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VIRTUE ETHICS IN SOCIAL CONTEXTS

Kate Ward

Virtue ethics in North American social contexts is defined by its response to extreme social injustices within North America, particularly those related to race and class, and by profound awareness of the privileged, ignorant, and often destructive position many North Americans inhabit with respect to much of the rest of the world. This essay addresses three questions about North American virtue ethics in social contexts in 2018: What is our current situation? What ethical tools do we have at our disposal? And how are we working to improve our ethical tools in order to better address the signs of the times in our own local contexts?

I will describe our current situation with a few representative examples of applied virtue ethics in North American social contexts. Many ethicists address consumerism, a significant problem in North America with implications for both the moral growth of persons and just distribution of global resources. Julie Hanlon Rubio recommends a return to tithing as a family practice to resist consumerism, contribute resources to the common good, and inculcate the virtue of temperance. David Cloutier says Christians need a renewed recognition of the vice of luxury, that disposition to overconsume on behalf of our own comfort, ease, and entertainment that shapes the lives of so many people of means in the US. Personal virtuous practice and systemic injustice clearly interconnect, too, in environmental ethics. For Daniel DiLeo, prudence must direct our response to human-generated climate change and might advocate particular concrete policies such as a carbon tax. Nancy Rourke argues that encounter with the diversity and complexity of creation compels our attention and respect, a disposition she calls the virtue of "wonder." When personal practice contributes to systemic injustice, as with consumerism and environmental destruction, virtue is a most appropriate tool. Applied virtue ethics often uses fairly classical virtue language, describing virtues as Augustine or Aquinas would, agreeing that such virtues promote human flourishing, and exploring how to pursue them in contemporary contexts.

Moving on to my second question: What new or emerging methodological tools do North Americans use to do virtue in social contexts? One significant methodological movement connects Catholic social thought to virtue ethics. Daniel Daly's "structures of virtue and vice" notes that many "structures of sin," a term in the magisterial documents, are better understood as socially embedded vices. Among many who use Daly's framework with profit is Conor Kelly, who elucidates Gaudium et Spes's portrayal of the family as a structure of virtue, dedicated to reshaping economic, moral, and political life through everyday practices.
of resistance. Kelly and Christopher Jones return to the structures of vice when they diagnose sloth as a structural vice peculiar to the US. The independent, even isolationist, culture of the US structurally promotes sloth, the vice against charity that tempts us away from proper interest in those we should love, including God. Christopher Vogt called for three virtues to accompany the “see, judge, act” praxis of Catholic social thought. Through mercy we see and share the suffering of others; through solidarity we analyze our place in responding to their needs; and hope sustains our engagement with the world, even against what may seem like overwhelming obstacles. Eli Sasaran McCarthy takes ample warrant from Catholic social thought and virtue theorists when he proposes nonviolent peacemaking as a virtue in itself.

The mutual fitness of virtue and Catholic social thought is evident, as well, in a great body of work on the virtue of solidarity. In the North American social context, this virtue feels especially important for navigating the position of global privilege we all share as North Americans, coupled with the reality that we inhabit very different positions of power and privilege in our own local contexts. Uses of solidarity have complexified in recent decades from straightforward exhortations to the development of critical perspectives. As William Mattison notes, views continue to differ on such questions as whether solidarity is an infused or acquired virtue, a distinctively Christian one or not, and nuances such as the distinction of solidarity and justice. Meghan Clark explicates the virtue of solidarity in her 2014 book The Vision of Catholic Social Thought, describing it as occupying the mean between “excessive individualism” and dehumanizing collectivism, with defending human rights its quintessential act.

