Virtue: Personal Formation and Social Transformation

Christopher P. Vogt
St. John's University, New York, USA

Abstract
Virtue ethics has an expanded role in contemporary moral theology. While continuing to engage the work of Thomas Aquinas and other historical sources to take up fundamental theological questions such as the relationship between human agency and divine grace, contemporary virtue ethics also provides a helpful framework for examining the interplay among social context, personal formation, and social change. There has been growing interest in virtue in the fields of neuroscience and anthropology. The author surveys examples of how theologians have drawn fruitfully from those fields, arguing that a more expansive interdisciplinary engagement would enhance theological understandings of virtue, formation, and social transformation.

Virtue ethics is no longer a peripheral methodology in contemporary moral theology. In the nearly 25 years since William Spohn described "The Return of Virtue Ethics" in these pages, it has flourished and now occupies a place of central importance in the field.[1] The turn to virtue has shifted the focus of teaching and scholarship in moral theology away from the morality or immorality of discreet acts in favor of consideration of questions of character and formation. Many theologians have

1.   William Spohn, "The Return of Virtue Ethics," *Theological Studies* 53 (1992) 60–75.

Corresponding author:
Christopher P. Vogt
Email: vogtc@stjohns.edu

used a virtue-based method to answer the challenge put forward in the decree on priestly training (*Optatam totius*) at the Second Vatican Council that moral theology should "be nourished more on the teaching of the Bible" and "shed light on the loftiness of the calling of the faithful in Christ" (16).[2] Spohn's own work made helpful connections among Christology, spirituality, liturgy, and moral theology.[3] More recently, James F. Keenan, S.J., Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., and Lúcás Chan, S.J., demonstrated that virtue ethics allows moral theology and biblical studies to engage each other in mutually beneficial ways.[4] William C. Mattison III and David Cloutier credit virtue ethics with stimulating the growth of more sophisticated understandings of moral decision-making and the importance of social context in contemporary moral theology, and for providing a framework that can illuminate how human agency and practical reasoning can be oriented toward the supernatural and be transformed by grace.[5] The prevalence of attention to virtue in contemporary moral theology has grown to a point at which it would be necessary to survey the entire field in order to explore fully the latest work on virtue ethics.

The purpose of this article is not to capture the full range of publications in this important area. Instead, I will examine the ways in which recent scholarship on virtue illuminates the dynamics of personal formation and social transformation. I begin with a discussion of recent theological scholarship that draws upon Aquinas, Aristotle, and other historical sources to address some fundamental questions about how virtues are cultivated. Next, I examine a series of works that illuminates how turning to the natural and social sciences can enrich a theological account of virtue and its formation. Finally, I turn to the question of what virtue ethics can contribute to theological understandings of how social change can be effected. This is not an entirely new question for virtue ethics in the sense that careful analysis of justice was an important part of the thought of Aquinas, Aristotle, and many contemporary virtue ethicists. That being said, the question of how the cultivation of virtue in individual persons can be linked

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2.   Paul VI, *Decree on Priestly Formation* (*Optatam totius*), October 28, 1965, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_optatam-totius_en.html. (Accessed December 3, 2015).

3.   William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 1999).

4.   Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. and James F. Keenan, S.J., *Paul and Virtue Ethics: Building Bridges between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010). Lúcás Chan, *Biblical Ethics in the 21st Century: Developments, Emerging Consensus, and Future Directions* (New York: Paulist, 2013); Yiu Sing Lúcás Chan, *The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes: Biblical Studies and Ethics for Real Life* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

5.   David Cloutier and William C. Mattison III, "The Resurgence of Virtue in Recent Moral Theology," *Journal of Moral Theology* 3 (2014) 228–59, at 230. On the relationship between nature and grace, the authors focus in particular on Jennifer Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008), and Michael Sherwin, O.P., *By Knowledge and by Love: Charity and Knowledge in the Moral Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2005).

to the transformation of the societies in which they live has received relatively little attention. Typically there has been little overlap between the work of virtue ethicists who focused on formation and social ethicists who concentrated on bringing about social change.

In recent years, that has begun to change. Some theologians who work primarily in social ethics have begun to attend also to links between structural change and personal conversion.[6] In addition, some social ethicists such as Maureen O'Connell have demonstrated that virtue can provide a helpful framework for approaching political theology in new ways.[7] Our focus below will be on how renewed interest in the concept of social or structural sin has served as a catalyst for investigating the links between personal formation and social transformation through the lens of virtue.

Personal Formation

In St. Thomas Aquinas's approach to virtue ethics, he recognizes a twofold teleology for humankind: a more modest "human" happiness or flourishing that can be attained through our own abilities and a more perfect end (union with God) that can be attained only with God's grace.[8] Likewise, there two sets of virtues: moral virtues that typically are acquired by habituation, and theological virtues that are infused by God's grace.[9] A number of recent works have moved forward in interesting ways the ongoing discussion of the relationship between those two ends and those two sets of virtues. William C. Mattison has taken the novel view that it is not possible for Christians to possess the acquired cardinal virtues (prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice). Mattison's work arises out of a concern that contemporary Thomistic writing on the relationship between nature and grace and the twofold ends of human life misread Aquinas and tend toward a compartmentalization of God's activity and human activity.[10] Mattison argues that Aquinas maintains that every human person has only one last end (which is supernatural); everything a person wills is willed toward that last

6. Michael Griffin, and Jennie Weiss Block, *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations with Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013).

