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Theology Brief

THE VIRTUES

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How can reflection on the virtues help to shape the life of Christian discipleship? And how can we embody the virtues as scholars and in the life of the university? In this essay, I explain how the virtues enable us to move beyond a narrow focus on dos and don’ts; virtues form character and enable persons to flourish in community. I explore how Christian reflection on the virtues is rooted in the Bible while also being informed by ancient ethical reflection and able to connect fruitfully with other traditions. I discuss the processes by which virtues are acquired and developed, contrasting them with personality traits and skills. The task of differentiating the virtues from one another involves identifying the distinct challenges that confront us as we seek to live well; I unpack the four classical cardinal virtues along with the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, and discuss how Christian thinkers have understood the virtues in relationship to divine law. It is theologically important to understand how the virtues are gifts of divine grace and not a form of works righteousness; I also address how these commitments can go hand in hand with the affirmation of genuine virtues among non-Christians and the recognition of the imperfection of Christian virtues. The final sections of the essay address questions surrounding the virtues of institutions and the possibilities for cultivating the virtues in our scholarly lives, within our academic disciplines, and in the life of the university.

Why Virtues Matter

Often when we think of morality, we think first of rules or principles defining good action, which together comprise a code of conduct for behavior. Rules and principles, however, require people capable of putting them into practice. Principles must be interpreted in order to be applied, and this requires good judgment. Virtue ethics helps us think not just about discrete dos and don’ts, but in a much more holistic way, about how social groups, institutions and practices form personal character and in turn are shaped by the

character of the people who constitute them. Most fundamentally, virtue ethics is about how we can be formed to flourish as persons in community, formed to find our own good in shared goods. [1] Given this, it should come as no surprise that the virtues are salient for issues in every academic field and for all elements of the academic life.

The virtues, such as courage, kindness, and practical wisdom, are stable dispositions that enable an agent to respond and act well. An agent's virtues and vices together constitute their moral character. The virtues are perfective of actions and of the agent who performs those actions; they also thereby enable agents to contribute to the common good. The virtues of Christians are formed within the context of the life of the Church and support a life of faithful discipleship lived out in Church and world. Without the virtues, a person might sometimes act well, but will be unable to do so in a consistent way and for the right reasons. With the virtues, a person perceives, feels, desires, judges, and responds well, in ways appropriate to the complexities of situations. In the absence of the virtues, no moral code, however perfect, can ensure that we act well. The virtues are essential to living well as the embodied practical reasoners that we are, in right relationship with one another. They are therefore also essential to human flourishing in community.

Biblical Virtues

The Bible makes clear that Christians are summoned to a life of virtue. Jesus in the Beatitudes declares blessed or happy those whose character is marked by the virtues of meekness, justice, mercy, purity, peacefulness, and fidelity (Matthew 5: 3–11). Matthew's gospel shows Jesus both as epitomizing these virtues in his own life and as empowering his followers to develop them. Paul associates love with a multitude of other virtues: patience, kindness, humility, forgivingness, as well as faith and hope (1 Corinthians 13: 4–7; 13). 1 Peter, meanwhile, speaks of a purification of the soul that issues in "genuine mutual affection," reminding Christians that they are called to "be holy, for I [God] am holy" (1 Peter 1: 22; 16). 2 Peter calls Christians to "make every effort to support your faith with excellence, and excellence with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love" (2 Peter 1: 5–7). While developing these virtues requires effort on the part of believers, they are also assured that God's "divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness" so that they may become "participants of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1: 3–4). In Galatians 5, the virtues are described as "the fruit of the Spirit," and enumerated as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (5:22–23). The virtues are thus held up as forms of Christlikeness and godliness, transformations of character that involve human striving but that are at the same time gifts of grace.

While the Hebrew Bible is typically associated with divine commandments and thus with a legal morality, New Testament understandings of the virtues as forms of godliness are rooted in characterizations in the Hebrew Bible of God's faithfulness, mercy, compassion, and lovingkindness, that is, of God's virtues. The God of the Covenant is characterized above all by *hesed*, translated variously as "love and faithfulness," "unfailing love," "faithful love," "steadfast love," and "loyal love." To be called to be holy as God is holy is

thus to be called to develop this virtue of faithful love. Christians encounter this love most fully in Jesus.

The Virtues as Default Commonsense Ethical Reflection

That Christians understand the virtues to be grace-enabled does not mean that the presence of the virtues among non-Christians need be denied. As we shall discuss in a later section, the doctrine of common grace can help to make sense of the fact that neither reflection on the virtues nor the virtues themselves are exclusive to Christians. Explicit Christian reflection on the virtues, while rooted in the Bible, also drew extensively on the philosophical thought of ancient Greece and Rome. Ancient schools of thought varied, but all agreed that ethical reflection begins with asking, how ought I to live? with the virtues forming a critical part of the answer. [2] Greek and Roman virtue ethical traditions were absorbed into Christianity while also being transformed in decisive ways. This origin story does not mean, however, that virtue ethics is a characteristic solely of the West. All human communities identify virtuous and vicious character traits, and virtue ethics is a default form of commonsense ethical reflection across cultures and eras, albeit more highly theorized in some contexts than in others. Confucian thinkers offer highly refined discussions og the virtues that enable persons to live an admirable life. [3] Even ethical traditions heavily focused on law, such as we find in the Hebrew Bible, Rabbinic Judaism, and certain strands of Christianity, unite this with robust concern for the virtues and their cultivation. Proper obedience to the law requires stable dispositions, ranging from wise discernment to love of the law, which can be identified as virtues.

