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CREATION, REDEMPTION AND VIRTUE

Caleb Miller

In this paper, I defend the claim that Christian theology gives us good reason to think that virtue is relative to individuals and communities, i.e., that what character traits are virtues for individuals is relative to individuals and to the communities of which they are members. I begin by reviewing the theological claims that I take to be relevant. I then argue that these claims make it plausible to conclude that virtue is morally redemptive and therefore relative to individuals and communities. I then seek to use these conclusions to illuminate the discussion of the correctiveness of virtue. Finally I respond to some objections and suggest some further ways that my views could be developed.

I. Theological Background

God, according to Christian theology, created humanity. Moreover, he created humanity in order for human beings to fulfill the purposes for which he created humanity. Taken together, I am assuming, these purposes constitute the human *telos*, the fulfillment of which would constitute achievement of the human good. The primary purpose for which human beings were created is to love God. Part of what it is for human beings to love God is for them to love each other. The good human being, i.e., the person whose life fulfilled her *telos*, would have a character that disposed her to live only in ways consistent with the love of God and the love of other human beings.

Human sin, however, has seriously undermined the achievement of those purposes. It has done so in two ways. It has directly undermined the achievement of our *telos* in that human sin is constituted by a refusal to cooperate with God's purposes for humanity. Secondly, it has undermined the fulfillment of our purpose by so corrupting human nature that we have become incapable of achieving God's purposes for us. That is, human character has become so deficient that human beings, in the grip of sin, are incapable of living a life characterized by the love of God and the love of others. Redemption is God's effort to save humanity from sin. This effort is most centrally, I suggest, an effort to restore human life to the love of God and others. Redemption includes, of course, the offer of forgiveness in Christ and the gift of eternal life. But it also includes God's effort to transform human beings into people who love God and love their fellow human beings, i.e., to become people who fulfill the human *telos*.



II. *The Redemptiveness of Virtue*

Morality, I suggest, is intended by God to increase the degree to which we fulfill the purpose for which God created us, or, alternatively, the degree to which we fulfill our *telos*. Following Aristotle, I suggest that virtue is "the state of character which makes a man good and which makes him do his own work well." (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106^a) Virtue is then the state of character that improves the degree to which our lives approximate the life for which God created humanity.¹ Virtues are character traits which improve our conformity to our *telos*. This much I take to be fairly typical of those who have sought to think about virtue from a Christian perspective. Indeed, except for the theistic interpretation of the human *telos*, it is consistent with Aristotle's account of virtue. What is missing from such a generic understanding of the relationship of human nature to virtue is an appreciation of human fallenness. More specifically, such an understanding typically overlooks the fact that the character of fallen human beings is deformed by sin and that the deformity of human character leaves human beings morally incapacitated. As such, human character is not only in need of maturity and perfection, it is in need of restoration, particularly the restoration of moral capacities. Given human depravity, human fulfillment is human redemption. I suggest, therefore, that morality is intended by God to redeem humanity, i.e., to restore humanity to the life for which he created us and from which we are fallen by sin. In particular, I suggest that virtues are those character traits which contribute to our redemption. More precisely they are those character traits that are best suited to overcoming the impediments of sin to the fulfillment of our *telos*.² In what follows, I shall develop the implications of this suggestion and defend it along the way.

III. *Redemption and the Relativity of Virtue*

Martha Nussbaum has pointed out an interesting difference between the virtue ethics of Aristotle and that of his twentieth century admirers. Unlike Aristotle, twentieth century defenders of virtue ethics "as otherwise diverse as Alasdair MacIntyre, Bernard Williams and Philippa Foot" are relativists when it comes to virtue.³ According to Nussbaum, Aristotle accepted and these relativists deny the correctness "of a single objective account of the human good, or human flourishing,"⁴ and the correctness of a single "list of virtues that will serve as normative for all . . . societies."⁵ Nussbaum seems to assume that these two differences between Aristotle and relativist virtue theorists are inextricably linked to each other, i.e., that relativism with respect to the human good requires relativism with respect to virtue, and vice versa, and similarly that absolutism with respect to one of these issues requires absolutism with respect to the other. Indeed, she seems to treat these two differences as alternative characterizations of the same difference. She therefore defends the existence of a single objectively correct account of the human good, by arguing that there is a single objectively correct list of human virtues. But it is not at all obvious that these two different claims are as inextricably connected as Nussbaum takes them to be. Indeed, I shall

