Heroes are "not mere moral paragons but exemplars, demonstrations of human beings living the best kind of moral life."[30] Though they distinguish themselves by excelling, heroes are ordinary

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Science of Moral Action. Virtue Ethics, Exemplarity, and Cognitive Neuroscience, Florence, KY: Routledge, 2012.

[27]Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue*, 57.

[28]Woodhill, *The Fellowship of Life*, 31.

[29]Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 32-33.

[30] Andrew Flescher, *Heroes, Saints and Ordinary Morality*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003, 172.

persons, represent and act (already) the way we should; the life they live is "in principle accessible to anyone who becomes sufficiently virtuous."[31] Nevertheless, they are extraordinarily virtuous and we need to act as they do.

The second type, saints, differs from heroes in many ways. Specifically, they "transcend their 'exemplar' status and come to embody a higher law."[32] Saints are thus distinctive moral agents who are extraordinarily virtuous, visionary, and embody "an ideal of character that is not fully realizable by ordinary agents in the course of a life."[33] They have no limits regarding what is morally required of them. Some further perceive saints as acquiring *all* the moral virtues to an extreme degree.

The differences between heroes and saints further highlight the two different senses of "exemplar:" the example of heroes "instantiates and thus clarifies general principles of morality and qualities of character that can be articulated as meaningful and understood as possible for all participants in a society or community." [34] The morality of saints is, in contrast, above ordinary morality and, hence, it is exemplary in the sense that it "motivates us from afar, as a future ideal that impinges on us in the present."[35]

Although moral saints are extraordinary persons, one could still aspire to sainthood in general. We should also remember that, like heroes, particular saints exemplify "only certain types of sainthood, and [those] other types may be compatible with quite different human excellences."[36]

In sum, exemplary models inspire and instruct us to be virtuous. Both heroes and saints are much needed in our society. They give us not just concrete guidance in the process of formation but at times "challenge us toward the *telos*, and toward fuller embodiment of the virtues."[37] Because of the specificity of their heroism or saintliness,

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[31]Flescher, *Heroes, Saints and Ordinary Morality*, 172.

[32]Flescher, *Heroes, Saints and Ordinary Morality*, 211.

[33]Flescher, *Heroes, Saints and Ordinary Morality*, 219-20.

[34]John Stratton Hawley, ed., "Introduction," in *Saints and Virtues,* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987, xvi, as quoted in Flescher, *Heroes, Saints and Ordinary Morality*, 177.

[35]Flescher, *Heroes, Saints and Ordinary Morality*, 179.

[36]Adams, "Saints," 158. See also Wolf, "Moral Saints," 137-52.

[37]Kotva, *The Christian Case*, 28, 36-37. See also William C. Spohn, *What are They Saying about Scripture and Ethics?* (fully revised and expanded ed.), Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995, 82.

they further re-awaken us to appreciating a neglected virtue or a forgotten way of being.

Community and Communal Identity

Virtue ethics has often been criticized as self-centred and virtues as simply subjective dispositions. However, there are important arguments for a communal aspect within virtue theory. The first group of arguments focuses on the roles of community in relation to virtues. First, other than mentors and exemplars, narratives and community facilitate the practice of virtue. Second, community plays an important role in the understanding of the virtues. Thus, the same virtue can be expressed differently in different places. For example, hospitality in a Confucian society like Korea may differ from hospitality in the United States of America. Third, the community, being a historical place that has a tradition, is the proper locus in which the people can understand themselves, recognize the appropriate *telos* of the community, and articulate the virtues they need to develop. Fourth, there is interplay between virtues and an anthropological vision of human identity. Virtue ethics considers identity as not just personal but also communal, for our human identity needs a story, a temporal framework that "synthesizes our diverse moments of experience into a coherent whole."[38] Personal identity "comes through a process of identification with [this] larger narrative framework — a story — and with a community that tries to live out this story."[39] In other words, certain narratives of community define, set limits, and configure personal identity through the ideals they present to us. Thus, the individual finds her/his moral identity in and through her/his membership in a community. However, the community must be vigilant against becoming "closed," for that will only lead to sectarianism.