How Are the Virtues Acquired?

We Admire and Seek to Emulate:

The virtues are not inborn, but neither can they simply be taught. Virtues are like skills in that neither is innate, and both are acquired through a kind of learning by doing that is not a mere matter of copying or repetition but requires understanding and a capacity for improvisation in the context of new situations. Emulation of a virtuous exemplar is never simply a matter of rote imitation but involves a deepening grasp, affective as well as cognitive, of what is worth doing and being and why. From infancy, we come equipped with certain capacities and preferences, for empathy and compassion, for kindness and fairness. [4] These provide raw materials for the development of the virtues. In early childhood, the family provides the most significant site for ethical formation, as children learn both through direct instruction and example what counts as “kind,” “brave,” “generous,” “fair,” “truthful,” and so on. But it does not suffice that a child learns the meanings of these virtue concepts, nor simply learns that acting in these ways elicits affirmation and approval from parents and others. Children must come to aspire for the approval of those whose goodness they admire, not merely for the approval of those who have power in their lives. [5] And ultimately, their commitment to the good must become independent of such approval. Children must grasp for themselves that being kind, brave, fair, and truthful is good and desirable for its own sake, and desire to become this kind of person. This is possible because moral education harnesses

given preferences and motivations, engaging the child in an ongoing process of reflection that shapes and refines existing desires, emotions, and judgments. We love and admire those we experience to be caring and generous, and we desire to become like those we admire. [6] We imaginatively adopt the ways our exemplars perceive and respond to the world. A child longs to emulate young Jesus, teaching in the temple, or the boy who offered up his loaves and fishes. And even young children are engaged in a complex process of working through tensions amongst the various things and people they find good and admirable, guided by trusted adults who provide reasons that point out salient features of circumstances and motivations. Jalen knows that it is unfair if Tala is given a cookie and he is not. But is it unfair if Tala and Jalen were told that each would receive a cookie if they helped mix the cookies, and only Tala was given a cookie because only Tala helped? Reflection on such ordinary situations, and on the feelings and responses we have in such contexts, enables the development of practical reasoning.

Our Characters Continue to Develop:

The development of the virtues is not completed within childhood but extends across the lifespan, insofar as acting well further strengthens our virtues while acting poorly undermines them. While Aristotle was pessimistic about the possibility of developing the virtues in adulthood, Christians have always affirmed the possibility of transformations of heart and character at any age. Today, psychological research is confirming the possibility of ongoing characterological change. [7] As we mature, we encounter new circumstances; a steady disposition to generosity within the family may not neatly translate into generosity outside the home; courage on the soccer field into courage in the face of chronic illness, and so forth. Both Martha and Mary are exemplars, but how are we to emulate both? Integrity across domains becomes a new challenge. [8] Both our commitment to the good and our discernment of how to act well in the context of varied circumstances are at stake.

Communities Play a Key Role:

Personal relationships, communities and institutions all play a critical role in enabling persons to develop and sustain the virtues. Virtues are cultivated in the context of communities that lift up exemplars, pass down inspiring narratives of life lived well amidst circumstances both supportive and challenging, and offer both bracing truth-telling and a sense of belonging within which it becomes possible to face up to our own deep flaws and reaffirm our commitment to develop finer-grained moral discernment and more whole-hearted devotion to the good. All of these important features are present within communities of faith. Biblical exemplars are often deeply flawed, enabling us to identify our own flawed selves with them while renewing our ethical and spiritual aspiration. Think of Peter, eager to show his faithfulness to Jesus, who nevertheless in fear denies his connection to him, or the disciples unable to stay awake in the Garden of Gethsemane. Communities of faith invite persons to orient their lives to God, opening themselves to the grace-filled transformation of all finite concerns and commitments, now known and loved in relation to their divine source and ground.

