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 Preview

THE VIRTUES

Jennifer Herdt

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

Why Virtues Matter

The virtues are salient for issues in every academic field and for all elements of the academic life. Often when we think of morality, we think first of rules or principles defining good action and codes of conduct for behavior. These 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 to think holistically about how groups, institutions such as universities, and practices form character and in turn are formed 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, not least, in academia.

The virtues, such as courage, kindness, and practical wisdom, are stable dispositions that enable an agent to act and live well. An agent's virtues and vices together constitute their moral character. Christian virtues 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 consistently and rightly. Without virtues, no moral code, however perfect, can ensure that we act well. With the virtues, a person perceives, feels, judges, and responds well, in ways appropriate to the complexities of situations, including the worlds of scholarship.

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 challenge.

Cardinal Virtues

Christian thinkers, building on pagan thinkers of antiquity, most notably Aristotle and Cicero, identified four major challenges and thus four corresponding cardinal virtues.

1. *Temperance* equips a person to respond well in the face of challenges posed by our strong desires for what we find pleasant.
2. *Courage* enables a person to act well when pursuit of the good is difficult or dangerous.
3. *Justice* enables us to treat others fairly, despite proclivities to selfishness and injustice.
4. *Prudence* or *practical wisdom* allows the virtuous person to deliberate and judge well, appropriately applying general precepts to particulars, rather than acting impulsively or in unbridled ways.

Christian reflections on the virtues critiqued and transformed the pagan heritage. For instance, the crucified Jesus and his martyred followers, rather than heroic warriors, have been regarded as epitomes of courage. The difficult good to be pursued is not earthly glory but love and service of God and neighbor.

Theological Virtues

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 developed distinctive emphases. Augustine, influenced by the Stoic's 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, building on Aristotle, developed a systematic account of the virtues, offering an intricate account of the cardinal and theological virtues, including a host of subordinate virtues. Lutheran and Reformed thinkers, underscoring the fallenness of human will and reason and the centrality of scripture as God's revealed law, developed Scholastic treatments of the various virtues by amplifying the moral skeleton provided by the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1-17).

Virtues Enable Flourishing

Things do not always go well for virtuous people. However, the virtues heal our inner conflicts, transform our affections so that we enjoy acting well, take pleasure in what is good, and are equipped 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 the conditions that person confronts, including the circumstances of academic fields and institutions.

Christian Virtues are Infused and Cultivated

Infused Virtues

Christian thinkers from Augustine through Thomas Aquinas and Jonathan Edwards have 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 speak in terms of the infusion of moral and theological virtues through the sacraments. The virtues are not a means of earning salvation, not another form of works-righteousness. Fallen human beings lack the capacity to acquire the virtues through their own autonomous effort. This has not been taken to mean, however, that Christians need not be fully involved in the process of cultivating these grace-given virtues.

Developing Virtues

The virtues are cultivated 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. These exemplars are encountered in scripture and worship, in family life, in the university, and in broader worlds of public life. Jesus Christ, as perfectly human, fully exemplifies the virtues. The saints, with their depiction in religious art, serve to inspire the faithful. Scriptural narratives display virtues (and sometimes vices) in rich detail—courage in the story of Esther, vice in the parable of the rich fool. 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.

Virtues and Scholarship

The intellectual virtues have clear relevance to the conduct of scholarship and the scholarly life. Scholars can be attentive to the ways their scholarship might contribute to communities of genuine human flourishing. For instance, law can shape the character of citizens. Public policy can foster practical wisdom. The arts can powerfully shape perception and affect, fostering compassion and courage. Engineering can be oriented to flourishing in equitable community, guided by the virtue of justice.

Virtues reach to ways the academy itself is structured. We may ask: What are characteristic vices or virtues nourished by the university? And, how might academic communities and disciplines be made more hospitable to cultivation of the virtues?

For more information

www.globalfacultyinitiative.net