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Character Formation and Virtue Ethics: A Moral Theologian's Point of View

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Abstract

This essay on character formation from the perspective of a moral theologian working on virtue ethics offers seven reasons for the following virtue as a worthy method for teaching character formation: virtue ethics uses familiar, ordinary and fairly specific language; deals with ordinary life; is a very active ethics; is a very comprehensive system; is fairly easy to teach; teaches us that virtues never stand alone; and, that virtues are fundamentally social. The essay develops from each point, building on one another like building blocks so that the reader can appreciate how inclusive and robust the work of virtue ethics today is.

In order to address character formation, I propose seven reasons for appropriating the work by contemporary moral theologians on virtue ethics. As reasons for doing virtue ethics unfold, our understanding of it will develop as will our engagement with it. These reasons are like building blocks where each one will help us to address the issues of character development. We can also begin to recognize the assistance that virtue ethics brings to the believers who ask themselves how they morally live out their faith, to the activists who seek to answer the challenges of the world before them, and to the academics who are

asking themselves whether their research makes any difference to people of faith and of good will.

Virtue ethics uses familiar, ordinary and fairly specific language

Virtue ethics' basic concerns deal with the virtues that are ways of being, practices, and actions that are integral to the good life of any culture. The more familiar virtues are justice, prudence, charity, faith, hope, fidelity, wisdom, temperance, courage, fortitude, honesty, friendliness, generosity, gratitude, and piety. It deals with direct, plain talk. It is used in the home, school, houses of worship, civic centers, sports arenas, in the media, in cross-cultural discourse, and in inter-religious dialogue. It is taught to children from the earliest stages of their moral formation, whether they are at home, in school, in the playground, or at worship.

Unlike other ethical systems, virtue ethics does not use language that is foreign or estranged from ordinary life. It does not invoke one's or call another to realize the categorical imperative. When a judgment is made, there is not an appeal to prove grounds of neither commensurability nor that one offer or establish proportionate reasoning. It compels neither one to articulate nor to obey a deontological rule.

Too much of modern and contemporary ethics looks like one needs a professor or at least a philosophical handbook in order to justify what one claims to be the right way of being or of acting. This infers, in turn, a specific presupposition that people do not know how to be ethical without a philosophical education. But this is not so.

This does not mean that Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were wrong in thinking that ethics is best taught to those with some real experience. Indeed, some of the complex ethical social issues that we must address regarding trade, immigration, healthcare, and sustainability, for instance, require both a high level of professional expertise in the field of inquiry as well as experience and training in more sophisticated levels of ethical judgment that enable one to appreciate the goods, values and virtues at stake as well as the claims from moral traditions that deserve to be advanced.

Still, these advanced levels are not based on the use of foreign or academically-pretentious phrases nor on a fictive algorithm. Those who genuinely help us, as a society to move forward, are the very persons who as children understood and were responsive to commands like "Be kind." They learned as we learned through ordinary language

and understood that through the ordinary language they would grasp what was ethically expected of contemporary societies. Like great social reformers, great philosophers and theologians realize that moral language derives from ordinary language. Not surprisingly then Israel's Ten Commandments, the Confucian's Tao and Jesus' Beatitudes are clear and familiar utterances. Their longevity arises in part from their easy-to-hear, remember and repeat framework. Parents, children, family, ministers, prison wardens, academic deans, teachers, soldiers, and leaders invoke them as mainstays of moral claims.

The dependence of moral language on ordinary language allows ethics to not only instruct but also to empower. After all, Aristotle like Thomas Aquinas was right in claiming that the end of ethics is to act. Ethics makes possible human flourishment. When moral language disenfranchises ordinary people as much as contemporary ethical language does, it can neither illuminate nor accompany anyone in the course of their daily events nor in their long-term personal or communal goals. As parents know this, they are able to easily turn to virtue language as a well-spring of resourcefulness. Parents know that they need to be clear, instructive and supportive of their children's moral formation. They can say to their children to be friendly, honest, and respectful, and the children would know what they mean.