7. Maureen H. O'Connell, *Compassion: Loving Our Neighbor in an Age of Globalization* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009). More recently, O'Connell has written on the limits of virtue ethics as a method for addressing social injustice. See "After White Supremacy? The Viability of Virtue Ethics for Racial Justice," *Journal of Moral Theology* 3 (2014) 83–104.

8. Bonnie Kent, "Habits and Virtues," in *Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: Critical Essays*, ed. Brian Davies (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006) 223–44, at 236.

9. For a more thorough and precise treatment of the categories of virtue in Aquinas's thought and their relationship to each other, see William C. Mattison III, "Aquinas's Categorizations of Virtue: Historical Background and Contemporary Significance," *Thomist* 74 (2010) 189–235. Mattison describes three types of virtue: theological virtues (infused), infused cardinal virtues, and acquired cardinal virtues.

10. William C. Mattison III, "Can Christians Possess the Acquired Cardinal Virtues?" *Theological Studies* 72 (2011) 558–85, at 563–65.

end, and the virtues by which one wills a supernatural end are always infused and never acquired (as per *ST* 1–2, q. 63, a. 2). From those arguments Mattison maintains that it is impossible not to conclude that Christians have only infused (not acquired) cardinal virtues even when their activity is directed toward a natural end because natural ends are always penultimate for Christians.[11] Mattison's argument runs contrary to the majority of theologians writing on this topic today. The prevailing view maintains that a framework that includes both acquired and infused virtues simultaneously in Christians more adequately captures the widely accepted Catholic view that grace perfects (rather than replaces) nature and the fact that even virtuous human beings must continue to grow in virtue throughout their lifetimes.[12]

Jennifer Herdt takes up a similar set of concerns about the dangers of radically opposing the cultivation of virtue through habituation within a community against the transformation of a Christian's character that takes place as a result of God's grace.[13] She draws especially from Aquinas and Erasmus to articulate a view in which God's grace is inseparable from human agency and where the imitation of Christ is central when it comes to growing in virtue. The imitation of Christ is far deeper than mere mimicry of his actions. The Christian wishing to grow in virtue also must imitate Christ's humility, which brings with it a desire to be reshaped by God. At the heart of Herdt's approach is a view of human agency and divine grace that are not in competition with one another, but rather that work together in ways more intimately connected than a term like "cooperation" can express.[14] Her study of Erasmus highlights his appreciation for theater and for the notion that analogies can be drawn between learning a part and learning to grow in virtue (especially when associated with the imitation of Christ). Gradually and by a grace already present in our own actions the virtuous part we sought to play becomes a part of who we are.[15]

In opposition to the normative view that Herdt develops is a theological position she terms "hyper-Augustinianism," which maintains an opposition between social formation in community (*mimesis*) and the internal transformation of one's heart brought about by God's direct action. Herdt detects hyper-Augustinianism in the thought of reformers such as Martin Luther and John Bunyan as well as later philosophers such as Rousseau and Kant (among others). It is the broad scope of her work as

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11. Mattison, "Acquired Cardinal Virtues" 564.
12. Angela McKay Knobel, "Can the Infused and Acquired Virtues Coexist in the Christian Life?" *Studies in Christian Ethics* 23 (2009) 381–96. For Mattison's response to these objections, see "Acquired Cardinal Virtues" 570–80. It is worth knowing that Mattison is very sympathetic to these concerns, but believes that his proposal can address them while remaining providing a more accurate, compelling reading of Aquinas.
13. Jennifer Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008).
14. Herdt helpfully restates and clarifies her view on this point in a later article written as a response to three commentaries on her book. Jennifer Herdt, "Redeeming the Acquired Virtues," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 41 (2013) 727–40, at 734.
15. Herdt, *Putting on Virtue* 119.

well as Herdt's carefully researched and documented analysis of several historical figures on this question that makes this book an exceptionally strong contribution to the field.

The book's impact was enhanced by three helpful articles that were published as a book discussion in the *Journal of Religious Ethics*. Sheryl Overmyer's article would be of particular interest to Thomists. She claims the questions about pagan virtues that Herdt brings to her reading of Aquinas should themselves be transformed by a deeper reading of Aquinas that starts from the beginning of the *Summa*.[16] Overmyer also claims that Aquinas provides a more holistic account of moral formation than Herdt's interpretation allows for, concluding that Aquinas need not be displaced by Erasmus as the central source for her project. Darlene Fozer Weaver offers a very sympathetic reading of Herdt's argument, but puts forward a mild corrective, suggesting that Herdt's book should have been more emphatic regarding the importance and legitimacy of positive self-regard.[17] This is a point that Herdt herself has conceded even while maintaining that her original work is fully consistent with a right account of good self-love.[18] Herdt's book warrants the attention of anyone interested in understanding moral formation from a theological point of view.

