Global Faculty Initiative

The Faculty Initiative

seeks to promote the integration

of Christian faith and academic disciplines

by bringing theologians into conversation with scholars

across the spectrum of faculties

in research universities

worldwide.

www.globalfacultyinitiative.net

Theology Brief Postscript

THE VIRTUES

Jennifer Herdt

Gilbert L. Stark Professor of Christian Ethics, Yale Divinity School
Senior Associate Dean of Faculty Affairs
Professor of Religious Studies

The various responses to the Theology Brief on the Virtues, whether in the form of Preview Responses, Disciplinary Briefs, or Disciplinary Notes, make for wonderfully stimulating reading. I am grateful to all who took the time to read and respond to the Brief or the Preview (and sometimes both!), and who have given us all such food for reflection. I shall not be able to respond to each and every insight. What I have sought to do is to organize my reflections on the responses under a relatively small group of themes. These are sometimes, but not always, linked with academic disciplines. For instance, I found that common themes emerged in reflection on the virtues in relation to teaching, learning, and the conduct of research, regardless of the discipline of the practitioner. And since we are a community of academics, and this context is one that we share, let me take that as a natural starting point, before proceeding to reflections related to institutional virtues and vices, economics, digital technologies, law, epistemic vice and virtue, moralism, flourishing and the therapeutic mindset, and friendship with God.

Virtues in Teaching, Learning, and Research

GFI scholars are keenly aware of the need for a host of virtues in educational and research contexts, and concerned about the ways in which these contexts often tend instead to facilitate the cultivation of various vices. Hubertus Roebben, Pauline Chiu, and Rafael Vicuña all worry about the damaging effects on character of a publish or perish research environment. Pressure to deliver outcomes, and quickly, elbows out attention to complexity and the kind of deep, substantial reflection that issues from “slow research” (Roebben). Along with compromises in the quality of research, it is often students who suffer, as supervisors exploit their labor and fail to provide either formation or worthy role models (Chiu, Vicuña). If faculty do not display the necessary virtues of generosity, justice, courage, humility, and selflessness (Dean, Gill, Kong), how are students to be expected to cultivate these dispositions, rather than simply reproducing the deformations they experience all around them?

Nicholas Wolterstorff, while also very much alive to these characteristic deformations of academic life,

begins to provide a response here by reminding us not just of the virtues needed in the (philosophy) classroom, but also of the attractions of the life of the mind. Nearly all of us fell in love with this life at some point along the way. We did not choose our disciplines for the sake of success and prestige, since success and prestige are external goods, available through many avenues. [1] Rather, we encountered something particular about philosophy or economics or psychology or what have you, something that we found deeply appealing, that fascinated or stymied or moved us, that activated our minds and released our energies. We are not used to thinking of bafflement or amazement as virtues. Indeed, typically they are not—they are attitudes or experiences, not stable dispositions. But there is no reason that we can't speak of a stable disposition to be baffled or amazed in ways that are perfective of action and character, and this would be virtuous bafflement or virtuous amazement.

We happened, then, upon goods internal to the practice of a particular academic discipline, and these goods drew us in much as a virtuous exemplar draws us in, exciting our admiration and emulation. And, truth be told, in many instances it was through a virtuous exemplar of the discipline that we first came alive to its charms. We wanted not just to grasp those thoughts, or that style of thinking, but we wanted to be like that person, made more vibrantly alive through their grasp of these distinctive internal goods. Oliver O'Donovan's observation about the ways in which talk of the virtues focuses our attention on admirable others offers a helpful response to those who worry that virtue ethics encourages preoccupation with oneself and one's own character: "when we talk about virtues, we disengage ourselves from our own preoccupations with acting and seek to 'distinguish what is excellent' as seen in the lives of others."

Augustine explored this dynamic in a particularly powerful way. The acquisition of the virtues, he argued, is not merely a matter of training via repetition, habituation into certain patterns of action. It requires a transformation of the heart and will, an ordering of our loves to genuine goods and ultimately to God, Goodness itself. This takes place insofar as God reveals Godself, God's supreme beauty, to us. And this transformation can be mediated through the lives of others and even through texts. One of Augustine's favorite examples is of the power of a narrative, the *Life of Antony*. He relates a story told by Ponticianus of an imperial agent who, happening upon a copy of the *Life of Antony*, "began to read it, marvelled at it, was inflamed by it," inspired to devote his life to seeking friendship with God. [2]

Something of this dynamic is at work in the kind of transformation involved in the development of any virtue, as it involves the way we perceive and feel as well as judge. Reconnecting with this living water, the attractions of wealth and prestige fade. A critical first step is to reconnect with whatever has mediated for us this disclosure of the Good. From this flows the power to resist careerism and to begin to cultivate the array of virtues to which respondents so eloquently point.