The second group of arguments for a communal aspect in virtue theory lies in the nature of virtue itself. MacIntyre claims that virtue is a social quality and always demands the taking of certain features of one's social and moral life for its application. As a quality, virtue is needed for "the pursuit of a good for human beings the conception of which is elaborated and possessed within an ongoing social tradition."[40] Thus, some virtue ethicists would understand the human *telos* as flourishment in both a social and a personal way.

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[38] Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993, as cited in Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 174.

[39] Spohn, *What are They Saying about*, 81-82.

[40] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 273.

This understanding highlights that the nature of a human good is also corporate. There are two major claims here. First, human good is not conceived singularly in individual terms. Moral education and improvement need the presence of others, such as mentors and role models; we depend on each other for moral development; and the community provides important resource for the moral growth of each of us. Second, the human *telos* and the journey toward this end are found in shared activities and relationships. For Aristotle the good of a human being is one and the same good as that of those for others with whom one is bound in human community. A community is "a common project that brings about some good recognized as their shared good by all those engaging the project."[41] The central bond of a community is the shared understanding of, and the shared vision of, goods.

However, many virtues depend on social connections within a community that provide the "form and mode" in which the human good is realized — that is, they give "point and purpose" to these virtues. Aristotle thus insists that virtues also find their place in the life of the *polis* (the city). The virtue of friendship, for example, "arises within a relationship defined in terms of a common allegiance to and a common pursuit of goods."[42] Aquinas's understanding of the virtue of justice is similarly social: general justice has the common good of the community as its object (*ST* II.II. 58.5–6). Keenan likewise points out that the theological virtues and the cardinal virtues have enormous social ramifications — they perfect us in the different forms of social relationships that distinguish us.

The relationship between virtue and community, however, is not one-sided. Since the time of Plato and Aristotle virtues "exist not primarily for private purpose, but to form and improve our communities."[43] Hauerwas even claims that certain virtues are necessary should the faith community intend to sustain its existence. Insofar as our identity depends on the community, our character formation is equally communal. Thus, within the community we seek not only to become virtuous persons but also a particular kind of community.

By way of conclusion, Verhey's advocacy of practices within the faith community illuminates us regarding the relationship between the community and virtue ethics:

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[41]MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 151.
[42]MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 156.
[43]Keenan, "Virtues, Principles," 50.

> People facing choices and longing for wisdom and virtue are more likely to find help in such a community than in a book on Christian ethics. Precisely as a practical discipline Christian ethics depends upon such a community, relies upon its 'goodness' and 'knowledge,' and points to it to help people think and talk about their choices. The task of Christian ethics is to serve such communities and their moral discourse and discernment, not to attempt to be a substitute for them.[44]

Issues Concerning Cultural and Theological Adaptation

The insights on community as an important dimension of virtue lead to three related questions that are prerequisite to our exploration of relating Scripture and virtue ethics. First, there is the question of cultural contextualization. Specifically, virtue theorists' emphasis on the local community raises the concerns about cultural relativism.[45] Proponents of virtue ethics generally believe that every culture has a set of virtues to guide its people to answer the question of what kind of community they should become. Among them a few believe that each set of virtues is specific only to that particular culture and thus argue for a "thick," local understanding of virtues. Many, however, believe that virtues from different cultures can be analogously compared. In other words, there are trans-cultural similarities between virtues of different cultures. Some further argue that there are universal virtues, or at least "thin" virtues in all cultures. Consequently, we see a spectrum of views, ranging from those who believe in cultural contextualization to those who want to transcend the boundary of local culture. I am inclined to take the more progressive view here: though virtues are context sensitive, they are not ultimately relative to a limited context or culture but remain open to revision in light of new circumstances.[46] And it is centred on this view that the undertaking of bringing a virtue-based reading of Scripture into other cultural and religious systems becomes possible. However, such an undertaking inevitably leads to a second, religious question — the question of theological relevance — that I now treat.

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[44]Allen Verhey, *Remembering Jesus: Christian Community, Scripture, and the Moral Life*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002, 6.

[45]A significant example is the debate between Lisa Sowle Cahill and Jean Porter. Cahill believes that it is not enough to recognize the emergence of norms from local cultures. Rather, it is a necessity to establish consensual universal norms among all cultures. See Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Community and Universals: A Misplaced Debate in Christian Ethics," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 18 (1998) 3-12.