Virtue Ethics and Neuroscience in Dialogue on Morality and Moral Formation

Neuroscience and neuropsychology are rapidly growing fields that have captured the popular imagination in terms of their potential explanatory power. There is a decided tendency by many people writing in that field to overreach in terms of their assertions about what neuroscience can explain. For example, Sam Harris has used his background in neuroscience to write a book for popular audiences that "proves" that free will is an illusion, and another book in which he argues that neuroscience can provide an objective basis for developing a "scientifically based" morality.[19] Similarly, neurobiologist Wolf Singer claims that human consciousness and self-awareness can be entirely explained by human brain development. Referring to the quantitative differentiation between the cerebral cortex of human beings and other mammals, Singer writes that "everything which constitutes us and distinguishes us from animals, and therefore everything that has made our cultural evolution possible, is evidently based on the

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16. Sheryl Overmyer, "Saint Thomas Aquinas's Pagan Virtues? Putting the Question to Jennifer Herdt's *Putting on Virtue*," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 41 (2013) 669–87, at 675–76.
17. Darlene Fozer Weaver, "Double Agents: Persons and Moral Change in Jennifer Herdt's *Putting on Virtue*," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 41 (2013) 710–26.
18. Herdt, "Redeeming the Acquired Virtues" 732.
19. Sam Harris, *Free Will* (New York: Free Press, 2012); Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2010).

quantitative increase of particular brain structures."[20] Much like the recent work of "the new atheists" of a few years ago, many writers who attempt to approach morality from the viewpoint of neuroscience show a significant lack of understanding of the limits of science and fail to appreciate what questions can be answered only philosophically and theologically.[21]

The excesses and lack of philosophical sophistication of many works on morality and neuroscience may have discouraged some theologians from engaging that field, but several recent works show the promise of neuroscience as a dialogue partner for theology, and for virtue ethics in particular. Work on the role of emotion in moral reasoning appears to offer especially fruitful ground for possible cross-disciplinary insights. Some very interesting theological work has been done recently on emotion and the moral life.[22] Unfortunately, it is not possible to offer a treatment of those works here except to say that all of them say considerably more than what could ever be said scientifically about the role of emotion in moral reasoning, but at the same time they are making certain empirical claims about how human reasoning works. Despite that fact, these works and others in theology rarely interact with scientific studies of emotion and behavior. Careful studies of the understanding of emotion in Aquinas or Aristotle are of immense value to the discipline, but there also is a need to connect those works to empirical analysis.

It turns out that research in neuroscience can be quite helpful in terms of supporting the empirical claims about moral formation as well as how human beings engage in moral reasoning and the role emotions play in those processes. Although there is a history of debate in the fields of social and affective neuroscience over whether emotions are integrated into conscious, goal-oriented thought and activities, there is a growing body of research which indicates that emotion is constitutive of moral reasoning and decision-making rather than separate from it.[23] In particular, multiple studies of individuals who

20. Wolf Singer, "Verschaltungen legen uns fest: Wir solten aufhörn von Freiheit zu sprechen," in *Hirnforschung und Willensfreiheit. Zur Deutung der neuesten Experimente*, ed. C. Geyer (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004) 40. Cited in Martin Rhonheimer, "Moral Reason, Person, and Virtue: The Aristotelian-Thomistic Perspective in the Face of Current Challenges from Neurobiology," *Journal of Moral Theology* 3 (2014) 1–17, at 4–5.

21. Michael L. Spezio details a specific manifestation of this problem in his discussion of widespread "psychologism" among neuroscientists. He defines psychologism as "the doctrine that normative logic and ethics/morality are subsets of descriptive, causal theories of mental processes, such as are found in psychology and neuroscience." In other words, psychology and neuroscience will be arbiters of what is true and moral, eclipsing philosophy and theology. Spezio details many examples of this problem in a long, very helpful footnote (n. 10). See "The Neuroscience of Emotion and Reasoning in Social Contexts: Implications for Moral Theology," *Modern Theology* 27 (2011) 339–56, at 340 and 353.

22. Diana Fritz Cates, *Aquinas on the Emotions: A Religious-Ethical Inquiry* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2009); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2003); Elizabeth Agnew Cochran, "The Moral Significance of Religious Affections: A Reformed Perspective on Emotions and Moral Formation," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 28 (2015) 150–62.

23. Spezio, "Neuroscience of Emotion" 342.

suffered damage only to areas of the brain that are strongly associated with emotion without any damage to non-affective neural areas exhibited significant impairments in social judgment, practical reasoning, and inter-personal relationships.[24] Spezio captures the importance of these and other findings well when he writes that "rather than dichotomous, opposing systems, what is emerging is a complex interconnection of circuits in which emotional signals cannot be separated from adaptive reasoning and decision making when such judgment and action are relevant for oneself and others."[25] These findings support the work ongoing among scholars such as Cates, Nussbaum, Cochran, and others and point to the importance of continuing to pursue careful theological research on virtue and emotion.