We Encounter Ongoing Challenges:

When all goes well in this process, desires and emotions harmonize with increasingly refined judgments, in a process that goes on as long as a person continues to encounter new situations and circumstances. [9] As one acquires the virtues, one develops an ever-richer grasp of what is worth doing and being and works toward a fuller integration of all of one's loves and commitments. This often involves coming to see the limitations of those who have served as one's exemplars, and a finer-grained grasp of their virtues and vices. We learn to emulate in more discerning ways. We come to be critically appreciative of our communities and of the ways in which they have deformed as well as formed us. Dispositions that enable us to act well in strictly limited circumstances—on the playing field, or within the congregation—grow in ways that enable fine-grained perception and response in a wide array of circumstances. For many of us, though, the virtues do not develop in such a smooth fashion. We may take pleasure not in acting well, but in self-indulgences that harm and deprive others, failing to attend to the viciousness of our patterns of behaving. Or we may have a commitment to standing up for the oppressed but fail time and time again, fearful of losing the favor of powerful others. Or we may succeed in surface generosity while experiencing giving as difficult and unpleasant. These are three distinct ways of falling short of acting virtuously: self-indulgence, weakness of will, and continence. The self-indulgent person follows pleasure, acting well only by accident, when doing the kind, generous, courageous thing just happens to be pleasant. The weak-willed want to act well but experience other, conflicting desires that carry the day. And the continent person succeeds in acting well, but finds it a struggle to do so. To be virtuous, in contrast, involves not only consistently acting well but having a character such that one finds it pleasant to act fairly, courageously, and generously and is no longer capable of taking pleasure or satisfaction in acting any other way.

What Virtues Are Not

Human beings have both temperamental and acquired dispositions that do not count as virtues.

Compared to Personality Traits:

Temperamental dispositions are personality traits like being extroverted, anxious, or talkative. We also have acquired dispositions that arise out of experience, as when a person becomes withdrawn as a result of trauma or abuse. An influential psychological theory introduced in the 1980s identifies the "Big Five" personality traits as openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. [10] Temperament is generally regarded as biologically based and permanent. Even Aristotle spoke of "natural virtues," noting that each person seems to have a certain type of character from birth. [11] These do not count as virtues in the proper sense because a virtue enables its possessor to respond appropriately to a wide range of differing circumstances, and this flexibility of response requires knowledge and understanding of what one is doing and why; the virtuous agent, argues Aristotle, not only acts out of a stable disposition, but also deliberately and voluntarily chooses the act, and chooses it for its own

sake. [12]

Compared to Skills:

While character virtues are similar to skills, they importantly differ in that a skill can be used to either good or bad ends. Grit, or persistence in the face of difficulty, has been hailed as key to success in a wide range of endeavors from school to business and the arts. [13] Grit is a skill, however, not a virtue; a gritty criminal is able to inflict much more harm than a lazy or distractible criminal. In order to count as the virtue of perseverance, perfective of its possessor, the skill involved in grit must be holistically good and directed to good ends.

In Relation to Intellectual Virtues:

One traditional division among the virtues, reaching back to Aristotle, is that between the intellectual virtues and the moral virtues. A person can possess intellectual virtues, dispositions that perfect their capacities for the attainment of knowledge, independently of possessing the moral virtues, which make a person's actions and character good. Absent the moral virtues, one can make bad use of an intellectual virtue, as a person's capacities for the pursuit of knowledge can be put to bad ends. The intellectual virtues are thus virtues only in a qualified sense, since perfecting the intellect alone does not ensure that we desire and will what is good. Intellectual virtue is thus better characterized as skill.

Some thinkers are willing to consider traits such as good memory and excellent perception as intellectual virtues. These, however, are best thought of as natural traits rather than virtues. Better candidates for intellectual virtues properly speaking, as dispositional traits subject to cultivation, would be skills in abstraction, inference, imagination, and synthesis. It is possible to be a brilliant scientist, possessing a host of intellectual virtues or skills, while lacking the moral virtues that make one a good person. On the other hand, excellent scientists often have a host of moral virtues as well, including patience, humility, courage, and honesty, which enable them to make good use of their intellectual skills, directing them to good ends, and perfecting their actions and character.

Virtues Enable Flourishing

The observation that the wicked prosper is age-old. To understand the virtues is to grasp that the wicked, even if they gain power or wealth, cannot possibly prosper in an ultimate sense; the virtues are essential to human flourishing. It is certainly not the case that things always go well for virtuous people; circumstances can be recalcitrant and dramatically impede flourishing, as witnessed by the righteous indignation of Jesus in the temple and his agony on the cross. However, the virtues heal our inner conflicts. They transform our affections so that we enjoy acting well, taking pleasure in what is good. They equip us to resist injustice and to work for institutions that support human flourishing in community. The virtues thus never detract from happiness; they enable a person to flourish as fully as is possible amidst whatever

conditions that person confronts. [14] To have the virtues is to be equipped to live well, come what may.

Acting virtuously is functioning well as a human person, with desires, emotions, judgments, and projects harmonizing with one another. It is thus intrinsically pleasant. While those who are self-indulgent or weak-willed take pleasure in pursuing desires that are unhinged from a person's judgments concerning what is good and worth seeking, the virtuous can find no pleasure in acting viciously. While virtuous action is inherently pleasant, the virtuous person does not act well instrumentally, with a view to experiencing this pleasure. Nor is the virtuous person's ultimate reason for acting her own perfection. This would be objectionably egocentric. Rather, to be virtuous is to act as one does because one cares for their own sake about the goods at stake in particular situations—because this person is hurting and in need of comfort, say, or because the truth must be told despite powerful interests in concealment. The virtuous person seeks to act well because acting well is *good*, not merely because it is good *for me*. [15]

Christians grasp this pursuit of the good as a pursuit of God. We come to know and love God ever more fully as we develop the virtues, for in and through the virtues we come to grasp and align our agency with the various finite goods that are grounded in God's perfect goodness. In Jesus we encounter this perfected agency in alignment with the good.

