ENGAGING VIRTUE ETHICS IN THE PHILIPPINES*

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In engaging virtue ethics in the Philippines, I propose first to introduce basic premises in virtue ethics, then to turn to some contemporary transcultural virtues and finally to name and apply some specific, Christian virtues to the Philippine context.

I. Contemporary Virtue Ethics

Renewed interest in virtue ethics arises from a dissatisfaction with the way we do ethics today. Most discussions about contemporary ethics consider major controversial actions: abortion, gay marriages, nuclear war, gene therapy, etc. These discussions are driven by controversy and quandaries.¹

Virtue ethicists are not primarily interested in asking what I/we should do or what problems I/we should solve. Virtue ethicists are more interested in stepping back and asking, what type of people we should become.

The turn to virtue was started by a variety of persons. For instance, when the Journal of Religious Ethics published its first issue, it

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launched a discussion among philosophers and theologians on the suitability of virtue ethics.\(^2\) Alisdair MacIntyre's name dominates, however, the initial phase of revisiting the virtues. In his important work, *After Virtue,\(^3\) MacIntyre played on the words in his title. First, it is descriptive: since the Enlightenment, he argued, we live in a period after virtue; after centuries of writings on the virtues by Homer, Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, now we live in a time of moral fictions. But the title is also prescriptive, we ought to pursue or go after the virtues. In this, MacIntyre agrees with Thomas Aquinas when he writes "every moral question can be reduced to the consideration of the virtues."\(^4\)

Like those before him, MacIntyre argued that character precedes action, that being precedes action, that *agere sequitur esse*. MacIntyre gave practical, ordinary force to the virtues by raising three key, related questions: Who am I? Who ought I to become? How am I to get there? These questions are first about self-understanding, then about setting a personal goal and, finally, about setting an agenda for attaining that goal. Each question can be handled by the virtues. We can answer the questions about self-identity, about the goals of the person we want to become or the agenda we want to set, all in terms of virtues.

Virtue ethicists recognize that what we do shapes who we become and therefore we estimate the actions that we ought to perform or avoid according to the type of people we aim to become. In this way, we are proactive, determining first who we should become and, in that light, the actions we should perform.

**II. Contemporary Transcultural Virtues**

In the current retrieval of virtue ethics, we need to go further than simply examine particular virtues to develop human identity. We need to examine a constellation of virtues, particularly, the cardinal virtues. The name "cardinal" suggests that all other virtues "hinge" on these four and therefore, as such, they hold up the outline of our anthropological vision.
If we take the cardinal virtues as they are proposed in Thomas Aquinas, who built upon the insights of Cicero, Ambrose, Gregory and Augustine, we find that the four cardinal virtues—prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude—perfect four corresponding powers: the practical reason, the will, the concupiscible power, and the irascible power. These virtues inhere in a particular hierarchy. Temperance and fortitude are predominantly at the service of justice. Prudence determines the right choice of means for each of the virtues, but it especially looks to recommend the just action since justice governs all exterior principles. In a manner of speaking, the anthropological identity of the virtuous person is simply the just one.

These virtues and their over-arching structure are, however, no longer adequate: they endorse an anthropology that inhibits greatly the present theological agenda. As far as I see it, three reasons merit replacing them. First, contemporary writers repeatedly express dissatisfaction with the insufficiency of justice. For the most part, they offer hyphenated constructs, the most famous being “love-justice” which attempts to acknowledge that while working for equality for all persons, we still maintain partial relationships that need to be nurtured and sustained.⁵

But the hyphen is distracting. Rather than reducing one to the other or eliding the two together, Paul Ricoeur places them in a “tension between two distinct and sometimes opposed claims.”⁶ Ricoeur’s insight that the virtues are distinct and at times opposing stands in contrast with Aquinas’ strategy of the cardinal virtues where justice is supported by fortitude and temperance and is neither shaped nor opposed by the two auxiliary virtues. Only when another virtue stands as a fully equal heuristic guide can there be a dialectical tension wherein the virtues challenge and define one another, and as Ricoeur suggests, “may even be the occasion for the invention of responsible forms of behavior.”⁷

Second, the modern era insists that moral dilemmas are not based on the simple opposition of good and evil but, more frequently, on the clash of goods. Thus, a constellation of heuristic guides that already resolves the priority of one virtue over another by a precon-
ceived hierarchal structure preempts realism. We cannot propose heuristic guides that prefabricate solutions when the concrete data is still forthcoming.