Can Institutions Display Virtues and Vices?

Reflection on the ways in which educational institutions facilitate the cultivation of various vices and virtues leads us to a question posed by both Terence Halliday and Donald Hay: can we speak of

organizations or institutions as having virtues and vices, as being more or less just, temperate, or prudent? Chris Marshall, meanwhile, speaks unhesitatingly of “institutional character.”

We Can Speak Analogously

In my Preview on the virtues, I suggested that institutions form character and in turn are formed by the character of the people who constitute them. In the Brief itself, I expand on the critical role that social practices, communities, and institutions play (or fail to play) in enabling persons to develop and sustain the virtues. Strictly speaking, virtues cannot be attributed to institutions. This is because virtues, strictly speaking, are dispositions of individual persons, stable tendencies to feel, perceive, respond, judge, and act in good ways, perfective of the agent and of the common good. I do suggest, however, that “we can speak analogously of virtuous institutions when their organizing principles and daily practices are such as to support the virtues of those who inhabit them.”

Oliver O’Donovan, in his response, shows that this approach can be taken further: “we refer intelligibly... to the ‘virtues’ of institutions, for though this use of the term is an analogy it is a perfectly valid one. Institutions resemble human agents in embodying a consciousness of some good and a purpose of realizing it.” This is helpful. Aristotle emphasized that the virtuous agent does not merely habitually perform good acts, but chooses their actions deliberately and voluntarily, precisely in order to act well. As O’Donovan notes, institutions can articulate the ends they seek (for instance, in mission statements) and work to ensure that their policies and practices align with these ends. An institution that is organized solely around the maximization of profit is dramatically different from one that seeks to enable a decent life for all its employees, offering products that enhance the lives of those who purchase them and creating a work environment that honors the dignity of all of those touched by the company. We can certainly—and quite profitably—speak of the virtues of such an organization, characterizing it as just and practically wise, perhaps even generous. On the contrary, a company that seeks only to maximize shareholder value, allowing that end to justify any means available, is bound to be deeply vicious, even if its practices remain within the bounds of legality. It will be likely to exploit and overwork its employees, manipulate and deceive customers, and yield products of little value. Nonprofit organizations exist to provide a public good or social benefit, with the requirement that revenues must be directed to the organization’s purpose, so it is easier for a nonprofit organization to resist being derailed by the pursuit of external goods. Yet as we see in the case of universities, for instance, this is no guarantee of institutional virtue. Many universities allow prestige, “rankings,” to shoulder out commitment to the substantive internal goods of knowledge and creative inquiry for which they were created. For-profit and nonprofit organizations alike can become vitiated despite the articulation of lofty purposes, when their internal workings are not effectively aligned with these purposes. An institutional culture of backbiting and cutthroat competition can render a workplace inimical to human flourishing, regardless of any lofty mission statements. With institutions as with individuals, certain virtues can exist alongside other vices, but any institutional vice serves to vitiate the whole.

Terence Halliday, in his Disciplinary Brief on “Courage and Prudence in China’s Human Rights Struggles,”

offers a powerful example of the virtues and vices not just of institutions, but also of more loosely organized communities, such as the community of human rights lawyers in China, who band together in ways that support collective discernment and sustain commitment to justice in the face of a host of threats and active persecution. We cannot make sense of the extraordinary courage displayed by these human rights lawyers without attending to the way in which community here serves as a "carrier" of the virtues of courage and prudence.

Can virtuous individuals exist within vicious organizations?

Yes, to be sure, but they will chafe at the institutional context in which they find themselves. Chris Marshall notes (pointing to the criminal justice system as an example) that it seems at times that complex institutional forces are at work that seem to defeat the good intentions of individuals at work within them, and this is certainly true. Such individuals can work towards the transformation of institutional character by seeking to articulate genuine goods towards which the institutions can or ought to be oriented, by identifying policies and practices that disproportionately elevate external goods, and by seeking to foster just and caring institutional cultures. The kind of contribution that an individual can make to improving institutional character is constrained by the role of the individual within the institution. Some workers have little influence on organizational policies and practices, while others have immense power for transformation.

