

Some Notes On The Relevance Of Virtue And Virtues in Bioethics

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As we present *Some Notes on the Relevance of Virtue and Virtues in Bioethics*, we shall try to answer the following questions: *Is virtue relevant in bioethics? If it is, why is virtue important today, too? What virtues are particularly relevant to healthcare providers?*

Let us focus our attention on the relevance and need of virtue, on the nature of virtue, on the kinds of virtues, and finally on the acquisition and practice of virtues.

We will speak from a humanist and Christian perspective; mainly, from an ethical viewpoint. Note the first two words of our title: "Some Notes"; we shall offer, therefore, a mere introduction; hopefully, a good appetizer! We begin with the question, *Is virtue relevant in ethics and bioethics?*

Bioethics and Virtue

Historically, virtue has usually been considered as a basic ethical category, particularly in Greek, humanist and Christian ethics. In our century, virtue ethics continued to be rejected by followers of Kant, became irritating to some others, and much used and abused by a few others.

Through the last decades of our century, virtue has been making—so to speak—a strong come back, to the point that it is now on center stage as a much discussed, debated and talked about ethical topic.

Is virtue really relevant today? Indeed, it is! To prove it, let us mention the titles and authors of some current and significant publications on virtue.¹ From a philosophical perspective, the most influential book on the matter is, perhaps, Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1984). Earlier, Peter Geach had written *The Virtues* (1977), and Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices* (1978). Geach and Foot are considered key representatives of virtue ethics today. Let us add the popular book *Petit traité des grandes vertus* (1995), by philosopher André Comte-Sponville, and a best-seller, *The Book of Virtues* (1993) by William J. Bennett.

From a Christian perspective, let us mention a few titles, too: Peter Kreeft, *Back to Virtue* (1992); Romanus Cessario, O.P., *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics* (1991); Harak G. Simon, S. J., *Virtuous Passions: The Formation of Christian Character* (1993); Bartomeu Bennassar, *Virtudes cristianas ante la crisis de valores* (1995), and *A Year With the Saints: A Virtue for Every Month of the Year* (1988), by an unknown author. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), for its part, presents ethics within the framework of virtues and the commandments.

From a specifically medical —and humanist— perspective, James F. Drane has written a remarkable book entitled *Becoming a Good Doctor. The Place of Virtue and Character in Medical Ethics* (1988).

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984, 2nd Ed.); Peter Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge, 1977); Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978); André Comte-Sponville, *Petit traité des grandes vertus* (1995) (we have read the Spanish version, *Pequeño tratado de las grandes virtudes* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1995); William J. Bennet, *The Book of Virtues. A Treasury of Great Moral Stories* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993); Gilbert C. Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); Romanus Cessario, O.P. *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991); Harak G. Simon, S.J., *Virtuous Passions: The Formation of Christian Character* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1993); Bartomeu Bennassar, *Virtudes cristianas ante la crisis de valores* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sigueme, 1995); James F. Drane, *Becoming a Good Doctor. The Place of Virtue and Character in Medical Ethics* (Kansas City, Mo: Sheed & Ward, 1988); Edmund D. Pellegrino and David C. Thomasma, *The Virtues in Medical Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); *A Year With the Saints. A Virtue for Every Month of the Year* (Translated from the Italian, first published in 1891, and reprinted, Rockford, Ill.: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1988); *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (English Ed.: The Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994).

A leading representative of virtue-based bioethics is Edmund D. Pellegrino, co-author with David C. Thomasma of the book *The Virtues in Medical Practice* (1993).

Even an international best-seller, Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World* (1994), an excellent novel about the history of philosophy, underlines the timeless and timely importance of virtue in ethics, since the time of Socrates.

Why is virtue ethics making a strong come back at the end of the twentieth century? Basically, virtue is a fundamental ethical category and, therefore, continually important in general ethics and in professional ethics — *important and relevant in bioethics, too?*

Bioethics is a kind of professional ethics centered on human life from birth to death. Like all other kinds of specific ethics, bioethics is doctrine and life, knowledge and will, theory and practice, orthodoxy and orthopraxis. It is not only a systematic ethical normative knowledge, but mainly a persuasive invitation to correct ethical practice. Bioethics, like fundamental ethics and any kind of concrete ethics, considers not only ethical principles and norms, but also, and most of all, good deeds and, therefore, virtues, or positive attitudes. After all, the ethical principles mean nothing unless they are carried out in real life, and virtues precisely incline the possessor to practice the internalized principles and norms.

In general, most textbooks of ethics and bioethics have a chapter on virtue and virtues. Bioethics discusses in particular the virtues of the healthcare professionals. Classical fundamental ethics, radically teleological, and also moral theology, attempts to lead the human person, its subject, towards the end through good human acts (and positive attitudes, and basic positive options). In his journey of life, the human person is directed by his/her conscience, guided by law. His movement to the ultimate end (the fundamental option, happiness, God), implicit in intermediate ends, is strengthened by virtue, frustrated by sin, and, in Christian perspective, rooted in and aided by grace.

