Virtues Are Back in Fashion

James McTavish, FMVD & Monica Jalandoni[*]

Often the goal of Christian moral life is viewed solely as avoiding sin. However with the revival of virtue ethics we are challenged instead to do good and become the best people we can be. This article explores some key concepts in virtue ethical theory drawing from a diverse range of thinkers both ancient and modern on the topic. Issues looked at include character formation, goal-oriented behaviour, importance of role models and the doctrine of the mean. The cardinal virtues as understood by St Thomas Aquinas are shown to be ever pertinent for our contemporary moral living. The revival of virtue theory with its goal of striving to be the best one can be is consonant with the universal call to holiness for all Christians.

Keywords: *Virtue ethics, character, habits, cardinal virtues, holiness, perfection*

There is more to morality than just avoiding vice

Considering the use of the words virtue and vice in popular language, it is more common to hear of people 'living a life of vice.' Rarely do we hear that a person is living a life of virtue or that she is virtuous. Perhaps this relates to a larger vision that sees the whole aim of the moral life as the mere avoidance of sin. Of course we must avoid sin but it can end up a rather minimalist and uninspiring approach. It is oft said as a justification of mediocrity "Well I am not a bad Catholic, I haven't killed anyone," but as *Optatam totius* no. 16 reminds us, the whole aim of the moral life is not merely to avoid sin but to bear fruit in charity for the life of the world.[1] We are to strive not merely to

[*] *The authors would like to thank Brother Daniel Drum, FMVD, for proof reading the manuscript.*

[1] Second Vatican Council, *Optatam totius*, 28 October 1965, no. 16.

avoid doing bad but to do good! To be fruitful as our good Lord reminds us in John 15: 5 – "Remain united to me and you will bear much fruit."

This article would like to explore the other, often neglected, side of morality: doing good. This is best accomplished through an introduction to virtue ethical theory. Virtue ethics, unlike other systems of morality is focused not on the morality of the actions but on the kind of person one is becoming through one's actions. The question is not: "Is this a bad action or a good one?" but rather: "What kind of person does this action make me?" Further on, we ask: "Is this action congruent with the kind of person I would like to become? What actions should I choose in order to become a better person?"

This article offers an overview of some key concepts in Aristotelian-Thomistic virtue ethics theory supplemented by insights from virtue ethicists such as James Keenan, Joseph Kotva, Alasdair MacIntyre, Jean Porter and Servais Pinckaers. It is hoped that the article can thus provide a useful introduction to virtue ethics, and perhaps be an intellectual springboard, encouraging the reader to explore more deeply this increasingly important area in contemporary moral theology. That there has been a recent revival of interest in virtue ethics is clearly noted by Kotva, a renowned author on virtue ethics:

> Today's resurgence of interest in virtue and character can hardly go unnoticed. Calls for a return to virtue are coming from many directions and range from careful philosophical treatments to best-selling books. Indeed, the return to "virtue" has even made the cover of Newsweek. As recently as the early 1980s, theories of virtue occupied only a few Anglo-American moral theologians and philosophers. That has changed. The number of books on virtue ethics is growing rapidly and professional journals increasingly publish articles written from a virtue perspective.[2]

Prior to Vatican II, moral theology was act-centered, sin-orientated and individualistic.[3] For centuries, the main focus of moral theology had been to form confessors and provide instructions for suitable penances either through

[2] Joseph Kotva, Jr., *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics*, (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1996), Kotva holds that the reasons for this renewed concern include the realization that modern society is in crisis and a contributing factor has been the incompleteness or even failure of many of the modern ethical systems. To help society, good role models are needed more than ever and virtue ethics with its emphasis on character and its development gives due importance to this.