Karen Kong makes an important point in this connection: Christians might in some contexts "face the choice of whether to continue to stay on to practice virtues against institutions or political pressure at a high cost and a risk of their own fallenness and stifling, or to sever from those institutions and authorities and find a more nurturing place that enable them to better promote human flourishing." As Terence Halliday and Karen Man Yee Lee also point out, standing up against authoritarian regimes can require great courage and involve intense suffering. How might a decision of this kind be made well? Implicit in Kong's articulation of the situation are some of the relevant considerations. Does remaining within the institution bring with it meaningful opportunities to transform it towards justice? Does the individual have the skills and virtues necessary to enact such a transformation, or are they likely only to be broken by the experience? Do others exist with whom common action could be undertaken? Does the individual have special obligations towards particular others who would be deeply affected by the decision to remain or to sever institutional ties? I know persons who have left the academy, or a particular institution, for reasons of conscience, believing that they were not capable of transforming existing structures. Some are whole and at peace; others broken and bitter. It takes the virtue of practical wisdom to reflect well on how to respond to such challenging situations, and the virtue of courage to make and follow through on a difficult and costly decision. Self-knowledge, too, is key: one who thinks they have greater courage and perseverance and practical wisdom than they in fact possess is likely to attempt something of which they are not capable.

Kong asks how Christians might be supported in decision-making processes of this kind. For starters, we do well to reflect on the kind of support that fellow Christians and church communities, can play in situations

like this. [3] It need not be a matter of a single virtuous individual arrayed against the power of a corrupt institution, where there is community and institutional power of a very different kind supporting that individual. Terence Halliday makes this point very powerfully in his reflections on human rights lawyers in China. Christian faith that human virtue is in need of divine grace for its perfection goes hand in hand with a recognition of virtue's fundamentally frail and dependent character. Empirical studies have suggested that virtues are often highly local and context dependent, acquiring whatever stability they have by way of stability in social situation. [4] (This relates to the important point about relational selfhood, and the co-dependency of individuals in community, made by Manuel Morales in his Preview Response.) If the virtues are typically socially dependent, it underscores the potential significance of Christian churches and their many liturgical and paraliturgical practices as offering robust social support for the cultivation of the virtues. Research on meditation and compassion suggests that those who regularly call to mind the needs of others, dwell on their common humanity, idealize caring responses to the marginalized and disempowered, in the context of communities that prize and practice these same forms of attention and responsiveness, become more likely to develop robust dispositions of compassion and generosity. [5] The flip side of the confession of virtue's fragile and dependent character is confidence in the power of divine grace, working through the life of the church, to strengthen all-too-human virtues. This does not mean that every Christian should remain within a corrupt institution to work for its transformation; the wise and courageous action may be to leave, if that is an option, rather than stay.

Economics and the Virtues in Markets and Commerce

Above, I noted the ways in which a narrow focus on the maximization of profit or shareholder value vitiates the character of for-profit companies. Several respondents had important observations to make that relate to this point. As Susan Thorp notes, the principle of maximizing shareholder value "conveniently offers an 'escape clause' for corporations' choices that neglect virtue and damage people, exploit the environment and degrade community and institutions." Ever since Adam Smith, the notion of the invisible hand has been invoked to legitimate self-interested economic behavior as facilitating the efficient workings of markets. Bernard Mandeville argued that private vices gave rise to public benefits. Smith, however, was quite aware that reliance on the invisible hand would not give rise to a decent society, and that efficient markets do not guarantee equity. [6] Much of the discipline of economics is directed at the analysis of unintended consequences of human action that arise through large scale patterns of interaction. The virtues, in contrast, have to do with intentional action; virtuous agent acts in ways they know to be good precisely because they grasp the goodness of so acting. Bringing these two ways of thinking about human action together in ways that serve the common good has proven to be no easy task.

Susan Thorp points out that the mathematical models of financial economics need not assume that economic actors are purely self-interested. If I derive greater satisfaction from drinking coffee produced under fair trade conditions than from coffee not subject to such constraints, this can be captured in my utility function. These models can be useful for description and prediction. At a deeper level, however,

these models encourage a kind of homogenizing in which all action is seen as aimed at maximizing utility. And this may have the perverse effect of encouraging self-interest by legitimizing an approach to life conceived in terms of maximizing one's own utility.

The analysis of human behavior in terms of incentives can also have the insidious effect of encouraging a view of human persons as manipulable targets of social engineering rather than as active reflective agents of their own lives. In his Preview Response, Donald Hay draws attention to literature suggesting "that the emphasis on incentives in the standard presentations of economic behaviour in economics departments and business schools has eroded the virtuous character of a new generation of economic actors involved in running corporations." While I argued that universities should avoid creating perverse incentive structures that reward cutthroat careerism, I agree with Samuel Bowles (2016) that "good incentives are no substitutes for good citizens."