Moral Exemplars

Virtue ethicists have long affirmed the importance of exemplars or role models for moral development. Recently, Patrick M. Clark argued for an expanded role of moral exemplars in contemporary virtue ethics.[26] He builds his argument by beginning with the work on exemplarism by Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, who contends that paradigmatically good persons are crucial for understanding the meaning of goodness and virtue.[27] Following direct reference theory, which was advanced by Hilary Putnam and Saul Kripke, she insists that definitions of goodness must always be traced back to instances of that goodness in the world as embodied by specific individual persons.[28] Clark links this general theory to the Christocentric approaches to moral theology found in the work of Livio Melina and in *Veritatis Splendor*, both of which put forward Jesus Christ as the ultimate exemplar and norm for Christians.[29] For Melina and for St. John Paul II, encounter with the person of Christ is crucial for understanding the demands of morality and the shape of virtue. This is an encounter not only with Jesus

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24. Daniel Tranel, Julie Hathaway-Nepple, and Steven W. Anderson, "Impaired Behavior of Real-World Tasks Following Damage to the Ventromedial Prefrontal Cortex," *Journal of Clinical and Experimental Neuropsychology* 29 (2007) 319–32; Joe Barrash, Daniel Tranel, and Steven W. Anderson, "Acquired Personality Disturbances Associated with Bilateral Damage to the Ventromedial Prefrontal Region," *Developmental Neuropsychology* 18 (2000) 355–81.
25. Spezio, "Neuroscience of Emotion" 352.
26. Patrick M. Clark, "The Case for an Exemplarist Approach to Virtue in Catholic Moral Theology," *Journal of Moral Theology* 3 (2014) 54–82.
27. Linda Zagzebski, "Exemplarist Moral Theory" *Metaphilosophy* 41 (2010) 41–57.
28. Clark, "Exemplarist Approach to Virtue" 57. Zagzebski, "Exemplarist Moral Theory" 50. On direct reference theory, see Clark 56 and Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of Meaning," in *Mind, Language and Reality*, vol. 2 of *Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1979) and Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).
29. Livio Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2000). Melina has expanded upon that work in his more recent *The Epiphany of Love: Toward a Theological Understanding of Christian Action* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

as portrayed in the Gospels, but also with the living Christ. There is some tension here between this encounter with Christ and Clark's insistence that "we cannot gain access to the concept of the 'virtuous human being' or 'good human life' before we have some direct experience of virtuous individuals and good lives as mediated through the sensorium" in the sense that any encounter with Christ is not a sensory encounter with a person in any ordinary sense. Nevertheless he makes an interesting case for the importance of exemplars and for finding ways of integrating those insights more fully into Thomistic approaches to virtue and moral reasoning.

Many recent studies in neuroscience and the behavioral sciences have emphasized the importance of exemplars as well.[30] Some have outlined how the careful study of individuals living in intentional communities can clarify what specific virtues mean as well as how those virtues are learned or transmitted.[31] Brown and Reimer have developed a theory they call embodied cognition that helps to explain why practices, community, and narrative are so crucial for the development of virtues.[32] It should be noted that those are the same three primary sources of virtue formation identified by Alasdair MacIntyre and the majority of Christian ethicists working today.[33] They posit that virtues exist in human beings "in the form of sensorimotor interactional memories and action–outcome schemas."[34] They explain how it would be possible for the human brain to be shaped in ways that orient a person toward specific modes of action in specific contexts. Their insights regarding the role of mirror neurons are particularly helpful.[35] They explain that one's own motor and perceptual neurons are activated as one observes another person engaged in an activity ("mirroring" what is taking place in the brain of the agent). In this way, a person can be primed to engage in an observed behavior in much the same way that one would have been if one had engaged in that behavior oneself.[36] Along the same lines, Brown and Reimer suggest that narrative can

30. For brief review of relevant literature in virtue ethics and scientific approaches to exemplarity, see Gregory R. Peterson, "Virtue, Science, and Exemplarity," in *Theology and the Science of Moral Action: Virtue Ethics, Exemplarity, and Cognitive Neuroscience*, ed. James van Slyke et al. (New York: Routledge, 2012) 27–46.

31. Kevin Reimer, *Living L'Arche: Stories of Compassion, Love, and Disability* (London: Continuum, 2009). For some commentary on this and similar studies see Warren Brown et al., "Empirical Approaches to Virtue Science: Observing Exemplarity in the Lab," in *Theology and the Science of Moral Action: Virtue Ethics, Exemplarity, and Cognitive Neuroscience*, ed. James van Slyke et al. (New York: Routledge, 2012) 11–26, at 15–21.

32. Warren S. Brown and Kevin S. Reimer, "Embodied Cognition, Character Formation, and Virtue," *Zygon* 48 (2013) 832–45.

33. Brad J. Kallenberg, "The Master Argument of McIntyre's *After Virtue*," in *Virtue*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Lisa A. Fullam (New York: Paulist, 2011) 21–50.