[3] See Richard Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 28. A detailed history of the development of moral theology is outside the confines of this essay. For a comprehensive overview see John Mahoney's *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

the penitentials, confessional books or moral manuals.[4] With a predominant focus on sin and its avoidance the possibility of living virtuously was neglected and even forgotten. As Richard Gula notes, by the time the council arrived, "a change was long overdue."[5] One of the key developments in moral theology in the post-Vatican II era has indeed been the resurgence of interest in virtue ethics.[6]

Universal appeal of virtues

Contemporaneously in the post-conciliar period inter-religious dialogue has emerged as a theme of importance and virtue ethics may offer some light owing to a certain universality of virtues. As Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster, London said recently "virtues belong to all humanity."[7] As part of humanity's common patrimony, a discussion of virtues may appeal to Christians and non-Christians alike. Who would fail to recognize the extraordinary courage in the likes of Gandhi who fought in a peaceful way to overcome his unjust British colonial oppressors and free his countrymen from tyranny? An anecdote is also told about Gandhi whereby one can easily see the virtue of temperance too. A mother approached Gandhi to ask his help. Her son was eating too many candies. Gandhi told the boy to come back in three days. Three days later Gandhi advised the boy to stop eating too many candies. The irate mother berated Gandhi, asking why he had not given this good advice three days before. Gandhi replied that he had to cut down himself first before advising others to do the same![8] The Church readily recognizes the seeds of goodness and truth present in all peoples and many Pontiffs address their words not only to Christians but to all people of good will.[9] In a recent article on discovering Asia's gifts of the Spirit, Fr. James Kroeger, a Maryknoll missionary and theologian commented that we can learn much from the followers of other religious faiths: from Buddhists, the Church can learn

[4] See James Keenan, S.J., *Moral Wisdom - Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition* (Quezon city: Claretian publications, 2004), 1-6.

[5] Richard Gula, *Reason Informed...28.*

[6] See Fr. Fausto Gomez, O.P., "Vatican II…Moral theology forty years after" in Vatican *II: 40 years after*, UST Theology week 2006 (Manila: UST Publishing House, 2007), 249-278.

[7] Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster, "Living the virtues in a time of austerity" given at Leicester University, England on 28 October, 2010. Full text accessed on 15 June 2011 and available at http://www.thetablet.co.uk/page/nichols-leicester.

[8] Full anecdote can be found on website of the Gandhi Memorial Center, Washington D.C. Accessed on 14 June 2011 at http://www.gandhimemorialcenter.org/for_children.

[9] Pope John Paul II's first encyclical, *Redemptor hominis*, was addressed to "his venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, the Priests, the religious families, the sons and daughters of the Church and *to all men and women of good will*" (emphasis mine). *Humanae vitae* of Pope Paul VI was likewise also addressed to "all men of good will."

about respect for life, from Confucianism, filial piety and from Taoism, simplicity and humility.[10]

The universality of virtues can form a fruitful basis for dialogue even with non-believers. Following the recent economic crisis, Archbishop Vincent Nichols stated that the "tradition of the 'virtues' can be an extremely fruitful point of profound and ongoing dialogue between the secular reality and the world of religious belief."[11] He pointed out that when the virtues are practiced and lived out genuine progress is then possible. He appealed for a return to virtue as a response to the economic and moral crisis affecting British society.

Virtue ethics theory has wide appeal and a review of its basic tenets will be useful for us. It will be seen that an understanding of its key concepts is helpful for daily moral life. All too often the moral arena is reduced to major and sensational concerns such as abortion, homosexuality and stem cell therapy; and rarely in connection with the more mundane aspects of our lives such as the way we drive to work in the mornings, or how we treat those we encounter daily.[12] But Thomas Aquinas says every human act is a moral act. All of our actions fall under the purview of morality. The way I drive to work in the morning affects my actions throughout the day. If I drive to work aggressively then I come to work with an aggressive attitude which will reflect in my dealings with the people around me. If I drive to work carefully and patiently, then my patience will reflect in my encounters with people. This will make me a patient and careful person.