Gordon Menzies and Donald Hay offer a richly developed Disciplinary Brief on Economics and the Virtues that rewards careful reading. As they note, there are literatures reaching back to the 18th century that explore the question of how markets and commerce shape character, with advocates of "doux commerce" arguing that commercial exchanges foster a host of virtues from honesty and reliability to friendliness and helpfulness, while their opponents worried that market exchanges foster selfishness and crowd out virtues nurtured in the family, churches, and other civil society institutions. I find persuasive their nuanced conclusion that "the 'self-destruction' effect in market economies is likely to be widespread in economic behavior, and that the more optimistic doux commerce effect is present, but is probably not robust unless sustained by a moral framework imported from outside the market." Inasmuch as market incentives now permeate all corners of society, this is a matter of grave concern. The cultivation of the virtues requires social contexts in which agents learn to value and engage in practices for the sake of intrinsic rather than extrinsic goods. We might for starters think here of children who learn that helping out around the house is a way of participating in the loving community of the family, not something they can do if they want to earn pocket change but otherwise can leave to others. I am reminded of a recent interview in the New York Times with Robert Putnam, whose study of the erosion of civil society institutions in *Bowling Alone* offered such a penetrating analysis of American society. [7] "We're not going to fix polarization, inequality, social isolation until, first of all, we start feeling we have an obligation to care for other people," notes Putnam. [8] I would add that we need not merely a feeling of obligation to care but actual caring for others. Learning to care is bound up with the cultivation of the virtues and requires contexts in which we see and feel how beautiful, how attractive, is a life of such loving care. Christians encounter this beauty in Jesus Christ, and churches have the capacity (whether or not always realized) to embody it day by day.

Do Digital Technologies Enhance or Subvert the Virtues?

Priscila Viera poses critically important questions concerning digital technologies: are these technologies neutral with respect to the virtues? Can we neatly detach the medium from the message? Are phenomena like social exclusion, individualism, and the fostering of extremism inevitable results of certain

technologies, or could the same media also generate community and compassion? These are poignant questions, given the great enthusiasm that greeted the birth of the internet, with many hailing it as an unprecedented boon for global connection and democracy. Now, three decades later, we are more aware of the destructive outworkings of these technologies. The human drive for social connection is easily manipulable, and algorithms designed to maximize profits for Facebook and Google feed polarization, echo chambers, and flash-in-the-pan virality over kindness, truth, and boundary-crossing love. This does not mean that digital technologies generally, or social media in particular, inevitably feed the vices. It does highlight the moral dangers of allowing the drive to maximize profits to operate without constraints.

Jocelyn Downey, Victor Li, and Jacqueline Lam raise a related set of questions in their response to the Brief, "Virtue Ethics and Development of an Ethical AI for Social Good." There is intense attention at present to the need to develop a so-called "ethical AI," given the increasing autonomy of digital systems ranging from self-driving cars to weapons systems capable of making "decisions" without human intervention. Might a virtue ethical approach be helpful here, they ask? And might "nature itself facilitate development of a bottom-up ethical framework when trained on big data taken across diverse languages and cultures?" This is a fascinating question, given Christian faith that the world, as highlighted by theologian Nigel Biggar in his Brief on "Created Order," is the creation of a rational Creator and thus evinces a created order. Might that order come into view as AI systems capable of analyzing vast quantities of data discern patterns indiscernible by human intelligence? Just this has been suggested by theologian Jordan Joseph Wales, who argues that a neural network can begin "to resonate with the entangled relations implicit in our world, including relations not easily discerned or logically represented by human investigators." A neural network is "receptive to, imprinted by the structure of the world as presented to it." [9] The problem with using such methods to try to drive a bottom-up development of ethical AI, and in particular to develop a kind of common morality in the midst of global ethical diversity, is that the patterns discerned by neural networks will be the patterns of a fallen creation. As Downey, Li, and Lam note, "AI should carefully avoid being misguided by the inherent order exhibited by data, which may likely reflect the worldviews and behaviours of the sinful as well as Christian virtues." [10]

Downey, Li, and Lam highlight some of the challenges that attend the attempt to imbue AI systems with the virtues, noting that "if an AI is trained to adjust its behaviour according to the virtues of beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and explicability, in each case a judgment is needed through trained data provided with given rules, as to whether a behaviour is beneficent, just, maleficent, or explicable." They therefore suggest a hybrid approach in which virtues are constrained by rules. These are valuable observations. A common approach of data ethicists involves articulating a list of principles that AI systems should honor in order to be ethical. Beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and explicability are often on the lists (reflecting the influence of the principlist approach to medical ethics developed by Beauchamp and Childress). [11] It is helpful to note the difference between principles and virtues. In medicine, the principle of benevolence expresses the commitment to the importance of medical treatment that actually benefits the patient. Principles must be specified and balanced in relation to other principles; they are not immediately action-guiding. A virtue is a stable disposition to respond well in response to salient

considerations in some particular domain. It is possible to endorse the principle of benevolence, and to strive to embed that principle in various systems, while lacking the virtues of love and kindness. One might, for instance, work to ensure that an AI system is benevolent solely in order to protect the public reputation of the company that created it.

