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Preview Response

IF NEW VIRTUES CAN ARISE, HOW IS ANY LIST CANONICAL?

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Jennifer Herdt's statement is an excellently focused statement of the traditional presentation of the virtues in theological discussion. In putting one or two questions to her, one is putting them to the tradition she has carefully sustained and developed.

The impossibility of an exhaustive list of the virtues appears to be stated as a principle. The reason appears to be, though not quite stated in these terms, that *new* virtues may arise as new instances of dispositions perfectly responsive to challenges appear in history. I would personally support both that principle and that reason for it. But if it is so, how do we defend the status of the classical lists of cardinal and theological virtues as *canonical* and *definitive*? If "Jesus Christ fully exemplifies the virtues", such a canonical set of virtues seems to be implied. It would seem too little to claim that he exemplified "some possible virtues", and too much to claim that he exemplified "all possible virtues". And is this statement about Christ adequate from a *Christological* point of view? Or is it liable to the reductive interpretation that Kant produced in his famous statement about "the Holy One of the Gospels" who is admired because he corresponds to our idea of moral perfection? Might Jennifer Herdt copy Balthasar's response that Christ was the *concrete* categorical imperative, with some such claim as that he was the *concrete* form of the virtues?

With the idea of a canonical list there seems to be implied a permanent "form of the virtues" or "unity of the virtues" – i.e. some description of the shape of virtue which is expressed in *this* list and would not be expressed in other possible lists of dispositions required to meet new challenges – *e.g.* "smartness, savviness and an eye to the long game". That would be necessary if virtue-language was to be a *critical* language, not just a *formal* language of morals. Can Jennifer Herdt say more in support of this idea than she has? It bears on whether virtues transcend concrete cultural evaluations or are ultimately culturally relative phenomena – in which case they are to be numbered among the culture's "values".

In turn this affects the claim made for the saints that they inspire the faithful to virtue. Do they represent

the *form* of virtue as a whole, so that each is held to be, as it were, a perfectly rounded character, or merely that each inspires the faithful to *one* virtue among the range – St. Francis to tenderness for nature, St. Joan of Arc to military courage, etc.? If the former, might some of the statements about the virtues of the saints need to be more nuanced by a critical distance on their vices? And that prompts a further question about about the status of vices as such? Are they co-original with virtues – as it were, “stable dispositions that enable an agent to act badly” (!)? Or are they *defective* virtues, so that every vice could be analysed as a virtue-not-quite-realised?

The presentation of virtues in the first paragraph makes it clear that they can be attributed to corporate agents as well as individual agents. But the language of “infused virtues” and “the heart” , introduced to specify Christian virtues, leans strongly towards individual virtues. Does the Holy Spirit infuse virtues into a business organisation? Does a university have a “heart”? Or are virtues primarily produced in individuals by the Spirit and then *communicated to the corporate* bodies by those who participate in them?

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