argue, an appreciation of the fact that virtue is redemptive gives us reason to accept relativism, in Nussbaum's sense, with respect to virtue, and to reject relativism with respect to the human good or *telos*.

Let us assume what I have already claimed, viz., that the human good consists in fulfilling the purposes for which God created us, and the actions and character traits that fulfill those purposes are respectively those that express, and dispose us to, the love of God and others. For the sake of argument, assume that excellence of character comes in degrees ranging from zero to ten. A person with a character rating of ten would be precisely disposed to live perfectly in accordance with her *telos*, whereas a person with a character rating of zero would be disposed to live life entirely in opposition to her *telos*. One way to think about virtue is to hold that virtues are all and only those character traits that the person with a character rating of ten would have. After all, what character traits would be better suited to satisfying Aristotle's requirement that virtues make a person good and make him do his own work well? But that way of thinking about what makes us good considers only our *telos*. It fails to take into account our fallenness. The traits that are best suited to improving the character and actions of a person with a character rating of four might be quite different from those that would guide the actions of a person whose character were perfect.

In order to defend that claim, I need to spell out some assumptions I am making about human moral psychology. Although I shall not defend these assumptions, I intend them to be plausible, independently of the use I make of them. A character trait, I am assuming, is a disposition to act in some particular way. Dispositions to act are dispositions to intentional behavior. These dispositions are constituted by such factors as beliefs, desires, commitments and psychological tendencies. A person's character is the set of all such dispositions of that person. The character of a community is the set of all such dispositions in the members of that community. I am assuming that character traits are acquired and sustained, in large part, by habituation and by social influence. In other words, acting in some particular way reinforces the disposition to act in that way. Other things being equal, the more frequently one acts in that way, the more strongly such actions reinforce the corresponding dispositions. The dispositions of an individual are also strongly influenced by the actions, character and commitments of the other members of the communities to which that person belongs. Much more could fruitfully be said about how character and action causally relate to each other, but these general comments will be enough for me to defend the claim that virtue is relative to communities and individuals.

Let me illustrate by considering one of the teachings of Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' but I tell you, Do not resist an evil person."⁶ and later "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, . . ."⁷ It is interesting that the precept with which Jesus contrasts his teaching is quoted directly from the Old Testament, which Jesus manifestly took to be the Word of God. Arthur Holmes offers a fairly standard explanation for the existence of this requirement of the Old Testament Law. "In the ancient near East, . . . vastly disproportionate punishments were often the practice. The Old Testament Law insists on a *proportionate* response to evil

and *limits* society's use of force."⁸ Against that background, proportionate retribution was closer to the ideal of love for one's fellow human beings. In that context, the effect of the "eye for eye" rule was to limit the degree to which actions were opposed to the love of others. But, in the spirit of encouraging the love of others, Jesus asks his followers to go beyond limiting one's retaliation. He asks them rather to do just what the love of others would require, i.e., to seek what is good for others, regardless of the harm that they have done to the agent.

