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Theological Studies, Vol. 81, No. 1 (March 1, 2020): 150-168. [DOI](#). This article is © SAGE Publications and permission has been granted for this version to appear in [e-Publications@Marquette](#). SAGE Publications does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without express permission from SAGE Publications.

Virtue and Human Fragility

Kate Ward

Theology, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

Abstract

New perspectives from virtue ethicists engaged with human fragility make concrete moral theology's long understanding that humans are both free and constrained in our virtue pursuit. Theologians examine the possibilities of virtue under conditions of oppression as well as the virtue and vice of oppressors. Some adapt the term "moral luck" from philosophy to describe how persistent life circumstances shape the pursuit of virtue. Others focus on determinative individual acts through the lens of moral injury, a concept developed by psychologists caring for veterans. Finally, theologians engaged with disability describe flourishing, virtuous lives lived amid human mental and physical fragility.

Keywords

disability, fragility, lament, moral injury, moral luck, moral theology, oppression, virtue ethics

God desires humans to flourish, becoming the best versions of ourselves. Flourishing requires both key basic goods and virtues, persistent moral qualities developed throughout life. Both basic goods and virtues are gifts from God, though we humans share responsibility for achieving them. And, most virtue ethicists would agree, certain basic goods are necessary not only for flourishing, but for the pursuit of certain virtues.

This elevator-speech version of Christian virtue ethics immediately begs several questions. When people lack basic goods necessary for flourishing—as is too often the case in our suffering world—do such privations also threaten their virtue? Isn't that a sort of double jeopardy, to think that lacking goods such as health or freedom could threaten to relegate a person to an immoral life? And yet, it remains difficult to imagine a well-led human life without the enjoyment of certain basic goods, and equally difficult to imagine a good life without virtue. Where does that leave us?

Amid the revival of virtue in Catholic and Protestant theological ethics, scholars have begun to answer these questions from multiple angles. First, scholars will point out that although virtue ethics can take an optimistic tone, failure in the pursuit of virtue is inevitable. It is not exactly news that humans are sinful and fail in the pursuit of virtue, and that no one achieves perfect virtue in this life. The new things being done in thinking about the fragility of virtue, or virtue in light of human fragility, fall into several categories. From one angle, theologians are asking whether flourishing is possible under conditions of oppression. In order to respect the agency and the persistence in hope of oppressed persons, the answer is often a defiant “yes”—although such flourishing may look different than the account traditionally given in virtue ethics. Some of these perspectives are explored in the first section of this article. Philosophers who work on constitutive moral luck give a bleaker answer, arguing that virtue may be impossible to pursue under certain conditions of oppression. Lest that smack too much of blaming the victim, they also show how occupying the role of oppressor fractures virtue for those in power. Proponents of moral luck within Christian theology generally agree with this diagnosis but end on a more hopeful note of faith in God, the ultimate author of all human virtue.

In addition to being fragile to life circumstances such as privilege or oppression, virtue can also be destroyed by as little as a single act. Theologians are familiar with this insight under the classical term “mortal sin,” but many are profitably using a new concept—moral injury—framed by psychologists caring for veterans whose sense of self as good and worthy did not survive participation in war. A final challenge, or better, improvement, to traditional accounts of virtue and flourishing comes from theologians engaged with disability. Confronted with the truth of human mental and physical fragility, these scholars paint detailed portraits of flourishing, virtuous lives led without basic goods many others take for granted.

Contemporary virtue ethics often portrays the moral life as a journey, implicitly painting the person who pursues virtue as able, free, and active, perhaps meandering or falling, but always making progress. This optimistic image does not quite capture Catholic moral theology's long-standing understanding that we as moral agents are both constrained and free. Certainly, our own willed choices shape us, but in addition to that, “our freedom is profoundly shaped by our being, and by its limits . . . Not only are other persons outside our control, but each one of us is outside his or her own control,” as Pope Benedict XVI writes.¹

Our virtue is fragile, as Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler point out, simply because we are human and therefore changeable.² In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis calls attention to the concrete life circumstances that can limit our moral choices, writing “Situating freedom, real freedom, is limited and conditioned.”³ *Amoris Laetitia* presents several concrete examples of life circumstances placing limits on freedom, as when poverty pushes partners into “de facto” unions instead of more stable marriages.⁴ Catholic theology affirms that cultures can teach pernicious values, social sins, that encourage personal sins and vices. Recent explorations of vicious cultures include Eli S. McCarthy’s proposal of just peace virtues in response to cultures of violence, and Megan K. McCabe’s call to solidarity in the face of the social sin of rape culture.⁵ As ethicists increasingly break down boundaries between social ethics and personal virtue ethics, they remind us that the world in which we pursue virtue is one shattered by sin, and so our virtue, and our flourishing, cannot be simple, easy, or guaranteed.⁶ We are porous to the world around us. This is good news when it enables the insistence that changing hearts will change the world, and sobering news when we confront the challenges of pursuing virtue in a world racked by sin.