Virtue, then, is a basic ethical category, to be studied with other fundamental moral categories, such as happiness, freedom, law, conscience, love and, in religious perspective, grace. Virtue, moreover, is interconnected with the other ethical categories to the point of aiding them become practically operative.

Virtues dispose human beings to act according to their nature, help them develop rationally and creatively their potentialities. Josef Pieper, a lucid exponent of the two more salient authorities on virtue, Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, has written that through the practice of virtues the human person may attain "the furthest potentialities of nature."² Virtuous living is a never-ending process towards excellence, self-realization and happiness.

Currently many ethicists, philosophers and theologians are stressing the point that ethics, and bioethics, ought to improve human beings and the societies where they live. Moral philosophy, Iris Murdoch has said, discusses the ego to defeat it, for in the moral life "the ego is the fat relentless ego."³ To achieve it, we need to perform good deeds, the repetition of which shapes good attitudes which, in turn, deepen a positive fundamental option, or the most radical choice or decision of life.

The good act is certainly most important in ethics: only through good acts are our projects of life — of a good life — realized.⁴ However, more important than the good action — or isolated actions — is the good habit, or virtue. St. Thomas Aquinas said that the whole matter of moral theology (and ethics) is the study of virtue. "What is the purpose of ethics?" asks Peter Kreeft. To answer: "It is to make people good, that is, virtuous."⁵

Ethics ought to help us not only do good deeds, but be good. Following a classical ethical tradition, some authors today present the object of ethics as the formation of a good moral character, obtained

² Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), XII; cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Trans. by T. Irwin (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Co., 1985); St. Thomas Aquinas, I-II, 55-70; II-II, 1-170. "In spite of this recent work, it is best when considering the virtues and vices to go back to Aristotle and Aquinas" (Philippa Foot, *o.c.*, p.1). See also Jean Porter, *Moral Action and Christian Ethics* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

³ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of God* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 58.

⁴ José Antonio Marina, *Ética para náufragos* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1995), pp. 176, 180-181.

⁵ Peter Kreeft, *Back to Virtue*, pp. 30-31.

through the acquisition of good habits, or virtues, by the repeated performance of good acts. "Moral teaching is not reduced to the knowledge of values, nor to improving moral judgment; it attempts, above all, to form character. This is an old aspiration that is found at the origin of Greek philosophy."⁶

Ethics must help us become good —and better. Is not this too pious a goal? What people want is to be happy. Certainly, we all want to be happy; but, happiness is found in the practice of virtue, and the degree of *happiness* is equal to the degree of virtue. Furthermore, happiness is also the reward to virtuous actions, and the more perfect the virtue is the more complete the happiness will be.⁷

Many of our contemporaries equate happiness with *freedom*: to be happy, I got to be me! Yes, but to be truly free one has to be good — virtuous. In fact, the virtuous act, St. Thomas tells us, is the good use of freedom. Maritain writes: "Virtue is a stable disposition which fortifies and perfects the power of the soul in respect to the right use of freedom."⁸

In our human actions, we are also guided by laws, whose main purpose is to make us good citizens, that is, virtuous persons: "The purpose of the law is to lead us to virtue, not suddenly but gradually."⁹ Moreover, as propensities towards what is good, virtues incline us to obey natural law, or the law of being human, and the laws and principles derived from it, beginning by the fundamental ethical principle, that is, "Do good and avoid (and fight) evil." Virtues develop obedience to just civil laws as well as civil disobedience to unjust and immoral laws.

⁶ José Antonio Marina, "El carácter del hombre es su destino," *ABC Cultural*, Núm. 207, 20 Octubre 1995, p. 58. See José Luis L. Aranguren, *Ética* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1972, 5a. ed.), pp. 219-231. See also Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

⁷ Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, I-II, 5,6; I-II, 5, 7.

⁸ Jacques Maritain, *Moral Philosophy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), p. 35.

⁹ I-II, 96, 2 ad 2; cf. I-II, 93, 1. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1179b-1180a; Russell Hittinger, "Law and Virtue," *Ethics & Medics*, Vol. 19, No. 11, November 1994, pp. 1-3.

