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## CHAPTER 5

# Protestant virtue ethics: tradition and contemporary relevance

*Prof Dr Pieter Vos*

### **Abstract**

This chapter argues that the Protestant tradition is not opposed to virtue ethics but rather a valuable and viable exemplification of it. This is demonstrated by drawing on sources of the post-Reformation theology of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries which reveal that virtue and the cultivation of the virtues were crucial in Protestant ethics. Furthermore, it is argued that the Protestant theological tradition has particular contributions to offer to a contemporary virtue ethics. Contrary to other views on virtue ethics, in a Protestant perspective with its insistence on human sinfulness and grace it can be acknowledged that the moral life often exhibits virtues alongside moral flaws or even deep-seated vices, without the pursuit of a virtuous life being abandoned.

### **Introduction: Protestant virtue ethics?**

Since Elizabeth Anscombe (1958) first raised the matter, Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) and others have initiated a revival of virtue ethics in philosophy. In theology, Stanley Hauerwas (1975, 1981) began to think of the Christian moral life in terms of character, virtue, community and narrative. Since then, Protestant theologians have shown a growing interest in an ethics of virtue. Several of them, such as Gilbert Meilaender (1984), Richard Mouw (1990) and Eilert Herms (1992), corrected the common view that Protestants have no place for the virtues at all, but nevertheless presuppose that their approach

to virtue ethics is contrary to the Protestant tradition or a supplement to this tradition. Mouw (1990), for instance, stated: ‘My main concern in this book is to set forth a case for divine command ethics in the comprehensive sense’ (1990, p 2), that is, a ‘divine command’ into which virtue ethics is incorporated. According to Herms (1992), ‘In protestant orthodoxy the concept of virtue didn’t play any prominent role’ (1992, p 126). For his part, Meilaender (1984) made a strong case for Luther’s emphasis on grace, which always makes virtue a secondary category. Whereas theological virtue ethics is considered to be completely at home in the Roman Catholic tradition, Protestant ethics is considered an ethics of divine law and of human obligations and responsibilities, at most with the exception of Friedrich Schleiermacher and the liberal theology of the 19th century. Hauerwas (1975), for instance, developed his initial research into an ‘ethics of character’ precisely as an *alternative* to a Protestant command ethics by returning to the classical virtue ethical representatives Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. They gave him the instruments that Protestant authors lacked, in his view, to develop an understanding of character formation and the cultivation of the virtues. Jennifer Herdt (2008) has argued that early Protestantism developed a ‘hyper-Augustinian’ view with an over-emphasis on divine agency, which transforms human agency into a stance of pure passivity – which resulted in the loss of the traditional Thomistic conception that grace can work through ordinary processes of habituation. According to these views, if virtue ethics were to be developed along Protestant theological lines, a profound *revision* of core concepts would be needed. In itself, the Protestant tradition therefore does not seem to offer much that could contribute to developing a virtue ethics.

Even more severe is the criticism that the Reformation has been a major factor in the final abandonment of virtue ethics, paving the way for a modern deontological ethics and consequentialism as its counterpart. According to this view, the characteristically Protestant account of the Ten Commandments as the ordering of the moral life encouraged an emphasis on principles, rules, obligations, duties and prescriptions. MacIntyre (1984) famously argued that the Reformation inaugurated a process that led to the breakdown of what he called ‘the teleological view of human nature’ (1984, p 54), a perception that formed the underlying framework of virtue ethics and its eudaimonistic conception of the good life in both antiquity and Christianity. In line with MacIntyre, Brad Gregory (2012) has argued more recently that the Protestant

rejection of the authority of the Roman Church and the resort to Scripture as the only source created an open-ended range of rival truth claims about the biblical message. This led to ‘bitter disagreements among early modern Christians about the objective morality of the good’ (2012, p 188).

According to these influential interpretations, the Reformation inaugurated a decline of virtue ethics and its teleology by breaking with the view that human nature as an image of God (*imago Dei*) has access to the good and can habituate the virtues, devaluing ancient pagan virtue ethics and over-emphasising divine grace.