Given that the virtuous person's motivation and reasons for acting flow from the good as such, rather than from the agent's particular good, the virtues are no more oriented to personal than to social flourishing. To have the virtues is to be disposed to act well in relation to other individuals and to one's various communities. It is to seek their flourishing as one seeks one's own flourishing, as intrinsically good. The virtuous person will not cultivate habits of lying, cheating, or stealing in order to promote the social welfare, but this is not because she values her own character above the common good. Rather, it is because welfare achieved by such means is not genuine social flourishing.

Which Virtues?

There is no exhaustive list of the virtues. Wherever there is a distinct challenge to our ability to feel, judge, and respond well, we can identify a virtue that perfects our dispositions with respect to that particular difficulty. We need the virtue of honesty because it is tempting to use falsehoods to protect ourselves and our projects; perseverance because we are inclined to give up when the going gets tough. If we consider the virtues as perfecting character with respect to challenges to acting well that arise from our physical and social environments, it is evident that people face distinct obstacles in different times and places, and hence that they need different virtues. Constancy, for instance, has been identified as a distinctively modern virtue required for navigating the fragmented social spheres of contemporary life. [16] On the other hand, if we consider the virtues with reference to how they perfect dimensions of human agency itself, responding to challenges that arise from within, we arrive at virtues of perennial significance, vital to living well in any circumstances. What does it mean to say that Christ was perfectly virtuous? This does not mean that there is a definitive, all-encompassing list of virtues, and that he had all of these. Rather, the

claim is that his character was such that he responded perfectly, in his desires, perceptions, emotions, deliberations, decisions, and actions, in all the situations he encountered.

Cardinal Virtues:

Christian thinkers, building on pagan thinkers of antiquity, most notably Aristotle and Cicero, have long identified four major challenges to acting well arising out of the character of human agency (our passions, will, and practical intellect) and thus four corresponding major virtues, which are known as the cardinal virtues. Other virtues have typically been subsumed under these four.

1. *Temperance* equips a person to respond well in the face of challenges posed by our strong desires (our concupiscible passions) for what we find pleasant, such that we desire what is truly good.
2. *Courage* enables a person to act well when pursuit of the good is difficult or dangerous, harnessing well our spirited or irascible passions.
3. *Justice* perfects the will in its orientation to the good. More specifically, justice perfects our willing of the good such that it is not distorted by love of self and those near and dear. Justice enables us to embody fairness in our relationships with others.
4. *Prudence* or *practical wisdom* allows the virtuous person to deliberate and judge well about how to pursue the goods that the other virtues enable us rightly to desire and will, appropriately applying general precepts to particulars. Practical wisdom straddles the intellectual and moral virtues. It is an intellectual virtue insofar as it involves reasoning rightly concerning means to ends. Yet it presupposes the moral virtues, in that it involves reasoning rightly concerning genuinely good ends.

Theological Virtues*:*

Indebted as Christian reflection on the virtues has been to pagan antiquity, it has also critiqued and transformed that heritage. For instance, the crucified Jesus and his martyred followers, rather than heroic warriors, have been regarded as foremost epitomes of courage. [17] The difficult good to be pursued is not earthly glory but love and service of God and neighbor. The vulnerable and powerless are not to be despised and exploited, but embraced and upheld. Christian thinkers have also held that persons are in need of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love in order to be able to act well in relationship to God, who transcends finite earthly goods, and in order to love enemies as well as friends (1 Cor. 13:13; Matt. 5:44).

Different Christian thinkers and traditions have developed distinctive emphases in their accounts of the virtues. Augustine, influenced by the ancient Stoic view of the unity of virtue, regarded all of the cardinal virtues as expressions of the love of God and neighbor commanded by Jesus as the summary of the law (Matt. 22:37). Aquinas, who was more concerned to develop a systematic account of the virtues that integrated insights from Aristotle’s ethics, developed an intricate account of the cardinal and theological virtues, including a host of subordinate virtues, all infused by grace and nourished by the life of faith. Lutheran and Reformed thinkers, underscoring the fallenness of human will and reason and the centrality

of scripture as God's revealed law, picked up and further developed Scholastic treatments of the various virtues as correlated with and amplifying the moral skeleton provided by the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1-17). For all of these thinkers, divine law and the virtues go hand in hand.