The immediate norm of our actions is our conscience. But our conscience, to become a true and certain, or right, conscience, that is, a genuine norm of morality, needs the invaluable help of virtues to be obeyed. While virtues shape a good conscience, vices deform conscience, to the point that it is possible to discard the decision of conscience for lack of moral virtues.¹⁰

Our *passions*, or *emotions*, too, need the energy of virtues, to remain within the orbit of reason, and thus become "virtuous passions." We need virtues to put order in our disordered, weak and vulnerable nature; to moderate our passions and make them dynamic forces in our journey of responsibility, temperance, courage, justice and solidarity. We need virtues, to correct our moral deficiencies, overcome temptations, eradicate evil and vices. Thus, as Philippa Foot emphasizes, virtue is also corrective in nature.¹¹

Virtues, then, increase our happiness, help us be truly free; that is, free to love. The value of ethics, of bioethics, is *love*. Love, charity, is the virtue of ethics and Christian ethics. Charity is the form of all virtues; and these, mediations of love.¹²

In religious perspective —concretely, in Christian context—, the believers need virtues to make *grace* operational. Grace is a share in God's divine nature; it is the beginning of glory, or, as Leonardo Boff put it, glory in exile. The followers of Christ march forward towards full glory —towards heaven— by the practice of virtues, of moral and theological virtues: while the latter orient us to and unite us with God, the former incline us to lead good personal and social lives in relation to ourselves, to others and to nature.

Virtue, therefore, is indeed very relevant in ethics and bioethics. Why? Mainly, because it is virtue. *What is virtue?*

Virtue and Virtues

Through history, virtue has been described in various ways. MacIntyre writes: "We thus have different conceptions of a virtue to

¹⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, I-II, 58, 5.

¹¹ Philippa Foot, o.c., pp. 8-14.

¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 25 and 1827.

confront: a virtue is a quality which enables an individual to discharge his or her social role (Homer); a virtue is a quality which enables an individual to move toward the achievement of the specifically human *telos* (end), whether natural or supernatural (Aristotle, the New Testament, Aquinas); a virtue is a quality which has utility in achieving earthly and heavenly success (Benjamin Franklin).” (Parenthetically, “the road to success in Philadelphia and the road to heaven may not coincide after all”).¹³

Traditionally, virtue is defined simply as *a good operative habit*.¹⁴ In general, virtue is a habit, that is, a human quality which firmly disposes the human person’s potencies toward good or evil. The habit of compassion, for instance, inclines the compassionate person to perform acts of love to the neighbor in need.

Virtue is, moreover, an *operative*, not *entitative*, habit: it disposes a person to act in a manner that is pleasant, prompt and easy. It is, specifically, a good habit, a good operative habit. The quality of goodness distinguishes virtues from vices: while good operative habits are in conformity with our nature as human beings, vices, or bad operative habits, are contrary to our nature. Socrates said it well in Plato’s *Republic*: “Virtue would be a certain health, beauty and good condition of a soul, and vice, a sickness, ugliness and weakness.”¹⁵ Truly, “virtue enhances vision, while vice darkens and finally blinds.”¹⁶ Hence, virtues strengthen and perfect our nature and our potencies in the direction of the good, of what is in conformity with our human nature. We can describe virtue, with Ladislaus Boros, as the human person’s practice of his/her humanity; and virtues, with Cornelius van der Poel, as successes in self-realization.¹⁷

Virtues are firm dispositions, “skills which suit us for life, traits of character which shape our vision of life, helping us to determine not

¹³ Alasdair MacIntyre, o.c., pp. 185 and 198.

¹⁴ Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, I-II, 55, 1-3; II-II, 109, 2 ad 3.

¹⁵ Plato, *Republic*, IV, 444e; cf. Peter Kreeft, o.c., p.64.

¹⁶ Gilbert C. Meilaender, o.c., p. 17.

¹⁷ Ladislaus Boros, *Meeting God in Man* (London: Burns & Oates, 1968), X; Cornelius J. Van der Poel, CSS, *The Search for Human Values* (New York: Paulist Press, 1971), pp. 148-160.

only who we are but what world we see"¹⁸; strong propensities which lead us to live as "flourishing human beings."¹⁹

By reason of object, virtues can be many: any and every moral good deed —if repeated— can become a virtue, a positive attitude, a good operative habit. Traditionally, there are *intellectual virtues* (understanding, science, wisdom, art and prudence — also a moral virtue, in its matter), *moral virtues* (centered on the *cardinal virtues*, prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance), and the theological virtues (faith, hope and charity).

The definition of virtue does not apply equally to all the virtues, but analogically, that is, *improperly*, or in a relative sense, to the intellectual virtues (except prudence); *properly* to the moral virtues; and *perfectly* to charity and the other theological virtues and the moral virtues when informed by charity. The intellectual virtues provide a skill to the possessor. Only the moral and the theological virtues make the action good, and also, in a way, its agent. May the courageous act of a criminal be a virtuous act? Saint Augustine defined virtue thus: "A good quality of the mind by which one lives rightly, which no one can use badly, and (this characterization applies to the infused virtues only) which God accomplishes in us without us."²⁰ The theological virtues, if informed by charity, make the person a child of God, a brother/sister of Christ, and in Christ, of all human beings. (According to St. Thomas, the seven virtues that make a good Christian are the three theological virtues and the four cardinal virtues.)