Within theological virtue ethics, James Keenan’s insistence that the virtues can conflict remains influential and speaks to the reality that virtue pursuit is fragile to circumstance. For example, when duties of justice to general others and fidelity to close relationships make conflicting claims, a person may find herself unable to pursue both virtues at the same time.⁷ Many virtue ethicists accept Keenan’s framework. Some who may disagree with particular aspects of Keenan’s approach nonetheless agree with its central premise, the rejection of the “unity thesis” which insists the virtuous person must possess all virtues equally.⁸ Given the challenges of the world we live in, insistence on unified virtue seems less inspiring than discouraging.

Our virtue, then, is fragile to conditions within and without us. We all know that our own sinfulness hinders our pursuit of virtue, but less considered may be the ways social structures created by some interfere with progress in virtue for those persons and others. To this we now turn.

Oppression and Virtue

A pathbreaking reflection on the interface of virtue with unjust social structures was Judith Kay’s use of Aquinas to understand internalized oppression as a habit that does not contribute to persons’ flourishing. Vices restrict us from seeing the world clearly and acting in it effectively. While they can be acquired through willed acts or through outside forces acting on us, vices are acquired involuntarily, in the sense that humans are naturally attracted to what is good.⁹ Internalized oppression shares these characteristics of vicious habits. Vices can operate as a type of “second nature,” but the human always remains free to choose contrary to the vice, however difficult such a choice may be. Kay shows that Aquinas’ account of vice demonstrates the potential for oppressed persons to resist their own oppression, the “second nature” habits that cause them to believe false messages about their own unworthiness, and the negative emotions that accompany such internalized oppression.

More recently, examinations of the interface of oppression and flourishing have addressed social movements or the moral conditions necessary for their existence. Two essays reflect on community forms of resistance in Ferguson, Missouri, USA, in the aftermath of the shooting death of Michael Brown, a young black man, by Darren Wilson, a white police officer. Michael Jaycox discerns a proper

place for the emotion of anger in response to social injustice, particularly for members of oppressed groups: “Anger enables us to perceive systemic deprivation as injustice and not as ‘the way things are.’”¹⁰ Jaycox evaluates the appropriateness of social anger in part in terms of the relative privilege of the angry social groups: “the social anger expressed by white ‘citizens’ councils’ in response to the desegregation of public schools in the United States was not exactly an accurate judgment of injustice.”¹¹ Anger itself is not a virtue for Jaycox, but a “cognitive interruption” to intellectual habits that justify oppression.¹² The civic virtues of prophetic prudence, conflictual solidarity and restorative justice help groups respond virtuously to social anger. Solidarity has a particular role in judging anger’s righteousness: “the solidarity found among members of oppressed groups provides an objective epistemological standpoint from which to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate judgments of injustice, which is to say, righteous social anger and ideological social anger.”¹³

Similarly inspired by Ferguson, Sarah MacDonald and Nicole Symmonds provocatively ask whether rioting can be viewed as an expression of flourishing, or at least a means of moving toward flourishing. They start by assessing critiques that virtue ethics has historically excluded the experiences of members of marginalized groups. With Katie Geneva Cannon and Emilie Townes, the authors note that the character traits required to endure, survive, and resist oppression may look very different from virtue as conceived from a position of dominance.¹⁴ MacDonald and Symmonds focus on rioting understood as affective expression of anger in response to long-term oppression, and claim that “the political resister’s participation in riots and other activities of oppositional political struggle promotes their concern for a broader community, which opens up the possibility for flourishing.”¹⁵ For MacDonald and Symmonds, rioting could be understood as an act of burdened virtue along the lines envisioned by Lisa Tessman—it does not contribute to the agent’s present flourishing, but enables her to work toward the possibility of flourishing for herself and/or others. (More on Tessman below.)

While Jaycox, MacDonald, and Symmonds reflect on resistance already underway, others essays in Christian ethics start earlier, asking about when resistance is proper or required. For Julie Hanlon Rubio, the inevitability of some cooperation with evil in a world riven by structural sin highlights the duty to resist evil, rather than maintain a vain hope of avoiding contact with it entirely. Rubio’s analysis learns from womanist theologians, who “have a strong sense of the power of evil and yet know the impossibility of innocence . . . because they know that the scope of cooperation and scandal is wide, they also see that there is no hope of avoiding it altogether. Purity will always be elusive.”¹⁶ The lens of cooperation focuses on what actions we must do or avoid, not on who we shall become, with the insight that innocence (or perfect virtue) is impossible in a world of structural sin.