34. Brown and Reimer, "Embodied Cognition" 836.

35. For a survey of literature on mirror neurons and how they facilitate the apprehension of the actions, sensations, and emotions of other people, see Christian Keysers and Valeria Gazzola, "Towards a Unifying Neural Theory of Social Cognition," *Progress in Brain Research* 156 (2006) 379–401.

have a similar impact because one understands a story "by implicitly simulating in one's own sensorimotor systems the actions being narrated."[37] Brown has developed these theories at greater length in a book he co-authored with Brad Strawn.[38] The book's overall thesis is problematic in that it critiques what amounts to a straw-figure caricature of "dualism" on its way to attempting to provide a wholly materialist yet nonreductionist account of human personhood. If one can set that overall aim aside, their work is helpful for understanding the human person as rational animal and how people are formed morally. For example, they offer chapters on the impact of inter-personal relationships ("How Relationships Shape Us"), practices ("How We Are Changed and Transformed") and the church ("Why Bodies Need Churches") on moral formation.[39]

Narrative, Liturgy, and Personal Formation

Charlene P. E. Burns's work supports Brown and Reimer's conclusions regarding the importance of narrative for personal formation. From a very young age, human beings use narrative to process experiences, to develop a coherent sense of the past, and to evaluate possible responses to situations.[40] She also finds that studies in behavioral psychology and neuroscience align very well with what Stanley Hauerwas and many others have long maintained regarding the importance of narrative for the formation of character.[41] She puts forward the work of Anglican theologian Samuel Wells as a model for explaining how Christians attempt to live faithfully. Scripture and liturgy provide "a training school that shapes the habits and practices of a community."[42] Rather than a rote "performance," the model here is that of improvisation in which Christians attempt simultaneously to be faithful to the community's master narrative (primarily Scripture) "without being stuck in the past" so as "to be prepared for the many unknown challenges life brings."[43] The image of improvisation is novel, but

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36. Brown and Reimer, "Embodied Cognition" 842.

37. Ibid. 843.

38. Warren S. Brown and Brad D. Strawn, *The Physical Nature of the Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology, and the Church* (New York: Cambridge University, 2012).

39. Brown and Strawn, *Physical Nature of the Christian Life* 71–98 and 105–20. For more on how brain research can inform our understanding of the human as rational animal, see Rhonheimer, "Moral Reason, Person, and Virtue" 15–17.

40. Charlene P. E. Burns, "Hardwired for Drama? Theological Speculations on Cognitive Science, Empathy, and Moral Exemplarity," in *Theology and the Science of Moral Action: Virtue Ethics, Exemplarity, and Cognitive Neuroscience*, ed. James van Slyke et al. (New York: Routledge, 2012) 149–63, at 154–55.

41. Burns, "Hardwired for Drama" 157. Stanley Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations into Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1977) 11, 24, and 104.

42. Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2004) 11. Cited in Burns, "Hardwired for Drama" 157.

otherwise the goal and process Burns describes are extremely similar to William Spohn's method of employing the analogical imagination to be simultaneously faithful to Christian liturgy, narrative, and tradition and to the new and unique circumstances we face in everyday life.[44]

One of the most important ways that Christians are formed by the narratives and practices of the church is through their participation in the liturgy. Of course, the primary purpose of liturgy is worship of God, but the ongoing formation and sanctification of those who participate in the liturgy is more than a side-effect.[45] Liturgy shapes a person's character in the sense that the narratives one hears and the practices one performs at worship give a person a sense of what they are, who they are, and whom they are called to become (creatures created by God and sustained by God, members of a community called to live as disciples, etc.).[46] In the particularly influential thought of Stanley Hauerwas, participation in the liturgy and in the life of the church more broadly is the most important way that Christians are formed in virtue. According to Hauerwas, it is through their participation in the Eucharist that Christians learn to hear, understand, and enact the gospel story; it is through liturgy that one learns the skills to know what the gospel is all about, what it calls you to do, and who it calls you to become.[47] Many scholars writing on liturgy and ethics use the image of liturgy as a rehearsal of sorts. When a person participates in the liturgy, she repeats actions over and over again until she has internalized the part assigned to her as an actor in the church and the world.[48]

This understanding of the central influence and importance of narrative, liturgy, and related practices for personal formation has grown to become the conventional wisdom in contemporary virtue ethics, but in the last five to ten years a growing number of theologians whose approach to theology draws upon ethnographic research have called for some nuance and revision of the prevailing view. They have pointed out that moral theologians spend more time theorizing about the importance of liturgy and church practices than they do observing the practices of real communities or talking to people about their beliefs.[49] They point out that when virtue ethicists write about "the