Virtues Are Interconnected

No single virtue can be perfected in the absence of the others. This may seem implausible at first glance. It seems commonsensical to affirm that a person may be courageous but impatient, or scrupulously fair but stingy. Yet as soon as we think about what is involved in possessing a virtue, we see how each is connected with many others. Possession of the virtue of generosity, for instance, is not simply a matter of spontaneous giving. A person's generosity is flawed if she gives away what belongs to another, or gives someone something that will harm or offend them. Perfected generosity thus requires good judgment, that is, practical wisdom. It also requires justice, even courage. Given the interconnectedness of the virtues, it is only possible to possess a virtue in its full, perfected, form if one possesses all of the other virtues as well. The upshot here may be easier for Christians than for others to acknowledge, given the Christian confession that Jesus Christ is the only perfect human person. This leaves ample room for recognizing *imperfect* virtues in ourselves and others, and for recognizing that each of us typically possesses certain virtues more fully than others. Indeed, just as Paul speaks of spiritual gifts that are variously distributed among individuals for the upbuilding of the Body of Christ, so we can rejoice that some of us excel in the virtue of kindness, being exquisitely sensitive to the needs of those around us, while others are noteworthy for their courage, their willingness to speak out in the face of injustices on behalf of the marginalized and downtrodden.

Acting together, the virtues heal persons of inner conflict of desire against desire and desire against judgment, equipping a person to discern and seek good ends and to deliberate well concerning good and appropriate means to these ends.

Christian Virtues Are Infused and Acquired

We have explored how the virtues are acquired through a complex process in which a person admires virtuous exemplars, desires to be like them, discerns the distinctive forms of goodness they embody, imagines an ideal self that is relevantly like them, and seeks to act accordingly, critically examining their failures and successes along the way. For Christians, this process is shaped in fundamental ways by life in the church. [18] Exemplars are encountered in scripture and worship and potluck dinners and church ministries. Jesus Christ, as perfectly human, fully exemplifies the virtues. The saints, too, serve as spiritual and moral exemplars, with their depiction in stained glass windows, altars, and sculptures serving to inspire the faithful. Scriptural narratives display virtues (and sometimes vices) in rich detail; the virtue of courage comes to life in the story of Esther; the vice of greed in the parable of the rich fool.

A Gift of Divine Grace:

Christian thinkers from Augustine through Thomas Aquinas and Jonathan Edwards have also insisted that the virtues are a gift of divine grace, building on Paul's talk of God's love being *poured* into believers' hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5), and therefore speaking in terms of the infusion of moral and theological virtues through the sacraments. While some thinkers have held that only the theological virtues are infused, while the moral virtues are acquired, others have insisted that Christians receive infused moral virtues, too, in order to be effectively oriented to God as final end and equipped for the new life of faith. Scholastic thinkers also identified a distinctive role for the scriptural gifts of the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 11:2–3), disposing persons to be moved directly by the Holy Spirit. [19]

Not a Form of Works-Righteousness:

Grasping the character of virtues as gifts heals our sinful tendency to regard them as a means of earning salvation. The virtues are not another form of works-righteousness, and fallen human beings lack the capacity to acquire the virtues through their own autonomous effort. This does not mean, however, that Christians need not be fully involved in the process of cultivating these grace-given virtues. Divine and human agency do not exclude or compete with one another when it comes to growth in the virtues. [20] Spiritual disciplines such as repentance, self-examination, and prayer join with common practices of admiration, emulation, and aspiration in cultivating virtue. [21] Grace orients human beings to the God whose transcendent goodness is beyond our grasp, and heals sinful tendencies that distort our desires and commitments and lead us to privilege ourselves and our in-groups.

Virtues Among Non-Christians

If the virtues are grace-given, does this mean that Christians deny the possession of virtues by non-Christians? Early and medieval Christians wrestled with this question in the form of the possibility of pagan virtue. Augustine famously considered the virtues of pagan Rome to be in reality splendid vices, corrupted at their heart by pride. Whereas the pagan pursuit of virtue was a pursuit of glory and honor for the self, Christian virtues were grounded in humble acceptance of grace and oriented to God, not self. But even Augustine held that Christians could learn a great deal by studying and emulating certain pagan heroes. Medieval scholastic thinkers, meanwhile, argued that pagans possessed genuine, if imperfect, civic or acquired virtues. They noted that pagan thinkers were capable of recognizing that self-giving service to the common good was distinct from, and corrupted by, the pursuit of glory for oneself. The end of living well in earthly community was not a false end but one that, rightly understood, could be related harmoniously with the ultimate end of glorifying God. [22] Pagan virtue could thus be seen as oriented to a good proximate or penultimate end, even if not (or not consciously) to God as ultimate end.

We can affirm, further, that it is not solely through the sacraments or the life of Christian faith that grace is given or virtue infused. Our very being is divine gift, and there are no limits on the workings of divine

grace. Many Christians, particularly within Reformed Christian traditions, affirm a doctrine of common grace, through which God bestows providential blessings on all humankind. In some sense, then, we can appropriately affirm all virtues, whether those of Christians or of non-Christians, as both acquired and infused, grace-given and developed through human agency. It is of course true at the same time that grasping one's being, agency, and virtues as grace-given is profoundly transformative. It is therefore appropriate to speak of an added special gift/grace that transforms our perception of and relation to all other goods when we understand ourselves as creatures invited into friendship with God.