Agere Sequitor Esse

Agere Sequitor Esse, being precedes action, is one of the key tenets of virtue ethics. Actions proceed from our character. If one is virtuous, one can more readily recognize the goodness to be chosen.[13] For example, if you are a just person, you will recognize what is fair, and therefore will treat your employees accordingly. Conversely, vice itself distorts the moral vision.[14] Somebody who is not just will have many excuses for treating employees unfairly, all the while believing himself to be a just man. Every time a virtue or a vice is acted out it becomes more ingrained. How many times have little lies we've told taken a life of their own and spun out into a

[10] Fr. James H. Kroeger, M.M., "Discovering Asia's Gifts of the Spirit" in *Boletin Eclesiastico de Filipinas*, Vol. LXXXVII, No. 885 (July-August 2011), 397-406.

[11] Archbishop Vincent Nichols, "Living the virtues..."

[12] James Keenan, *Virtues for Ordinary Christians.* (Wisconsin: Sheed and Ward, 1999), 9.

[13] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed., (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 154.

[14] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144a-35. Hereafter *NE* with relevant Bekker and line numbers.

veritable daisy chain of lies? That one little lie led us to tell another lie, and another, until we become in fact liars. There is a synergy between our actions and the person that we become as a result of those actions. Who you are impacts what you choose, and, at the same time, the actions you choose form who you are.

Through our actions we can choose the kind of people we want to become. Knowing this, we can ask ourselves the questions: "Who ought I become? What kind of person should I be?" This implies that there is an ideal type of person that we are trying to reach. One can see that virtue is goal-oriented or teleological. Our goal is to be a virtuous person.

Goal-oriented behavior

Often in life we have goals. A goal can be to finish studies, lose weight, to pray more or to attend mass more often. Long-term goals are frequently achieved through setting short-term goals. For example, in order to finish studies we must pass this class; and in order to pass this class we have to complete this assignment. Almost all goals are intermediary goals. We want to pass this class in order to finish our studies. We want to finish our studies in order to get a good job. We want a good job in order to provide for our family. There is almost always a further goal – except for happiness which is the one goal that is desired for itself and not as a means to attain something else. *Eudaimonia*, a true and lasting happiness (and not the fleeting joy that comes from passing an exam or eating chocolate), is our ultimate goal, our *telos*.[15] Aristotle says we achieve our *telos*, a life of happiness, by living a life in accordance with virtue.[16]

If we want to flourish, then we need to practice and live the virtues. However, the virtues are not to be simply understood as a means to the goal, but they are also the goal themselves. Consider the human good of friendship. To reach this goal, another does not merely become a friend at the end but on the way. The friendship grows and spending time with a friend is not simply the means to an end but is the end in itself. Thus we see that the virtues lead to, and constitute, the human *telos*. To arrive there we should enjoy the journey too; as the popular phrase runs – 'the way to heaven is heaven.'

Community is important

Speaking of friendship, we do not become virtuous alone or in isolation. We begin learning virtues in our families; virtues like love, respect, obedience, generosity

[15] *Telos* is the Greek word for goal, but is often used to refer to an ultimate goal.
[16] *NE* 1102a-5.

and justice. James Keenan says that a child's first moral judgment is one of justice, or rather, injustice. "That's not fair! Why do you get more than I?" Throughout our lives, our friends, the people around us, influence and teach us how to be virtuous or vicious. "We learn the virtues through practice and in the company of others. We learn the virtues by imitating worthy role models, listening to the advice of virtuous friends and teachers, hearing the stories of virtuous people and following rules of virtuous behavior."[17]

This makes us reflect on who our role models are. As Christians we have many good role models in the lives of the saints. Andrew Flescher says "we ought to read about heroes and saints because they, who were once not so heroic or saintly, have struggled just as we have but have subsequently learned to lead a virtuous life."[18] The lives of the martyrs can often serve as role models, especially to assist Christians in their daily carrying of the cross. The English martyr Edward Campion has been an example to many generations of British Catholics, as have countless other martyrs. Campion, a Jesuit, was executed in 1581 when he was only 41 years old. As a priest, he carried out his ministry in England at a time when anti-Catholic persecution was rife. He was zealous for the salvation of souls and put up with great hardship before being betrayed and handed over to be hung, drawn, and quartered. Looking at the heroic lives of so many witnesses who have gone before us encourages us to carry the weight of our daily crosses. In some ways, every martyr makes his own the words of St. Paul, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ." (1 Cor. 11: 1)