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43. Burns, "Hardwired for Drama" 158.
44. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise* 50–71.
45. Keith F. Pecklers, *Worship: A Primer in Christian Ritual* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2003) 15.
46. Don E. Saliers, "Liturgy and Ethics: Some New Beginnings," in *Liturgy and the Moral Self: Humanity at Full Stretch before God*, ed. E. Byron Anderson and Bruce T. Morrill (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998) 15–35, at 17.
47. Stanley Hauerwas, "The Gesture of a Truthful Story: The Church and 'Religious Education,'" *Encounter* 43 (1982) 319–29, at 325.
48. Mark Searle, "Serving the Lord with Justice," in *Vision: The Scholarly Contributions of Mark Searle to Liturgical Renewal*, ed. Anne Y. Koester and Barbara Searle (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2004) 4–22, at 19. This image is similar to Burns's approach described above, although she would favor a model of the improvisational actor rather than one learning a specific part or script.

liturgy" and "the church" they tend to rely upon idealized forms that bear little resemblance to the actual practices of church communities.[50] The church in the real world is radically diverse in the sense that various denominations diverge from each other in terms of belief and practice.[51] Even within a single Catholic parish one might find considerable variations in terms of liturgical style and the language in which it is celebrated; some might ask in what sense that community and its practices can be described in singular terms.[52] Finally, there can be considerable distance between the ways in which church leaders aim to form members of their congregations through liturgical practices (including preaching) and whether and how those practices are received by the people.[53]

All of this work in ethnography does not undercut the practical and theological importance of the church or the liturgy in moral formation. In fact, research in ethnography and neuroscience support the view that narrative and participation in the life of the church are crucially important for shaping the beliefs and character of Christians. What this research does show is the need to recognize that "church" and "liturgy" are heavily influenced by local context. Virtue ethicists who are interested in writing about formation and the impact of liturgy and practices cannot retain credibility while avoiding any engagement with ethnography and similar lines of social scientific research.

Moral Anthropology as a Source for a Theological Ethics of Ordinary Life

Despite the considerable work that has been done in terms of theological engagement of ethnographic research, some theologians might remain at a loss methodologically in terms of imagining what an approach to moral theology that is heavily engaged with anthropology might look like.[54] Michael Banner's recent book constitutes a very good,

49. Harold Hegstad, "Ecclesiology and Empirical Research on the Church," in *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Christian Scharen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012) 34–50, at 41.

50. Christian Scharen, "Introduction," in *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* 1.

51. Robert P. Jones, "Ethnography as Revelation: Witnessing in History, Faith, and Sin," in *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, ed. Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen (New York: Continuum, 2011) 118–41, at 120.

52. Nicholas M. Healy, "Ecclesiology, Ethnography, and God: An Interplay of Reality Descriptions," in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012) 182–99, at 183.

53. Sibohán Garrigan, *The Real Peace Process: Worship, Politics, and the End of Sectarianism* (London: Equinox, 2010) 117–22. Christian Scharen unpacks the theological implications of Garrigan's work in "Ecclesiology 'From the Body': Ethnographic Notes toward a Carnal Theology," in Ward, ed., *Perspectives on Ecclesiology* 50–70, at 60–61.

54. For those looking for practical advice regarding how to engage ethnographic research or conduct their own study, see Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds., "Benedictions: For Those Willing to Give Ethnography a Try," chap. 12 of *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 227–38.

constructive start in this direction, offering both an extensive commentary on his own method as well as several constructive chapters on consideration of suffering, dying, birth, and other central aspects of every human life.[55] Banner exaggerates the extent to which contemporary moral theologians focus on "hard questions" and moral dilemmas at the expense of studying everyday practices and moral issues, but that inflated indictment does not compromise the very high quality of his proposal.[56]

At the heart of Banner's argument is the claim that moral theologians need to develop richer and psychologically and socio-historically more robust accounts of both good and bad. He faults ethicists and church leaders both for being too quick to judge and too unwilling to understand the (im)moral lives that people lead.[57] He puts forward Pope John Paul II's *Evangelium vitae* as an example of an approach to moral theology that has a misplaced, nostalgic confidence in natural law and in the power of disembodied reasoned argument as a means of calling people to conversion and bringing about social change.[58] He thinks that *Evangelium vitae* and many contemporary moral theologians fail to take seriously the depth and compelling logic of "the culture of death" that the encyclical condemns. People do not choose abortion or euthanasia or other death-dealing acts out of ignorance or by acting against what they secretly know "deep down"; the culture of death is not an unfathomable badness, but only seems so because of our lack of imagination and experience.[59] Judith Merkle would agree that anthropological and ethnographic categories can be of use to the church as it considers how to form and transform people in the faith.[60] She sees societies in Western Europe and the United States to be marked by profound fragmentation and an absence of public signs of religion or faith. In such a context, in order to be effective the church needs to undertake a variety of pastoral strategies for evangelization that vary according to the existing relationship people have with the church and with other structures of meaning and belonging.