The Imperfections of Christian Virtues

If the virtues of non-Christians remain imperfect in not being exercised for the sake of friendship with God, the virtues of Christians, too, remain imperfect in a host of ways. Augustine emphasized that virtue remains a struggle for Christians in this life, echoing Paul in Galatians 5:17. Aquinas argued that the infused virtues suffice to direct Christians toward their ultimate end in God, but they often coexist with contrary acquired dispositions. Hence, the infused virtues do not, at least initially, enable Christians to act well easily and with pleasure. Reformation thinkers underscored the radical character of human sinfulness, stressing that sinful inclinations remain active in the faithful. There is no tidy contrast to be drawn between the virtuousness of Christians and the viciousness of non-Christians. Christians affirm the perfect virtue of Jesus Christ, but by that same token do not look for this perfection in mere human beings.

Virtues, Society, and Institutions

Virtues are dispositions of individual persons, stable tendencies to feel, perceive, respond, judge, and act in good ways. Can we also speak of the virtues of institutions? Social practices, institutions, and communities can be conducive, or not, to developing and sustaining the virtues. We have already seen this in the case of the church and its varied practices. In this sense, 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. Take as an example the volunteer mountain rescue services that operate in regions around the world. Teams of world-class climbers and guides volunteer their time, training and carrying out complicated rescue operations, often saving hapless hikers who have failed to follow basic safety precautions. These organizations model courage, discipline, dedication, and compassion. To participate in an organization of this kind is to refine one's grasp of these virtues, of the goods they secure, and of their intrinsic value. This is not to say that every person who participates in such an organization will develop its associated virtues. Brash daredevils, too, might be attracted into mountain rescue activities, and might fail to develop their associated virtues. To the extent that they fail to do so, they fail to become good rescuers.

While we can easily think of institutions that support the cultivation of virtues, it is also not difficult to identify institutions that cultivate vices as well as or instead of virtues. While participation in team sports can cultivate persistence, cooperation, and loyalty, becoming part of the institution of professional sports

can have a corrupting effect on character, as the pursuit of money and fame swamp the goods intrinsic to athletic competition. This is not to say that money or fame are evil; money is a social institution that supports the exchange of goods and services, and fame or honor is bound up with the social recognition of excellence and thus with the cultivation of the virtues. The pursuit of money and fame as ends in themselves, however, has a corrupting effect on character. It is possible to maintain the virtues associated with athletics while participating in professional sports, but it is not easy.

Nuanced analyses of different social institutions, from families, schools, and neighborhood associations to advocacy groups, social media, markets, the law, and political institutions, can yield a finely differentiated understanding of the ways in which each, in particular times and places, supports or undermines the development of specific virtues and vices.

The Virtues in the University

The Virtues in Scholarly Life Are Not Just Intellectual:

In reflecting on the virtues associated with academic life as a practice, we might think first and foremost of the intellectual virtues as those most directly fostered by the academy and by the scholarly life. As we have seen, however, intellectual virtues are not good in an unqualified sense, since perfection of the intellect, of our capacities for learning and knowledge, need not go hand-in-hand with perfection of the will and affections, of one's commitment to the good. Universities gather together many individuals who possess natural traits that suit them to the life of the mind: sharp memory, keen analytic skills, capacities for abstraction, for synthesis. Universities are, moreover, a site for the cultivation of such capacities into intellectual virtues, developed skills of the intellect. Whether or not these intellectual virtues will be joined together with character virtues is an open question.

There certainly are character virtues that are particularly important to the life of the mind. One of these is intellectual humility, which is characterized by an appropriate degree of confidence in one's beliefs and judgments and an appropriate openness to arguments and evidence that might undermine these commitments. [23] Another is perseverance, the virtue that facilitates sustained effort over the long haul in the face of setbacks and challenges. Fairness is needed, in order to treat students appropriately, avoiding playing favorites. So is kindness, as students and colleagues alike encounter difficulty and discouragement. The more we reflect, the more we are forced to recognize that the scholarly life cannot flourish in a holistic way without the full panoply of the virtues.

Vices That Hound the University:

In order to think well about the virtues that can be fostered within academic life as a practice, and by the university as a social institution, it is equally important to be attentive to the particular vices that are often cultivated in these contexts. Universities, like other social organizations, seek to create incentive structures that will elicit greater levels of effort and thus higher levels of performance. However, these

incentives do not simply elicit effort; they also shape character, often in pernicious ways. Individuals who are initially drawn into the academy by their love of the pursuit of truth or their desire to contribute to productively addressing some social crisis or challenge, may come to care more about the recognition they receive for their discoveries than for the discoveries themselves or for the good accomplished in and through them. They may come to measure their value by the size of their compensation packages. They may be tempted to cut corners with their research to accelerate publication or pad their cvs in order to make a stronger impression on others. Faculty members may neglect their teaching or their responsibilities to students, since these receive comparatively little institutional attention or recognition. Each of us likely able to recall some brilliant but callous colleague, unwilling to invest in the common life of a department and skilled at triggering paralyzing self-doubt in others.