Unfortunately, various Protestant theologians and philosophers consciously or unconsciously contributed to this narrative in their criticism of the concept of virtue. Neo-Calvinists and dialectical theologians, for instance, rejected the anthropological scope of 19th-century liberal theology, including the concept of ‘Christian and civic virtues’, and instead regarded the Reformation’s doctrine of justification not just as prior to but also as opposed to the concept of virtue. In particular, the implied element of the selfishness of virtue as it focused on human perfection and its capacity for meritorious action was criticised, as was the anthropological presupposition of a relatively autonomous existence independent of God (Herms, 1992).

500 years after the Reformation started in the Low Countries and continued even after the first Protestant martyrs died for their faith in Antwerp in 1523, the question I would like to ask is this: Did the Reformation indeed inaugurate a break with the moral tradition in which a shared understanding of the good and the good and virtuous life played a crucial role? In this contribution,<sup>1</sup> I do not develop counter-arguments against all the criticisms mentioned; instead, I show that the post-Reformation theology of the 16th, 17th and early 18th centuries, including that of a number of Reformed theologians working at universities in the Low Countries, has not abandoned virtue ethics at all. On the contrary, virtue ethics formed one of the crucial elements of Protestant ethics. This suggests that the break of the Reformation was not at the level of a shared moral framework but primarily at the level of understanding the gospel of grace and what this means for the Christian moral life as understood within this moral framework. Secondly, I argue that the Protestant theological tradition has particular contributions to offer to a viable contemporary virtue ethics. I will show in particular how

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1 What follows is partly based on my monograph: Vos, 2020, especially chapters 4 and 7.

the insistence on human sinfulness and grace in Protestant views of the moral life results in an articulation of moral growth in which moral excellence is possible, even though imperfection is still part of one's character.

## **Protestant ethics in continuity with tradition**

Although the theology of the Reformation is significantly distinct from and even opposed to late medieval Aristotelianism, this theology still reveals the basic characteristics of virtue ethics, that is, understanding morality in terms of an ethics of the good life. It also entails considering moral qualities that are generally viewed as virtues that are necessary for living the good life and somehow considering human nature as having been created and being in need of redemption as a source of moral knowledge. In fact, there was much more continuity between the teleologically structured Christian medieval view of life and Protestant views of natural law, virtues and the good than is suggested in the dominant interpretation. New historical-theological research indicates not only that Aquinas played a significant role in Protestant theology (Svensson & Van Drunen, 2018), but also that Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, as the source book of virtue ethics *par excellence*, still offered a crucial ethical framework in post-Reformation Reformed scholastic theology (Sinnema, 1993; Svensson, 2019; Vos, 2020). Of course, this does not mean that no changes took place in the understanding of the good and the virtues, in particular in the understanding of law and grace. Yet the Reformers, and especially the post-Reformation theologians, developed their ethics in relative continuity with the multifaceted tradition of medieval virtue ethics, either in an Aristotelian shape or in a Scotist account, or even in a more Augustinian way. The tradition of Reformed orthodox theology has often been explored, but until now scholarly attention has been devoted almost exclusively to doctrine. As Luca Baschera (2013) observes in his overview, Reformed ethics in the era of Reformed orthodoxy is almost completely untravelled terrain.

I provide a brief overview of this field, ordered from three kinds of writing on ethics that can be traced in Protestant works during this era: commentaries on Aristotle's *Ethica Nicomachea*, philosophical writings on ethics, and ethics treated as part of larger dogmatic works.

## Protestant commentaries on Aristotle's *Ethica Nicomachea*

First, historical–theological research has demonstrated that the Reformation did not lead to the abandonment of Aristotelian ethics. This becomes immediately clear from the fact that Aristotle's *Ethica Nicomachea* continued to function as the main ethical textbook in the curricula of Lutheran and Reformed academies and universities. Although the dominant Aristotelian framework of sciences gradually came to be contested in the modern era, this did not affect the status of the Aristotelian model in both the Catholic and Lutheran and the Reformed universities and academies of the 16th and 17th centuries. Following the classical tripartite division of the *artes* into physics, logics and ethics, courses in these fields generally followed an Aristotelian model, including the widespread practice of commenting on Aristotelian texts. As Richard Muller (2001) indicated, the Renaissance brought about not the removal of Aristotle but a demand that better (Greek) texts should be used (in new editions of the *Ethica Nicomachea* Protestant theologians regularly cooperated with humanists). Furthermore, the practice that grew out of the medieval tradition of commentaries on the *Nicomachean Ethics* continued not only during the Renaissance but also in these Protestant universities and academies. Manfred Svensson (2019) lists no fewer than 46 Lutheran and Reformed commentaries on the *Nicomachean Ethics* between 1529 and 1682! No generation of Protestant theologians passes without a new set of commentaries on Aristotle's *Ethics* emerging. In short, the exposition of this work continued to form the backbone of moral education.