Let us not think that virtuous instructions are no more than general admonitions to be good or do the right. These are fairly economical and specific instructions; they are packed with very particular meanings. The command to be faithful communicates a very different directive than be courageous or be chaste! It is important to remember that virtues are instructive. They are never without content and information. If, for instance, I were to be giving a lecture and midway paused and said to an audience member, "Be respectful," you would all be commenting to one another, "Somebody must have been talking or somehow offended Fr. Keenan." They would understand that I was correcting someone who was acting without sufficient respect or attentiveness. But imagine, if I were to pause and say to the same person, "Sir, be chaste." Here I would be communicating something very different and certainly, the audience's reception of such a public admonition would be quite different. Why would I tell someone to be chaste? The audience would think clearly I was suggesting something about the person's sexual habits! Virtues have very specific content and

therefore give direction. The language of ethics needs to be familiar; it needs to be part of the fabric of ordinary human life. Moreover, it cannot be first and foremost general, but rather it needs to be specific, urgent and immediately applicable.

Virtue ethics deals with ordinary life

Like their language, too much of contemporary ethics might look exotically unsolvable. The more problematic, the more remote, and the more peculiar a case looks, the more it is appreciated and the more its exponent is considered brilliant. Ethics courses based on these type of rare cases can look like spectator sports: it's wild, unanticipated, chic, entertaining, and plays well in the media. Edmund Pincoffs (1986) saw this as a major challenge to any number of professional fields of ethics when he coined the phrase "quandary ethics."

Admittedly, on occasion, but not with enduring frequency, we need to entertain some quandaries. In particular, some quandaries that are legitimate "hard" cases are needed for our ability to rethink the order of goods, values, virtues that serve as the foundations of our thinking. Thus a "hard" case is that type of case that forces us to rethink all our presuppositions on a particular matter.

Anyone familiar with John Noonan's (1957) history of money-lending or usury recalls the "hard case" of the triple contract which provided ethicists with the substantive circumstances that finally prompted assent to a particular form of money-lending. In this century, in the aftermath of *Humanae Vitae,* some Catholic ethicists proposed a variety of "hard" cases to ask whether the absolute and universal claims of the encyclical were adequate in anticipating all the circumstantial possibilities that demanded moral recognition.

These hard cases are not simply designed to break down rules or principles. Rather they reveal unspoken biases or unacknowledged presuppositions operative in the deliberating processes of community leaders. Still, these hard cases are rare and rarely should we try to re-think the fundamental presuppositions of ethics. Rather, ethics ought normally to deal with ordinary life.

Regarding the ordinariness of virtue, Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae* I. II. 6) makes a helpful distinction between a human act (any deliberate action) and an act of a human (which does not require any deliberate reason). Later Thomas asks the question whether any

human action can be morally indifferent. In an important claim, he (*Summa Theologiae* I. II. 18. 9c.) answers that "every human action that proceeds from deliberate reason, if it be considered in the individual, must be good or bad."Effectively he (*Summa Theologiae* I. II. 18. 9. ad 2.) claims that every human action is inevitably a moral action; "every individual action is either good or bad." He (*Summa Theologiae* I. II. 18. 9. ad3.), uses, as an example of a moral act, the simple human act of going to bed an act that parents try endlessly to teach their children how important an action it is. For Thomas, everything we do effectively is either virtuous or vicious.

This gives us a much broader agenda for ethics than we normally imagine. Ethics is not primarily about the rare quandary issue or the even more seldom hard case; ethics is about ordinary daily life. Every human action that we perform is for Aquinas, and for us, either a virtuous or vicious act. He helps us to realize that as we deliberate and act, we are realizing ourselves as moral persons day by day.

Virtue ethics is a very active ethics

When we realize that every human action is a moral one, we begin to realize that we are inevitably built up or brought down by what we do. Now before we proceed any further, we must face the enormous questions about grace and redemption, lest we fall victim to a naïve virtue ethics of works righteousness. With this in mind, we might ask the question, if every human act is a moral act, how can we put the fullness of that full challenge into an overall life agenda?

Among the great contributions of Alasdair MacIntyre (2007) is the exposition of the important three-fold question for ethics: Who are we? Who ought we to become? How ought we to get there? Those questions not only underline the importance of self-understanding and the need for both a specified yet at once, overarching goal or teleology, but also a lifelong agenda for the regular practices and actions that move toward the right realization of those goals. These three questions basically encompass, I think, the moral life.