Policies Supportive of the Virtues in the Life of Universities:

Universities can work to develop policies that weave fairness, transparency, and care into the daily life of the institution so that it is less vulnerable to individual faults and foibles. They can support rather than undermine the cultivation of character virtues as well as intellectual virtues by avoiding policies that create perverse incentive structures. For instance, universities can offer public recognition not merely of those achievements that bring in the most research dollars and that contribute most to the university's reputation and ranking, but also those habits and dispositions that contribute to the holistic flourishing of the university as a human community—devoted teaching, patient mentoring, fair and efficient administration, and so forth. They can avoid using money as the primary measure of achievement and contribution, while ensuring no employee is exploited or treated in ways incommensurate with their dignity as human beings.

Attention to incentive structures must go hand in hand with policies that foster a strong sense of community and belonging. The virtues thrive in contexts in which persons feel affirmed and supported as well as challenged to become their best selves for the sake of a common mission. There is a place for healthy competition, which can elicit striving towards shared goals, but only within a broader context in which individuals feel safe enough to risk failure because they know that their ultimate value does not ride on winning a competition.

Of course, university administrators are often under pressure to rise in the research rankings, as this is a critical pathway to securing the funds that sustain the research enterprise and attract top faculty and students. Yet university mission statements typically articulate a commitment to the promotion of intrinsic rather than merely instrumental goods. My own university's statement is representative: "Yale is committed to improving the world today and for future generations through outstanding research and scholarship, education, preservation, and practice." [24] The culture of the university ought itself to be aligned with these goals. Just as a commitment to cutting-edge research on carbon containment rings hollow when carried out on a campus that makes no effort at carbon containment, so the lofty commitment to improving the world ought similarly to begin at home, with the alignment on all fronts of the inner workings of our institutions with the ultimate ends they seek. We can begin to improve the world

by fostering the virtues, without which holistic flourishing is impossible. By attending to the virtues and vices that are fostered by university life, by its institutional structures, policies, and cultures, and by working to transform these for the better, we can contribute to greater individual and social flourishing.

The Virtues in Diverse Scholarly Disciplines and Scholarly Agendas:

As scholars, we can be attentive not just to the characterological dimensions of the scholarly life as such, and to the university as an institution that is formative of character, but also to how our respective disciplines and individual scholarly agendas might help to contribute to the creation of communities of genuine human flourishing by contributing to building the character of the persons that constitute these communities. Laws, for instance, do not simply prescribe and prohibit actions, but also play a role in shaping the character of citizens. How might legal scholarship attend more fully to this feature of the law? [25] Public policy can be designed in ways that respect and foster practical wisdom, rather than merely manipulating citizens as objects of social engineering. Search engine algorithms can be built in ways that foster awareness of complexity and ambiguity and therefore encourage conscious reflection rather than reinforcing stereotypes. [26] The arts can powerfully shape perception and affective responsiveness to goods at stake in complex circumstances, fostering compassion and courage. Engineering can be oriented to flourishing in equitable community, guided by the virtue of justice. Business leaders and regulators can acknowledge that profit is not an ultimate human good and can work towards a more humane economy, one that serves genuine human needs and a more just and sustainable world for all creatures. [27]

Consideration of how our activities shape character should also extend to all dimensions of the academic life, ranging from our participation in scholarly societies, our involvement in scholarly publishing, grant-getting and grant-making activities, our social media presence, public scholarship, and all of the diverse ways in which our lives as academics are lived out beyond as well as within the walls of the university. In every dimension of our lives, our actions are expressive of our character and work in ways that contribute to the formation of others' character.

Conclusion

The virtues assist us in developing lives worth living and communities worth inhabiting. Christians can unite with those of other faiths and of no faith to attend to the ways in which our academic agendas, practices and institutions, form and de-form character and to how they can be remade in the service of holistic flourishing. Christians can grasp how the virtues that we cultivate are God's generous gift poured into our lives, and seek to live in ever-deeper awareness of the divine Goodness that grounds our being, inviting us to partake of the joy of the divine life.

Further Reading

Adams, Robert M. *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the* Good. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. A systematic framework for reflection on virtue by a leading Christian philosopher.

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Hauerwas, Stanley. *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991. One of the most impactful Christian ethicists of our time argues that the church is the community within which the virtues are formed in faithfulness to the story of God.

Hauerwas, Stanley, and Charles Pinches, *Christians Among the Virtues*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1997. A discussion of the distinctiveness of Christian virtues in conversation with Aristotle and a range of contemporary thinkers.

Herdt, Jennifer. *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. A historical and constructive exploration of Christian reflection on genuine and counterfeit virtue, the distinctiveness of Christian virtue, and the possibility of pagan virtue.

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Press, 2007. Highly influential account by a leading contemporary Catholic philosopher of the ways in which philosophical discourse and the culture at large fell into incoherence through neglecting virtue-ethical reflection.

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Murphey, Nancey, Brad J. Kallenberg and Mark Thiessen Nation. *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997. A helpful collection of essays exploring the impact of Alasdair MacIntyre for contemporary Christian virtue ethics.

