
T. Ryan Byerly

University of Sheffield
E-mail: t.r.byerly@sheffield.ac.uk

(Received 31 March 2022; revised 12 May 2022; accepted 22 June 2022; first published online 8 August 2022)

This book brings together thirteen essays by contemporary Christian philosophers which mine the resources of Christian thought and tradition ‘in aid of becoming good’ (xvi). Most of the essays are original to the book, though a few are reprinted from previous publications or borrow substantially from the author’s previous works. A mix of newer and more established authors contributes to the book, and both historical and contemporary research on virtue and virtue acquisition is discussed with the emphasis leaning on the latter. While some essays focus on processes which may promote or inhibit the formation of many different virtues, others focus on the nature or cultivation of individual virtues. Most of the essays engage at length with Christian thought and practice, though a few do this in a more cursory manner. The result is a book that will be of interest to contemporary virtue theorists and scholars in adjacent fields, regardless of their religious affiliation, as well as to those of us who simply want all the help we can get with growing towards virtue.

The book is full of suggestions about how virtue might be cultivated. Robert Kruschwitz begins the book with an essay in which he argues that education about the capital vices may help people grow towards virtue, especially during their time at university. Drawing both on his long-standing experience of teaching a class on the seven deadly sins and on his analysis of the situationist literature in philosophy, Kruschwitz proposes that during their time at university, students are typically neither virtuous nor vicious, and educating them about the capital vices can help them to understand better ‘the subterranean sources of distraction, disordered concerns, and skewed perceptions that impede our virtuous behavior’ (10), which is foundational to helping them develop strategies to oppose these influences. The second chapter also engages with themes of vice, as Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung argues that habitual anger’s genuine benefits (especially in cases of persistent structural injustices) may be best harnessed and its very serious detriments (especially in cases where it is based on an inflated sense of self) best avoided through virtuous communal cooperation. DeYoung contrasts the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition with certain Christian monastic traditions on this topic, and seeks to preserve the insights of both approaches while offering wise advice for people today whose distinctive vocations may lead them to experience righteous anger more frequently. In my opinion, it is one of the best chapters of the book, worthy of returning to multiple times.

Kevin Timpe’s chapter highlights several ways in which different disabilities may inhibit the formation of some virtues by creating impediments to the virtuous display of emotions – for example, by flattening emotional experience or by weakening a person’s ability to regulate their emotions. Timpe argues that this conclusion highlights another way in which some disabilities may create impediments to their possessor’s flourishing, and argues that this
should provide further motivation for communities such as Christian churches which are committed to the flourishing of all their members to provide appropriate scaffolding for their disabled members’ virtue development where possible. Ryan West’s chapter offers a detailed and practical explanation of how people can cultivate virtue through the exercise of willpower, using such techniques as implementation intentions and reconstrual exercises to resist temptations to act contrary to virtue. This is perhaps clearest in the case of structural virtues partially constituted by willpower, such as self-control and patience, but West argues that exercising willpower is relevant for developing motivational virtues, too, and even—somewhat paradoxically—for overcoming limitations of acting on willpower alone.

The chapters by Jennifer Herdt and by Steven Porter and Brandon Rickabaugh concentrate on the ways in which God, and one’s orientation towards and engagement with God, plays important roles in virtue development. Herdt’s focus is on Augustine’s ideas about how genuine virtue, which is always a form of love for God, is best cultivated through the ‘holy spectacle’ (110) of Christian liturgical worship, in which the agent’s imagination and desires are engaged through their receptivity to imitating God. Herdt argues that Christians must adopt Augustine’s ideas carefully, however, in a way that maintains his emphasis on corporate worship as the central site for virtue formation while also fully affirming acting for the sake of common goods in a pluralist society as an expression of this worship. Porter and Rickabaugh address the topic of the Holy Spirit’s work of sanctification, aiming to recover an interpersonal model of this process articulated by William Alston, and seeking to show that this model can be defended against Alston’s own criticism that it makes the Spirit’s work objectionably external to the agent. For Porter and Rickabaugh, the Spirit brings about characterological change through a person’s receptivity to the Spirit’s personal presence in their life, which helps to calm their fears and anxieties and opens up a pathway towards developing virtue in much the way that a secure human attachment does.