In order to fully appreciate how active this life is, Thomas again provides us with a distinction. He argues that virtuous and vicious activities are in themselves immanent activities and should be distinguished from transient actions (*Summa Theologiae* I. II. 74. 1c.). That is, the virtuous or vicious practices that one performs redound into the agent

and further transforms the person accordingly. He uses the verb "to do" to highlight his claim: practices that we do, shape us. We become, what we do. If I dance, story-tell, paint, write, I become the dancer, story-teller, painter or writer. Likewise, if I do works of generosity, friendship, or kindness, I become shaped by the particular practices that I perform. All moral actions are then immanent actions and virtues are immanent habits formed by immanent practices and actions.

Thomas distinguishes these immanent activities from those more transient or productive actions by what we "make" some things. Here the object that we are making is shaped by our own intentionality and activities: I make dinner, a table, a glass of lemonade. My activity is not self-transformative per se; rather, it transforms something else: it is what Thomas calls "transient" activity.

The human life is fairly well filled with opportunities for moral formation. The way we wake-up in the morning, take breakfast, greet family, friends, neighbors, and strangers, drive, arrive at school or work, all these "ways," are occasions for us to develop habits or practices that shape the moral fabric of our very selves. We become what we do.

As in doing athletics (a very good metaphor for virtue!), our bodies, muscles, health, and spirit are shaped by immanent exercises. Borrowing from Avicenna, Thomas saw the life of virtue as one of reflection and exercise. For him, the moral life was incredibly active and ambitious.

Like athletics then a certain measure is needed for virtue. Unless we adequately exercise then we do not adequately become impacted. Similarly, we need to be attentive to the harm of doing too much exercise. For instance, weightlifting requires an athlete to know the tipping point between too little weight and too much. If we do not have adequate weights, we do not have adequate exercise. Such exercise is hardly worth it. Conversely, too many weights are dangerous; we can harm ourselves and our future. There is a need then to know what the "mean" between these two extremes are. Even here though what constitutes the mean is fairly tailor-made. Like weight-lifting the mean for one person is very different than another, hence the need for real self-knowledge.

Virtue is much the same kind of immanent exercise. I need to know myself and my limits. I also need to push myself, to increase challenges to see where I am at a level of equipoise. I need to anticipate the lifting I should do, as well as the breaks and time-outs. I certainly need to be spotted, as well.

Virtue ethics is a fairly comprehensive system

The philosopher William Frankena (1973: 65) said some forty years just as the field of virtue ethics was at the dawn of its renaissance "Virtues without principles are blind; Principles without virtues are impotent." Frankena was trying to acknowledge a place for the virtues. He understood ethics to be predominantly about norms, principles or rules, that is, specific guidelines for or against certain forms of action. Ethics according to Frankena was predominantly about determining what actions ought or ought not to be performed. Frankena had his pulse on the way most people thought and still think about ethics: ethics is about whether we can do research on stem cells, prohibit gay marriage, attack potentially belligerent countries, use condoms for HIV prevention, ban abortions, and so forth. But Frankena wanted to provide space for virtues because virtues tell us not what to do but rather how to be. Rather than giving us principles that tell us "do this," "don't do that," virtues tell us how to be: "be just," "be faithful," "be loving." Virtues tell us to adopt certain kinds of character traits or dispositions.

0At first glance, then, Frankena's little adage makes a lot of sense: if I tell soldiers to be just and send them into war without a principle like, "never directly attack the innocent," then I am offering them an upright disposition but no real direction about how to express in action that disposition to justice. They would be "blind," Frankena remarks, as to how to proceed. Frankena's adage seems even more plausible when we consider the second half of it: if I inform soldiers to heed the principle, "never directly kill the innocent" and send them into war without helping them to acquire the virtue of justice, then we cannot expect that they will have the strength to withstand the enemy and still follow the principles. If they are not disposed to justice, what will happen when all they know that there is a principle of justice to heed. For this reason, Frankena says knowing a just principle without having the virtue of justice to heed the principle leaves a person impotent. This seems fairly simple until we push the adage one step further: which comes first, the virtue or the principle?

For the most part, philosophers and theologians usually say that ethics is predominantly about principles. Usually, they think of ethics as norms, rules or guidelines for certain forms of actions and then expect that we should develop complimentary virtues so that we can execute those guidelines.

At first glance, this seems reasonable. The Church teaches us the principle, "no sex outside of marriage" and then exhorts us to be chaste. The church teaches us, "Fast during lent" and then helps us to develop the ascetical disposition that helps us to do that. The Bible commands our children, "honor your parents" and expects them to develop the virtue of obedience so as to follow parents' orders.