Third, the primary identity of being human is not an individual with powers needing perfection, but rather a relational rational being whose modes of relationality need to be rightly realized. Moreover, this latter description is much more conducive for providing a context for cross-cultural discussion than one that describes the virtues as the perfection of particular powers.

Let me add that in making this proposal for a new set of cardinal virtues, I am not assenting to an essentialism. I am simply suggesting a congruence among cultures that suggests a significant overlap among cultures.

Throughout the world, our identity is relational in at least three ways: generally, specifically and uniquely. Each of these relational ways of being demands a cardinal virtue: as a relational being in general, we are called to justice; as a relational being specifically, we are called to fidelity; as a relational being uniquely, we are called to self-care. These three virtues are cardinal. Unlike Thomas’ structure, none is ethically prior to the other; they have equally urgent claims and they should be pursued as ends in themselves: we are not called to be faithful and self-caring in order to be just, nor are we called to be self-caring and just in order to be faithful. None is auxiliary to the others. They are distinctive virtues with none being a subset or subcategory of the other. They are cardinal. The fourth cardinal virtue is prudence which determines what constitutes the just, faithful and self-caring way of life for an individual.

Our relationality generally is always directed by an ordered appreciation for the common good in which we treat all people as equal. This is the treatment by which justice measures us. As members of the human race, we are expected to respond equally and impartially to all members in general.8

If justice urges us to treat all people equally, then fidelity makes distinctively different claims. Fidelity is the virtue that nurtures and
sustains the bonds of those special relationships that humans enjoy whether by blood, marriage, love, citizenship, or sacrament. If justice rests on impartiality and universality, then fidelity rests on partiality and particularity.

Fidelity here is like love in the "love-justice" dialectic. It is also like the claim that Carol Gilligan made in her important work, *In a Different Voice*.

Gilligan criticized Lawrence Kohlberg for arguing that full moral development was found in the person who could reason well about justice as impartial and universal. She countered that the human must aim both for the impartiality of justice, as well as the development of particular bonds.

Neither of these virtues, however, addresses the unique relationship that each person has with oneself. Care for self enjoys a considered role in our tradition, as for instance, the command to love God and one’s neighbor as oneself. In his writings on the order of charity, Thomas Aquinas, among others, developed this love at length.

Finally, prudence has the task of integrating the three virtues into our relationships, just as it did when it was among the classical list of the cardinal virtues. Thus, prudence is always vigilant looking to the future, trying not only to realize the claims of justice, fidelity and self care in the here and now, but also calling us to anticipate occasions when each of these virtues can be more fully acquired. In this way, prudence is clearly a virtue that pursues ends and effectively establishes the moral agenda for the person growing in these virtues. But these ends are not in opposition to or in isolation of one another. Rather prudence helps each virtue to shape its end as more inclusive of the other two.

Inasmuch as all persons in every culture have at least these three ways of being related, by naming these virtues as cardinal, we have a device for talking cross-culturally. This device is based, however, on modest claims. The cardinal virtues do not purport to offer a picture of the ideal person, nor to exhaust the entire domain of virtue. Rather than being the last word on virtue, they are among the first, providing the bare essentials for right human living and specific action. As
“hinges,” the cardinal virtues provide a skeleton of both what human persons should basically be and at what human action should basically aim. All other issues of virtue hang on the skeletal structures of both rightly-integrated dispositions and right moral action.

Thus these virtues are thinly described. The virtues only thicken in content when we begin to ask what the virtues for general, special and unique relations in a specific culture actually look like.

III. Christian Virtues in the Philippines

Every culture needs to thicken these thin virtues. For instance, in the United States, the significance of autonomy for American life thickens the meaning of justice, fidelity and self-care there. Thus, American notions of fidelity depend on the importance of mutual consent. In the Philippines, its strong emphasis on cohesion, unity, and peace, clearly provide the yeast for images of justice, fidelity and self-care.

