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Disciplinary Brief

THE PLACE OF VIRTUE THEORY IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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There was a time in the last century when expansive claims were made for "virtue". Dissatisfied with a modern ethics that had reduced morality to decision-making, moralists in search of a wider understanding of human morality looked back to Aristotle, and paid special attention to his treatment of virtue, which they hoped might help them to establish a new foundation, a way in which everything could be said better. These claims for virtue as a foundation are not heard so often now, and, of course, not repeated in Jennifer Herdt's Theology Brief. The well-established tradition she follows, associated especially with St Thomas, defines "virtue" more sharply. Thomas' virtue-theory is a striking example of judicious Christian incorporation: Aristotle's observations on the formation of moral dispositions are accommodated in a framework of other, more obviously evangelical moral categories, such as law, grace, and the final good. "Virtues", in Thomas' account, have a major place in the descripton of life lived before God, but that place is not at the beginning or the end, but in between.

A "decisionist" for whom love was, as it was for Kierkegaard, "sheer action", might doubt whether there could be any place for virtue in Christian Ethics. What use could a theory of moral character be to those who see it as their task to live in faithful obedience from moment to moment? Their thinking will be deliberative, spelled out in moral rules and principles, prima facie obligations and perfect duties, roles and situations, anticipated consequences, and so on. These categories mark the main road to practical resolution; reflection on character seems more like a scenic drive for tourists. An ethics that told of nothing but virtues and vices could never focus the field of moral vision upon a definite action, never identify practical challenges lying near to hand or convert evaluations into decisions. The doubt is reasonable, but it should not have the last word.

The New Testament contains much talk of obedience, temptation, resolve and decision, but there are also lists of virtues (though not so named), and occasionally of vices. When we read that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering ..... etc., that is not an escape from the challenge of decision, but a way of framing it: "If we live by the Spirit, let us walk by the Spirit!" (Gal. 5:22-25.) Deliberative trains of thought depend on good moral descriptions, which must take in not only the field of action and its possibilities, but

"the agent", bringing specific responsibilities and resources to the action. By "the agent" we mean simply the subject of a given action. We need not make up our mind at once as to what kinds of thing can, and what cannot, be said to possess "agency", but since "action" in the full sense requires a commitment of intention, an agent must at least be capable of understanding not only its field of action but itself, too. An agent can tell you what he, she, it or they are doing.

From Virtue Descriptions to Virtue Decisions

It is the special contribution of virtue-theory, then, to make us concious of our own agency, not simply as a point of view on the field of action but as a factor we must understand in approaching it. It describes for us the different forms that the success or failure of our agency may take. *Different* forms require a theory that keeps the plurality of virtues in view, for when "virtue" is spoken of only in the singular, it usually means that the full range of moral responses has been collapsed into just one kind of response, the only one that matters to the speaker, as when warrior-cultures speak of "virtue" to mean simply military courage. The possibility of *failure,* as well as success, demands that an account of virtues must be an account of vices, too.

Virtue Description

Virtue-descriptions, in the first place, teach us what and how we may admire. People acting and living well are the primary object of moral appreciation and satisfaction. When we talk about virtues, we disengage ourselves from our own preoccupations with acting and seek to "distinguish what is excellent" as seen us in the lives of others. We notice not only how acts shape situations, but also how they shape enduring dispositions in their agents, when considerately decided on and consistently persisted in, so that a moral person emerges before our eyes as a whole, sustained over time. A good act excites our admiration; a good person attracts our love, and so enriches our moral resources.

Virtue Decisions

But can we do more with virtues than admire them? Can we make them an object of decision, too? Apparently, we can. As we appreciate virtues, we may resolve to imitate them. Policies we form for our lives may be patterned on the lives of others. What kind of a decision is involved in this? The classical world liked to recound the moral fable of the young Herakles, confronted at a crossroads by the ladies Virtue and Vice who challenged him to make a decisive, once-and-for-all choice between them. Barth characterised this fable as "a pagan image for a pagan thing", and we can understand his unease. For though Christians, too, believe in a decisive act of moral self-determination, represented in baptism, they are likely to be wary of characterising it as a "choice", for choices are between commensurable objects. Virtue and vice are not commensurable; the bad life is not an *alternative* to the good life. Yet there may still be a decision; wholly freely, and yet wholly dependent on divine grace, we may make the life-committing decision of baptism. And in consequence there can be many further decisions that have in

view not merely our immediate acts, but the direction of life as a whole. To take the simplest example, there may be a decision to recognise a vocation – to be a scholar, a physician, or a musician. Our moral concerns are not limited to *what we shall do next,* but include *what we shall become.* We may pray, taking the broadest view of our lives, "Let me not wander from thy commandments!" And where we may pray, there we may deliberate.