In fact, when we think for a moment on the commandments, we can think of Moses coming down from Mount Sion with the Decalogue. Were Moses's commands about virtues or principles? Did they say, "be just," "be obedient," "be chaste"? No, they were about principles for actions: "Do not bear false witness," "Do not kill," "Do not commit adultery." If the commandments were about specific forms of action, then it seems reasonable to recognize that principles come first.

Virtue ethicists do not agree with this priority

To pacify principalists on one side and virtue ethicists on others, some try to offer us a certain compromise. They see normative ethics and virtue ethics as two independent systems each making comparatively similar claims on one another, broadening both our understanding of ethics and our ideas about how we should proceed morally. But that leaves us worse off than Frankena because inevitably they are offering either two systems of thought for ethics or a bipolar one.

For any virtue ethics to be worthy of being called ethics it has to, in itself, offer us guidelines for actions and practices. I argue that a virtue-based ethics actually generates its own norms and principles are more capable of guiding us in action than a simple normative or principalist ethics.

In fact, any normative ethics inevitably finds its origins in a virtue ethics. As we shall see, virtue ethics actually generates its own principles, norms, and rules on a regular basis and all principles eventually emerge from some community that has certain anthropological expectations, expressed in the form of virtues, which it needs to protect and develop.

Every community has a constellation of virtues that are offered as normative character traits for the community's own members. In order to promote these goals, these communities generate rules, norms, and principles that prompt members toward actions and practices that keep these virtues as realizable. For this reason, every community has principles, norms, and rules of justice that actually embody the very specific virtue of justice which they want to see embodied in their culture. Likewise, every community promotes its own notion of the virtue of fidelity or loyalty in a variety of specific forms and subsequently articulates particular rules, norms, and principles in order to direct their members toward the actions and practices that secure the specific trait of loyalty.

In order to see this, we must appreciate that virtues are not simply subjective dispositions. We have known since Plato and Aristotle that virtues exist not primarily for a private purpose, but to form and improve our communities. Since Plato wrote about justice and Aristotle about friendliness, the virtues are fundamentally social. As Jesus taught us to be loving, he taught us how to be social persons by virtue.

We can see easily how even virtues that form us at the depths of our being are social, e.g., love, faith, charity, justice, fidelity, etc. A simple virtue like self-care is, then, hardly a subjective virtue; rather, it has enormous social ramifications, without which we would be parenting one another our entire lifetime. In fact, as I (1995) proposed that one could argue that virtues actually perfect us in the different forms of social relationships that distinguish us. Virtues, therefore, offer us guidelines. They direct us to become a person with certain character traits and therefore the virtues must teach us not only who we ought to become but also how we are to become that type of person. Therefore, virtues must provide us with guidelines or directives for acquiring the virtues we aim to have.

Here again, norms are articulated so as to help us grow in virtue and are therefore derived from the very understanding of the virtues we are pursuing. This is, of course, the basic thesis of Alasdair MacIntyre: virtues have to tell us, not only who we are, but also who we ought to become and how we ought we become that person with those character traits.

Let us develop the argument further by considering parenting. The work of parents in teaching their children to become fine human beings is a

long one and parents are constantly generating rules so as to guide their children not only nor primarily to right conduct but rather to becoming responsible, virtuous people. That is, every parent gives rules to their children simply to help them grow in virtue.

Think here of the basic rule of all families, setting the time for a child to return home. We can easily imagine a parent saying to a ten-year-old, "Tommy, be back from Shaji's by 5.30 pm. I don't want you out past dark." Here the parent is teaching the child to socialize on his own, to develop new bonds of friendship beyond the family household, and at the same time to realize the responsibility to participate in family life, while being vigilant of the fact that growth toward greater maturity means assuming forms of self-governance one step at a time. This particular rule, then, is training Tommy to engage a variety of virtues like friendship, responsibility, self-care, and prudence.

Imagine, however, we were to meet Tommy again ten years later, at twenty-years of age and we hear his father say, "Tommy, be back from Shaji's by 5.30 pm. I don't want you out past dark." This would be a startling rule. We would wonder why Tommy has not become more social, more autonomous, more self-caring, more prudent, and we would probably wonder the same about Tommy's father.