Religious cultures also provide particular virtues that thicken these cardinal virtues. Here, I propose three virtues that are specifically Christian: mercy, a reconciling spirit and hope. As such, I do not mean that they are not practiced by other, non-Christian people. Rather, I mean that the Christian tradition promotes several specific virtues, and these are among them. These are powerful virtues present in the Scriptures. Certainly, we would easily cite faith and charity or love as foundational virtues: by faith and charity we are saved and both make enormous moral claims on us.

I choose these three other virtues because I think they are appropriate for life here in the Philippines as I intend to demonstrate in an application of each.

MERCY

When we read the Good Samaritan parable, we remember that the story begins because Jesus is asked the question, “Who is my
neighbor?” Ironically, at the end of the story, the answer is remarkable. Why? Because at the beginning we think that the answer is the one who is in need, that is, the poor person who is wounded on the road. But by the end, the neighbor is the one who showed mercy. The parable is not about whom we should love as much as it is about who we should be: Jesus wants us to BE neighbor, to show mercy.

The priest and the scribe are not neighbor; they do not stop to help the wounded man. They know that if they were to stop, they would have to enter into the chaos of the wounded man: they will not only have to tend his wounds, they will have to care for him along the way, take him to some place, pay for his care and come back for him. The wounded man is in a state of chaos and they do not want to enter into it.

Throughout the history of the Catholic tradition, many preachers and theologians used the parable to tell the story of Jesus. They tell it this way: exiled Adam lay wounded by original sin outside of the gates of the city which was Paradise. Neither the law nor the prophets (the priest or the scribe) were able to help Adam. Then one, not from the land of Adam, Jesus, the Good Samaritan, comes to Adam and tends him, and carries him on his own mule to the inn which is the Church. Jesus pays an initial price, our redemption, which will be paid in full when Jesus returns again at the end of time to take wounded Adam into the Kingdom.

Jesus is the neighbor who has entered our chaos to rescue and save us: the incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus—that is the saving mission of Jesus—was understood as an act of mercy. Thus, Ignatius of Loyola presents to us, in the Spiritual Exercises, the meditation (102) on the Trinity who sees all of humanity falling into damnation and decides to save humanity by sending the Son to enter into our chaos.

The centrality of mercy in our tradition has never been overlooked. Let me point out four places where mercy emerges from our tradition. First, Scripture characterizes God’s covenant with us as dominated by one fundamental disposition: hesed or mercy. Not only
is it present in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament, mercy appears especially in the Gospel of Luke, which gives us the Good Samaritan parable (10:25-37) as well as the triple parables of rescuing the lost coin, sheep and son (15:1-32). Likewise we see the practices of mercy by Jesus to the sinful woman (7:36-50), Zaccheus (19:1-10), and the good thief (23:39-43). Not surprisingly, then, Luke exhorts us to an *imitatio Dei* when he declares that we are to be merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful (6:36).

Second, using Mt 25 as their foundation, the corporal and spiritual works of mercy became the charisms identifying religious orders, their lay associates, third orders, guilds, and confraternities. As John O’Malley notes regarding the Society of Jesus in his important work, *The First Jesuits*, no one can underestimate the significance that mercy had in shaping the Christian’s response to neighbor.13

Third, in the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas asks “whether mercy is the greatest of the virtues?” (II. II. 30. 4). He responds by writing: “Mercy is accounted as being proper to God and therein His omnipotence is declared to be chiefly manifested.” Though charity is the greatest virtue when we consider that it unites us to God, still “of all the virtues that relate to our neighbor, mercy is the greatest.” In fact, regarding external practices, Thomas writes, “the sum total of the Christian religion consists in mercy.”

Finally, written works about mercy have been appearing recently among Catholic authors such as John Paul II (*Divina misericordiae*) and Jon Sobrino (*The Principle of Mercy*).14 From papal writings to liberation theology, mercy continues to capture the Catholic mind and heart.

When I look at the Philippines, I see a Christian culture immersed in mercy. I see a continuous engagement of the chaos of the poor. I see lay students, religious and seminarians recognizing that the formation of their identity is shaped by a solidarity with the poor.