[46]Martha C. Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy XIII Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue,* ed. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988, 44-45.

As noted earlier, Aquinas classifies virtues into theological and cardinal virtues. Theological virtues are basically virtues infused by God. Cardinal moral virtues, in contrast, have a certain naturalness about them and can be acquired by both Christians and non-believers. Moreover, the kind of inner-worldly virtuous acts done by Christians are sometimes distinguished from those by non-believers: the former has the supernatural destiny as its goal and grace as its source.

However, are graced virtues outside the faith community possible? In other words, is it possible to find comparable infused theological virtues in non-Christian communities? Here we face the same issue that is found in the question of cultural contextualization: are infused theological virtues specific only to the Christian community or can they be analogously compared? According to Karl Rahner, graced virtue is possible outside the Church community. Again, I take the progressive view in approaching this issue: while the virtues emerged from Scripture are the result of Christian faith and have God's assistance as their source, they can still be engaged cross-culturally with the non-Christian society. A classic example is the virtue of hope.

The third question deals with translating philosophical language into a theological one. This question is directly related to the issue of employing this moral philosophy as a hermeneutical tool for interpreting Scripture. Kotva suggests several fundamental points of references for bridging moral philosophy and theological ethics.[47] The first is the notion of Christian anthropology. Kotva notes that there are similarities between Christian anthropology and virtue theory's understanding of human agency and communal nature. A virtue framework understands that "being" informs "doing" and yet our choices and actions shape our character and play an important role in our character formation. A Christian anthropological perspective, in a similar way, while it understands that human freedom is capable of choosing and intending the kind of person one becomes, would also understand that our freedom is limited as a result of our finiteness and sin, and grace is needed for our liberation. On the other hand, Christian anthropology would affirm the importance of relationships and fellowships with (and service to) God and others. This affirmation is in tune with virtue theory's interest in and emphasis on community and communal identity.

[47]See Kotva, *The Christian Case*, 69-93.

Second, sanctification, like virtuous character formation itself, is a teleological process. But in the theological enterprise, the Christian *telos* is one's conformity with Christ. Its beginning, continuation, and completion radically depend on God's grace (which does not negate one's participation and responsibility for growth). Thus, within a theological setting, the concept of virtue is tied to the notion of grace. Moreover, the *telos* as an ideal and perfection is, in both settings, a goal beyond this world.

The third point of reference is Christology. Theological ethics perceives Jesus Christ as the *telos*. He is the paradigmatic person whose humanity realizes our full human potential and offers us the content of our human *telos*. Jesus is the norm of humanity; and a virtue framework affirms Jesus as normative humanity. Finally, Jesus' call to discipleship finds similarities with the above discussed dimension of virtue (in other contexts), especially in the need and role of exemplary figures.

Both the questions of religious relevance and of translating philosophical language into theological language further point to the relationship between virtue and grace. We understand that moral goodness conveys the agent as striving to realize right living; still, the degree of striving in one's life depends not on oneself but the gifts one receives. From a Christian point of view, it points to the gifts God gives each of us. Within the Catholic tradition, the impact of the gifts of the Holy Spirit has been highlighted even if the Spirit was not directly mentioned.[48]

While theological ethicists rightly retrieved the Christological dimension of ethics, a pneumatological dimension of ethics is also needed for the Holy Spirit has always been our primary resource for moral life. And although the focus upon the third person of the Trinity has developed slowly, many would agree that the commonly employed language of grace is simply a short-hand for speaking of the Spirit acting.

Aquinas has offered a systematic view of how the Holy Spirit, virtues, and grace are related in the *Summa Theologiae*. He begins with a discussion of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as understanding, fear, and piety, in light of habit and in relation to

[48]See Ronald A. Mercier, "The Holy Spirit and Ethics: A Personal Gift Making Persons," in *Moral Theology: New Directions and Fundamental Issues*, ed. James Keating, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004, 44. Mercier's work offers a good discussion on the role of the Holy Spirit in our moral life, which I consulted here. See also Kotva, *The Christian Case*, chapter 4.