Doctrine of the mean

Another key tenet of virtue ethics is the doctrine of the mean which Aristotle introduces in the *Nicomachean ethics*. This doctrine holds that a virtue lies in the middle of two extremes called vices, one of excess and one of deficiency. A concrete example can help clarify the concept. The virtue of courage is the virtuous mean between a deficiency, cowardice and an excess, rashness.[19] Both extremes are to be avoided. Cowardice or timidity is a vice as here a lack of courage would result in a person avoiding a situation that he needs to face. However, the opposite of cowardice, that of rashness, is also a vitiated response of someone without proper regard for herself rushing headlong into something dangerous. The doctrine of the mean proposes that the virtuous person exhibits the right amount of courage at the right moment, and for the right reason.

[17] Joseph Kotva, Jr., *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics*, (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1996), 6.

[18] Andrew Flescher, *Heroes, Saints and Ordinary Morality,* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003), 8.

[19] *NE* 1115b-25.

This middle path is not the arithmetical mean, a kind of easy compromise, but rather a carefully judged response to the concrete situation at hand. The mean is a point between the excess and deficiency of a disposition that is relative to you. This means that the virtuous disposition is judged in relation to my situation. The temperate amount of food for me, a moral theologian, is vastly different from temperate amount of food for Manny Pacquiao, a world boxing champion.

The mean relative to you sounds like moral theology has become more relaxed and relative, we might think – "now I can do anything I like since it is all relative to me." But actually the opposite has occurred. It is no longer enough to ask is this action a good action or a bad one, but one must ask if this the right action at this time towards this person? For example, one might say that telling the truth is always good. However, should you tell your mother that the dish she spent all afternoon cooking for dinner is awful, even if it is the truth?

Under the old system, good and evil were relatively simple: a truth is good and a lie is evil. With virtue ethics, telling the truth may not always be a good act. Aristotle gives us five criteria or questions we can ask ourselves: "Is this the right time, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way?"[20] Virtue ethics is actually a much more stringent system because there are so many more ways to get it wrong, such that getting the mean right is actually more akin to hitting the bulls-eye.[21]

Virtues are good habits

Virtues are not innate.[22] Rather, nature gives one the capacity to acquire them, and their completion comes through habituation. Much like we are born having the capacity to read but are not able to do so until we learn through habitual practice. When we habitually do bad things, we form vices and when we habitually do good things we form virtues. Virtues are good habits.[23]

However, 'habit' can sometimes connote boring repetition; being in a rut. Servais Pinckaers encourages us not simply to translate *habitus* as 'habit' so as to exclude the notion of automatic, repetitive activity.[24] Virtue is not merely a repetitive habit but is about excellence, and the capacity of a power to act to accomplish the maximum of which it is capable. Somebody with the habit of playing the piano may

[20] *NE* 1106b-20.
[21] *NE* 1106b-30.
[22] *NE* 1103a-15.
[23] St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.II.55.3. Hereafter *ST*.
[24] Servais Pinckaers, O.P., "Virtue is Not a Habit," Cross Currents: Winter 1962, 65-81.

be able perform Beethoven's 5th Symphony. This ability would be beyond somebody who does not have the habit of playing. Pinckaers defines virtue as "an active quality which disposes a man to produce the maximum of what he is able to do on the moral plane, which gives to his reason and will conjoined the power to accomplish the most perfect moral actions, actions, that is, of the highest moral value."[25] The Saints illustrate these perfect moral actions – Mother Theresa compassion in caring for the poor, or Don Bosco's dedication to educating street children.