Lap-yan Kung describes human dignity as a virtue of deep mutuality which was present in Christian communities’ resistance to government removal of crosses from their church buildings in Zhejiang Province, China, between 2014 and 2016. In Chinese philosophy, particularly Confucianism, human dignity is a norm as well as a virtue conveyed through one’s respectful bearing towards others.¹⁷ In the face of the removal and destruction of their building’s crosses by government cadres, Christians in Zhejiang Province responded with forbearance, noncompliance, and renewed faith. For Kung, they expressed their own Christian dignity by “treating others in a dignified manner.”¹⁸ Kung differentiates between human dignity and “face,” or *mien-tzu*, public treatment according to one’s relative social status, although both are harmed when the government persecutes churches. “Protecting dignity

through resistance is not less spiritual than endurance in suffering,” Kung concludes, and “Christian resistance is an appropriate response to the violation of Christian dignity by the government.”¹⁹

And how can virtue be pursued when resistance seems impossible? Vincent Lloyd seeks an account of the virtue of tolerance from the point of view of the pre-Constantinian early Christians—those forced to bear oppression with few other options. (While Lloyd appreciates recent attempts to describe Christian toleration in a pluralistic world, including John Bowlin’s Thomistic account of the virtue of tolerance, he finds these offer an incomplete “Constantinian toleration,” tolerance of others from the point of view of the dominant group in power.²⁰) Tolerance describes patient endurance, which means that neither total collapse of the will nor violent resistance, however justified, accurately describe tolerance from the point of view of the oppressed. “Pre-Constantinian toleration,” which must be sourced from the experience of those enduring domination, could help prepare persons to be subject to God’s authority, even while enduring the unjust dominance of earthly authorities.

Moral Luck

Several of the essays described above evaluate virtue differently based on the social location of the one who pursues virtue, recognizing the fact that opportunities to pursue virtue differ based on one’s life circumstances. Philosophy captures this reality in the term “moral luck,” which describes the possibility that factors outside an agent’s control may affect the moral import of her actions (incident moral luck) or who she is able to become (constitutive moral luck). Moral luck is used to describe obstacles to the pursuit of virtue, to evaluate the cost to an agent who pursues virtue, to explore limits on moral agency, or to question the possibility of becoming virtuous at all.²¹ Martha Nussbaum’s *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986) focused on the vulnerability of the external goods that are necessary for flourishing. The possibility of losing goods that are necessary to practice the virtues means that even virtue developed over a long life can be vulnerable to reversal. Focusing on the goods necessary to pursue virtue begs the conclusion that different life circumstances, including privilege and oppression, can shape the pursuit of virtue. As Claudia Card puts it, “different combinations of circumstances in fact provide opportunities for, stimulate, nurture, or discourage the development of different virtues and vices.”²² Qualities developed in order to survive oppression, or as a result of occupying a dominant position in society, may help persons navigate life, but that does not change the fact that they may be vicious. This points to the fact that “human good may be unrealizable” in societal circumstances that encourage such malformative habits.²³ This is familiar stuff to moral theologians who know we live in a world riven by sin, in which humans may strive to be virtuous but will always fall short due to the structural sin within which we navigate and the personal tendency to sin within each of us.

Lisa Tessman elaborates on the ways oppression and domination place virtue out of reach with her concepts of burdened virtue and the ordinary vices of domination. Under conditions of oppression, persons may develop traits required for survival that are vicious, such as deception, or may fail to develop virtues, such as proper self-regard. Furthermore, oppression shapes conditions in which only acts of vice, rather than acts conforming to a virtuous mean, are realistic options. For example, someone who risks bodily harm to speak out against oppression may be said to commit a foolhardy act, rather than a courageous one.²⁴ Not only is flourishing denied because the means to flourish are denied under oppression, but the means to pursue virtue are denied as well.

Those who occupy positions of domination tend to develop “ordinary vices” that are rarely recognized as such but which support them in maintaining their unearned dominance, including callousness and self-centeredness. Members of dominant groups may also fail to develop virtues required for flourishing, such as justice, compassion, and openness to others.²⁵ This insight of Tessman’s, too, resonates with Christian perspectives on the moral life. One has only to recognize the fact that renunciation of power is practically a paradigmatic act of sainthood. The Christian tradition invites us to venerate those like Francis, Hedwig, Ignatius, and Katharine Drexel who left behind lives of great privilege for the sake of the gospel, recognizing how easy and common it is to remain attached to the trappings of one’s own power.