virtue (*ST* I.II. 68–70). The gifts of the Holy Spirit have certain characteristics. First, as "gifts" they are infused by God. Second, they are perfections of humankind by which one is disposed and is open to the promptings of God. They are thus related to virtues and are virtues in this particular sense. Third, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are also "habitual dispositions of the soul, rendering it amenable to the motion of the Holy Ghost" (*ST* I.II. 68.3; II.II. 121.1). Fourth, although they are more perfect than the intellectual and moral virtues, they are regulated and preceded by theological virtues. In other words, they seem to link natural virtues with theological virtues and elevate them. Fifth, each theological and cardinal virtue has its own corresponding gifts. For instance, the virtue of faith contains the corresponding gifts of knowledge and understanding (*ST* II.II. 8, 9).

Aquinas later examines the notion of grace and points out that grace as a gift not only heals our corrupted nature but also perfects our nature so that we can carry out those meritorious works of supernatural virtue and participate in the divine good (*ST* I.II. 109–114). Hence, grace is supernatural, infused by God, and is teleological. Moreover, grace is gratuitous and produces certain effects: it elevates, justifies, sanctifies, and allows us to be moved by God to act virtuously. It is therefore prior to virtues. However, grace differs from infused virtues in that the former is the participation of the Divine nature while the latter is derived from and is ordained to this light of grace.

Aquinas further discusses grace as particular gifts of the Holy Spirit (such as the gift of tongues) that pertain to certain people for the sake of the community, and are manifested within the communal context (*ST* II.II. 171–78). Grace as gifts of the Holy Spirit thus is in line with the fourth important dimension of virtue.

For Aquinas, virtue and grace are closely related and both are gifts of the Holy Spirit. Still, we are also reminded that our dependence on God's grace and the priority of God's grace in our transformation does not mean a passive dependence; rather, God's grace calls for our responsibility and active participation with God in the process of transformation.

Relating Scripture and Virtue Ethics

Virtue, indeed, has a place in theology. Grounded in this affirmation, I now proceed to show how virtue and Scripture are related.

My Approach

I propose a more systematic way of demonstrating how virtue ethics is relevant in reading Scripture. This proposal is based on two convictions: first, the concept of virtue can be found in Scripture;[49] second, the dimensions of virtue I have introduced above are effective hinges and reference points for relating Scripture and virtue theory.

Many Christians would note that certain writings in the Bible explicitly talk about virtues, such as the Hebrew wisdom literature (e.g., Proverbs). Some scholars are even more expansive: following Athanasius's word that "the entire Holy Scripture is a teacher of virtues," they claim that the moral agenda found in Scripture is written in terms of virtue.[50]

Biblical scholars like John Barton think otherwise. They are reluctant to claim that the Bible supports an ethics of virtue (or vice versa). Rather, they observe that the term virtue is not prominent in the Bible:[51] even though the Hebrew Bible is aware of human virtues, it does not have any particular term to articulate the general idea of virtue. In the New Testament, despite those instances that occur in the lists of vices and virtues (e.g., Gal 5:22–23), the term appears only a few times. Barton therefore argues that the Bible is not primarily about virtue.

Most scholars who are interested in the question of Scripture and ethics are, on the contrary, inclined to virtue. Benjamin Farley, for instance, is convinced that the Bible encourages believers to venture a biblical ethics of virtue for it contains and commends virtues and character-building motifs. He thus attempts to offer a comprehensive

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[49]The following works are particularly consulted here: John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003; Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Christian Character, Biblical Community, and Human Values," in *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002, 3–17; Benjamin W. Farley, *In Praise of Virtue: An Exploration of the Biblical Virtues in a Christian Context*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995; Larry L. Rasmussen, "Sighting of Primal Visions: Community and Ecology," in *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation,* ed. William Brown, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002, 389–409.

[50]Athanasius, *The Life of Anthony* and *The Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg, *The Classics of Western Spirituality: A Library of the Great Spiritual Masters*, New York: Paulist, 1980, 112, as quoted in Joseph Woodhill, *The Fellowship of Life*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1998, 17. See also Keenan, "Virtue Ethics: Making a Case as It Comes of Age," *Thought* 67 (1992) 121.