Virtuous action is not mere repetition of external acts. True virtue involves creativity – it is about doing what we can in the best way and is primarily an interior act. A creative act is required each time we perform the action – to act with fortitude in a given situation will require one to be creative. In one battle a surprise attack may be needed and in another a hasty retreat. Both acts can be courageous. If virtue was simply the repetition of an external act then we could not consider both these opposing acts, attacking and retreating, as courageous.[26]

Living a virtuous life needs training or practice. Like the story of the world famous violinist in New York looking for the Carnegie Music Hall. He was running out of the subway, a little late for the concert, with his Stradivarius violin under his arm. He ran up to the traffic policeman and asked how he could get to Carnegie Hall. "Practice man, practice," said the policeman.

Theological, Intellectual and Moral Virtues

Thomas Aquinas differentiates three kinds of virtues. First, he makes the distinction between theological and moral virtues which rests on how they are acquired and their object. The theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, are acquired primarily through grace although human effort contributes to their development.[27] The object of the theological virtues is to dispose the human being for communion with divine love. The cardinal moral virtues are acquired by human effort and are the fruit and seed of morally good acts.[28] They can be taught but thereafter need to be assumed in a personal way; and they dispose us to harmonious relations with our fellow human beings.

Next, he distinguishes between the intellectual virtues[29] and the moral virtues.[30] The intellectual virtues make the mind work well but not necessarily for

[25] *Ibid*., 70.
[26] *Ibid*., 73.
[27] *ST* I.II.62.
[28] *ST* I.II.61.
[29] *ST* I.II.57.
[30] *ST* I.II.58.

the right things. For example, one could be a brilliant nuclear physicist and use his skill to create nuclear weapons that cause mass destruction. The moral virtues, on the other hand, actually make their possessor good.[31] Our moral identity hinges on the possession and development of the cardinal[32] virtues. Prudence[33] orders practical reason and justice orders the will. Fortitude orders the irascible passions (those concerned with struggle, e.g. against fear) and temperance orders the concupiscible passions (those involving the desire for sex, food or drink and the like).

It will be profitable at this point to provide a brief outline of the cardinal virtues. An exposition of each virtue could and has filled entire books but an abbreviated overview is nonetheless useful for introductory purposes.[34]

The Moral Virtues

Prudence

Prudence is the virtue that helps us make good decisions. It is "right reason in action."[35] Prudence is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it.[36] A prudent person takes counsel, assesses the situation, formulates a plan for action while anticipating possible setbacks and proceeds to act according to his reason.

Prudence is the virtue that helps us to grow.[37] Our *telos* is happiness and we achieve it through becoming persons with the theological and cardinal virtues. Prudence helps us assess where we are and then figures out what steps we need to take to grow in virtue. For example, if I realize that I lack temperance then prudence will help plan the changes I need to make in my life to become a more temperate person. Do I need to eat less sweets? Then a prudent decision might be to not buy them. Prudence will help me plan how to avoid the offending item. Alternatively if I decide I need to become fitter, prudence helps me plan my day so that I have time for the gym.

---

[31] "Human virtues acquired by education, by deliberate acts and by a perseverance ever-renewed in repeated efforts are purified and elevated by divine grace. With God's help, they forge character and give facility in the practice of the good. The virtuous man is happy to practice them." *Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1810.* Hereafter referred to in text as CCC with relevant paragraph number.

[32] From 'cardo' the Latin word for *hinge*.

[33] Prudence is both an intellectual and a moral virtue.

[34] Please see Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* for a lengthier exposition on the virtues.

[35] *ST* II.II.47.4.

[36] CCC 1806.

[37] See James Keenan, "Virtue Ethics" in *Christian Ethics: An Introduction*, edited by Bernard Hoose, (London: Cassell, 1998), 87.

In a certain way prudence unites all the virtues as it acts as the guide for the others. It is only possible to be just in the distribution of wealth if one makes a prudent decision how to share it, and a 'courageous' act without prudence may be sheer recklessness. Choosing the best course of action requires prudence or good judgment. What may be virtuous action in one circumstance may be vicious in another. Prudence is required to choose what is good as the good lies in the mean between two extremes.