In my judgment, Tessman’s critique that “much of virtue ethics literature speaks as if most people are basically virtuous”²⁶ characterizes much of Christian virtue ethics as well, even if this attitude is only conveyed by omission. The same cannot be said for a newer wave of virtue ethics work taking up Tessman’s bracing call to grapple with virtue’s fragility and contingency. As Cristina Traina summarizes Tessman’s contributions for theologians, “oppression damages moral and spiritual goods, not just material ones.”²⁷ Following are works of Christian virtue ethics that draw on Tessman’s contributions directly.

Among those who have taken up Tessman’s challenge, Lisa Fullam explores the complexities of Teresa of Avila’s account of humility. Teresa’s strong emphasis on her own shortcomings and dependence on God could, it’s true, be interpreted for non-liberative ends, undermining women’s full humanity. But Fullam shows how Teresa skillfully used humility to animate her resistance to corrupt church structures: “Far from disempowering her, humility set her free.”²⁸ Fullam’s use of Tessman shows that the question of whether a virtue enables flourishing is crucial, but not simple. To determine whether a quality enables flourishing and thus is true virtue, “we must ask also if a particular character trait liberates or constrains its possessor in his or her *pursuit* of flourishing” (emphasis added).²⁹

I engaged with Card, Tessman, and womanist theologians including Melanie L. Harris and Rosita deAnn Mathews to develop a Christian ethical account of moral luck.³⁰ I showed that Thomas Aquinas discusses both incident and constitutive moral luck, for example in his discussion of whether the excellence of the person sinning increases the gravity of the sin (yes) and his positions on vincible and invincible ignorance which does not absolve from blame. Womanist theologians clearly describe how racism, sexism, and other intersecting forms of oppression can function as moral luck to harm virtue, but insist that oppressed persons always retain moral agency nonetheless. Community is crucial, in womanist theology and for Christians more broadly, in healing selves and pursuing virtue amid oppression. I conclude that a Christian account of moral luck must not encourage moral pessimism, but rather remind us how deeply and specifically we depend on God for the possibility of attaining virtue at all.³¹

Cristina Traina critiques accounts of temperate consumption that uncritically baptize the consumption practices of the white upper middle class, spending on intangibles like household help and education rather than on visible consumer goods. Rather, virtuous consumption should be assessed through its burden or contribution to the common good.³² Traina consults sociologists and economists to examine attempts to consume virtuously when constrained by low income and racism. Lower-income parents, particularly parents of color, may consume on behalf of their children in ways that do not benefit

children's flourishing in the wider society or that do not contribute to the common good, such as spending money on clothing that conveys status children are otherwise denied in a racist society.³³ Traina applies Tessman to show how parents' spending on behalf of their children can manifest both the burdened virtues and the ordinary vices of domination. Disadvantaged parents may lack the ability to spend on their children in ways that promote their flourishing, while advantaged parents' spending on their own children hoards resources and harms the common good.³⁴ Appreciation of the considered reasons those in poverty or in privilege may consume in vicious ways does not mean acceptance of such practices. Rather, it conveys the urgency of working for a world in which all can pursue virtue as they consume by having legitimate access to virtuous choices.

Traina again engages Tessman to discuss virtue in the context of unwanted pregnancy. Christian tradition portrays "interruptibility" as a virtue that disposes one to hear the voice of God. But for Traina, it should be a conditional virtue in light of the fact that "at some times, including unwelcome pregnancy, we actually cannot turn to meet new obligations without, by that same act, directly compromising or even refusing existing ones."³⁵ Traditionally, Catholic moral theology has assumed we can make the right choice even in constrained, non-ideal situations, but Traina again turns to Tessman to point out that women who welcome unintended pregnancies may find themselves forced to fail in their responsibilities to others with equally urgent and justifiable claims. While it may be true that societal injustice causes many of the difficult choices faced by pregnant women, still it is not society, but individual women who will bear the burden of failing in one or more responsibilities. Mercy is called for in response to women's moral anguish, and solidarity in response to the ways societal structures continue to fail women and children.³⁶ Traina richly interweaves Tessman's perspectives with traditional tools of Catholic moral theology, including imperfect charity, an analogy for moral failure, and *epikeia*, a tool for judgment in nonideal situations which falls short by presuming the possibility of right action.³⁷

Moral Injury

Moral injury, a concept developed by psychologists to describe the experience of veterans whose actions in war have harmed their ability to see themselves as good and moral persons, is another valuable category that acknowledges the way our moral progress can be fragile to circumstance, particularly to acts that we do in situations of high import or limited choice. Psychologist Jonathan Shay coined the term "moral injury" in his work with combat veterans, finding descriptions of their experiences in works of great literature like Homer and Shakespeare. Moral injury combines features of incident and constitutive moral luck. It can refer to the effects of a single incident in one's life, but it is held to affect who the person becomes.