Pieper, Josef. *Four Cardinal Virtues*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966. A classic exposition of the cardinal virtues by a leading Thomistic philosopher.

Pieper, Josef. *Faith, Hope, Love*. Ignatius Press, 1997. A classic treatment of the theological virtues by a leading Thomistic philosopher.

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Tousley, Nikki Coffey and Kallenberg, Brad J. “Virtue Ethics.” In *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, edited by Joel Green, Jacqueline Lapsley, Rebekah Miles and Allen Verhey. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011. An accessible account of Christian virtue ethics with extensive attention to scripture.

End Notes

[1] "There is no way of my pursuing my good which is necessarily antagonistic to you pursuing yours because the good is neither mine peculiarly nor yours peculiarly – goods are not private property," Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 229.

[2] For exploration of the unity and diversity of Greek ethical reflection, and the centrality of this question, see Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 27–34.

[3] Wong, David, "Chinese Ethics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/ethics-chinese.

[4] Paul Bloom surveys some of the relevant empirical research in this area in *Just Babies* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2013). We share many of these basic capacities and preferences with other social animals, as we are just starting to learn. See, e.g., Sarah F. Brosnan, and Frans B. M. de Waal, "Fairness in Animals: Where to from Here?" *Social Justice Research* 25 (2012): 336-351, Jessica Pierce and Marc Bekoff, "Wild Justice Redux: What We Know about Social Justice in Animals and Why it Matters," *Social Justice Research* 25 (2012): 122–139; Frans B.M. De Waal and Stephanie D. Preston, "Mammalian Empathy: Behavioural Manifestations and Neural Basis," *Nature* 18 (August 2017): 498–509.

[5] Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 16–27.

[6] Linda Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 33.

[7] See, e.g., Kim Josefsson, Markus Jokela, C. Robert Cloniger, Mirka Hintsanen, Johanna Salo, Taina Hintsa, Laura Pulkki-Råback, and Liisa Keltikangas-Järvinen, "Maturity and Change in Personality: Developmental Trends of Temperament and Character in Adulthood," Development and Psychopathology 25.3 (2013): 713–27; Dan McAdams, "The positive psychology of adult generativity: Caring for the next generation and constructing a redemptive life," in J. D. Sinnott, ed., *Positive psychology: Advances in understanding adult motivation*, 191–205 (New York: Springer, 2013).

[8] Robert M. Adams, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Best* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 206–212.

[9] Jennifer A. Herdt, "Enacting Integrity," in *Integrity, Honesty, and Truth-Seeking*, ed. Christian Miller and Ryan West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 63-96.

[10] Robert R. McCrae and Oliver P. John, "An introduction to the five-factor model and its applications." *Journal of Personality* 60.2 (1992): 175–215.

[11] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1144b5. The Confucian philosopher Mencius identified four inborn "sprouts" of virtue that, if properly cultivated, develop into the mature virtues. Owen Flanagan, *Moral Sprouts and Natural Teleologies: 21st Century Moral Psychology Meets Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2014).

[12] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1105a40. For a contemporary restatement of these conditions for virtue proper, see Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 123–125.

[13] Angela Duckworth, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. New York: Scribner, 2016.

[14] Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 129-130.

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

[16] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 203; 219; 242.

[17] Jennifer A. Herdt, "Aquinas's Aristotelian Defense of Martyr Courage," in *Thomas Aquinas and the Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Tobias Hoffmann, Jörn Müller and Matthias Perkams (Cambridge: Cambridge Univeristy Press, 2013), 110-128.

[18] Jennifer A. Herdt, "Augustine and the Liturgical Pedagogy of Virtue," in *Virtue and the Moral Life*, ed. William Werpehowski, (Lexington Books, 2015), 19-36; Herdt, "Frailty, Fragmentation, and Social Dependency in the Cultivation of Christian Virtue," in *Cultivating Virtue: Perspectives from Philosophy, Theology, and Psychology*, ed. Nancy Snow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 227-250. This formation is not always for the good; churches are flawed human institutions and serve at times as sites for the cultivation of various vices. A veneer of holiness can serve as a cloak for horrific abuse or for more garden-variety vices of smugness, habitual backbiting, and the like. Lauren Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

[19] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II.68.1.

[20] Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

[21] Jennifer A. Herdt, "Guilt and Shame in Virtue Development," in *Developing the Virtues: Integrating Perspectives*, ed. Julia Annas, Darcia Narvaez, and Nancy E. Snow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 235-254.

[22] Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 73–76.

[23] Robert C. Roberts, "Learning Intellectual Humility," in *Intellectual Virtues and Education*, ed. Jason Baehr (London: Routledge, 2015).

[24] https://www.yale.edu/about-yale/mission-statement

[25] See, e.g., Cathleen Kaveny, *Law's Virtues: Fostering Autonomy and Solidarity in American Society* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012).

[26] Shannon Vallor, *Technology and the Virtues: A Philosophical Guide to a Future Worth Wanting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[27] Mary Hirschfeld, *Aquinas and the Market: Toward a Humane Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018.

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