Downey, Li, and Lam propose a hybrid approach in which "virtues are constrained by a series of hard consequences or rules." Substituting "principles" in place of "virtues" here, I agree that principles must be specified through rules, for instance, in training self-driving cars. But there is an additional complication here. Rules must be applied to situations, and the virtues are needed in order to apply rules wisely. Regardless of how specific the rule, situations will always arise in which there is ambiguity and lack of precedent. Are we prepared to offload responsibility for such judgments to autonomous systems that function as black boxes and that cannot be held responsible? Or does the ineliminability of wise judgment mean that human beings must always be kept in the loop and autonomous machine intelligence kept at bay?

What is the Role of Law in Relation to the Virtues?

These reflections on the critical importance of judgment lead nicely into responses from the area of law. Karen Kong notes that the presence of discretionary powers in law means that virtues will always be required. And Nicholas Aroney, emphasizes that "prudent governance will not consist simply in the multiplication of rules in order to secure good conduct. The particular situations to which rules must be applied are too contingent and complex for a discrete set of rules, no matter how sophisticated and comprehensive, to provide sufficient guidance for good conduct in every situation." Instead of multiplying legislation, we need greater support for civil society organizations that help to form the virtues in their participants. Like Putnam (and other distinguished thinkers, notably Jacques Maritain), Aroney regards these institutions as the key to forming persons of good character. I agree. I am not confident, though, that greater government support of civil society institutions will in and of itself bring people back into the pews. We may need more Spirit-led innovation within these institutions (and notably within the churches) in order to respond effectively to the major cultural shifts that have led to decline.

Anna High offers a nuanced set of reflections on the capacity of a legal system to facilitate or hinder the development of virtues among those governed by it. Certainly we can see how law evolves in response to changing societal norms. For instance, as High notes, the legal understanding of rape now reflects greater regard for human dignity. In the United States, for instance, more states now define rape by reference to lack of consent rather than by reference to the presence of coercion. Indeed, some states define rape by reference to the lack of affirmative consent. High raises important questions about the permissibility of using law as a tool to effect changes in societal norms. Would it be appropriate, for instance, legally to require affirmative consent in a jurisdiction in which this would mean that ubiquitous and previously permissible sexual activity would become criminal? I am a bit hesitant on this score. Where a broad-based social consensus exists, law can be a tool for ethical formation. In the absence of such consensus, I doubt

that law can serve as an effective tool for this purpose. Legislating high ideals can be counterproductive, eliciting disrespect for the law. This argument goes back to Thomas Aquinas, who argued that law should be framed for the many, who are far from perfect in character. It should be aimed at more severe forms of viciousness from which the majority are capable of abstaining. If the law sought to legislate perfection, people would become hostile to the law and this would defeat its purpose: “the purpose of human law is to lead men to virtue, not suddenly, but gradually. Wherefore it does not lay upon the multitude of imperfect men the burdens of those who are already virtuous, viz., that they should abstain from all evil. Otherwise these imperfect ones, being unable to bear such precepts, would break out into yet greater evils.” [12]

Epistemic Virtue and Vice

A cluster of respondents highlight epistemic virtues and vices, that is, virtues and vices related to beliefs, their acquisition and revision. Epistemic virtues assist their possessors in arriving at the truth. They also govern discursive exchanges, how we engage with others, in our pursuit of truth. Michael Spence notes that epistemic virtues for the conduct of effective discourse are of particular importance in the context of universities. Allan Bell, coming from the perspective of sociolinguistics, highlights the virtues of speaking and listening. John Inazu raises concerns about the ways in which the meanings of key ethical concepts, like “equality” and “justice,” are often distorted, with the loudest or most influential voices able not merely to capture attention, but to reshape collective perception and judgment. Daniel Hastings, meanwhile, asks how we are to respond to the challenges that surround the post-truth phenomenon, in which basic facts are disputed and lies accepted as truth no matter the evidence.