Three essays address the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. First, Angela Knoble articulates Thomas Aquinas’s conception of faith as giving us ‘inchoate knowledge of our supernatural good’ (157) in a way that parallels the knowledge of our natural good provided by synderesis. Offering a general exposition of the differences between infused and acquired virtues in terms of differences in their particular principles, Knoble argues that it is a mistake to think that growth in the infused virtues can be secured exclusively through growth in their acquired counterparts, and illustrates how this growth must instead be secured by allowing the knowledge provided by faith to guide all our actions. In her second contribution to the book, DeYoung highlights the relational features of hope as involving habitually relying upon another, God, in order to secure a desired and uncertain good which is itself a relationship with God. Using this analysis of hope, DeYoung evaluates the portraits of hope found in the film The Shawshank Redemption, and identifies a range of practices for cultivating hope including engaging with art to broaden one’s ideals of the good, cultivating human friendships, remembering God’s promises kept in the past, and practising petitionary prayer. Adam Pelser’s chapter defends the paradoxical possibility of developing the emotionally generous vision of others that is characteristic of Christian love. Following Kierkegaard, he argues that while the initial seeds of such love must be planted by God, Christians can through study and practice learn to perceived the beautiful and lovable qualities of all others, and can even choose to adopt more benevolent views of others, presupposing love to be present in them, which cultivates love in both these others and in themselves.

The final four chapters consider the nature and cultivation of four additional individual virtues. Christian Miller sketches an account of the virtue of honesty as a disposition to avoid intentionally distorting the facts, and reviews empirical work on cheating which suggests that people generally tend to succumb to certain temptations to act dishonestly, though they desire to perceive themselves as honest and be perceived this way by others.
He then discusses several proposals about how honesty might be cultivated in light of these findings, including making one’s moral beliefs (including theologically based moral beliefs) more salient, and strengthening one’s love of neighbours and thereby reducing one’s desire to cheat. Jason Baehr defends the conception of intellectual humility as owning one’s intellectual limitations against various charges, including the charge that it cannot make good sense of the humility of Jesus Christ as discussed in Philippians. Ultimately, Baehr proposes a modification of the limitations-owning account in order to incorporate a tendency to take on new limitations appropriately, and not just own existing ones – a modification that will be of interest to scholars of humility.

In another of the more original essays, Heidi Giannini develops an account of the virtue of graciousness as a tendency to ‘undercut contextual indications of one party’s superior standing over another’ (258) based on one’s sensitivity to the other’s discomfort with suggested differences in status or worth. Graciousness is a virtue that can be exercised by both those with high standing and those with low standing, and it stands out as distinct, though related, to several other virtues such as generosity, humility, and modesty. In the final chapter, Stephen Evans aims to defuse the tension between law-based ethics and virtue ethics by arguing that accountability to God’s law is properly seen as both a condition that encourages virtue and a virtue in its own right. The person with the virtue of accountability welcomes and appreciates the prospect of being held accountable to God’s laws, and Evans offers theological reflections about God’s love that may help the Christian regain a sense of joy in accountability to God.

While this book contains many proposals about how one might grow in virtue from a Christian perspective, the question of whether there is direct empirical support for the utility of implementing the proposals for virtue development is only occasionally broached (most notably, in the chapters by West and Miller). This is probably for good reason: namely, the relevant research doesn’t yet exist. One hope I have, and perhaps the co-editors would share it, is that some of the proposals offered here might be taken up in interdisciplinary research and tested, so that we can better assess how useful (or not) they are for growing in virtue. In the meantime, they might still be worth trying.

Mohammad Saleh Zarepour Necessary Existence and Monotheism


Nader Alsamaani

Qassim University
E-mail: nsamaany@qu.edu.sa

(Received 23 August 2022; accepted 23 August 2022; first published online 26 September 2022)

Recent years have seen an emerging interest in introducing Islamic concepts and approaches to the analytic philosophy of religion. Mohammad Saleh Zarepour’s recent