This widespread practice of commenting on Aristotle's ethics is contrary to the impression one gains from the position we find in the early views of the Reformers – Luther in particular – which may explain the influential view that Protestantism does not entail much virtue ethics. Whereas Luther had lectured four times a week on Aristotle's *Ethics* in his first years at Wittenberg before the Reformation, after 1517 he advised the university to discard it completely, together with Aristotle's other works. According to Luther (1966, p 201), Aristotle's

book on ethics is the worst of all books. It flatly opposes divine grace and all Christian virtues, and yet it is considered one of his best works. Away with such books! Keep them away from Christians.

Luther's renunciation of Aristotle and his proposed complete revision of the curriculum that follows from it is often regarded as something that actually took place, but this was not the case: Aristotelianism continued to dominate the *artes* programme. And although Aristotle's *Ethics* disappeared from the curriculum for several years, Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560), who had the task of teaching ethics in Wittenberg, started to lecture on it again. The textbooks he developed on ethics and other disciplines were in fact compendia of Aristotle's works. Melanchthon (1850) acknowledged the gap between the theology of Christ and Aristotelianism. However, based on the distinction between law and gospel, it was possible to see philosophy, including ethics, as 'part of the divine law that is about civil morality' (1850, pp 277-278). Melanchthon lectured at least eight times on Aristotle's *Ethica Nicomachea*, which culminated in his commentary, *In ethica Aristotelis commentaries*, published in 1529 and extended as *In primum, secundum, tertium, et quintum ethicorum commentarii* in 1532. This work, since republished in numerous editions, had a great influence on theologians from new generations. In sum, Melanchthon believed that Protestant education in ethics should be grounded in the study of Aristotelian virtue ethics. And since the use of Aristotle was properly based on the distinction between law and gospel, Luther could not have had anything against it.

Theologians in Lutheran and Reformed universities and academies followed Melanchthon in treating ethics as a philosophical discipline, based on a reading of Aristotle's ethics and very often resulting in a published commentary. To give but one example: Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499-1562), a former Augustinian monk educated as an Aristotelian scholar at the University of Padua and an important Reformed theologian, also delivered a series of lectures on Aristotle's *Ethics* from 1554 to 1556 at the academy of Strasbourg. His extended commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* remained unfinished, but was posthumously published in 1563 as *In primum, secundum, et initium tertii libri ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum commentarius*.

Distinguishing true philosophy such as Aristotle's from corrupt philosophy such as that of the Epicurians, Vermigli (2006, p 13) stated:

Since true philosophy derives from the knowledge of created things, and from these propositions reaches many conclusions about justice and righteousness that God implanted naturally in human minds, it cannot therefore rightly be criticized: it is the work of God.

He acknowledged, on the one hand, the human being's natural ability to understand the good and, on the other, that this ability is a divine gift. God 'endowed our minds with light and planted the seeds from which the principles of all knowledge arose' (2006, p 7). Yet natural knowledge needs to be distinguished from revelation. Grace relates to nature just as restoration does to creation:

The goal of philosophy is that we reach that beatitude or happiness that can be acquired in this life by human powers, while the goal of Christian devotion is that the image in which we are created in righteousness and holiness of truth be renewed in us (Vermigli, 2006, p 14).

In sum, Protestant universities and academies in the 16th and 17th centuries taught ethics in the faculty of the arts as a philosophical discipline, taking Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* as the most important textbook and ethical framework, and correcting it by citing references from Scripture where needed. This practice stands in great continuity with a broadly conceived Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics.