An important instinct in this ongoing work has been to critique, challenge, and develop Catholic social thought, rather than uncritically repeating magisterial insights. A significant critical perspective is Bryan Massingale’s concept of the virtue and practice of “conflictual solidarity.” For Massingale, conflictual solidarity takes seriously John Paul II’s assertion that solidarity is not simply a “vague feeling,” but a “firm commitment;” genuine solidarity issues forth in action. Inspired by black activist and thinker Malcolm X, Massingale’s conflictual solidarity recognizes that making the concerns of the oppressed and excluded our own may entail difficulty and struggle. True solidarity will likely demand political struggle and internal struggle as we confront our own reticence to embracing the full human dignity of members of oppressed groups. This conflict is experienced by members of those groups who internalize their own despised status as well as by those who hold undeserved power.

Conflictual or critical solidarity has been widely adopted, including by Kristin Heyer, as Victor Carmona points out in his contribution to this volume. Also following Massingale’s lead, Michael Jaycox proposes conflictual solidarity as an intellectual virtue helpful for navigating the virtuous use of social anger at perceived injustice. As an intellectual virtue, conflictual solidarity teaches those who hold societal power to privilege the epistemological insights of members of oppressed
groups, in order to discern where injustice has been done and what redress is called for. Additional virtues for rightly directing social anger include restorative justice, which seeks redress for harm done by unjust systems, and prophetic prudence in using anger to interrupt ordinary political discourse.

Like Massingale, scholars increasingly caution against naïve or superficial expressions of solidarity such as programs that center those helping rather than those in need or attempts to treat solidarity as ironic unity rather than struggle for justice. Nichole Flores trenchantly calls out "consumptive solidarity," a false notion of solidarity that places the consumer at the center of response to human rights violations in the food supply chain. Genuine solidarity centers the voices and agency of trafficked persons, engaging them as persons, not mere aesthetic symbols. And Tisha Rajendra explores how solidarity can be a burdened virtue within immigrant diaspora communities. Burdened virtue is a concept from US philosopher Lisa Tessman to denote virtue that fails to contribute to the individual's flourishing because of oppressive conditions. For Rajendra, the experiences of many immigrants to the US challenge easy assumptions that the virtue of solidarity is simply or straightforwardly connected to flourishing or to pursuit of the common good.

Any observer of Catholic theological ethics in North America would fairly comment that solidarity is being asked to do a great deal. Indeed I could have mentioned many other works that focus on particular ethical problems and propose solidarity as a theological solution. There is a deep hunger for the expressions and the fruits of solidarity among North American theological ethicists. At the same time, this work is far from over. In the US it has become commonplace to remark that social life for many has become increasingly fragmented, disembedded, and even lonely. The deep ties to family, local community, and even profession that once offered stability and identity to many North American lives may be more superficial or even not at all present. More work needs to be done to bridge the gap between a crying need for solidarity and an individualistic, work-obsessed culture where it is difficult for many to feel that we truly belong to each other or to find the time to perform those acts that say, unambiguously, that we do. Helpful and necessary work on solidarity could include the following: learning from cultures within North America where a sense of solidarity is felt, including black, Latinx, Native American, and LGBTQ communities; retrieving stories, exemplars and norms from within the individualistic, dominant culture that do inculcate solidarity; learning from social science and other epistemologies; continuing to expose social vices against solidarity such as racism and economic inequality; and exploring how the church's ecclesial practice can help people in North America cultivate solidarity.

Collective activism is another tool in ethicists' toolbox. Academics are organizing to respond to injustice precisely in our roles as scholars such as by issuing public responses to critical issues, encouraging our professional guilds to divest from fossil fuels, even conducting fieldwork with activist groups. We should hope that this work continues to improve in scope and efficacy and to build a real community of trust among North American ethicists.
Now to my final question: How are we improving on the tools we have, to better address our own “signs of the times?” A significant development in virtue method, of particular importance for virtue in social contexts, is attention to the role of material reality in the virtuous life.