Justice

Justice is defined as "a habit whereby a man renders to each one his due by a constant and perpetual will."[38] Interestingly, the practice of religion falls under the virtue of justice, as here one gives to God what is due. "Justice toward men disposes one to respect the rights of each and to establish in human relationships the harmony that promotes equity with regard to persons and to the common good. The just man, often mentioned in the Sacred Scriptures, is distinguished by habitual right thinking and the uprightness of his conduct toward his neighbour."[39]

There are two kinds of justice, commutative and distributive. Commutative justice is concerned with the "mutual dealings between two persons" while distributive justice is concerned with the equitable distribution of common resources for the common good.[40] The challenge of applying a universal law to the exact concrete case falls under the scope of justice.[41] It may be that the law was not written for the particular scenario under scrutiny.[42] For example, Aquinas states that stealing is always wrong. However, he also holds that in cases of dire necessity, it would be lawful for someone to take what did not belong to him but only where the need was urgent and there was no other possible remedy.[43] Such a scenario could occur in taking a car that did not belong to you in order to bring your dying child to hospital for emergency treatment and where no ambulance was readily available. This is, properly speaking, not considered 'stealing' because under Divine Law all things belong to God and are given to humanity for their sustenance and well being. Therefore, God's original ownership and intention for something precedes a particular person's ownership of a thing.

[38] *ST* II.II.58.1.

[39] CCC 1807.

[40] *ST* II-II.61.1.

[41] MacIntyre explains "because laws are general, particular cases will always arise in which it is unclear how the law is to be applied and unclear what justice demands." *After virtue*, 152.

[42] See *NE* 1137b-15. *Epikeia* is the name given to situations where it is deemed that the law does not apply as it was not written for that scenario.

[43] *ST* II.II.66.7.

Fortitude

Thomas Aquinas was concerned about our good resolutions when we are faced with danger or difficulty.[44] Despite having good intentions, when we are faced with danger, we are likely to become afraid and run away, abandoning the good we set out to do. Fortitude, which is also known as courage, is steadfastness of heart in the face of danger.[45]

Fortitude can manifest not merely as the courage to act, take initiative or attack but also in the capacity of endurance and perseverance, to grit one's teeth and hang in there, especially when times are difficult. Applying fortitude in a broader sense might involve waiting in line in a government agency despite the presence of 'fixers' and the temptation to bypass the process by 'greasing' a few hands. Another example of fortitude might be seen in the resilience of people who have endured natural disasters and are rebuilding their lives.

"For Aquinas, the primary act of fortitude is to be able to hold firm to the good while enduring evil and physical harm. Christians, then, are to practice fortitude by enduring evil they encounter in fulfilling their missions, to hold fast to Christ in a sinful world."[46] Structures of sin are so deeply ingrained in our society that it is very easy and tempting to be a part of them and difficult to stand up against them to do what is right. The virtue of fortitude gives us the strength to overcome this difficulty and to do good at all costs.

Temperance

The virtue of temperance is needed in the world of today to help exercise moderation.[47] Various arenas can be helped by moderation such as that of food, drink and sex. Regarding food and the capital sin of gluttony, Bethany Haile writes that gluttony is not simply an overeating of food but an inordinate or excessive preoccupation with it:

> Gluttony can manifest itself as eating at inappropriate times, over-concern with the quality of food, over-concern with the way food is prepared or served, over-eating, or eating in a way that is not fitting for a reasonable human being. In each manifestation of gluttony, we see the same basic preoccupation or over-concern with food. Not all gluttons are over-eaters

[44] *ST* II.II.123.1.

[45] *ST* II.II.123.4. See also CCC 1808.

[46] Monica Jalandoni, "Fortitude in the Philippines" in *Transformative Theological Ethics.* Ed. Brazal, Cartagenas, Genilo, Keenan. (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2010), 203.

[47] See also CCC 1809.

> – some are excessive snackers, some are excessive gourmands, some are simply eaters with bad table manners due to overly-intense involvement with the food they are eating.[48]

This means that an anorexic, someone who does not eat at all, can also be gluttonous as the key is an inordinate preoccupation with food. Temperance does not merely cover the traditional fields of food, drink and sex but the use of all the passions involving desire. Where the desire is not governed by right reason, the virtue of temperance can help put order – the time spent on Facebook, emails, internet browsing, shopping…the list could go on. Temperance thus moderates the pleasure derived from created goods and frees us from our addictions.