Banner proposes a theological appropriation of moral anthropology (a form of the social scientific discipline of anthropology, not a "theology of the human person") as a remedy for what he sees as the dominant method of doing moral theology today. He demonstrates that social anthropology can provide methodological tools as well as actual content that can help theologians learn to explicate the moral lives of actual people in ways that are psychologically and socio-historically realistic so as either to commend them as exemplary or to engage them critically with an eye toward calling people to conversion.[61] He writes, "What we currently lack and what we need is a coherent and

55. Michael Banner, *The Ethics of Everyday Life: Moral Theology, Social Anthropology, and the Imagination of the Human* (New York: Oxford, 2014).
56. Ibid. 7, 10.
57. Ibid. 12.
58. Ibid. 13–15.
59. Ibid. 16.
60. Judith A. Merkle, *Being Faithful: Christian Commitment in Modern Society* (New York: T & T Clark, 2010).
61. Banner, *The Ethics of Everyday Life* 23.

perspicuous account of the practice of the Christian life, which would, in a space of cultural contestation, describe and sustain this form of life as a particular way of being human in the world . . . in conscious and therapeutic dialogue with other accounts."[62]

Banner goes on to provide the initial sketch of such an account by addressing how people approach issues such as birth, suffering, dying, and mourning as well as how Christians whose imaginations have been deeply shaped by Scripture, ritual, and community practices approach those same questions. Note that his approach is not altogether unlike that of Hauerwas or many other virtue ethicists, but Banner's method is distinguished by a close examination of particular communities alongside a rich consideration of Scripture and historical theology. For example, in his chapter on "Remembering Christ and Making Time Count," he seeks earnestly to understand why "remembering" is so often linked to retribution in the post-9/11 West. Thus he takes very seriously a mindset he considers wrong in order to understand how it might be engaged. He also uses moral anthropology to investigate rituals of remembering in a Greek mountain village; in particular he uncovers how liturgy and cultural practices around death and burial have formed the villagers' understandings of time and remembering in the village.[63] He combines that anthropological data with a reading of Augustine's letters to magistrates on how to "remember" crime to gesture toward what "right rites for remembering rightly" might look like today. He insists that this process is "not a matter of Christians inventing new rites, but of living in accordance with the rites of remembrance that we already have and that seek to colonize our life and times and re-member Christ."[64] Banner does not use the language or structure of virtue ethics in his method, but his way of looking carefully at practices (including worship) and exploring how they form a view of the world, and so on could be engaged very fruitfully by those who use virtue as their primary framework of analysis. As the field of moral anthropology continues to grow, studies that explore the role of narrative and virtue in moral formation will become more accessible and numerous.[65] Moral theologians working on virtue and formation would be wise to engage this research.

Social Transformation

In some ways, efforts at personal formation in the virtues aspire simultaneously (if secondarily) to social transformation. The primary aim of Christian moral formation is

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62. Ibid. 28.
63. Ibid. 178–81.
64. Ibid. 197.
65. For a discussion of recent studies of narrative and moral formation among anthropologists, see Jarrett Zigon, "Narratives," in *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*, ed. Didier Fassin (Malden, MA: Blackwell-Wiley, 2012) 204–20. For a similar treatment of virtue see Thomas Widlok, "Virtue" 186–203. For a general overview of the ways how anthropologists have come to engage religion and morality in new ways (many of which are quite fruitful for theological engagement), see "Introduction: Toward a Critical Moral Anthropology" 1–17 (all in the same volume).

to help people become more faithful disciples of Christ, but as Banner makes plain in his book, cultivating specific practices that are deeply rooted in the Christian narrative or the "Christian imagination" can have "colonizing" effects on the surrounding culture. So as we turn to the question of how to approach social transformation from a point of view rooted in virtue ethics, one way to proceed would be to study how the witness of individual Christians and specific Christian communities have affected the broader culture in which they are located. That is not the approach that I will take here. Instead, this final section will take up some recent attempts to use a virtue framework for approaching social ethics more directly. These approaches emphasize the links between personal formation and social transformation by building upon the concept of social (or structural) sin that was introduced by theologies of liberation and has since become incorporated into the canon of Catholic social teaching. In her article on social ethics, Christine Firer Hinze will highlight many of the other ways that theologians are writing about how to bring about social transformation.

Derek R. Nelson takes up the relationship between personal sin and social sin in his recent book, but a more helpful (especially from a Catholic point of view), concise encapsulation of recent work on social sin can be found in Kristin Heyer's *Kinship Across Borders*.[66] She defines social sin as "unjust structures, distorted consciousness, and collective actions and inaction that facilitate injustice and dehumanization," and also relies in part on Kenneth Himes's definition of "disvalues" such as racism, sexism, and imperialism which are "embedded in a pattern of societal organization and cultural understanding."[67] These structures are related to personal sins in two ways. First, social sin can be seen as the accumulation of individual sins over time. Second, these structures have a negative effect on the development of a person's moral formation and often lead them to sin. As Mark O'Keefe explains,

> Structures exercise an influence on human persons, for good or ill, even though they are unaware of their power. Because of the complexity and subtle power of structures, it may seem therefore that in order for social sin to be overturned structures must first be changed. Once the unjust structures are overturned people may be sufficiently free of their influence to effect an authentic personal conversion. On the other hand, it seems apparent that structures themselves cannot be overturned—at least in any lasting manner—without changing persons.[68]

Clearly, any effort at social transformation must address both persons and structures.