Family rules are the paradigm for moral rules. Families engage in practices which help children to keep their room in order, to develop and maintain relationships, to come to degrees of self-understanding and self-guidance, to study and to learn, to articulate goals and agenda for the realization of self, relationships and dreams, and to appreciate the world, the neighbor, the needy, and the Lord. All these practices come with rules and the engagement of these practices help children to grow into a more virtuous way of living. And of course, these family rules come from very specific cultures. Thus, the command, "Tommy, be back from Shaji's by 5.30 pm. I don't want you out past dark" would probably be a very rarely uttered one in a little place like Tarime, Tanzania where a family member would never go to another family household individually and unaccompanied and where without electricity it would be unthinkably dangerous for most people to imagine one another walking around in the dark.

We should be able to see then that virtues promote not only the virtues themselves but also the rules that we need and the practices that they govern which furthers our ability to be and live virtuously. In other

words, virtue ethics is a complete system. In this light, we need to ask, in such a complete system, whence principles?

The philosopher John Kekes (1998) comments on the way we constantly interact with principles. First, he claims that principles are simply short-hand endorsements of already accepted conduct; they are "extracted from conventional conduct prevailing in the society." Second, principles are revised or rejected to the extent that they continue to conform with our "prevailing practice." Their developments are conditioned by the social practices that originally validated them. Third, the degree that the practice is commonly accepted, to that degree the principle has force, and vice versa. In sum, principles are derived from conventional conduct: "practice is primary and principles are secondary."

Martha Nussbaum (1986: 299) makes a similar point and writes with an Aristotelian assumption that "principles are perspicuous descriptive summaries of good judgments, valid only to the extent to which they correctly describe such judgments." In sum, principles are summaries of summary judgments. They are late-stage articulations of the basic considerations of relevant judgments that further a community's attempt to determine its future. Their relevance to us depends on our need for them as we continue to develop a society whose members conform with the type of people we are to become.

Concretely think here of the universal law to not attack non-combatants. How did we get that law, a universal claim that it is always wrong to harm or kill non-combatants in war? Was it not that at some point in time, and in some very different places, that the desire to be just in the waging of war, prompted people to say that regardless of the war effort, non-combatants need to be protected. This insight happened in different wars at different times and places until finally, even in the barbarity of war, people sought to establish worldwide the guidelines of justice and articulated the principle of non-combatant immunity. Principles and norms have their own historical genesis. They may be universal but they are not eternal. Rather they are historical. They are eventually one day found to adequately capture the guiding insight that persons of virtue are seeking.

As Daniel Daly (2010) and I (2008) write principles, like rules and norms, are key factors in guiding us expeditiously toward the goals

we are seeking. They briefly encapsulate enormous insights that have taken years, decades and, sometimes even centuries to achieve. Moreover, like telling Tommy when he is to return home, they not only presume an enormous number of concerns about where we are going but they also embody a marker of sorts regarding where we have been and where we hope we are now. Behind these principles, then, are shared dispositions about what it means to be human.

Virtue ethics is fairly easy to teach

Every culture has its own heroes and heroines, significant figures bearing characteristic virtue traits that the culture recommends to be emulated. Not only are such lives enormously attractive and commendable, but the exhortation to imitate them are part of a considerably well-honed narrative.

Stories or narratives of exemplars are the teaching materials of virtue ethics. Occasionally the narrative might be long and thick; other times brief and focused. In the United States, we have any number of narratives that easily couple with a particular virtue. Some of these belong to a long list of ways that we recommend the particular conduct of particular presidents. We can think, for instance, of the stories of Washington's honesty, FDR's courage, JFK's wit, Eisenhower's discipline, or Lincoln's relentless fidelity to the nation. These virtues come alive not just for an individual but for a people and they are learned through stories and taught at very young ages.

Similarly, in India, we have exemplars both political and religious. Think of the enormous legacy of Mahatma Gandhi, of his respect for religious diversity, of his deep commitment to justice, of his personal asceticism, of his heroism. Or think of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara and his own piety, his courage, prudence, humility, and patience, as well as his devotion to family life and to the members of his community.

Of course, these narratives pale in comparison to the stories of Jesus. In as much as Christianity is the baptismal response to the call to discipleship, we seek to know the Lord. The Gospels are not simply a story then, but revelation itself. As such, the stories are themselves effective. By them, we understand better Jesus and grow in the possibility of becoming like him. We become like him when we understand ourselves as he understands himself. As disciples, we participate in the self-understanding of Jesus. What does that mean,

specifically? By his self-understanding, Jesus entered into a radical openness to the will of God, and in that openness, he freed us from sin and death; in turn, Jesus made possible our ability to hear and respond to his call to follow in his footsteps. But what does following in his footsteps look like?