## Works in (philosophical) ethics

Along with these commentaries on Aristotle's *Ethics*, Protestant theologians gradually developed their own (philosophical) ethics. In 1577, Lambert Daneau (1530-1595), working with Theodore Beza at the Geneva academy, published the first independent Reformed ethics, entitled *Ethices christianae libri tres*. His *Ethices* was part of a larger project in which he wanted to found all philosophical disciplines on Scripture rather than on classical works. At first sight, Daneau's approach of developing ethics solely from Scripture as the source of all knowledge is opposed to the trend of early Reformed ethics. Yet it is important to note, as Sinnema (1993) observed, that Daneau's ethics, although based on Scripture, is still to be regarded as a *philosophical* rather than as a theological discipline. In his approach to the sciences, Daneau followed the classical tripartite order of philosophical disciplines and published a *Physics*, a *Politics* and an *Ethics*. As he stated: 'In the science of ethics, if we wish to think truly about the principles of our actions, we ought to philosophize from the Word of God' (quotation from Sinnema,



1993, p 22). In Book 1 of his *Ethics* he offers an anthropological basis, with a clear influence of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which he frequently cites, but primarily based on the Word of God. In Book 2 he treats the precepts of human moral action based on the Decalogue and in Book 3 he deals with the virtues and vices that correspond to the precepts of the Decalogue. Daneau's Christian ethics was primarily based on Scripture:

The precepts of this so wholesome instruction cannot be drawn better or more safely or, I also add, more blessedly than from the Word of God himself, and especially from the part of it that is commonly called the law of God or the Decalogue (quoted in Sinnema, 1993, p 24).

However, this is not at all in contrast to virtue ethics, since the final part of his works is devoted entirely to the virtues. Daneau shared with his contemporaries the view that the human being is created in the image of God and that remnants of the *imago Dei* have survived in the rational soul after the Fall. A general moral knowledge of the original righteousness, which was grafted in Adam's mind, has survived in fallen man, and this enables us to discern between good and evil and to understand certain moral precepts. A natural disposition such as *synteresis* – understood as the disposition of the human mind by which we apprehend the basic principles of behaviour – is acknowledged, but at the same time it needs to be 'reformed' since it has been corrupted by the Fall. Therefore, divine law is the final norm for moral action. The Decalogue is identified as the natural law: 'This law of God is called natural, because before it became written down in human laws, it flourished in human minds' (quoted in Sinnema, 1993, p 30).

More in line with Melanchthon, Bartholomaeus Keckermann (1572-1609) treated ethics as a philosophical discipline in its own right in his *Systema ethicae*, from 1607. This book was the product of his lectures on ethics at the Gymnasium of Danzig. His ethics is largely Aristotelian in nature, but it does not consist of a commentary on the ten books of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Instead, Keckermann systematises the content of Aristotle's work according to a logically determined method in his own system. As Sinnema (1993) points out, he regarded himself as being the first to produce such a *systema ethicae*.

Another example of a Reformed philosophical ethics is Franco Burgersdijk's *Idea philosophiae moralis*, published in 1623; Burgersdijk worked as a professor at the University of Leiden.

## Ethics as integral part of dogmatics

A different presentation can be found in those Reformed authors who treat ethics within major dogmatic works, not simply in a single chapter among other *loci* on the Ten Commandments (*de lege*) but in a much more extensive way, namely, as a second part following the dogmatic first part of their work. In this approach ethics is explicitly treated as a *theological discipline* – theology being considered a practical rather than a speculative discipline. Peter Ramus (1515-1572) was the first to set the standard for this approach by defining theology as the doctrine of living well and dividing his *Commentariorum de religione christiana* into two sections: one on faith and a second on the actions originating from faith. But this still did not result in a fully fledged part on ethics. A good example of a more comprehensive work is that by the German theologian, Amandus Polanus (1561-1610), who published his *Syntagma theologiae christianae* in 1609. This work consists of seven volumes on doctrine (the things to be believed, *credenda*) and three volumes on ethics (the things to do, *agenda*). As Bachera (2013) demonstrated, Polanus treated ethics, including moral virtue, not from the perspective of the natural human being but exclusively as pertaining to the regenerate believer.