[51]See John W. Crossin, *What are They Saying about Virtue?*, NY: Paulist Press, 1985, 9-10.

exploration of virtues, claiming that "no one has identified the full range of biblical virtues that support such an interest [in virtue ethics]."[52] In the Hebrew Bible, although there is no provision of a definitive list of virtues, particular virtues among certain Hebrew figures of different historical periods are found, such as Gideon's sobriety (Judges 8:23). The wisdom literature, especially, supplies us with numerous virtues, such as loyalty toward spouse and family, honesty, integrity, and faithfulness.

The New Testament is even more convincing. There are extensive lists of virtues and character-moulding motifs in the texts. For example, the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 extols eight corresponding virtues, including meekness, mercy, and courage. The parables of the Synoptic gospels also point to a variety of virtues, such as vigilance, accountability, and social consciousness (e.g., Mark 13:32–37). John's gospel, on the other hand, highlights the virtues of constancy, perseverance, and endurance (e.g., 15:4–5). For Paul, all virtues are set within the context of salvation by grace through faith. Consequently, besides the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, Paul also calls for various virtues based on different communal contexts, such as self-control for the Galatians (5:22), renewal and humility for the Romans (12:2–3), and mutual subordination/love for the Ephesians (5:21–32).

Scripture not only reveals moral virtues, values, and vision, it actually promotes them. Specifically, as Birch and Rasmussen claim, Scripture "helps form and name virtues... and creates and renews moral vision."[53] Their claim suggests that Scripture can be relevant to virtue. Still, I further claim that the important dimensions of virtue introduced above are in turn hinges to relate virtue theory and Scripture.

Scripture and Character Formation

The concrete lists of virtues found in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament and the Bible's discussion of virtues provide "a touchstone and a point of reference for theological discussions of virtues and Christian character."[54] This is because, as Lisa Sowle Cahill explains, Scripture orients the believers (on both individual and communal levels) around certain values, principles, and virtues

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[52]Farley, *In Praise of Virtue*, 1.

[53]Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in Christian Life*, rev. ed., Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1989, 64.

[54]Crossin, *What are They Saying about Virtue*? 10.

— such as repentance, forgiveness, and compassion — that reflect God's self-revelation in Christ. Moreover, Scripture is the witness of Israel and the early church both to their struggles to be God's faithful people (and community) and to their responses to God's revelation in concrete life experience. Whenever individuals and the faith community reflect on these life experiences recorded in Scripture, their basic character is shaped. In other words, Scripture shapes the reader's character as well as the character of the reader's community. For example, those biblical stories that narrate Jesus' associations with the outcasts and sinners, as Birch and Rasmussen rightly claim, shape the followers of Christ and their faith community into one that is inclusive and ever renewing.

Still, Scripture and its corresponding virtues not only shape our character but also our character as distinctively Christian. Scripture defines first the Christian virtues and thereby shapes one's character. The Judeo-Christian story provides what is needed (such as metaphors and concepts) for the shaping of Judeo-Christian character. Thus, the Bible is more important in forming character than in offering explicit ethical discourse.

Scripture also acts as a shaper of Christian identity in that it is the "prime source of the self-conscious identity of the community of faith, and... of those individuals who choose to identify themselves with the church and its faith tradition."[55] Therefore, it is in relation to the Bible that the moral subject is distinctively identified as a Christian.

Scripture and Exemplar

As cited in our exploration of the goods of virtue, Hebrew biblical figures Judith, Ruth, and Naomi are examples of role models for the virtues of courage, loyalty, and love of family respectively. Indeed, the Bible contains many "characters" that play the role of modelling for us certain moral characters. Barton, though he hesitates to claim that Scripture has any explicit idea of virtue ethics, similarly acknowledges that biblical stories (and their characters) have exemplary moral value in presenting humankind in all its singularity. For instance, the story of David presents to us not just a defective life but also an examined life that "manifests a concern for how one ought to live even when this runs clearly counter to the character's own moral insight."[56] Consequently, the Bible contributes to moral

[55]Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in Christian Life*, 181.
[56]Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 72.

formation by telling the stories of those exemplary figures and of the community.