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66. Derek R. Nelson, *What's Wrong with Sin? Sin in Individual and Social Perspective from Schleiermacher to Theologies of Liberation* (New York: T & T Clark, 2009); Kristin Heyer, *Kinship across Borders: A Christian Ethic of Immigration* (Washington, DC: Georgetown, 2012).
67. Heyer, *Kinship Across Borders* 37; Kenneth Himes, "Social Sin and the Role of the Individual," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1986) 183–218, at 184.
68. Mark O'Keefe, O.S.B., *What Are They Saying about Social Sin?* (New York, Paulist, 1990) 92–93.

Daniel J. Daly argues that the concept of structural or social sin needs to be updated to take account of the turn to the person in moral theology that began at the Second Vatican Council and the growth of virtue ethics that has taken place in the field since then.[69] After a careful analysis of the concept of social sin in liberationist and magisterial sources (especially the writings of John Paul II), Daly proposes replacing the term structural sin with "structures of vice" and adding its complement "structures of virtue."[70] He claims that these terms better reflect the fact that these structures profoundly affect the character and moral development of members of society and *incline* people toward sinfulness while they retain their freedom to do otherwise in a way that is not entirely unlike the way that virtues provide a basic orientation to do what is right in the right way while individuals retain the freedom to do otherwise. These are interesting and promising moves, but need much fuller development. Daly calls for better and more extensive use of social theory to analyze the relationship among structures, personal character, and individual acts.[71] This recommendation aligns well with my suggestion above that moral theologians need to engage the social sciences in order to move forward on some questions theologically.[72]

Kevin J. Ahern brings the concept of social virtues to bear as a response to what he describes as a culture of politics and fear that has emerged in the United States since September 11, 2001.[73] He points to humility and magnanimity as two virtues that offer an alternative way of being in a violent world. What is novel here is Ahern's suggestion that virtues can be embodied analogously by societies.[74] He offers five principles of social magnanimity, teases out some of their policy implications, and suggests some ways that institutions of civil society might be able to support the development of magnanimity. This is an interesting approach to a sociopolitical problem, but more clarity and conceptual development are needed to explain in what sense we are talking about social *virtues* being embodied by a society. How (for example) are we advancing the cultivation of a virtue if we were to follow Ahern's advice and ban political television and radio advertising in the name of magnanimity?

Meghan Clark draws upon Daniel Daly's proposal of structures of virtue and vice as well as the notion of social virtue found in Ahern's article and moves these concepts forward in helpful ways as they pertain to the virtue of solidarity.[75] She names the end

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69. Daniel J. Daly, "Structures of Virtue and Vice," *New Blackfriars* 92 (2011) 341–57, at 342.

70. Ibid. 343–51 and 355.

71. Ibid. 352.

72. Daly suggests the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann as a source of social analysis. Their work is quite helpful, but is now over 25 years old. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor, 1967); Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor, 1990).

73. Kevin J. Ahern, "Virtue, Vulnerability, and Social Transformation," in *Violence, Transformation, and the Sacred: "They Shall be Called Children of God"*, ed. Margaret Pfeil and Tobias Winright (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011) 117–29, at 117–20.

74. Ibid. 123 and 126.

75. Meghan J. Clark, "Anatomy of a Social Virtue: Solidarity and Corresponding Vices," *Political Theology* 15 (2014) 26–39.

of solidarity as participation in the universal common good by all, and specifies that solidarity is a feeling, an attitude, and a duty. Her work is especially helpful in terms of starting to explain how a virtue can be both personal and social in that her vision of solidarity requires both the cultivation of personal practices (and attitudes), interpersonal relationships, as well as actions by individuals and communities to build up structures of virtue.[76] The way in which Clark situates solidarity as a social virtue lying between the vices of individualism and collectivism also illuminates how the concept of "social virtue" can be meaningful and constructive for social analysis.[77] Her book sets these insights into a richer context by linking solidarity and the cultivation of virtue to a sophisticated discussion of identity that draws primarily upon the work of Charles Taylor.[78] She effectively integrates her treatment of solidarity and social virtue into the Catholic human rights tradition.

All of the works surveyed in these notes offer only a glimpse into the ways that virtue ethics can uncover strategies for understanding the dynamics of personal formation and social transformation. What they make clear is that these lines of inquiry offer fertile ground for further research.

Author biography

Christopher P. Vogt earned a PhD in theological ethics from Boston College in 2002. Currently he serves as Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at St. John's University in New York. Recently he edited an issue of *The Journal of Moral Theology* on "The Church and the World" to which he also contributed an article, "Locating the Church in the World: Ethnography, Christian Ethics, and the Global Church" (2013). Forthcoming is "Business, Capabilities Theory, and the Virtue of Justice," in *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics in Business and Management*, ed. Alejo Sison (Springer, 2016).

76. Ibid. 35.
77. Ibid. 35.
78. Meghan J. Clark, *The Vision of Catholic Social Thought: The Virtue of Solidarity and the Praxis of Human Rights* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014).