These issues have received considerable attention in recent years within so-called “vice epistemology.” Quassim Hassan, for instance, has studied the epistemic vices of “closed-mindedness, intellectual arrogance, wishful thinking, and prejudice,” analyzing what makes them resistant to change and how we can begin to transform them. [13] Miranda Fricker has analyzed epistemic injustice, in which persons are injured specifically in their capacity as knowers, their voices systematically discounted because of their membership in some subordinated group. Fricker proposes virtues of epistemic justice that can begin to remedy these injustices and correct these vices. [14]

Clearly there is an urgent need for better education that assists persons in evaluating the reliability of sources and helps them understand, for instance, the fact that social media algorithms are designed to boost engagement, not to track truth. It is also important to study and make widely known the ways in which human beings tend to form in-groups and out-groups and systematically discount the perspectives of members of out-groups. [15] A major challenge is the erosion of social trust within highly polarized societies. This is a self-reinforcing process in which distrust breeds polarization and polarization exacerbates distrust. In the face of ingrained distrust, education cannot get off the ground. Rebuilding trust is no easy matter and likely requires face-to-face engagement in activities that are not politically freighted, to return again to Robert Putnam’s insights. [16] With the institutions of civil society eroding, from churches to bowling leagues, it is not clear where this kind of engagement will take place. I have

argued for the importance of understanding how groups that perceive their social influence eroding are tempted to engage in partisan epistemology. Sadly, this includes Christian faith communities, which are often tempted to engage in epistemic insulation as a protective mechanism. Jesus facing Pilate offers an alternative model: disruptive engagement with a post-truth dominator. Jesus resists epistemic injustice and opens space for the building of unbounded communities of trust and shared understanding. [17]

Reckoning with Complexity and Avoiding the Vices of Moralism

In the 19th century, “moralism” referred to social movements to spread certain ethical commitments throughout society: the abolitionist and temperance movements are perhaps the best examples. Looking back, we may look rather quizzically at the latter, even as we admire the former as belated but nonetheless courageous and imperative. Over time, however, moralism itself has acquired negative connotations, no longer referring simply to the promotion of social causes on moral grounds, but to being too quick to issue moral judgements concerning others, or too quick to claim moral authority for oneself.

One good reason to be hesitant concerning moralizing social movements is that they often simplify a complex social reality. David Mahan makes a compelling case both for “the moral urgency of ambiguity” and for the importance of literature for assisting us to grasp both this ambiguity and its urgency. Literature activates our imaginations and exerts a strong affective pull. We are attracted (or repelled) by whole characters: we find ourselves wanting to be “like that” even where we cannot fully articulate just what it is that we find so attractive. Literature can wake us up, instill a sense of moral urgency, a sense that it matters, deeply, how we respond to what life hands us, and what sort of person we become. Mahan offers us rich examples. This is all music to my ears, and a theme I have myself explored elsewhere. [18] It is worth noting that literature, so understood, can be moralizing without being moralistic, that is, without issuing judgments on others or claiming undue authority; Mahan points to T.S. Eliot’s call for “criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint,” which was compatible with a dislike for preachiness. [19] One concern we might have about contemporary late modern societies is that they are characterized by a certain sort of incoherence: on the one hand, there is an intense dislike of exposure to the moral judgments of those with whom we disagree, while on the other hand, there is nevertheless a tendency to pronounce moral judgments on others within the safety of echo-chambers of the like-minded, or into the internet ether, in which no actual exchange is taking place. It is worth knowing that literature is “slow,” social media is “fast”; we need more social spaces today for decelerated reflection and judgment, spaces that allow for complexity and nuance.

I admire the work that John Peteet is doing to reintroduce the virtues into the arena of mental health. In the context of a therapeutic society, this has doubtless been an uphill battle (as for Tyler VanderWeele in the field of public health). Having considered the significance of virtues of self-control, benevolence, intelligence and positivity for clinical work, he is just getting started, and is now turning to incorporate a virtues-based perspective into diagnostic assessment, goal-setting, and treatment. “Clinicians typically

eschew the term ‘vice’ as moralistic,” he notes, “but maladaptive personality traits or disorders reflect perhaps the most obvious example of a need for virtues.” Doubtless talk of character strengths and vulnerabilities can gain an easier hearing than talk of vices or even of virtues. This is not necessarily a problem; choosing a vocabulary capable of gaining a hearing can be crucial, and the connotations of both “vice” and “virtue” can close ears and hearts. What is critical, as Peteet recognizes, is that whatever language we use empower the agency of patients. [20] Exclusive use of the paradigm of illness fosters passivity. The patient’s sense of their own agency in the process of moving towards flourishing must be activated. This involves coming to see one’s cares and emotions and motives and attitudes as one’s own even if not freely chosen, as woven into the selfhood with which one reflects and acts, even one can also take up a stand against some of these emotions and motives and seek their transformation. [21] This is a complex process in which, as Peteet notes, the wise therapist can play a valuable role. There is surely nothing moralistic here.