Approaching ethics as a theological discipline within major dogmatic works was especially common in the era of high Reformed scholasticism of the 17th century, a period in which all-encompassing theological systems were developed. Other examples of this approach are Peter van Maastricht's (1630-1706) *Theoretico-practica theologia*, published between 1682 and 1687 in the Netherlands, and William Ames' (1576-1633), *Medulla theologiae*, of 1627. In this latter work, this English Reformed theologian, who worked as a professor in Franeker, treated ethics as the second part of one systematic-theological book after having dealt with faith. Although Ames rejected the direct use of Aristotle's ethics in theology, this does not mean that he did not use Aristotelian and Thomistic categories; he did so, for instance, in his book, *De conscientia, et eius iure vel casibus* of 1630.

According to Ames (1639 [1630]), human conscience – literally understood as *conscientia* – ‘to know together with’ – is the instrument by which natural law is known by human beings. In line with medieval scholastics, Ames stated that by means of God’s gift of conscience the human being knows ‘together with God’ (1639 [1630], p 4) the divine judgements upon human actions. Therefore, conscience or *synteresis* is the natural disposition of the human mind by which it apprehends the general principles of natural law. Ames distinguished between the *apprehension* of natural morality as a universal human intellectual trait and the actual *application* of that knowledge to the evaluation of specific actions. Although natural conscience is capable of the apprehension of moral principles in general form, the application of those principles is corrupted at a variety of levels by sin. This explains why in practice *synteresis* can be hindered by sin from acting. Therefore, Ames regularly points to the clarity of biblical moral instruction.

Furthermore, in his *Medulla theologiae* Ames construes a system of virtues ordered from the two tables of the Decalogue and summarised by Christ in the double love commandment. The second table of the Decalogue is interpreted according to the virtues of justice and charity. Therefore, the language of command, obligation and obedience is harmoniously related to that of virtue, disposition and even perfection. As in the Thomist tradition, Ames (1968) defined virtue as ‘a condition or habit by which the will is inclined to do well’, and stated that it is called a *habitus*

because it is in general a state of mind of various degrees of perfection. It is called a habit not only because one possesses it but also because it makes the subject behave in a certain manner, that is, it moves the faculty, which otherwise would not be moved, toward good (1968, p 224).

## **Virtues and flaws: a Protestant contribution to virtue ethics**

Our brief investigation indicates that the ethics of Reformed scholasticism developed in great continuity with medieval scholasticism, its morality of the good and the virtues that make the good life possible. Aristotelian ethics continued to be the backbone of ethical education in Protestant universities and academies throughout the 16th century and remained an important point of reference in the Protestant scholastic works on ethics in the 17th

century. At the same time, the emphasis on biblical revelation as the main source and criterion is distinctive in these Protestant accounts, but this does not result in the general abandonment of Aristotelian virtue ethics.

Now the question that remains is this: What specific contributions can Protestant theology and ethics offer to contemporary virtue ethics? Although several relevant aspects could be explored here – for instance, the impact of what Charles Taylor (1989, p 211) called ‘the affirmation of ordinary life’ on the perception of virtue and the role of virtuous exemplars or the specific connection between virtue and law, which may be a bridge between premodern virtue ethics and modern deontological ethics – I limit myself to one challenging theme: the issue of *exemplary virtuous people showing moral flaws* or, more generally, the experience that most people often display of *mixed character traits*.

In the life of exemplary persons, great virtues regularly appear to exist alongside deep-seated vices. Think, for instance, of Martin Luther King, who was exemplary in his commitment to justice and civil friendship, his forgiveness of his enemies, his prudence in his work for social justice, his self-restraint, his perseverance, and his courage to the point of martyrdom. But he nevertheless saw himself, and was seen by others, as a person whose character was flawed in important ways. This is about not some incidental acts but patterns of activities that should be regarded as vices, such as repeated extramarital intercourse and the mistreatment of women, which apparently coexisted with his exemplary virtues. This case of what Jean Porter (1995) calls ‘the flawed saint’ seems to be in contradiction to the classical thesis of the unity of the virtues, which holds that anyone who possesses one of the cardinal virtues in the full sense necessarily possesses all of them. In Porter’s analysis it becomes clear that neither classical virtue ethics nor Aquinas’s understanding of the thesis can fully match up to this problem.