When we speak of virtues in ethics, we refer mainly to *moral virtues*, that is, to good operative habits which dispose the person to act according to reason, and make him/her good. The moral virtues rectify the whole ethical life of the person who possesses them, by putting order in his/her intellect (through prudence), will (through justice), and sense appetite (through courage and temperance). Since the time of Aristotle, the principal moral virtues are the four cardinal

¹⁸ Gilbert C. Meilaender, *o.c.*, p. 11.

¹⁹ Peter Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1977), p. 18; cf. Gilbert C. Meilaender, *o.c.*, pp. 11-13.

²⁰ St. Augustine, *De libero arbitrio*, II, c. 19: ML 32,1268; cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, I-II, 55, 4.

virtues. It has been said that upon these four virtues, the moral life of the human person pivots, like the door upon its hinge.

Among the cardinal virtues, *prudence* —or practical wisdom— stands out: "Every moral virtue must be prudent."²¹ "Prudence is cause, root, mother, measure, precept, and prototype of all ethical virtues. It acts in all of them, perfecting them according to their true nature; all participate in it, and by virtue of this participation they are virtues."²²

On the other hand, however, there can be no prudence without the moral virtues, that is without justice, courage and temperance. Prudence judges what is good in a given situation (the "golden mean" which avoids the extremes of excess and defect; for instance, an act of courage avoids cowardice and headlessness); the other moral virtues help make the intellect and the will see that the good must be accepted and pursued.

When possessed in a perfect degree, the moral virtues are interconnected to such a point that they help each other grow. In general, they do not compete against each other but cooperate one with the others. In a radical sense, all virtues are connected because "in every virtue man says yes to all that is good."²³ As Plato defended, there is only one virtue: knowledge and practice of what is good.

Lao Tzu said beautifully:

I am kind to the kind;
I am also kind to the unkind:
For virtue is kind.
I am faithful to the faithful;
I am also faithful to the unfaithful:
For virtue is faithful.

²¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *De Virtutibus in Communi*, 12 ad 23.

²² Josef Pieper, o.c., p. 20.

²³ Bernard Haring, *The Law of Christ*, I (Lafayette, Indiana: The Mercier Press, 1960), p. 491; cf. Gilbert C. Meilaender, o.c., p. 50. Romanus Cessario writes: "Grace makes the unity of the virtues a possibility for every believer. What the philosophers took as a description of a distinctive few, a moral oligarchy, the Gospel message proposes for all those who, in faith, accept the power of the risen Christ in their lives" (o.c., p. 145).

Virtues are many, and can be more. St. Thomas mentions more than fifty. In Aristotelian ethics and in Christian ethics, all the moral virtues are studied under the four cardinal virtues. From a humanist and Christian perspective, the virtue of humility, also connected with temperance, is given radical importance. *What are the virtues considered more relevant nowadays?*

The catalogues and ranking of virtues are, in a way, historical. To the traditional virtues, new virtues are being added today. Bennassar, for instance, speaks of the virtues of lucidity, transparency, austerity, tiredless stubbornness, and of the virtue of freedom. MacIntyre, for his part, mentions the virtue of having an adequate sense of the traditions to which one belongs or which confront one.²⁴ André Comte-Sponville begins his *Little Treatise of Great Virtues* (on 18 virtues) with the virtue of "politesse," or politeness, or courtesy. While some basic virtues are always important, others can be more or less relevant in different social and cultural environments. In his popular *The Book of Virtues*, William Bennett presents inspiring classical stories, fables and teachings to illustrate ten virtues, including self-discipline, work and loyalty.

From a global perspective, virtues that are given priority importance today are justice and love. Writes André Comte-Sponville: "Of all the virtues, the highest are justice—the great virtue of Greek and Jewish traditions—and love—the great virtue of Christian tradition. The greatest virtue is love": partly as 'philia' ("I am happy that you exist"), and principally as "agape" (a totally disinterested love).²⁵

We find Paul Ricoeur's exposition of both virtues very helpful. Philosopher Ricoeur says, in his book *Love and Justice* (1994), that three expressions define 'ethics' or the ethical life: the desire of an accomplished life, with and for others, in just institutions. Justice acts according to the logic of equivalence, manifested in the law of reciprocity.

²⁴ Cf. Bartomeu Bennassar, *o.c.*, p. 11 & ff.; Alasdair MacIntyre, *o.c.*, p. 223.

²⁵ André Comte-Sponville, "Interview by Thierry Lyonnet," *L'Actualité Religieuse*, No. 138, 15 Novembre 1995, pp. 39-42.