Continence: Growing in Virtue

Continence is the process we undergo in becoming temperate. It is when we are able to act moderately according to reason but against our desire. For example, if we were to decide that we have become too addicted to Facebook that we are checking in every few minutes, wondering what new things our friends are saying. If we were to completely stop for one day, we would spend all day desiring to check it. We would be behaving with moderation yet with internal turmoil. Ever notice how on Good Friday we spend all day thinking about and desiring food we cannot have? We may be moderating our actions but we are merely continent and not temperate. Now, if we were to disconnect from Facebook for a month, we might notice that by the end of the month we no longer think about it or desire it even. Only when one's desires and actions are in harmony (synchrony) can one have the virtue of temperance.

Emotions

Temperance is a good place to talk about the important role that emotion plays in virtue ethics. One must not only act in the right manner but also feel in the right way. Notice that the difference between temperance and continence is not evident in the way one acts, but resides in the way one feels. One is only temperate if one desires an appropriate amount of food in the right way.

A virtuous person is one who has complete harmony between the passions, will and judgments such that all one's capacities for feeling, desire and judgment must be in order if any of them is to operate properly on a consistent basis. Emotions are a

[48] Bethany Haile, Doctoral Dissertation proposal, "Applying Thomas Aquinas' Treatise on Temperance to the Discourse on Eating Disorders: Putting Thomistic Moral Theology in Dialogue with the Natural and Social Sciences" (Boston College, 2008). St Thomas follows Gregory the Great in identifying 5 variations of gluttony showing that it is not simply "eating too much." *ST*.II.II.148.4.

neutral energy with the capacity to be habituated to conform to reason. When they conform to reason, they act as a positive motivator and when they are untutored by reason they have the capacity to hold one prisoner.[49] The virtuous person's emotions prompt one to act in a virtuous way. For example, perceiving someone in a dangerous situation may arouse a courageous impulse within one. One can then evaluate this emotion and freely choose to act in a courageous way. On the other hand, someone who eats chocolate whenever she feels like it becomes a prisoner of her desire for chocolate. This person needs to recognize this impulse as something that is harmful and then exercise self control when this desire manifests. Emotions are habituated in this manner.

Whereas emotion is left out of the loop with many ethical theories, virtue ethics sees emotion as an essential component of a person's moral state. Jean Porter explains "no one can be virtuous, praiseworthy and admirable without qualification if she is deficient in either intellectual judgment or appropriate feelings; that is, both intellectual judgment, and desires and emotions, have distinct and indispensable roles to play in the exercise of moral judgment."[50] Feeling the appropriate emotion is an indicator of one's moral state. If one sees an injustice being committed and doesn't react with anger then there is something wrong with one's moral state. Aquinas himself points to the combined interplay of both the intellectual and affective dimensions of the person in moral decision-making and action. It is a holistic view of the person and reminds us of the importance of the whole self in moral judgment, not merely the rational or solely logical dimension of the person.

Conclusion

Aristotle reminds us that the goal of studying the virtues is to actually become good.[51] This is a goal we need to strive for, each day, taking small steps, accepting setbacks too. When the renowned Scottish explorer David Livingstone was asked where he was going, he replied, "I'll go anywhere as long as it is forward." On another occasion, he said, "Without Christ, not one step; with Him, anywhere!" For sure, if we are not going forward we will end up going backward. There is no room for passivity or half-heartedness as it takes a firm decision to go against the flow of mediocrity. Perhaps St. Paul understood this well when he wrote to the Church in

[49] Craig Steven Titus, *Resilience and the Virtue of Fortitude,* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 113.

[50] Jean Porter, "Virtue and Sin: The Connection of the Virtues and the Case of the Flawed Saint," The Journal of Religion, Vol. 75, No. 4 (Oct., 1995), 528.

[51] See *NE* 1103b-26. "Since, then, the present inquiry does not aim at theoretical knowledge like the others - for we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use."