Shay initially defined moral injury as "a betrayal of what's right by someone who holds legitimate authority in a high-stakes situation."³⁸ This definition has since been expanded to remove the reference to authority and make explicit that the injury done is to one's sense of self as a person of moral integrity. For psychologists Brett Litz and colleagues, moral injury is the result of "perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations [which] may be deleterious in the long-term, emotionally, psychologically, behaviorally, spiritually, and socially."³⁹ Robert Meagher, a theologian and classicist, gives this definition: "'moral injury' designates the violation, by oneself or another, of a personally embedded moral code or value resulting in deep

injury to the psyche or soul.”⁴⁰ For theologian Mark Wilson, “individuals suffering moral injury take themselves to have *done* or *not done* something,” under tragic conditions.⁴¹ Theologians Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini stress that the morally injured come to think of themselves as unworthy human beings, noting, “The consequences of violating one’s conscience, even if the act was unavoidable or seemed right at the time, can be devastating.”⁴²

Even a single transgressive act can profoundly alter the agent’s sense of self as a good person of integrity. Litz and colleagues observe that the way agents interpret an act as applying to the self has a great deal to do with the presence of moral injury and the possibility for self-forgiveness: “If the attribution about the cause of a transgression is *global* (i.e., not context dependent), *internal* (i.e., seen as a disposition or character flaw), and *stable* (i.e., enduring; the experience of being tainted), these beliefs will cause enduring moral emotions such as shame and anxiety due to uncertainty and the expectation of being judged *eventually*.”⁴³ These authors may not realize, but we can easily see how resonant the language of global, internal, and stable character flaws is with vice. Similarly, moral injury and mortal sin, concepts where a given single act could potentially disrupt the goodness and integrity of a person, could fruitfully be explored in tandem. As theologian Kinghorn observes, clinicians in moral injury have spoken approvingly of the practice of the sacrament of reconciliation in response to it.⁴⁴

Kinghorn points out that despite moral injury’s origins in medical-model driven psychology, the concept “beckons beyond itself to a thicker contextual account of proper human ends than modern scientific psychology, bound to liberal presuppositions, can or will provide.”⁴⁵ This is true, and accepted by psychologists who study moral injury, who typically welcome the use of the concept by those in other disciplines. Jonathan Shay himself frequently appears at the American Academy of Religion annual meeting where a regularly convened group applies the concept of moral injury to religious thought and contexts.⁴⁶ Litz et al. encourage engagement with religious communities as an important part of the healing process for veterans with moral injury, implicitly agreeing that the thick concepts of the good life offered by religious traditions matter in healing from moral injury.⁴⁷ Authors within pastoral counseling have eagerly taken up the call to engage with moral injury.⁴⁸ For Kinghorn, medical-model mental health therapy is characterized by “instrumentalism” and “means–end technical logic.”⁴⁹ But the openness and dialogue between theologically informed and medically informed practitioners who use moral injury suggests the distinction Kinghorn attempts to find between medical models of healing and religious accounts of the good life are not as thickly drawn by the framers of moral injury themselves as Kinghorn would have it.

Kinghorn observes that the psychological understanding of moral injury points to an account of moral agency that is more nuanced than both psychologists and theologians often admit. Soldiers operate under conditions of heightened stress and limited information where they must quickly make profoundly high-stakes decisions. The fact that they follow procedures and orders does not mean they do not have moral agency, as is indicated when soldiers feel profoundly morally damaged by the harms they have caused to others while serving in the military.⁵⁰ This echoes the insight of moral luck that despite virtue’s focus on actions and becoming, we are not fully in control of who we become.