Love, on the other hand, which is best expressed in the love of enemies, follows another kind of logic, that is, the logic of superabundance or the economy of the gift, summed up in these words: "Because it was given to you, in turn you have to give." Paul Ricoeur adds cogently that, at times, just demands can only be achieved through love—or the economy of the gift—, while justice can also be a necessary means of love."²⁶

Ricoeur, thus, enriches the ongoing philosophical debate on justice, a principle, value and virtue very important for bioethics, too. The continuing debate is centered still between Robert Nozick and his justice of entitlements and John Rawls and his distributive justice. We feel that, perhaps, one of the shortcoming in both, more pronounced in Nozick, is that they do not seem to give to love the importance it has, even in helping us be truly just. Without true love of neighbor, or solidarity, the person is really a stranger to the other persons, and society, a ship of strangers with competing interests.²⁷

In Christian perspective, charity as love of neighbor does not replace justice, but perfects it and goes beyond it. Almsgiving cannot cover up injustice. Charity, in fact, gives value to all the other virtues, that are her mediations: "Over all these virtues (mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness) put on love, which binds the rest together and makes them perfect" (Col 3:14).

Charity as love of neighbor is inseparable from charity as love of God: there is only one charity. As all true love is radically love of God, all virtues are fundamentally love of God, too. Love of God is truly, therefore, the correct fundamental option of life, the virtue of virtues. As Saint Augustine said: "Now if virtue takes us to the blessed life, I would dare to say that nothing is virtue outside of the love of God."²⁸ Therefore, the different particular virtues are genuine virtues only

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Amor y justicia* (Madrid: Caparrós Editores, 1994; cf. Gabriel Amengual, "De la justicia al amor," ABC Cultural, Núm. 162, 9 Diciembre 1994, p. 63.

²⁷ Alasdair McIntyre, *o.c.*, pp. 244-255. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971); Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); James F. Drane, *o.c.*, pp. 94-110).

²⁸ St Augustine, *De mor. Eccl. Cath.*, I, 15, 25: ML 32,1322.

"in as far as they are rooted in the true option and existential choice, which consists in the unwavering love for God and his will."²⁹

Virtues of Healthcare Professionals

Global ethics ranks virtue as an essential ethical category, and some human virtues — respect for life, justice, solidarity, nonviolence, tolerance — as important elements of the fundamental moral commonality existing among all humans. The projects of universal ethics, however, do not replace but respect and promote the ethical projects of cultural ethics. The different cultural ethics ought to be rooted in the equal dignity and rights of all persons and people. From this fundamental commonality derive cultural diversities. In this context, it is necessary to distinguish, with philosopher Marina, between difference and fragmentation.

The ethicists of global ethics accept and defend cultural differences, and therefore, multiculturalism in society, but they condemn correctly cultural fragmentation. Why? Because while cultural differences respect universal human rights, fragmentation does not. In fragmentation, "a group, or a race, or a nation, will end up demanding rights, but without taking the other groups into account. This annuls the notion of human rights" — a universal notion.³⁰

Ethically speaking, each culture has its ethical values and virtues — and also its limitations. While all of us have to be basically faithful to our culture, we ought to be reasonably critical of its possible negative elements. As human beings living in pluralistic societies, we all have to be tolerant, but not with the intolerable. Global ethics may help us distinguish between correct pluralism and intolerable evil like slavery or ethnic cleansing. On the other hand, universal ethics projects have to be reasonably criticized by the various cultural ethics so that the former will be truly global and not the interested ethics of the dominant

²⁹ C. Henry Peschke, SVD, *Christian Ethics* (Alcester and Dublin: C. Goodlife Neale, 1975), pp. 270-271.

³⁰ José Antonio Marina, "El estado de la cuestión," *ABC Cultural*, Núm. 202, 15 Septiembre 1995, p. 58. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *o.c.*, pp. 204-225; *The Parliament of the World's Religions, A Global Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 1993); Dionisio M. Miranda, SVD, *Pagkamakabuhay. On the Side of Life* (Manila: Logos Publ., 1994).

ideologies and powers. In both cases, intelligent, free, persuasive and respectful dialogue is the way to progress towards one basic human universal ethics that respects and enriches diverse human cultural ethics.

Virtues are influenced by culture, too. Different cultures will propose, with basic human virtues, their specific cultural virtues. Philippine culture, for instance, will promote virtues manifesting its specific cultural values and traits, such as, hospitality, religiosity, family solidarity, patience, joy...

In a similar way, different professions will present different virtues, that is, those corresponding to a particular profession: virtues that will incline the respective professionals towards the practice of the corresponding code of ethics and principles, which will make them good professionals.