Alana Moore’s poignant observations about “Virtue Ethics vs. Virtue Signalling in the Global Humanitarian System” touch on some related concerns. Recipients of aid, like patients engaged in therapy, are placed in positions of passivity and thus in danger of having their agency be undermined. “There must be opportunity for the participants,” Moore suggests, “to grasp for themselves what is good and wise and honest, and to desire to be the kind of person who is defined by such attributes.” Virtuous aid workers, meanwhile, are committed to “the mutual building up of equals in dignity and worth through the world they seek to bring into being together.” The worry that aid workers will be more preoccupied with their own goodness than with the preciousness of those who suffer, and the claims they make on others, is a real one; virtue signalling is indeed a vice, and one particularly endemic to humanitarian institutions. This does not mean, however, that the powerful and the vulnerable are not alike in need of virtues, and in particular “the overarching virtue of love to bind giver and receiver.” Our worries about moralism and virtue signalling must not be allowed to erode our capacity to name such truths.

Virtue and Flourishing beyond the Therapeutic Mindset

Tyler VanderWeele, Brendan Case, and Karen Man Yee Lee all take up the question of the relation of virtue to flourishing. VanderWeele and Case note empirical evidence for positive relationships between moral character and flourishing. Case points to a study by Harvard’s Human Flourishing Program that found that “even the self-assessed ‘commitment to promoting the good in all circumstances’ is highly predictive of future flourishing in many domains, including social relationships, life satisfaction, and even physical health.” Vanderweele refers to a multitude of studies showing that character-based interventions that promote gratitude, kindness, forgiveness, compassion, patience, and perseverance also have positive effects on happiness, sleep, physical health, depression and anxiety, and educational test scores. At the same time, Vanderweele notes that “good character, or virtue, is of course not only instrumentally valuable, but intrinsically important in its own right.” Virtue is constitutive of flourishing, not merely instrumental to flourishing. This is a critically important point. And it is helpful to distinguish different kinds of flourishing. It is possible to sleep well, have good physical health, high test scores, and be free of

depression and anxiety without having the virtues, even if having the virtues can under certain circumstances conduce to these forms of well-being. It is not possible to flourish *tout court*, *as a human being*, however, without the virtues. The virtues perfect our agency and responsiveness to the good such that we respond well regardless of the situations in which we find ourselves.

This is important for absorbing the force of the observations made by Karen Man Yee Lee and Terence Halliday, who point to the virtues of courage and justice that can strengthen persons risking liberty and livelihood in the face of authoritarian regimes. Here the virtues equip persons to act well in highly difficult situations. At the same time, the exercise of the virtues of courage and justice here can issue in "enormous human suffering." What are we to say about the connection between virtue and flourishing here? It might seem that having the virtues in this context positively detracts from flourishing; the courageous protester ends up in prison, say, while the ordinary compliant citizen remains free to sleep at home in their beds, receiving quality health care and sending their children to excellent schools.

I have argued that we need to put this differently. [22] The life of the virtues can certainly be accompanied by great suffering. The virtues never, though, detract from flourishing. The virtues equip persons to flourish as fully as possible under the circumstances they confront. We should not be surprised that the virtues are ordinarily conducive to having good physical and mental health, for the virtues bring harmony among our desires, emotions, and judgments and form us such that we find it intrinsically pleasant to act well. We do not always find ourselves in ordinary circumstances, however. We may continue to take satisfaction in acting well in the face of a murderous regime; this does not mean that we enjoy the violations we suffer under such a regime. To the Stoic who insists that the sage is happy even when tortured on the rack, I say that the sage is as happy as it is possible to be given those circumstances, since the sage (by definition one perfect in virtue) responds perfectly to the situation and all the various goods at stake in that situation. Responding differently (say, by betraying the cause and escaping torture) would only make the sage more miserable. The virtuous may have to relinquish worthy projects made impossible by circumstances; at an extreme, they may have to give up their lives. As Oliver O'Donovan wisely notes, "sometimes ideals formed by admiration of a worthy object and admirable in themselves may still not be the right guide to the circumstances in which God has placed us." Christians should not be surprised to hear that perfect happiness is found only in the eschaton.