Why, then, would God prescribe "an eye for an eye," for the members of an ancient near Eastern culture? The practice of "an eye for an eye" would improve the degree to which the lives of those who would have otherwise been inclined to disproportional retaliation are conformed to the human *telos*. It would also improve, by habituation, the character of those who would otherwise be disposed to disproportional retaliation by replacing that disposition with one more closely approximating the disposition to treat others according to love. The more rigorous requirement of unconditional love, to which Jesus called his followers, would improve, in these two ways, the conformity to the love of God and others of those otherwise disposed to *proportionate* retribution. But we are still left with a question, Why would it not have been better for God to have instructed his ancient Near Eastern people to follow the ideal standard of unconditional love? A plausible answer to that question is, I think, that the practices that would have been required to cultivate and sustain the character trait of unconditional love were not, given the character of ancient Israel, practices to which they could constructively aspire.⁹ They were not, in other words, practices to which they could aspire in a way that would tend to improve their conformity to the love of others. That was true, I suspect, either because their character left them incapable of genuinely aspiring to practices so strongly opposed to their dispositions, or because their character left them incapable of improving by such aspiration the degree to which they achieved that standard. If they had regarded unconditional love as a standard to which they were subject when it was utterly beyond their moral capacities to meet it, it would only have discouraged them from the project of improving their lives morally, and habituated them to the violation of their moral standards. If all that is true, then the disposition (let us call it "reciprocity") to treat others as one has been treated by them, was redemptive for the citizens of ancient Israel. It was a character trait that tended to transform their lives and their character in the direction of the love of God and others. Because it was redemptive for them, it was a virtue for them, i.e., it tended to make them good and to make them to do their own work well.

However, the character of the followers of Jesus is, or should be, such that they can constructively aspire to the standard of unconditional love.¹⁰ For us, unconditional love is a virtue and reciprocity is a vice, a disposition to treat others in ways that violate unconditional love for them. It is even conceivable that the character of a community is such that a disposition (let us call it "vindictiveness") to retaliate disproportionately against wrongdoers would serve to improve the life and character of its members by reinforcing an otherwise deficient repugnance for, and avoidance of, wrong actions. It is conceivable then that vindictiveness would have therefore

been a virtue for the members of such a community despite the fact that it was a vice for the ancient Israelites and for Christian believers.

Whatever the plausibility of these particular claims about these particular communities and conceivable communities, I hope I have at least illustrated how what is virtuous for a person can depend on what is redemptive for that person, and that what is redemptive for her can depend on the particular degree and type of corruption from which her character, and that of her community, suffers.

The illustration that I have offered is one in which the relevant character differences existed between communities separated by time. But there is nothing essentially temporal about such differences. This is not the place to pursue it, but the anthropological evidence suggests that there are differences among contemporary communities in the degree and type of corruption from which the character of those communities suffers. It seems obvious to me that at least some of these differences affect what character traits are redemptive for the members of the communities which so differ. Some cultures, for whatever reason, are quite prone to addictive behavior. Others seem to be relatively impervious to it. It seems to me that a severe ascetic disposition would likely be redemptive for the members of the first type of society whereas it might inhibit the appropriate appreciation of God's good gifts in the second society. A vigilant wariness of relating with members of the opposite sex would probably be redemptive in a society utterly lacking in sexual restraint, whereas the same trait would likely limit the degree to which people were able to love their neighbors in a society in which chastity is successfully sustained by strong social influences and the habituation that results from such influences. In each of these cases it seems plausible to me that there is a character trait that would be a virtue in one of the societies that would be a vice in the other.

Not all of the relevant differences in character are differences among communities. Differences within a society in the specific degree and type of individual corruption affect what traits are virtues for the members of that society. The sort of affectionate disposition toward children that would morally improve the ability of most people to love children would likely be a vice for a pedophile, since, combined with the other features of his character, it would likely dispose him to the abuse of children. Similarly, a billionaire who could not constructively aspire to the sort of self-sacrificing love that Mother Teresa exhibited, would benefit from a relatively generous, but less sacrificial, disposition that would have been a vice for Mother Teresa because it would have tended to make her life less conformed to the love of God and others.