Drane writes: "When the theory of virtue and character is used as a lens through which to look at medicine, something worthwhile is brought into focus..." And proving the need of virtues for physicians ("We know that there are both good doctors and bad ones"), he adds: "Medicine as a profession is already a philosophical vision, and creates its own orientation to the world. Its essential acts (diagnosis, treatment, pain relief, function restoration, caring) have recognizable structure, which serves as a standard for virtue."³¹

What are the most important virtues of a physician? It has been said that Hippocrates recommends to physicians the virtues of modesty, sobriety, patience, promptness, and piety. Beauchamp and Childress, in their classical textbook on bioethics, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, correlate virtues and principles. According to them, the four main principles are autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence and justice. The related virtues are respect for persons (particularly their autonomy), veracity, benevolence (including nonmalevolence, compassion, understanding and caring), and justice; they also mention charitableness, related to ideal.³² We believe with many other authors that the ethical

³¹ James Drane, *o.c.*, p. 19.

³² Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 235-236. See Tom L.

theory of virtues is not contrary but complementary to the theory of principles. Both moral theories support each other in presenting a coherent ethical theory and practice.

According to Edmund Pellegrino, the most essential virtues to the healing purposes of the clinical encounter between doctor (or nurse) and patient are the following: fidelity to trust and promise, benevolence, effacement of self-interest, compassion and caring, intellectual honesty, justice, and prudence.³³

Not long ago, we posed this question to a group of about forty Catholic physicians: *What are the most important virtues for a Catholic physician?* According to them the three most important are: first, compassion (unanimous); second, humility (also unanimous), and third prayerfulness. Fourth (equal number of votes), honesty, prudence, courage, and faith.

Taking explicitly into consideration our Philippine cultural context, five physicians, four priests and one graduate nurse all teaching bioethics reflected with Dr. H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., in May 1993, at Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, on the more important virtues of the physician in the Philippines. Their conclusion: honesty, humility, prudence, respectfulness, courage, patience, prayer-fulness. Let us present a brief description of these virtues.

(1) *Honesty*. Connected with justice (toward ourselves and others). Good healthcare providers ought to be honest. The virtue of honesty refers to integrity, to doing what is perceived as morally right. In bioethical perspective, it means being true to oneself and to others; being truthful in communicating with other healthcare professionals, and, above all, with patients and their families. Honesty, therefore, is often understood as *truthfulness*. (More than a virtue, honesty is the essential trait of every virtuous act. Honesty is goodness.)

Beauchamp, "Principalism and Its Alleged Competitors," *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 3, September 1995, pp. 181-198; Fausto B. Gómez, O.P., "Relevant Principles in Bioethics," *Unitas*, Vol. 68, No 2 (June 1995), pp. 18-22.

³³ Edmund D. Pellegrino, "Toward a Virtue-Based Normative Ethics for the Health Professions," *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 3, September 1995, pp. 253-277.

(2) *Humility*. Connected with temperance. The healthcare provider, in particular the highly esteemed physician, needs to be humble. *Humility* is the virtue which inclines physicians and others not to exaggerate their self-importance or professional excellence, not to be proud or arrogant, and to consider other persons, particularly their patients, as their equals in human dignity. In religious perspective, the other person is not only an equal but also a creature and a child of God, indeed an image and icon of the Lord. In bioethical context, the humble health care professional realizes that he knows little; that he is obliged to update himself continually; that he needs to consult his peers and, at times, bioethics committees; that technology is not omnipotent; that death is a reality and a mystery.

(3) *Prudence* is a good operative habit which disposes a person to do the right thing at the right moment. It guides and fortifies conscience. It is the virtue of discernment, a most important one for the healthcare giver, for it helps him/her to evaluate different alternatives in treatment, to tell the truth to his patients, to judge adequately when there are conflicts of values, or cultural, professional and personal tensions, to decide reasonably regarding the allocation of scarce healthcare resources.

(4) *Respectfulness*. Connected with *justice* and *love*. It inclines us to acknowledge the unique dignity of other persons and to recognize their inalienable rights. It empowers the possessor not to treat any human being as an object, or a means, or a number. It helps physicians be deeply aware of the autonomy of their patients and morally responsive to their choices. In religious perspective, respectfulness acknowledges God's sovereignty over all creation, and reveres every human person as the image of God.

(5) *Courage*, or fortitude is an important virtue for the healthcare giver. Courage is the cardinal virtue that helps persons face dangers and trials without cowardice or rashness. It inclines the professional to follow his conscience, to witness his values and virtues, to carry out faithfully the principles that guide his personal and professional life.

(6) *Patience*. Connected with *fortitude*. It is a skill of the soul that strengthens us to bear trials, suffering, difficulties, including the apparent limitations of others, with resignation, if not with joy. Another important virtue connected with courage, and also with patience, is

perseverance, the positive attitude that disposes a person firmly to pursue his/her work, decision, activity or program up to the end.