Chains of Decisions

Which is not to say that the moral shape of our future lives is simply placed in our hands to decide once and for all. These broad, self-orienting decisions are not "settled", as what we are to do next may be settled. They need implementation and confirmation in consequent decisions of practical detail. And perhaps they need modification, for we sometimes cannot, and sometimes should not, stick to everything that we have planned for ourselves, even with the highest ideals. Other decisions arise, and cannot be refused. Urgent decisions that affect others' welfare may make consideration of our own moral character seem impertinent. The scholar can be forced into administrative leadership; the sympathetic pastor can need to do something that hurts someone. Even Socrates had to accept political office, and Plantaganet Palliser (in Trollope's novel) had to refuse it for his wife's sake. Such departures from conscious moral goals are not breaches of moral law or principle, though we may be ashamed of them. We may feel guilty about the book we never wrote or the student we had to suspend, and may suspect ourselves of having missed our opportunity. But that is not necessarily the right explanation. 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.

The Correspondence of Dispositions and Acts

What virtue-theory has to tell us, then, is not the whole of Ethics, but is something important. It tells us that we are formed as continuous moral agents by the correspondence of our dispositions and our acts: what we have become is what we do, and what we do is what we shall become. This correspondence is not merely posited in logic by defining "act" and "disposition" in terms of one another. It is a law of human growth and development, something observed and proved in experience.

Yet there are liminal cases where this law seems to be suspended. Consider the life that acquires moral worth on the basis of a single act performed at a decisive moment: in the Gospels, the dying thief; in fiction, Sidney Carton in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, the rake who redeems his useless life by taking another man's place on the guillotine. Here, by a miracle of grace, a single act of perfect recognition or decision defines the moral person for eternity. Consider the opposite case, that of the hollowed-out hypocrite, whose acts are not morally determinative at all, but conceal an inner character of a very different kind: the Pharisees in the Gospels, and in Dickens' *Martin Chuzzlewit* Mr. Pecksniff. Perhaps neither type exists in life in its pure form; perhaps the law of correspondence is only qualified, never entirely suspended. But these types, abstract though they are, warn us of the conceptual limits of virtue

theory: the correspondence between disposition and acts may be a complex one; the good and evil of character may not be simply accountable in terms of what becomes second nature. Our acts may transcend what we have become; they may also conceal it.

But one apparent suspension of the correspondence is of perpetual interest: is not *politics* a sphere in which we must always be content to evaluate acts in ignorance of the dispositions that produced them? I know a friend's gift is well meant, however ill-chosen, because I know the disposition of my friend; I do not know that a politician's gift is well meant, however well-chosen, because I do not know the disposition of the politician. I must be content with what I know. Augustine once observed that a piece of legislation passed by a prince in return for a bribe may still be a *just law,* however unjust the *act.* That paradox may be quite difficult to come to terms with, which may be the reason why we constantly project caricatures of political actors and their motives, of which in fact we know very little. If it is the truth of public life that it is, as we call it, a "system", in which the morality of public actors is opaque and the outcomes, good or ill, may be what nobody intended, it is a truth that runs counter to our instinctive need to belong to our community morally.

Virtues of Political and Corporate Institutions?

One way of evading the cliff-edge of political cynicism to which this seems to lead us, a way congenial to Augustine himself, is to think of political acts and institutions as a kind of moral *form,* still waiting to be filled with the *substance* of motivation and commitment. Let us agree that the real moral character of a community is a matter of inner dispositions that cannot be clearly seen, an ultimate love of self or love of God. Yet what is projected on the screen of public life may still be morallly good or evil to the extent that it affords opportunities for good or evil intentions on the part of those act within its terms. We may understand in this way the apostle's guarded but perfectly serious remark that "the law is good, if it is used lawfully" (1 Tim. 1:8). Some institutions and practices may be of service and support to men and women whose hope is to act well and to cooperate in good actions with others. We might echo the apostle: education is good, if we use it educationally; medicine is good if we use it healthily, and so on. The good of these institutions is not a categorical good; it remains on the social surface, where it can be used to evil as well as good. Yet we may find them supportive of virtuous life and practice, a worthy object of good intentions and an essential condition for further good undertakings. Others may be hindrances to them.

In this way we can recognise that there are corporate agents and corporate acts with their own kinds of moral perspicuity. Even the state, though from one angle it is simply a "system", a set of processes for producing decisions that no human being can or would take, has a function that can support our good intentions, if we have them. A state can have something like good intentions itself: there is, after all, such a thing as "policy", which stands in the same relation to political acts as an intention does to personal acts. Non-state institutions, such as churches, voluntary associations, sports clubs and businesses, are formed as means for pursuing specified goods of action: leisure activities, the purchase of material goods, communications in worship, art or learning, and so on.