Sometimes the exemplary role of the biblical figures for virtues is presented rather straightforward. In James 5:11, for example, the author explicitly calls us to imitate Job in his virtue of patience and endurance in hard times. At other times it is not. The lack of explicit quotations, as one ethicist rightly claims, does not necessarily mean that the specific biblical text or theological insight is irrelevant.[57] Indeed, biblical figures can play the exemplary role in an implicit manner. One particular example is virtue of hospitality exemplified in the lives of many in the Bible.

One can find detailed accounts of welcome (such as the welcoming of Elisha by a wealthy Shunammite woman in 2 Kings 4) and inhospitality (such as the story of the men of Sodom in Genesis 19 and of Gibeah in Judges 19) in the Hebrew Bible. Similarly, in the New Testament, both the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37 and the person of Jesus are vivid models for practicing hospitality. However, there are others throughout. Specifically, I argue that the Hebrew Bible figure of Boaz — the husband of Ruth — in the book of Ruth is also an exemplary figure in cultivating the virtue of hospitality: both Ruth the Moabite and the land are redeemed through his unusual and exemplary words and deeds of hospitality.[58] Still, the person of Boaz is a model of hospitality not just for individual Israelites but also for a reformed postexilic Israelite community whose *telos* is being a hospitable community.

In short, Scripture is a rich source for providing exemplary models — either explicitly or implicitly — for the cultivation of virtues and our moral formation as individuals and a faith community.

Scripture and Community/Communal Identity

Scripture is relevant not just to an individual's character formation but also to community and communal identity, for character is "a process of communal formation of individual identity." [59] This relevance is best expressed in the words of William Brown: "Scripture forms community as much as

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[57]See Jens Herzer, "Paul, Job, and the New Quest for Justice," in *Character Ethics and the New Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture,* ed. Robert L. Brawley, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007, 77-79.

[58]See Yiu Sing Luke (Lúcás) Chan, "A Model of Hospitality for Our Times," *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture* 10, 1 (2006) 1-30.

[59]Cahill, "Christian Character," 10.

community informs the reading of Scripture."[60] Patrick Miller further rightly insists that the scriptural texts "do not speak about a *general* understanding of community but of the formation of a *particular* community whose identity as a people is evoked by their inextricable relationship to the Lord."[61] These specific communities formed by Scripture are thus diverse and historical. Moreover, Scripture does not simply form particular, historical, and diverse communities but, more importantly, *moral* communities, for moral characters are inherent and constitutive element of a community. In this manner, as Miller and others see it, the Bible plays the role of generating and sustaining not just the community but its spiritual-moral formation as well.

Let's turn to Boaz in the book of Ruth again. Biblical scholars agree that the main characters of the postexilic period were "dedicated to the task of reforming Israel... that she might become... nothing less than the covenant people of God."[62] Consequently, the narratives found in the books of the postexilic period are meant not merely to describe but to change the society to which the returnees belong. The writer of the book of Ruth, therefore, in portraying the character Boaz during the restoration period, aims at reforming and rebuilding the Israelite community into a hospitable community. The gospels likewise do not simply portray a unique human being but also serve as manuals for training the follower to be part of the new community.

In sum, Scripture as narrative does not only describe the character (of God) but also "render[s] a community capable of ordering its existence [in a way] appropriate to such stories."[63] It portrays the kind of moral community to be formed and is addressed to the community. It also calls for moral re-formation on the communal level. Last but not least, Cahill rightly notes that by forming communities that are consistent with God's revelation, Scripture gains its authority in morality. The more faithful we are to the Bible, the more we recognize its authority, and hopefully, vice versa.

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[60]William P. Brown, ed. *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation,* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002, xi.

[61]Patrick D. Miller, "The Good Neighborhood," in *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. William P. Brown, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002, 58.

[62]Raymond Foster, *The Restoration of Israel*, London: DLT, 1970, x.

[63]Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 67.

The above systematic presentation of the characteristics, dimensions, and issues of adaptation of virtue theory, as well as concrete instances of relating Scripture and virtue ethics, point to the worthiness of virtue theory as a hermeneutical tool in doing biblical ethics. My own approach further suggests that the four important dimensions of virtue ethics can serve as hinges and reference points in bridging the two disciplines. What remains is the practice of acquiring exegetical skill and employing a virtue framework by both biblical scholars and Christian ethicists.