In particular in the wake of EDSA 3, I have heard thorough soul-searching expressed by many preachers asking how it happened that those marchers believed that the Church was not on their side. In a way, EDSA 3 was an epiphany of the nature of the Church in the
Philippines. Gracefully, rather than provoking the Church into some narcissistic self-loathing or aggressive self-protection, it has prompted Church members to ask how, as they have walked the long road to political stability and empowering democracy, there was a sustained overlooking of those wounded on the road. A new effort toward inclusivity, that is, toward identifying with the marginalized continues to move the Church forward.

Along with this move toward mercy is a realistic recognition that such a tendency needs to be regularly cultivated and developed. The Church could move into a state of complacency again, but it needs to avoid that complacency by practicing mercy, that is, by developing the willingness to enter into the chaos of those in need. This is then a new era in the life of the Church in this country.  

**Reconciliation**

Reconciliation is the second virtue and it accompanies mercy. In many ways, reconciliation marks the conclusion of mercy for we know that the primary achievement of Christ’s merciful mission was that through him we became reconciled to God. Moreover, the Church has constantly taught us that we need to practice reconciliation, because like the answer to Peter’s question about the number of times we need to forgive, we need no less to cultivate reconciliation as a perpetual stance and practice.

There is something curious here in the Philippines, an observation that I have that makes me believe that the road to reconciliation might be more painful than the move to mercy. Reconciliation presumes brokenness, a fragmentation in one’s relationships. Usually that brokenness is learned through anger, for anger is a way to ward off any perceived threats to ourselves.

Wherever human beings are gathered we encounter anger, in part, because as relational as we are, we are also enormously complex and in our attempts to foster union we often threaten the integrity of others. Sometimes we do this intentionally, often we do not.

The Philippines certainly has as much anger as any culture but,
curiously, here I find few expressions of it. I do not know why expressions of anger in the Philippines are rare. Certainly, I would admit that as a foreigner, and a westerner at that, I may not be able to perceive culturally-based expressions of anger. In many conversations, however, Filipinos confirm my impressions. What inhibits this expression of anger? I do not know. Is it a vestige of colonialism? As Judith Kay notes, it is one thing to take Israel out of Egypt, but another to take Egypt out of the Israelites: liberation does not necessarily deal with the long-standing internalized messages that are cultivated in the colonized and oppressed. Is it a religious sense that anger is inappropriate, indeed, a vice? But again, Diana Fritz Cates, among others, shows us how anger is at times virtuous: anger as rational, justified, liberating, empowering and just. Is it that in order to strengthen its sense of identity that Filipinos promote such an extraordinary investment in cohesiveness, unity and peace, that anger is perceived as a threat to those overriding values? I do not know.

I do know that anger is constitutive of human relations and that anger prompts us to communicate with one another. I know, too, that many Filipinos recount how, during EDSA 2, several poorer persons angrily expressed their annoyance with them for participating in that demonstration as religious and clergy. The poorer persons felt betrayed. I did not hear, however, anyone who was at EDSA 2 express anger at those in EDSA 3. Many expressed bewilderment, concern, sadness, even a sense of guilt, but rarely have I heard any expression of anger, though from what I understand the marchers of EDSA 3 themselves conveyed anger.

In a manner of speaking, anger brings equality: those marchers at EDSA 3, like those poorer angry witnesses to EDSA 2, were asserting their political (in the absence of economic) power. Through anger they were claiming their rights.

I leave these as random observations by a short-term visitor who has come quickly to love this nation and its people. I believe, however, that there is need for reconciliation here, though that need is often not seen because the lack of expressions of anger masks a unity that is less vigorous than the absence of anger projects.
Anger and reconciliation together, allow us to rethink the ways we are related. Together, they allow us to recognize that perhaps we are too patient with one another or too condescending or too pitying or too “understanding.” They help us to see how we need to recognize our differences, how we need to face conflict, how we need to respect diversity as we forge forward. Together, anger and reconciliation, allow us another chance to reconfigure our relationships.

I will conclude with an observation by Carol Gilligan. Studies of boys playing games found that boys routinely broke into angry disagreements and even fights, but they quickly repaired their differences and resumed their games. Studies of girls showed that girls insisted that their game-playing promote cohesion and unity and that they avoided at all costs anger and disagreement. If an angry dispute arose, the girls ended their game and went to their respective homes. They also insisted that they would never play that particular game again lest it prompt division again. The conflict management skills of the boys, the feminist Gilligan noted, was remarkably more sophisticated than the girls, mostly because the girls were trained that expressing anger was a threat and not constitutive to human relationships.  