Philippi: "Straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3: 13-14). In his letter to the Romans, he reminded them not merely to go with the flow but to swim against the current: "Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect" (Rom. 12: 2).

The call to become good, the best we can be, to virtue, is actually the call to wholeness and is in its essence a call to perfection or holiness. This is in perfect accord with the call to Christian perfection which the Second Vatican Council so emphatically emphasized in *Lumen Gentium*, which has a whole chapter dedicated to the universal call to holiness. I am called to holiness not only when I am in Church for one hour on Sunday but also when I am making business decisions in my office on Monday. The split between faith and life is said to be one of the great challenges in our time.[52] It is well summarized in the popular childhood ditty, "Little Johnny went to Church every single Sunday, little Johnny went to hell for what he did on Monday!" For the virtuous person, the goal is not merely to avoid hell but to get to heaven and to bring many others along as well.

The study of virtue ethics helps to avoid compartmentalizing our lives and reminds us that all the dimensions of our Christian daily lives should have moral value and meaning. This awareness encourages us to live well the small details of our everyday existence. What I think, feel, desire, do or don't do has moral relevance.[53] It is a call to live well the hidden dimension of our Christian lives as we have been baptized in Christ and our life is now hidden in Him (cf. Col. 3: 3). If we are faithful in small details the bigger things will take care of themselves. Moral issues are not merely the big questions like "Should we clone or not?," but also "Which book should I read?" or "How much television should I watch?" The context of our quest to become good people is reachable for all because the moral arena of each person is their daily life.

This path to perfection is however a slow and gradual one. Rome was not built in a day and neither is our character. As Cardinal Newman once noted, if we want to become perfect we must change often. We are in a process of constant maturation aided by the Holy Spirit. We are works in progress and unfinished masterpieces. Our

[52] "This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age" *Gaudium et spes* 43.

[53] Even our trivial desires, choices and acts which fill a considerable portion of our day "have moral meaning because they have some effect – no matter how small – on the person we are in the process of becoming." David L. Norton, "Moral Minimalism and the Development of Moral Character," Midwest Studies in Philosophy, XIII (1988), 180-195.

moral life is a gradual process of growth and advancement towards moral perfection.[54] We are called to perfection, to happiness, to fullness of life in blessed union with God, through living a life of virtue. Jesus himself gives us a command to be perfect. Like a company's work motto that ran "Good, better, best, never let it rest, make your good better and your better best!;" virtue ethics changes the focus of moral theology from avoiding evil to forming oneself into a good person, to run towards the goal and strive to be the best one can be. Virtues are indeed back in fashion.■

Fr. James McTavish is a Scottish missionary priest with the *Verbum Dei* community based in Pansol, Quezon City (Diocese of Cubao). He worked as a surgeon before hearing the call of the Lord to heal the Body of Christ through evangelization – "Give me life by your Word" (Ps. 119, 105). He teaches Moral Theology and Bioethics at the Loyola School of Theology and also gives courses in the University of Santo Tomas. He completed his Licence in Moral Theology (*Alphonsianum*, 2008) and Masters in Bioethics (*Regina Apostolorum*). He can be contacted at jamesmctavishfmvd@yahoo.co.uk.

Monica Jalandoni, Ph.D. candidate at Boston College in Massachusets is finishing her dissertation on the Thomistic virtue of Fortitude in the Philippines. She is currently teaching moral theology to college juniors at the Ateneo de Manila University. Research interests include anything to do with virtue ethics, in particular, the Thomistic virtues and how they can be applied in contemporary life. She can be contacted at jalandoni131@gmail.com.

[54] The idea that time is important in our moral maturation is beautifully captured in the principle of gradualness expounded in the apostolic exhortation of Pope John Paul II in 1981 on the Christian family in the modern world called *Familiaris consortio*. In number 34 of this document we find - "But man, who has been called to live God's wise and loving design in a responsible manner, is an historical being who day by day builds himself up through his many free decisions; and so he knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by stages of growth."