A majority of published work on moral injury from theologians retains the original focus on injuries sustained in war, but aided by a robust dialogue between clinicians and religious scholars, some have used the term in other contexts. Karen Guth argues that when theologians encounter tainted religious

legacies, such as evidence that renowned scholars have committed abuse, they undergo experiences analogous to moral injury.⁵¹ While studying theology is significantly and meaningfully different from warfare, both activities are high stakes and personally significant to those who perform them in analogous ways. Due to the undeniable presence of wrongdoing throughout church history, the Christian tradition itself can be viewed as a tainted legacy which feminist and womanist theologians navigate by acknowledging the centrality of a traumatic event, Jesus's crucifixion, to the Christian story.⁵² Some scholars refuse to engage with tainted legacies, while others hold that necessary learning takes place by engaging with the tainted legacy and the community failures that enabled the harm that tainted the legacy to happen. Guth importantly highlights the morally self-implicating work theologians do. Virtue ethicists cannot stop at asking whether our conclusions are moral. We need to remember that we who do ethics are moral subjects being shaped by the work we do and the traditions we engage.

It is an important service to Christian virtue ethics to have these terms that allow us to describe and acknowledge the reality of virtue's fragility. Still, moral luck and moral injury are only useful in the Christian ethical context to the extent that they accomplish two things: (1) to remind us of the limited nature of our control over our own virtue, and (2) to point to the promise of God's assistance for our perseverance and progress in virtue, including our work to change the social structures that cause moral luck and moral injury. Thus Joseph Wiinika-Lydon finds "prophetic potential" in veterans' experiences of moral injury. The witness of veterans who respond to their moral injury by working for peace suggests that "what may be required is not a return to normal life but a transformation of one's life that reflects a new social ethic embodying the radical, prophetic knowledge attained. This, in itself, may help transform the burden of guilt, shame, remorse, and even self-hatred, by sharing responsibility more broadly."⁵³ Any exploration of virtue's fragility eventually broadens beyond the individual, as Wiinika-Lydon shows. Understanding the fragility of virtue shifts our understanding back to the social structures that make it fragile, giving the lie to ideas of a boundary between virtue ethics and social ethics.

Disability

The truth is, we are all vulnerable to our environments, and our virtue is fragile because of this vulnerability. Theologians reflecting on disability through the lens of virtue ethics, or vice versa, take human vulnerability as a starting point. Doing so, they trouble easy assumptions about the goods required for human flourishing and about the vice and virtue of persons with disabilities. Australian theologian Shane Clifton's book *Crippled Grace* shows how the lens of disability improves virtue ethics and fruitfully applies virtue ethics to challenges faced by disabled persons in unaccommodating societies, and I will discuss it at some length. Clifton, who became quadriplegic after a spinal cord injury in adulthood, reflects unflinchingly on his own experience of disability, interwoven with detailed personal stories of people with different experiences of disability.⁵⁴ Clifton's work through the lens of disability sheds light onto the innate frailty and dependence of all human life, and presents an account of disabled flourishing that is no less joy-filled and hopeful for its frank account of the many ways societies continue to marginalize people with disabilities.

Clifton finds that Christian virtue ethics has struggled to account for the experiences of people with disabilities, given ambivalent portrayals of disability in the Aristotelian, Hebrew Bible, and New

Testament traditions.⁵⁵ Contrary to prevalent stigmatizing views that people with disabilities would be better off dead (or aborted), empirical positive psychology suggests that people with disabilities are generally as happy as the average population, and that people tend to return to their baseline happiness level even after profoundly disabling injuries.⁵⁶ Clifton uses Lonergan's description of conscious reflection—"be attentive, be understanding, be reasonable, and be responsible"—to envision how people with intellectual disabilities can be said to use reason in pursuing virtue, although this does not take the self-reflective, purposive shape that Aquinas may have envisioned.⁵⁷ People with intellectual disabilities can and do exercise moral agency, Clifton shows, although the agency he elevates is not characterized by total independence:

We miss the point if we think agency is the same thing as pure independence and complete freedom of the will . . . Freedom and independence are never absolute, but, rather, are enabled and maximized by the type of support we are a part of, which ideally is competency-enhancing support. The development of each person's independent moral agency occurs in the context of our interdependency, which is also just as capable of inhibiting us.⁵⁸

Our relationships, whether loving or harmful, what we are taught, and the social structures that enable or frustrate our moral action all enable or constrain moral agency for each one of us, whatever the abilities of an individual's body or mind.

By the same token, flourishing for those whose disabilities are physical rather than mental (as well as for "those who currently understand themselves as nondisabled," to use Clifton's phrase) relies on appropriate support and interdependency.⁵⁹ Clifton points to disabled sexuality as an area where both mainstream understandings and Christian theology fall grievously short of following the lead of persons with disabilities in understanding what would allow them to flourish. One potential resource from Christian theology is the broken body of Jesus, which is beautiful and greatly to be desired *because*, not despite of, its brokenness.⁶⁰

Clifton's conclusions for virtue theory through the lens of disability have implications for all engaged in the pursuit of virtue: "Flourishing depends on opening ourselves to the out-of-controlledness of life."⁶¹ Not surprisingly, Clifton draws on Tessman with her conviction that virtue is not always under our own control.⁶² "The emphasis of virtue is generally on self-control, where the habits of virtue steer the passions toward their proper ends . . . The experience of disability, however, is a reminder that life does not always allow such control."⁶³ While Clifton challenges the account of flourishing often given by virtue theory, he does not leave it behind but proposes virtues to enable disabled people to flourish in a world that rarely cares whether they do.