In Pasolini's famous movie, 'The Gospel According to Matthew,' the person of Jesus is preaching and teaching while he is busy hurrying to Jerusalem for his encounter with history. Pasolini's Jesus never stops, sits, or rests. He is always walking at a fast pace and the disciples are trying to keep up with him. When he preaches, even in parables, he does not pause. Rather he keeps moving forward toward Jerusalem, occasionally looking back to let his disciples know that he realizes they are trying to follow him. He is the unsurpassable goal who always goes before us, making our call to follow him a dynamic movement.

That image of Jesus on the road is, of course, a dominant one in understanding the call to imitate Jesus. Nowhere is it more emphatic than in Jesus' answer to the question, "And who is my neighbor?" Here Jesus responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). The parable is an odd one because its end is, unless we are not attentive, a reversal of the beginning. As the story begins, the neighbor seems to be the wounded man on the road. But by the end, the scribe tells us that the neighbor is the one traveling on that road, the Good Samaritan, the one who shows mercy. In a way, Jesus is telling us not to look for a neighbor to love, but rather to be a neighbor who loves.

In virtue ethics, we are first instructed to appreciate that being precedes doing and this is exactly the lesson that we are taught here. The parable is a lesson about imitating the Good Samaritan. Moreover, though often forgotten today, the Good Samaritan was first a narrative of Jesus' redemptive work and only then a call to imitation. The parable reveals the mercy of Jesus.

Throughout history, many preachers and theologians have told the parable in this way: the wounded man was Adam, wounded by original sin and now exiled outside of the gates of the city, which was Paradise. Neither the Law nor the Prophets (the scribe nor the priest) were able to help Adam. Then one not from the land of Adam, Jesus, the Good Samaritan, found Adam, tended to him, and carried him on his mule to the inn which is the church. There Jesus paid an initial

price, our salvation, which will be paid in full, our redemption when Jesus returns again at the end of time to take Adam into the kingdom. Jesus is the neighbor who has entered our chaos to rescue and save us. The incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus--that is, the saving mission of Jesus--was understood as a life of mercy. That life of mercy is what the disciples of Jesus are to live as they follow the one who goes before them.

Virtues never stand alone

It is very important to appreciate that the virtues are related to one another. After Plato realized the inadequacy of the Socratic belief that all one needed to be virtuous was the one virtue of what we today call prudence or practical reason, we have always understood that to be virtuous we need more than one virtue! We have learned that standing up for justice requires not only a just mind and will but a prudential judgment, a courageous spirit, and a balanced or temperate disposition. In other words, shrewd intelligence is not enough: our emotional, spiritual and intellectual capabilities or powers need to be developed on a lot of levels and they cannot be developed individually.

Just as we know that being open minded is no guarantee for being intelligent, so too we know that the way to virtue requires an attentiveness to the multitude of dispositions that animate us day in and out. We cannot get by on good intentions or a restful spirit; we need to examine those very different powers at work in us so that, if we are to realize our dreams, we need to look at what moves us, what directs us, and what warns us.

Behind the thesis of the cardinal virtues, for instance, is the premise that human beings are complex and that if we do not understand and respond to that complexity, we will never grow virtuously. The virtues are called "cardinal" from the Latin word *cardo*, which means "hinge." They are cardinal because they are "principal" in that they are fundamental hinges upon which hangs our image of the moral person. As Josef Pieper (1966) taught us, Thomas Aquinas wrote that these four virtues rightly order all our appetitive and intellectual powers that enable us to act: prudence orders our practical reason; justice orders the will, or our intellectual appetite; temperance and fortitude order the passions, which are divided into the concupiscible, or desiring power, and the irascible, or struggling power, respectively. The four virtues are

cardinal because they sufficiently order all the components within us that are engaged in moral action.

Likewise, there are three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. Though charity is the only virtue that exists in that next life, charity cannot live in this life without faith as its foundation and hope as its ground of sustainability. Like the cardinal virtues, even these gifts from God do not come into our lives as singular or solo. The function of the virtues is to connect.