We refer intelligibly, then, 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 realising it. They conform to laws of action that enable them to realise it more effectively. We debate the "virtues" of different educational systems, of ways of regulating the circulation of money, of practices in the use of medical treatments, referring precisely to their disposition to perform well. We expect institutions to operate, as closely as possible, by laws calculated to realise their end. When institutions set themselves the task of pursuing other goods than their own, the confusion that may result, as in one or two notorious culture-war scenarios, can be comic. We don't want banks to act as political censors, even if we believe in political censorship; we don't want heritage organisations to condemn historical actors to banishment from public memory, even if we think some historical actors deserved a condemnation they never received. Yet that does not mean that institutions should never be conscious of goods other than their own specific objects. The virtues of those who work in the institution, at least, cannot be confined to the narrow performances of institutional excellence. Financial advisors must have numeracy and business acumen, but we also expect them to distinguish worthy from unworthy investment opportunities. Teachers must be scholars to whatever level is appropriate for them, but we are unhappy with teachers who see only the marks and don't see their pupils. An institution may have a special good to contribute to society – education, health, circulation of money, heritage preservation or whatever – but to offer it effectively it must be hospitable, at least, to some perfectly general virtues of social interaction - banks need tellers who can be helpful to customers, schools need teachers who can sympathise with the problems of failing students. The interaction between virtues of institutions and virtues of individuals who serve them has a prominent role in Jennifer Herdt's account.

And here we may be tempted to draw a line too clearly: may we say that the *special* virtue belongs to the institution, the *general* virtues to those who work in it? No, because the institution must at least allow and encourage the expression of those individual virtues in those who work for it. And when we have said that much, we have indicated a general virtue we expect of all institutions: that of allowing their staff to work in ways consistent with their best moral aspirations. Call it, if you will, being a considerate employer. And there may be other such general virtues that we expect of instutions in dealing with the public that has business with them. We cannot pursue these possibilities further. The point remains simply that in institutions, as in individuals, virtues do not come singly, but accompany and reinforce one another.

How Are Virtues Unified?

And with this train of thought one of the oldest questions in virtue-theory has crept up on us: how may we think of the virtues as concretely unified in the agent? Plato remarked that someone who had courage but no prudence, didn't actually have courage at all, but only the vice of rashness. To have one virtue, he suggests, one must have all. That is a daunting proposition. Virtues are goods of activity, and there are many of them. They must have some distributive economy, since human virtue is not a matter of being like God, doing everything well, but a particular pattern of doing some things well. Yet we would hesitate

to call someone "virtuous" who did only one kind of thing well, who was efficient, let us say, but had no other recommendation? A virtuous person has a certain scope, can move convincingly from one moral demand to the next. Perhaps we may allow that the "great character with great flaws" – the wisely compassionate artist or statesman, say, who neglects his family - can be a figure of virtue. But Plato was surely right that even such one-sided greatness must be composed of *more than one* excellent quality. Can we say anything about how one virtue accompanies another?

Virtue is a disposition to act well, and actions are conceived in unique deliberative situations where we are looking for the one "right" thing to do. Only the observer, who does not have to act, is at liberty to think there could be more than one right thing to do. If the notion of a virtue depends on the notion of a good act, and that in turn depends on its "rightness" for the situation, we may attribute special importance to the virtue, if there is one, of discerning situations and their practical demands "Prudence" was the standard name for that virtue, and Thomas, among others, regards it as occupying a distinct position in relation to the others, since it is always needed to act well.

Focal Virtues

But there are other ways of identifying certain virtues as focal . When the New Testament Epistles indicate the qualities that should mark the life of faith, they place them in lists, each list different from the next. Exploring the sequence of the virtues is a heuristic exercise, following no single binding order, and yet it is clear that the lists are not shapeless: "love" is mentioned at the beginning or end of a list, never in the middle. And in the Pauline writings we find a list of three "meta-virtues", shaped by salvation-history, which formed a canon for all other exercises of special practical powers: faith, attending to the fact of Christ, hope to the promise of his return and love to the presence of the believing community. These, and especially love, must accompany all special virtues of action and performance, Paul tells us, because they "last", giving enduring continuity to the moral agent throughout life and into eternity. Plato, for his part, had proposed a list of four focal virtues, based on his theory of the powers of the soul: continence, fortitude, wisdom and justice, virtues of appetite, of energy, of thought and, supremely, of the balance to be established among them. These two lists, Christian and pagan, were not usually seen as incompatible.