(7) *Prayerfulness*. In religious perspective, *prayerfulness* is very helpful to become strong, respectful, prudent, humble, honest and compassionate. It is connected with the virtue of religion, and the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. While secular virtue ethics—and bioethics—are centrally anthropocentric, religious, Christian ethics are theocentric. In this context, prayer is necessary, for God is the main agent of the good we perform.

This list of virtues in Philippine context is not exhaustive but indicative. Personally, I would also add, love and hope.

(8) *Love: compassion*. Love is the most important virtue of every human being, including the healing professionals. It means to wish good to another, to do good to another. It presupposes justice. It is love of benevolence and of beneficence, both acts of love, also of most perfect love, that is, charity: love of God and love of neighbor. The effects of charity are joy, peace and mercy. Mercy is compassion, or sympathy, that is, "suffering with" (others); it is, according to St. Thomas, the greatest virtue concerning the neighbor. The object of compassion is the remedy of the misery of others. It is connected with charity and justice. Opposed to apathy and antipathy, compassion is an essential quality of true love of neighbor or solidarity. True compassion goes beyond compassion as mere feeling or emotion, to evolve into virtuous compassion, that is, a positive attitude or good habit permeated by human love or charity. Virtuous compassion, or habitual sympathy, is perfected in empathy. The physician—and other healthcare professionals—has to be knowledgeable and compassionate. Paul Tournier, M.D.: "Two things go to the making of a doctor -great scientific competence and a great heart." Compassion for all patients, in particular for the suffering poor. For Christians, followers of Christ, the love of preference for the poor is an essential element of Christian discipleship. Like our Father, we have to be merciful and compassionate. Like Christ, whom the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes as "the form of all virtues."³⁴

³⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, II-II, 30, 4; Paul Tournier, *A Listening Ear* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publ. House, 1984), pp. 81-82; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2346; John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*.

(9) *Hope*. It is the virtue that believes in the future—in a better future! It is also a theological virtue, the virtue of the pilgrim on the way to God. Founded on the death and resurrection of Christ, Christian hope helps us journey to heaven by being faithfully committed to the present. Our hope in heaven ought to be at least implicit in our human hopes, if these are to be true hopes. In particular, hope is an important virtue for the physician and all healthcare providers. The physician cannot give hope to his/her patients if he/she does not have it; and he/she has to give hope, even to the terminally ill; but, a true hope. Death is not a medical failure, nor the end of hope; but part of earthly life, a reality, a mysterious reality, a non-ultimate reality. The physician should never say “nothing else can be done,” because something more can always be done: being at the side of the patient and family, relieving his/her pain, caring, praying... In Christian perspective, we believe in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, in our own resurrection—and that of our patients: “Through his death and resurrection, Christ turned sunset into sunrise” (St. Clement of Alexandria).

The physician, while respecting the conscience of his/her patients, realizes the importance of spiritual care, as an important dimension of integral or wholistic health care. As a pilgrim, he/she is on a journey—to God.

Acquiring and Practicing Virtues

We have tried to define virtue earlier. But, *do we really know what virtue is?*

G. E. Moore said, in *Principia Ethica*, that there are certain things that cannot be defined, except by pointing them out. For instance, blue, or beauty, or good. *And what about virtue?*

Virtue can be defined, of course, as we have done earlier (in a too simplified and unified way, perhaps). However, genuine knowledge of virtue is practical knowledge, a knowledge that comes with the exercise of virtue. This is why, St. Thomas tells us, the best definition of virtue is the virtuous person! Only the just man knows what is justice, said Plato; only the Good Samaritan knows truly what is the meaning of love of neighbor. Although we separate our knowledge of virtue from our practice, Socrates did not. For him, knowing what is right implied

necessarily doing right: "He who knows what is right, will do right. Because why would anybody choose to be unhappy?"³⁵

Full knowledge of virtue comes, then, with the practice of virtues. Indeed, "to know and not to do is not yet to know" (Buddhist saying). But, as Comte-Sponville says, one is not born a virtuous person; one becomes virtuous.

At the crossroads of our life, like Hercules, we have to choose, between virtue and vice. Because we want to achieve self-realization, because we want to be truly free, and relatively happy, we choose virtue, we try hard to be virtuous. To be good persons, responsible citizens, true professionals, genuine Christians, we commit ourselves to acquire and practice human virtues, and the specific virtues of our own profession. *How do we acquire virtues?* By the continued repetition of good acts.