Humility, disability pride, rage, and forgiveness are the virtues Clifton offers. While disability can present humiliating experiences, "to let go of the need for control is to move from humiliation to humility, and so to open oneself to the healing and peace that are the essence of grace."⁶⁴ By the same token, Clifton urges caregivers and medical professionals to encounter disabled people with humility, allowing them to be the experts on their own lives and needs.⁶⁵ He also envisions humility as a social virtue, present where societies allow disabled persons to take the lead in deciding what resources they will access and on what terms.⁶⁶

“Disability pride” is inspired by Aristotle’s virtue of great-souledness, the quality of one who appreciatively recognizes their own greatness. It “includes an appreciation of the achievements of the disabled community, and the formation of a disabled identity learned through hearing the stories of disabled resistance to marginalization.”⁶⁷ However, as an inherently political virtue, disability pride resists putatively “inspirational” accounts that seem to make disability pride contingent on individuals’ achievements.⁶⁸ Clifton does something valuable for all people here by suggesting the possibility of virtue decoupled from achievement, virtue that truly approaches recognizing one’s own innate human dignity as a child of God.

Rage is virtuously used when directed against injustice, and the virtue of forgiveness helps flourishing arise after rage.⁶⁹ When pursued by those who are empowered to identify wrongs done to them, forgiveness is not maintaining the status quo of oppression but simply “the letting go of anger” that helps disabled people flourish.⁷⁰

“The humility, pride, and rage of the disabled community challenges our assumption that weakness and power are opposites, and shows us what it is to be great-souled and virtuous while also broken and vulnerable,” Clifton writes.⁷¹ His point here is clearly that we are *all* broken and vulnerable, and as we strive to be virtuous despite that, we must attend to the experience of disabled people (Clifton’s term) and the many ways they fight, insist on, and fiercely claim their own flourishing despite vulnerability. Note the harmonious connections between Clifton’s work and many of the perspectives on oppression and moral luck mentioned above. While Clifton can be brutally frank about the vulnerability and humiliation that can attend his own experience of physical disability, he shows that agency is constrained for persons with disabilities largely to the degree that societies fail to offer them agency-enabling support. This is clear in his prescription of virtues for disabled flourishing, which are all social virtues with political import. Human fragility relevant to virtue, on Clifton’s account, has so much less to do with our breakable bodies and minds and everything to do with our broken responsibilities to one another.

Similarly to Clifton, Brian Berry wishes to correct limited, exclusionary accounts of flourishing in Aristotelian virtue traditions. Berry does so through the spirituality of Jean Vanier, the founder of the L’Arche communities, where people with and without mental disabilities live in friendship together. Friendship for Aristotle could only be among men equal in power and status, but Vanier finds that love demands not equal status but mutual vulnerability, the sharing of “shortcomings, weaknesses, and affective needs.”⁷² Vanier also prioritizes human affective capacity over Aristotle’s exaltation of the ability to reason.

Paul Gondreau joins Clifton in theologically seeing “beauty” and “blessing” in the lives of persons with disabilities and in their influence on others.⁷³ Gondreau seeks to describe how the virtue of hope responds to the creedal promise of bodily resurrection in light of disability. Reflecting in hope on his son’s life with a disability, Gondreau concludes that in the resurrection of the body, disabilities will be healed, but the “marks of disability” will remain as a sign of honor, as Aquinas, following Augustine, believed the wounds of martyrs would do.⁷⁴ Resurrection hope becomes not hope for the erasure of life experiences, including disability, but hope that God raises and transforms our particular lives with their particular frailties and wounds. Miguel Romero also uses Aquinas to conclude that while certain

people with profound mental disabilities may be unable to exercise will and so pursue the moral virtues, infused virtue is still available to them through the sacraments.⁷⁵

Although aging is not inevitably attended by disability, it does require confronting limitations on one's physical and mental capacity and troubles easy assumptions about ability and flourishing in the same way. Edward Vacek meditates on frameworks for aging developed by gerontologists to propose a series of virtues for old-age retirement: integrity, generosity, repentance, humility, detachment, and trust. For Vacek, these virtues will help prepare aging baby boomers to live lives of faith amid the physical and mental vulnerability that accompanies aging, resisting what he exposes as the banal and materialistic frameworks provided for aging by secular culture.⁷⁶