So, I suggest, while Christians have reasons to insist, with Nussbaum and Aristotle, on the correctness "of a single objective account of the human good, or human flourishing," they have reason to deny, with the relativist opponents of Aristotle and Nussbaum, the correctness of a single "list of virtues that will serve as normative for all . . . societies." Nussbaum's failure to recognize the possibility of such a position came, I suggest, from the failure to recognize that the character traits of the good human being can be different from the character traits that make a human being good. That failure amounts to the failure to recognize that human

character is, in various ways, so defective that the dispositions of the morally ideal human being are beyond our capacities. Virtue is always, for fallen human beings, redemptive in the sense that its making one good is a matter of repairing the damage of sin to our character, or of counteracting the effects of such damage on our actions.

IV. Redemptiveness and the Corrective Nature of Virtue

The recognition of the inevitably redemptive nature of virtue for fallen humanity explains what is right about the claim of Philippa Foot and others that the virtues are “corrective.” According to Foot, “[I]t is only because fear and the desire for pleasure operate as temptations that courage and temperance exist as virtues at all.” Later she adds, “[T]here is, for instance, a virtue of industriousness only because idleness is a temptation; and of humility only because men tend to think too well of themselves. Hope is a virtue [only] because despair too is a temptation.”¹¹

Robert C. Roberts points out that these counterfactual claims are, in some cases, false. He distinguishes between “virtues of will power,” such as courage, self-control and patience, and “substantive” or “motivational” virtues, such as honesty, justice, generosity and gratitude. The latter virtues are substantive because they are the “psychological embodiment of moral rules—the substance of the ethical patterns of behavior and judgment and emotion.”¹² They are motivational in that they are a matter of having the right set of motives, wanting the right things, taking satisfaction in the right things, etc. Virtues of will power, on the other hand, do “not imply any characteristically ethical patterns of behavior, judgment, and emotion. Racists, cheats, sadists, and thieves may well be persevering, resolute, and self-controlled . . .”¹³ Foot’s claims about the corrective nature of virtue apply, according to Roberts, only to the virtues of will power:

If people were never led astray by fears and pleasures, it is plausible that courage and self-control themselves would not arise. For courage and self-control are the capacities to manage our inclinations, when they are wayward, to flee dangers and seek pleasures . . . [But] Industriousness could exist in a world in which no one suffered from laziness, and honesty in a world where no one lied—though it is likely that in such a world these virtues would not be named or much noticed. The substantive virtues are ‘corrective’ in the trivial sense that there are vices which correspond to them; the virtues of will power are corrective in the significant sense that, in our present psychological condition but not in every imaginable one, they are needed to keep us on the path of virtue and our higher self-interest.¹⁴

While Roberts is right that some virtues would exist even if no one were tempted by the corresponding vice, appreciating the redemptiveness of virtue enables us to see that all of the virtues are corrective in a sense deeper than their mere opposition to vices. For fallen human beings, no character trait is a virtue, unless it is well suited to overcoming dispositions opposed to the love of God and others, and the moral incapacities of our character.

There are, moreover, not only virtues of will power, but also substantive virtues, such as reciprocity, that are needed given a particular psychological condition, but not given every imaginable one to keep people "on the path of virtue and [their] higher self-interest." The issue of whether a trait would serve that purpose in a human being without vice, is quite distinct from the issue of whether, given our actual condition, it is needed to correct our inclinations. The issue of whether a character trait can be put to immoral uses is also distinct from the issue of whether it would be a trait of the human being without vice. Although industriousness and loyalty would be virtues even for those lacking the contrary inclinations, they too can enhance the work of racists, cheats, sadists, and thieves. But that does not mean that they are virtues which do "not imply any characteristically ethical patterns of behavior, judgment, or emotion." Courage, self-control, industriousness, and loyalty are virtues, and they can be exercised in the pursuit of theft. But, in the thief, they are not virtues. The dispositions to pursue theft courageously industriously, with self-control, etc., do not tend to improve the conformity of the thief to the love of God and others. This is I think what is correct about Aristotle's doctrine of the unity of the virtues. Character traits are not virtues independently of their relations to the rest of one's character. The issue is not however, as Aristotle thought, whether all of one's character traits are those of a good person, i.e., the person in whom the human *telos* is fulfilled. Whether a given character trait of a person is a virtue or not, depends rather on whether combining it with her other character traits is a redemptive combination, i.e., whether it tends to improve her conformity to her *telos*.