Virtues are fundamentally social

Throughout this essay, I have been presuming that virtues are social, even, for instance, a virtue like self-care which allows a person to be a mature adult able to meet the needs of oneself but also it supports the same person's ability to participate in the greater common good project. We have just seen the intrinsic relationality of virtues: there can be no prudence without justice, nor vice versa; there is no charity without faith. This inter-dependence mean that virtues are disposed to animate not only the powers within a person but more importantly to incorporate the person into the human network of virtue. Any virtue is never solely concerned with a personal good, but always also with the common good.

In her essay on justice as a virtue in the reform of prisons, Kathryn Getek Soltis (2011) argued not for the virtue of justice for one prisoner, but for all prisoners. But she also saw that virtue as needing to be realized in the lives of all prison guards as well as in the treatment of them by their employers. Moreover, justice must of necessity be considered in the lives of the families of the prisoners and the families of the guards as well as in the neighborhoods where prisons are built and function.

Virtue ethics is, as we have seen, a fairly comprehensive ethics, not surprisingly then we can say that these claims about justice as a virtue for reform, requires us to think of not only the character traits or dispositions that need to be within each and all of these participants, but also that the appropriate practices, rules, norms, and policies of prison life must also be reformed by the same virtue. We cannot look at this claim about the social nature of virtue and argue that only justice is social, but not prudence. The prudential judgment of a prisoner or of a guard, of a warden or of a parole board must be socially informed, socially expressed, and socially accountable. Similarly, their fortitude and temperance must also be socially understood.

The more we look at the virtues and appreciate that no virtue can stand alone, the more we realize the social function and goal of virtues and their practices. For this reason, we see the extraordinary usefulness of virtue ethics in articulating the mission and other identity statements of schools, parishes, corporations, healthcare facilities and correction facilities. When institutions look to express their goals and the attendant practices and policies to realize those goals, they inevitably turn to the language of virtue for a comprehensive expression of their presence and work. This ought to come, at this point in our reflections, as no surprise.

Identity needs a story, as the late William Spohn (2002: 81-82) reminds us.He writes that 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." In other words, our identity is shaped by our membership in a community. The nature of virtue is, therefore, the pursuit of a human good that is necessarily corporate. There are two major claims here. First, the 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 an important resource for 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 is one and the same good as that of those others with whom one is bound in human community. Therefore, MacIntyre, (2007: 151) insists that a community is "a common project that brings about some good recognized as their shared good by all those engaging the project." In other words, the central bond of a community is "the shared vision of and understanding of goods (2007: 258)." These goods are the virtues themselves: communities seek to become just, hospitable, respectful.

Similarly, religious traditions found in virtue ethics the right medium for expressing their ends, goals, and forms of life. Like other identity statements, religious formulas easily depend on virtue language to express the theological anthropology that does and ought to shape their communities of faith. For instance, in Christianity, as Lúcás Chan (2013, 2015) teaches us Scripture is the story of a people called and led by God to be a distinctive community and a particular type of people.

Character is thus central to all narratives and offers us the ethical meaning of Scripture; we are called to be like Abraham, Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, Paul, Peter, John, and the others. When biblical ethicists like Chan and Spohn ask what ethics should I use to understand the biblical claims on me they turn t virtue and when preachers ask themselves how will they translate Sundays readings into a homily they turn to virtue.

Similarly, in our now more-emerging globalized world, we see more and more cross-cultural dialogue. This is very important for work throughout Asia as Lúcás Chan made clear in his writings on Asian Theological ethics (see George Griener and James Keenan, 2017) This can take the form of inter-religious dialogue or something much more secular, but in any of these cases, the dialogue is made possible by virtue language. These attempts at dialogue are not attempts to find the same virtue in a different culture. Rather, appreciating that no virtue stands alone, real inter-religious dialogue, for instance, depends on our ability to appreciate how different sets of virtue express an anthropological vision that can be compared and contrasted cross-culturally. One very important instance of this is the dialogue between Christians and Confucians where we have seen over the past twenty years works by philosophers and theologians comparing the virtue systems intrinsic to each tradition.

Conclusion

Hopefully, we can see the enormous resourcefulness of virtue ethics. Not surprisingly it is the form of ethics for Aristotle, Aquinas, and Confucius, as well as Paul, Jesus, and Plato. But its strengths emerge today in the 21st century particularly as we try to understand our place in the world. Turning to virtue, we can begin to discern not only who or where we are, but also who we could become. At this time in history, its strengths are more attractive than ever in helping us with character formation.

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