Responses to Moral Fragility

I have argued that moral luck and other concepts describing the ways our virtue pursuit is not entirely under our control can help remind Christians of our dependence on God for virtue progress. Many theologians agree, prescribing appropriate responses of affect and practice. For example, in response to the realities of moral injury, theologian Mark Wilson proposes the virtue of moral grief. For Augustine, even a just war entails "evils, in all their horror and cruelty" to which the truly human response can only be grief.⁷⁷ Late antique and medieval penitential volumes acknowledged this by prescribing penances to soldiers returning from war, on the understanding that even defensible participation in war entails contact with evil and requires a period of reflection and reintegration into ordinary life. For Wilson, moral grief is a distinct virtue which "responds to our participation in tragedy and its affront to our moral identity."⁷⁸ It shares affinities with the virtues of humility or accurate self-assessment, availability, or the readiness to accept responsibility for past actions, and what Wilson calls fidelity, a commitment to maintaining one's moral integrity and sense of self through time.⁷⁹

Grief can be an appropriate response to moral fragility even for those who have not sustained moral injury in war. Long-standing traditional interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount take "Blessed are those who mourn" (Matt 5:4) to refer to those facing the difficult truth of their own sinfulness.⁸⁰ William C. Mattison notes that mourning is a practice to counter the vice of presumption, the prideful assumption that God's gift of salvation is guaranteed or will be achieved without difficulty.⁸¹ Confronting virtue's fragility reminds us that fulfilling God's plan for us is not easy, and mourning is an apt response.

Lisa Tessman recommends "anguish," sensitivity to the suffering of others, as a meta-virtue opposed to the ordinary vices of domination.⁸² Yet, paradoxically, this is a virtue incapable of excellence in Aristotle's sense of a rational mean: "The conditions of our world require that one be either too indifferent or too anguished or both . . . Every point sacrifices either the other-regarding virtues or the self-regarding virtues or both."⁸³ Even when recommending responses to virtue's fragility (in this case, its fragility to occupying positions of social dominance), Tessman remains pessimistic about the possibility of virtuousness.

Lament is a practice of expressing grief or anguish with long resonance in the biblical tradition, which contemporary scholars apply to situations of privilege and oppression where virtue is fragile.⁸⁴ Bryan Massingale captures the transformative potential of listening and responding in his reflection on the power of lament for people of privilege. Lament has a rich history in African American spiritual and

literary traditions as a way to expose injustice and deny its ultimate power over life's meaning. For people who benefit from white supremacy, "lament involves the difficult task of acknowledging their individual and communal complicity in past and present racial injustices."⁸⁵ This represents hope in God's power to redeem beneficiaries of white supremacy and indicates willingness to stand in solidarity with white supremacy's victims.⁸⁶ Lament transforms the lamenter by preparing her to develop and express the virtues of compassion and solidarity.⁸⁷

Lament also holds potential for those who are harmed by oppression or whose virtue progress is limited by it. Massingale says that lament represents a subversive claiming of agency by those lamenting, taking upon themselves the power to "define reality" by pointing out injustice.⁸⁸ Lamenters also claim the power to describe God and God's relationship to themselves. For Christina Astorga, "in lament, God is experienced as hope in the midst of the ruins, but hope as fragile and fleeting, and yet abiding and faithful."⁸⁹ Lament draws attention to God's presence amid our fractured virtue and God's deep concern that we become better persons. Jacob Onyumbwe discusses lament in light of violence against women in the African Great Lakes region. "By sending out the communal 'why' of the community, we hope that our eyes will be clear[ed] by the falling of tears in order for us to gain new visions and dream new dreams."⁹⁰ Lament as a practice shapes the type of persons the lamenting community becomes—those who can see clearly, those capable of hope.

Grief, anguish, and lament do not undo the harm caused to virtue by moral injury, moral luck, or other ways that virtue is fragile. Most of these authors do not believe that grieving and lamenting repair virtue, but all the same, these responses suggest the presence of good in the person—in Aquinas' terms, they are rightly ordered actions even if insufficient for virtue. Virtue's fragility, whether we call it moral luck or something else, evokes powerful emotional responses—grief, anguish, lament, anger, rioting, rage. We are not in control of our own lives, our own virtue, but we often make the mistake of believing we are. Our inability to guarantee our own goodness is good for just one thing: turning our gaze back to the Source of all goodness in our fragile human lives.

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