The equivalence Roberts assumes between substantive virtues and those one would have even if we had no contrary inclinations comes from a failure to recognize that the substance of morality is itself affected by the limitations of our psychological condition due to sin. What we ought to do, morally, depends in part on what the limitations of our character are. His failure to recognize that the character traits of the morally perfect person, such as industriousness, could be vicious in those with character deficiencies is due to his overlooking the effects of sin on the sort of life that would tend to make us good. His failure to recognize the possibility that there could be character traits, such as reciprocity, that are substantive virtues only because of their corrective function is likewise due to a failure to appreciate the redemptive nature of virtue for fallen human beings. None of this undermines the claim that there is an important distinction between substantive or motivational virtues and virtues of will power. But the degree to which, and the sense in which, they are corrective are not differences between them.

V. Two Objections

It might be objected that the example of the courageous thief is really best thought of as a counter-example to my claim that virtue is a matter of redemptiveness in the sense I intend. Although courage does, given a thief's disposition to steal, tend to diminish the degree to which his life conforms to the love of God and others, it might nevertheless be thought to be a virtue. After all, vices are generally thought of as character traits of which one ought to seek to rid oneself. But it seems that if we were to give

the thief moral advice, we should advise him to seek to overcome his disposition to steal but not advise him to become cowardly. That would seem to indicate that his disposition to steal is a vice but his courage is not.¹⁵

My contention is that both the courage of the thief and his disposition to steal are vices. These two traits form an unredemptive combination. But it does not follow that all ways of eliminating it are equally good. There are typically two possible ways of eliminating this unredemptive combination in the thief's character: 1) eliminating his disposition to steal, or 2) eliminating his courage. Of these two, 1) is obviously a morally better strategy. To be a courageous, honest person is obviously better conformed to the human *telos* than to be a cowardly thief. That a courageous thief is morally worse than he would be if he were cowardly is typically irrelevant to the question of how he ought to seek moral improvement. If for some reason, it were possible for the thief to cultivate cowardice, but not possible to undermine his disposition to steal,¹⁶ then he would be morally well advised to undertake such a course of action. Such advice would be similar to the sentiment expressed by Jesus when he said, "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out."¹⁷ This is usually taken as a bit of hyperbole on Jesus' part. The literal advice to amputate one's hand when it contributes to sin is hyperbolic. But the literal truth behind the hyperbole is that one is morally better off without one's hand if its absence can eliminate the means to sin. There are, of course, typically less drastic means of seeking to avoid sin. But if, for some reason, the amputation of a person's hand really were the *only* means of eliminating some besetting sin,¹⁸ then she would be morally well-advised to seek the amputation. Hands can be very good things if they are put to good use, but if they were *unavoidably* put only or mostly to sinful use, we would be morally better off without them. Similarly, courage can be a very good character trait if it is put to good use, but if it were *unavoidably* used by a person only or mostly to steal effectively, then he would be morally well advised to seek its elimination.

A second objection to the relativity of virtue of the sort for which I have been arguing is that the "relative virtues" are really not virtues, but merely traits that are prudentially useful for moral development.¹⁹ Although the traits in question are typically desirable in part because of their usefulness for moral development, this objection misses the point that there is nothing *essentially* developmental about their moral excellence. The relative generosity of the philanthropic billionaire *might* enable his further moral development. If he practiced the best balance of other-regarding and self-regarding uses of his wealth to which he could constructively aspire, his character might improve to the point at which he could constructively aspire to a higher standard—perhaps to the degree of self-sacrificial regard for others that Mother Teresa exhibited. But that is only one of the ways that his relative generosity would be redemptive for him. It increases the degree to which his life is conformed to the love of others just by disposing him to serve others with his wealth more than he would otherwise be inclined to. Even if he would not, by means of such habituation, become able to aspire constructively to a greater degree of self-sacrifice, his relative generosity would still be a virtue for him because it would still be well suited to making him good.