In this regard, William James has given us four valuable suggestions: First, we make a strong resolution to pursue virtue; second, we make no exceptions at all; third, we actualize the resolution continually, and, finally, we make daily gratuitous exercise of the resolution.³⁶

To be engagingly pursued, virtues are to be loved. Love of virtue is a concretization of love of the moral good, of a good life. Virtues are acquired through the repetition of the corresponding acts, which shape and strengthen virtues, mold a good character and deepen a positive fundamental option. Moralists today stress that the human person expresses his/her personality not only through acts (casuistry ethics), but mainly through positive attitudes (virtue ethics), and radically through the right fundamental option (the basic choice, orientation or value, or ideal of life: the ultimate end, happiness, God). The fundamental option is concretized in virtues; these are particularized in acts. On the other hand, commitment to the option strengthens virtues, as practice of these make the corresponding acts more numerous, easier to make and their performance more pleasant. To

³⁵ Jostein Gaarder, *Sophie's World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), pp. 54-55.

³⁶ Cf. Pedro B. Gabriel, *Ethical Wisdom* (Manila: UST Printing Office, 1983), p. 51.

acquire and deepen virtues, it is important, therefore, to deepen our fidelity to the right fundamental option, that is, to God as the object of our happiness and ultimate end, our love.³⁷

Virtue, then, is truly important and relevant in ethics and bioethics. It is radically important and relevant even in education: "Prudent education teaches virtue," says the Catechism of the Catholic Church; in the words of William Bennett, "the central task of education is teaching virtue."³⁸ As educators, as ethicists, as moralists, we have to teach virtue to those we love. Aristotle said: "It would seem right for each man to help his children and friends towards virtue."³⁹ And we know that the effective way to teach virtues is by practicing them.

Throughout our discussion, we have talked principally of virtue and virtues from a human, ethical perspective, and, therefore, of human virtues as positive attitudes and beneficial dispositions acquired by our own efforts. In theological, in Christian perspective, we also speak of virtues—theological and moral virtues, and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit—as infused by God in the potencies of the soul with sanctifying grace. When speaking of grace, St. Thomas Aquinas puts forward an illuminating description of and distinction between acquired and infused virtues: as the acquired virtues perfect the human person so that he may walk properly according to the natural light of reason, so the infused virtues perfect the human person so that he may walk properly according to the light of grace. Specifically different from acquired virtues, the infused virtues, however, do not replace but improve our efforts to acquire and mold good operative habits: the infused virtues elevate, purify and transform our efforts, our acquired virtues, by God's dynamic presence—grace and the indwelling of the Blessed Trinity—that permeates and energizes our cooperation.

³⁷ Cf. Bernard Haring, *Free and Faithful in Christ I* (London: St. Paul Publications, 1978), pp. 164-168, 189-193; C. Henry Peschke, SVD, *Christian Ethics*, I (Alcester and Dublin: C. Goodliffe Neale, 1975), pp. 274-278; Marciano Vidal, *Moral de Actitudes, Moral Fundamental Personalista* (Madrid: PS Editorial, 1974); John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (Vatican City, 1993), nos. 66-70.

³⁸ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1784; William J. Bennet, *o.c.*, pp. 10-16; Plato, *Republic*, II; Christina Hoff Sommers, "Teaching the Virtues. A blueprint for moral education," *Chicago Tribune Magazine* (September 12, 1993), pp. 14, 16, 18.

³⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. X, 9, 1179b-1180a.

In this context, let us bring here another illuminating distinction made by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The Protestant theologian speaks of cheap and of expensive grace. Cheap grace means that God puts everything, and we put nothing; we just enjoy God's gifts, and in the process try to manipulate Him. *Expensive grace*: God puts everything without any merit from our part; but once we have God's grace, a dynamic movement begins in which our cooperation is required and valued by God.⁴⁰

We may speak of cheap and expensive virtues, too. Cheap virtue would mean that God does everything good in our lives; He is a miracle-worker —and we praise Him! On the other hand, *expensive virtue* would signify that God still does everything: He infuses graces and virtues in us, and with these we cooperate. Thus, we become God's instruments, that is, his miracles!

The holy writer advises us: "Associate with a religious man, who you are sure keeps the commandments, who is like-minded with yourself and will feel for you if you fall. Then, too, heed your own heart's counsel... Most important, pray to God to set your feet in the path of truth" (Sir 37:12-15).

In his book *Back to Virtue*, Peter Kreeft tells us this story. There was a man in Times Square, New York, who had a violin case under his arm. He seemed to be lost. The young man asked the policeman: "How can I get to Carnegie Hall?" The policeman answered him: "Practice, man, practice."⁴¹ *How may I be happy?* Practice, man/woman, practice; practice virtue. *How to practice virtue?* Just do a good act in a particular moral field —and repeat it! Samuel Smiles put it correctly in his well-known lovely poem:

Sow a thought and you will reap an act.
Sow an act and you will reap a habit.
Sow a habit and you will reap a character.
Sow a character and you will reap a destiny. □

⁴⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *El precio de la gracia* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1986); quoted by Felicísimo Martínez Díez, O. P., *Refundar la vida religiosa* (Madrid: San Pablo, 1994), pp.43-44.

⁴¹ Peter Kreeft, *o.c.*, p. 67.