Are Intellectual Virtues more than Skills?

There is another traditional way of organising virtues, to which Jennifer Herdt devotes some attention, arriving at a conclusion that I think subtly departs from Thomas. The distinction between *intellectual* and *moral* virtues was framed by Aristotle to focus the distinction between our reflective and spontaneous self-direction, a distinction that developed over the centuries and takes a distinctively modern form in the early-modern doctrine of two powers of the mind: "the power to begin or forbear" and "the power of perception" (Locke). For Herdt the power of perception is subordinate to the power to begin or forbear; the intellectual virtue is really just a "skill", because "absent the moral virtues, one can make bad use of an intellectual virtue". True, but I am inclined to think that one can make bad use of *any* virtue, intellectual or

moral, if it is not properly ordered to other virtues and supremely to faith, hope and love.

We have in the Gospels a striking parable from Jesus about an "intellectual virtue". A rich man ripped off by his manager warns him that he is going to be fired, with the result that he is ripped off once again as the manager exploits his last days in control to buy himself a few friends to aid him in his unemployment. The master, we are told, "commended the dishonest steward", and what he is commended for is precisely *prudence,* from Aristotle's list of intellectual virtues and specially highlighted by Thomas. Jesus explains what the manager got right: he *knew what money was good for,* which is, friendship. Manifestly, this manager made a bad use of his prudence, and yet the capacity to deliberate intelligently, taking the true measure of realities and possibilities, is something no form of virtue can do without.

Precisely because the virtues are not *unconscious* stable dispositions to do well, but *reflected* stable dispositions to do well, emerging not only from our spontaneous wills but from our understandings of the good, there are things we must know if we are to act well. Some of the things we need to know are purely contingent, and it would seem to be a matter of moral indifference whether we happen to know them or not, in which case ignorance is, in Hume's verdict, "more to be lamented than judged of". But suppose someone did not know that a child should make every effort to be present at a parent's deathbed? Is that ignorance unfortunate, or blameable? Not knowing something of that kind is an ignorance of what the parent-child relationship really *is,* and so, in a profound sense, of what, or who, we ourselves are. And there are other moral truths that it seems we are simply required to know. Has not the advocate for euthanasia, firmly convinced that a life of persistent suffering or deprived of intelligent self-control is a life unfit to be maintained, embraced a morally faulty belief?

Grace: Virtues are Necessary but not Sufficient

And so we shall need to look for the ordering of virtues in a grace that is not itself simply one of the virtues – a grace that allows our various dispositions and powers to come together to serve God's purposes effectively. Which is why some of the Greek Fathers were reluctant to allow that love, the "bond of perfection" among the virtues, was itself a virtue, seeing it, rather, as an operation of the Holy Spirit. Virtues are necessary, but not sufficient. Therefore we pray, *Lead us not into temptation* – "temptation" being precisely the moral challenge for which no acquired virtue can fully prepare us.

Further Reading

The classical texts referred to are Plato's *Republic,* book 4, and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* book 2. There are many good translations of both available; I use F.M. Cornford's Plato (Oxford 1941, 1970) and Terence Irwin's Aristotle (Indianapolis, Hackett 1999). An indication of the patristic use of this tradition is Augustine's early work, *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae,* which appears in a volume of the New City Press complete Augustine called *The Manichean Debate*, translated by R.J. Teske as "The Catholic Way of Life" (New York, 2006). Thomas's great treatise on virtue is in *Summa Theologiae* II-1.49-67. There are many translations, but those who can will use the Blackfriars edition (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode 1964-80, now reissued by Cambridge University Press), volumes 22 & 23. A fine Protestant text from the eighteenth century is Jonathan Edwards' "Dissertation on the Nature of True Virtue", in vol. 8 of the Yale University Press edition of the *Works* (*Ethical Writings,* ed. Paul Ramsey, 1989). Twentieth-century claims for virtue as a new foundation for ethics are represented at their strongest in Alasdair McIntyre's *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press 1981.) Robert M. Adams *A Theory of Virtue* (Oxford University Press 2006) must stand as a discerning contribution to a huge philosophical literature. Among theologians appropriating the theme Stanley Hauerwas got in early with *Character in the Christian Life* (Trinity University Press 1975, later University of Notre Dame Press) which signalled a direction for himself and others. For a lighter handling from the standpoint of the New Testament see N.T. Wright's *Virtue Reborn* (London, SPCK 2010). I have developed my own view of the topic in chapters 5&6 of *Self World and Time,* and chapter 4 of *Finding and Seeking* (Eerdmans, 2013-14); see also my article "Pride's Progress" (*Studies in Christian Ethics,* 2015, 59-69).

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