If he acts in accordance with it, he is doing just what he ought to do morally. Given his character, he ought to mix his regard for himself with his regard for others in the way that he does because to do so is the best way available to him of improving the degree to which he serves others. That makes it implausible to deny that this disposition would be a virtue for the billionaire because it is not a trait he would have if he fulfilled his *telos*. Such a denial implies that a trait disposing him to do just what he ought to do is not a virtue and that doing what he ought to do is not an act of virtue. The objector could, of course, deny that one is ever obligated to do anything short of what one would do if he fulfilled his *telos*. But it seems wholly implausible to deny that one ought to undertake the most morally constructive strategy of which one is capable. And I think I have the Christian Scriptures on my side in this matter. The New Testament seems, as I have argued, to treat the Old Testament Law as both an obligation of Israelites and as falling short of what one would do if one loved God and others completely.

VI. *Unfinished Business*

I have been arguing that, since virtue is redemptive, it is relative to the specific degree and type of corruption from which the character of the relevant individuals and communities suffer. Although it seems clear to me that the character of the individual and that of the community are both relevant to what is redemptive (and therefore virtuous) for the individual and the community, one job that remains to be done is to specify more clearly how individual and community redemptiveness relate to each other in the determination of character. Such a clarification will be made easier by the fact that the love of others is a part of the *telos* I have specified. Given that, any disposition of an individual that is redemptive for her community, will, all else being equal, also be redemptive for that individual, since the life to which it disposes him will thereby be better conformed to the love of others.

While I have said much about redemption as the transformation of our character, I have said very little about the transformations of our character due to the supernatural intervention of God in which the Christian faith gives us reason believe. That is a job for another time. But when a Christian understanding of supernatural redemption is integrated with what I have been saying, I think it will give Christians, who believe that we can benefit more fully from such redemption through faith in Christ, reason to hold ourselves to higher standards of virtue than those to which we hold others. I think we will have reason to expect, not only a fuller development of the same virtues that we expect to see in others, but also the development of virtues that we do not have reason to expect of others.

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NOTES

1. Hereafter, I shall refer to such improvement as improvement in the degree of our "conformity to the love of God and others."
2. This is not to deny that virtue would exist if it were not for human

depravity. My claim is only that, given human depravity, character traits contribute to human fulfillment if and only if they enable us to overcome the impediments of sin to our fulfillment.

3. "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach" in *Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue, Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 13, eds. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 33.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid. p. 34.

6. Matt. 5:38-39 (NIV).

7. Matt. 5:44 (NIV).

8. "Nonresistance: A Just War Response," in *War: Four Christian Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse, 2nd. ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1991) p. 66.

9. Jesus himself hints at just such an explanation for a similar discrepancy between his teachings and that of the Torah on the issue of divorce, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning." Matt. 19:8 (NIV).

10. Among the explanations for this that I regard as plausible given Christian theology are (1) that God's past commands had their redemptive effect on the people of God, (2) that the life and teachings of Jesus provided inspiration for, and clarity about, unconditional love that enabled a stronger disposition to love others unconditionally, (3) that the sort of community which God intends for Christian believers socially reinforces the disposition to love others unconditionally, and (4) that the enabling resources of the Holy Spirit are more fully available to the believer due to the redemptive work of Christ.

11. "Virtues and Vices," in *Virtues and Vices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) p. 9.

12. "Will Power and the Virtues," in *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life: Introductory Readings in Ethics*, eds. Christina Sommers and Fred Sommers, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993) p. 269.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid. p. 273.

15. William Tolhurst raised such an objection in the discussion of an earlier version of this paper.

16. It is not obvious that such a situation is psychologically possible.

17. Mark 9:43 (NIV).

18. It is not obvious that this could ever be the case.

19. Norman Wirzba raised such an objection in his response to an earlier version of this paper presented at the Wheaton College Philosophy Conference on October 31, 1996.