

# Virtues

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Virtues

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## Narrative and Virtue

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(pp. 61-63)

- Important way of identifying virtues and character is by understanding the narrative of the life where those virtues are found
  - In traditional Christian theology we talk about “hagiography” – lives of the saints
  - E.g., life of Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Challenge is for the narrative to be truthful
  - Involves imagination, selectivity, yet faithfulness to meaning
  - Truthful does not always mean factual
  - Multiple narratives are typical – complicates our understanding of virtue, e.g., George Washington

Narrative and Virtue

2

## Background on Virtue

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- Virtue comes from Greek idea of *arete* or excellence
- Points to those qualities that make a life excellent or praiseworthy
- Study of virtue is sometimes called aretology or aretological ethics
- Aristotle: ‘virtue is a **pattern** of behavior learned through **practice**, so that it becomes part of the way a person **normally tends to act**’ (64)
- “What we learn in acquiring a virtue is not just to do something regularly, but to do it well” (65)

Background on Virtue

3

## Virtue – “Golden Mean”

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- According to Aristotle, to do something well is to avoid extremes of excess and deficiency *relative to a particular situation*
- Courage is mean between excess of foolhardiness and deficiency of cowardice
  - Courage of a trained soldier is different than the courage of a child because their situations differ

Virtue – “Golden Mean”

4

## Cardinal Virtues

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- From Plato and Aristotle through Middle Ages four virtues were seen as fundamental or cardinal
  - Temperance – disciplined appetite
  - Courage – disciplined desire
  - Prudence – discernment of appropriate goals
  - Justice – balance of action and distribution of goods
- Generally thought to express the excellences of those parts which make up human nature

Cardinal Virtues

5

## Theological Virtues

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- Starting with Augustine and developed more fully in Thomas is idea that while nature points us to cardinal virtues, revelation points us to theological virtues (gifts of God's grace)
  - Faith
  - Hope
  - Love
- For Augustine, we need the theological virtues to overcome sin in order to live out the cardinal virtues
- For Thomas, it is conceivable to live out cardinal virtues without the theological virtues, but
  - Salvation requires theological virtues
  - Easier to live out cardinal virtues with theological virtues present
- John Wesley understood the moral life as one of continuous sanctification that begins with grace

Theological Virtues

6

## Church

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- Cultivating Christian virtues (sanctification), learning and understanding rules, discerning among competing goals, all require the input of community – church
- Lovin suggests that there are three different types of Christian community (based on work of Troelstch and his original study)
  - Ecumenical – characterized by inclusivity and plurality
  - Confessional – characterized by clearly defined beliefs commonly assented to
  - Missional – characterized by action or praxis of living out and proclaiming faith in service to others

Church

7

## Society

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- Christian life exist not only in church, but church exists within larger society that places demands upon us
- “Render unto Caesar...” points to the tension between the demands of Christian ethics and the demands of society
  - Lovin says that short of complete withdrawal from society, we must see Jesus’ response as placing us within the ambiguity of complete devotion to God that must still come to terms with demands of other authorities (104)

Society

8

## Approaches to Christian Social Ethics

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- Social Gospel movement of establishing God’s reign of peace, love, and prosperity
  - Optimistic view largely undermined by 2 world wars
- Divine mandates of Bonhoeffer (work, family, government) are the places God’s Word comes to us
  - Mandates must be balanced – when one usurps others it has become an idol (e.g., Nazism)
- Christian Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr says ideal of love stands in judgment over society, but society is governed by power and self-interests that have to be curbed by power and coalition with interests to attain proximate justice
  - At best we attain incremental steps toward justice

Approaches to Christian Social Ethics

9

## Responses to Christian Realism

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Liberation and Environmental Theologies

- Christian Realism's focus on counter-vailing powers and interests neglects the interests of the powerless and vulnerable
  - Perspective of the exploited is God's norm for social change – liberation, not power politics should be aim of Christian ethics
- True liberation needs to account for the most vulnerable aspects of creation – the ecosystem – and seek its liberation as part of human liberation

Responses to Christian Realism

10

## Dangers

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(119)

- Some try to turn Christian social ethics into a political platform or policy
  - Not likely to succeed because of diversity of society
  - Danger of turning platforms and policies into idols
    - Need to remember way our own sinful self-interests can affect even our ethics

Dangers

11