Grace, the Virtues, and Friendship with God

Christopher Hayes and K.K. Yeo offer rich reflections on the ways in which the cultivation of the virtues can be furthered through intercultural and interreligious exchange. Encounters with those from other traditions makes us aware of both commonalities and local peculiarities. Such encounters can be mutually enriching and transformative. My understanding of the virtues as both acquired and infused, and of the Holy Spirit as unbounded by human cultures and institutions, is hospitable to these encounters. We are called to friendship with God, and friendship involves the free and knowing embrace of intimacy with the friend. That the virtues are ultimately perfected by this friendship does not mean that those who do not seek

friendship with God have no virtues, or that Christians have nothing to learn from them. [23]

Oliver O'Donovan points to the fact that the Greek Church Fathers regarded love not as a virtue but as an operation of the Holy Spirit, pointing to the insufficiency of virtue and to our dependence on grace. [24] Thomas Aquinas took a different route to a similar end, affirming love's standing among the virtues but regarding the gifts of the Holy Spirit as additional habits or dispositions that perfect the theological and cardinal virtues by rendering their possessor receptive to the workings of the Holy Spirit. There is a shared affirmation here of the need for a grace that, in O'Donovan's words, "allows our various dispositions and powers to come together to serve God's purposes effectively." Our personal resources, however well-developed, do not suffice to fit us for friendship with God. They are perfected as we are opened up to, and learn to rely on, the power of grace in our lives. This is a lesson that any experience of love begins to teach us, but that faith teaches us to begin to name.

End Notes

[1] On external vs. internal goods, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 187–192.

[2] Augustine, *Confessions* Book 8 VIII, ch.6, 137. See the discussion in Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 66–71.

[3] This is a topic I address in "Frailty, Fragmentation, and Social Dependency in the Cultivation of Christian Virtue," in *Cultivating Virtue: Perspectives from Philosophy, Theology, and Psychology*, ed. Nancy Snow, Oxford University Press, 227-250. I draw from that essay here.

[4] Even situationist John Doris argues for this conclusion, *Lack of Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 65.

[5] The research on the topic is exploding, but here is a striking recent example: in a study at Northeastern University, researchers found that 50% of subjects who had just completed an 8-week course in meditation offered to help a person on crutches and in evident pain, compared with 15% of non-meditators—and even though others in the room ignored the person in need, setting up classic conditions for the bystander effect. P. Condon, G. Desbordes, W. Miller, D. DeSteno, "Meditation increases compassionate responses to suffering," *Psychological Science,* (in press). Discussed in Northeastern Press release, http://www.northeastern.edu/cos/2013/04/release-can-meditation-make-you-a-more-compassionate-person/, accessed 5/25/13.

[6] This is not unrelated to Ian Harper's astute observations concerning the many virtues required for wise decisions in the arena of central banking: formal models may be indispensable but cannot substitute for justice, prudence, courage, and love.

[7] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

[8] Lulu Garcia-Navarro, "Robert Putnam Knows Why You're Lonely," *New York Times Magazine*, July 13, 2024.

[9] Jordan Joseph Wales, "Metaphysics, Meaning, and Morality: A Theological Reflection on AI," *Journal of Moral Theology* 11.1 (2022): 165–166.

[10] Jocelyn Downey, Victor Li, and Jacqueline Lam, "Virtue Ethics and Development of an Ethical AI for Social Good," Disciplinary Brief.

[11] Brent Mittelstadt, "Principles Alone Cannot Guarantee Ethical AI," *Nature Machine Intelligence* https://doi.org/10.1038/s42256-019-0114-4.

[12] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.II.96.2.

[13] Quassim Hassan, *Vices of the Mind: From the Intellectual to the Political* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[14] Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[15] As Connie Svob notes in her Preview Response, understanding basic human cognitive processes is itself critically important and a contribution that can be made by cognitive science.

[16] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon

and Shuster, 2000).

[17] Jennifer A. Herdt, “Partisan Epistemology and Post-Truth Power,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 35.1: 3-15.

[18] Jennifer A. Herdt, *Forming Humanity: Redeeming the German Bildungsroman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

[19] T. S. Eliot, “Religion and Literature,” In *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, 1933.

[20] Javier Sánchez-Cañizares suggests that virtue and free will go hand in hand, in that humans develop virtues by “freely choosing their goals in life.” I agree, in that freedom, I would argue, is realized in knowingly choosing the good. See also Oliver O’Donovan’s perceptive comments on decision and choice in his Disciplinary Brief, “The Place of the Virtues in Christian Ethics.”

[21] Robert Merrihew Adams, “Involuntary Sins,” *The Philosophical Review* 94 (1985): 3–31; Jesse Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin, Cured by Christ: Agency, Necessity, and Culpability in Augustinian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jennifer A. Herdt, “Responsibility: A Human Distinctive?” *Zygon* 58.2 (2023): 504–521.

[22] Jennifer A. Herdt, *Assuming Responsibility: Ecstatic Eudaimonism and the Call to Live Well* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 114–115.

[23] On the subject of comparative theology of religions, I warmly recommend Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Orbis, 1995).

[24] Tim Maughan, too, makes this point in his Preview Response.

For more information

www.globalfacultyinitiative.net