While material circumstances never completely determine virtue, many ethicists observe that material circumstances, including race, gender, and economic status, offer persons different sets of options for action, different experiences of treatment by society, and different qualities that are valued or discouraged for persons in a particular situation. Increasingly, ethicists insist that all these factors affect, without fully determining, how persons are able to pursue and develop virtue. One term for this reality is moral luck. Moral luck, which may be good or bad luck, describes significant influences in the moral life caused by factors beyond our control.18

Our material circumstances can include unjustly bestowed power and privilege, or unjustly experienced oppression. For Maureen O’Connell, the pervasive presence of white supremacy in theological discourse haunts and troubles virtue ethics, even as virtue ethics holds promise for addressing systemic racism by valuing emotions, providing flexible responses, and focusing on becoming.19 Katie Grimes examines the pervasive power of antiblackness supremacy in a major work. Contrary to anthropological theories in which the mind masters and directs the body, Grimes shows that the body plays a prerational role in the development of habits, including virtues and vices. This “embodied voluntary” explains how antiblackness supremacy can be preconscious and nonrational, and, simultaneously, due to the culpability of individual actors. Antiblackness is habituated through the bodily actions of individuals and “white people will the habits their bodies have helped them acquire.”20 Connecting embodied anthropology to the social vice of antiblackness supremacy, Grimes shows how the material circumstances of being racially labeled as black or nonblack impact the development and practice of vice.

In economic ethics, too, it feels crucial to engage with lived reality. For example, Cristina Traina identifies a middle-class and white bias that renders previous ethical work on consumerism incomplete. Traina locates virtuous goals in culturally distinct consumer practices that can be hastily and sometimes inaccurately deemed vicious by middle-class white ethical commentators.21 My own work explores the impact of wealth, poverty, and economic inequality on the virtuous life, using social science, memoir, and journalism.22 Ethical thought on the family, work, development, and much more stands to be greatly enriched by rigorous engagement with the complex and concrete lived realities of economic life.

Insights into material reality inform more fundamental explorations in virtue ethics, including questions of the unity of the virtues and human agency in their acquisition. To the first question, Lisa Fullam argues that “unless we are created absurdly, virtues cannot conflict with one another, but clearly acts of a particular virtue often conflict.” Fullam engages with material circumstances when she notes that social sin, imposing unequal experiences on particular people, can drive acts
of virtue into conflict for some people but not for others such as when women are socialized to care for others at the expense of their own self-care. Miguel Romero's work on the virtues of people with profound mental impairments provides more important insights. While persons with profound mental disabilities may be hindered in their exercise of will and thus their acquisition of the moral virtues, Romero demonstrates the tradition's clear consensus that the infused virtues remain accessible to such persons through the sacraments. Here, as is often the case, attention to the material circumstances of particular lives offers theological insight that touches every life, reminding us of each person's dependence on God's gift of grace for the virtuous life.

Engagement with the impact of material reality on the moral life never assumes that one experience can speak for all. It demands deep knowledge of other epistemologies such as critical race theory, sociology, psychology, economics, and other sources of lived experience such as memoir and the arts. Theologians like to think that since the church is an expert in humanity, we must be experts too. But our witness is only credible to the extent that we truly educate ourselves on the complex, concrete realities of human life.

Doing virtue ethics in social contexts is one of the most authentic ways for North American theological ethicists to respond to the signs of the times. Christian life always asks us to care about both our own moral progression and the well-being of others around us. Virtue ethics in social contexts demonstrates that my own moral goodness and my neighbor’s flourishing are not separate concerns, but rather are radically interlinked. In North America, the disproportionate global power of our governments and our dollars makes this message particularly urgent—and ethicists are working hard to make it heard.

Notes

5. As James O'Sullivan points out, attempts to connect Catholic social thought and virtue have advanced significantly in recent decades, from simple assertions that virtue belongs in Catholic social thought to concrete and technical explications of the relationship between personal growth in virtue and transformation of social structures. James P. O'Sullivan, “Virtue and Catholic Social Teaching: A New Generation in an Ongoing