**Hope**

Finally, in order to consider hope, please indulge my Jesuitical tendencies as I profile hope in terms of St. Ignatius of Loyola. In doing that let me acknowledge that Mary is in many ways a paradigmatic symbol of hope.

First, Ignatius had an understanding of God that allowed him to appreciate the breadth and depth of God such that God always exceeded Ignatius’s expectations. God, for Ignatius, was the Trinity and the fullness of the Trinity, so perfectly clear at La Storta, constantly beckoned Ignatius to move beyond. There was, in Ignatius, no tendency to infantilize or domesticate God. God was the ONE beyond all expectations.

But Ignatius was intimate with God and Ignatius placed his trust
in God. The intimacy of his prayer allowed him to taste, see, touch, hear and smell the divinity. This paradox of the deepest intimacy with the Godhead provided a tension in Ignatius’s spiritual life that allowed for any other tension to exist.

Finally as triune, God is in the very nature of God relational and in God’s image, so are we. For this reason, Ignatius always thought of mission in a corporate way and, in fact, when he celebrated the mass he did so before a painting of the Holy Family. This was not out of any devotion to the infant Jesus, but rather to the very human association of those working with the divinity for our salvation. In a manner of speaking, the Holy Family is the prefiguration of the corporate apostolate.

Second, Ignatius valued the world and what it offered. In the first week of the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius depicts the world as a place where the majority of people are living lives leading to damnation. After the experience of the Exercises, in the closing exercise to attain divine love, we find Ignatius suggesting that the world is where God is working, the world is where God’s blessings can be perceived and received.

Looking at the world with a critical reason, appreciating its strengths and weaknesses, is key to any person of hope for one cannot stand in hope unless one knows the place in which one stands. Here, I think of Ignatius concerned about the material and spiritual needs of the prostitutes and of the converted Jews, of the Colleges and of the missions. He tangibly felt these needs, recognized what they specifically were, and worked for these needs being met. Contrary to the romantics, those who stand in hope are a people who face reality with all its demands squarely.

Third, Ignatius was resiliently flexible. Here was a man, set on returning to Jerusalem, an event that would never happen. Here was a man having missioned Nicholas Bobadilla to the East, only to have to send his trusted friend, Francis Xavier, in the place of the ill Bobadilla. Here was a man who accepted the College of Messina, an action that would dramatically change the members of the Society
as they would, in turn, be shaped by the educational apostolates that
the Society assumed. And finally, this man so dedicated to the Holy
Land waited one year to celebrate his first mass and rather than sim-
ply accept that situation, with his typical resiliency, he found another
way of recalling the Christ event and so he celebrated his first mass
in the Basilica of Mary Major where relics from the crib of Christ are
kept. As in the sending of Xavier and accepting the College of
Messina, when Ignatius was called to be flexible, he was resilient
because his imagination was as creative as his spirit was hopeful.

Finally, Ignatius was a sower, not a reaper. Sowers are by nature
hopeful. They have a sense of expectancy. They appreciate the vari-
ety of problems that can occur from the time of tilling to the time of
harvesting. They do not look for short-term returns; they look rather
to being sure that in the here and now they are doing what is needed
for the future. Sowers wait. They live with uncertainty. Ignatius was
a sower.

As I live in the Philippines, I see hope as so central: an ability to
trust in a God beyond our expectations, though a God who is as
intimate and relational as God is great. This is the God who is our
guarantor, our hope, who always goes before us.

We, in turn, are called to practice a critical realism, to not avoid
the diligence of understanding our problems, our situation, and our
alternatives. But we must be willing to be flexible; we must recog-
nize that, as the future unfolds, we must adjust to the events with a
resiliency that can never be surrendered. And, finally some of us
must be willing to sow to the point that we never see the harvest, but
hopeful enough that our efforts were, in some way, the groundwork
for the future that awaits us.
Notes


4Prologue, II-II, “Sic igitur tota materia morali ad considerationem virtutum reducta.”


7 Ibid., 197.

8 Ibid., 195.

9 Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1982).


11 I thank Rex Paul Arjona for this insight.