In my view, Augustine offers a convincing alternative in his radical understanding of the nature of sin and grace, which is followed in Protestant accounts of virtue ethics. Augustine’s account of ‘the unity of the virtues’ can do justice to the persistence of flaws and vices in the virtuous life. Augustine offers an illuminating argument in his letter 167 – a letter to Jerome in the year 415 – consulting this biblical translator and exegete on the statement made in James 2:10: whoever keeps the whole law but offends in one point becomes guilty of all. Augustine points to the problem of the unity thesis, that is, that it makes moral formation and conversion from vice

to virtue difficult. If we are to have either all the virtues or none of them, the consequence will be that we must acquire all the virtues at once. In contrast to this interpretation, Augustine provides the defence that it is possible to grow into virtue by advancing from darkness into light and, through habituation, gradually proceeding from vice to virtue. This view, according to which it is assumed that a person can possess a virtue and a vice at the same time, enables Augustine to avoid the unacceptable consequences of the thesis of the unity of the virtues without relinquishing their interconnection altogether. By allowing the coexistence of contrary dispositions, virtue and vice, it is possible to accept that the virtues all remain bound together but also that this does not exclude the presence of sins and vices in the individual human being. As Langan (1979) demonstrates, Augustine distinguishes the interconnection thesis from the identification thesis, that is, that the virtues are various expressions of one quality: love. The moral life of the Christian is understood as the progressive development of love, which is the one quality that underlies the activity of all the virtues and which no one can possess fully and perfectly in this life. Augustine (2004, pp 101-102) summarises his argument in this way:

Virtue is the love by which one loves what should be loved. This is greater in some, less in others, and not at all in still others, but it is not so perfect in anyone that it cannot be increased in him as long as he lives. But as long as it can be increased, then of course that which is less than it ought to be comes from a vice. Because of that vice *there is not a righteous person on earth who will do good and not sin* (Eccl 7:21). Because of that vice *no living being will be righteous in the sight of God* (Ps 143:2).

From this Augustinian perspective, it is possible to explain the phenomenon of the flawed saint in whom love is more present than in most of us but who is still not perfect. In some respect it may even be (almost) absent, as the example of King exemplifies; yet it is still possible for it to grow until God completes it in the life to come. As Augustine (2004, p 101) avers:

We can correctly say, 'Greater love is found in this person than in that one', and 'Some love is found in this person and none in that,' . . . and we can say of a single person that he has greater chastity than patience and greater chastity today than yesterday if he is making progress, and that as yet he has no continence, but does have no small amount of mercy.

Protestant scholastics understand gradual habituation and the persistence of moral flaws in a similar way. Vermigli (2006, p 222), for instance, states that ‘men cannot be blessed by themselves alone since their nature was flawed from the beginning’. On the other hand, he wrote that

when we have been restored and reborn, however, we cooperate with the grace and spirit of God and acquire the habits of the virtues by which we are repaired and made better every day. For this reason Paul urged the Philippians [2:12] to work out their own salvation (2006, p 337).

To give another example, Ames (1968) affirms the thesis of the unity of the virtues, understanding the cardinal virtues to be ‘four conditions necessarily required in the disposition that deserves the name of virtue’ (1968, p 228). Of these four conditions, justice ‘orders and constitutes virtue’, prudence ‘directs it and frees it from error’, fortitude ‘strengthens it against misfortune’, and temperance ‘makes it pure and defends it against all allurements’ (1968, pp 229-230). According to Ames (1968, p 231), there can be no such thing as degree *in virtue itself*:

There is no virtue which at least in application does not extend itself to all things contained within the compass of its object. He is not temperate who is moderate in one lust but indulges in others.

However, he adds (1968, p 231),

in respect of the *subject* a particular virtue may be stronger in one person than in another, either because of apter natural disposition, or more frequent use, or more perfect judgement of reason, or finally because of a greater gift of God.

Moreover, the virtues can increase by daily use and exercise: ‘To the extent that the acts of virtue, or contrary vices, are more intent, more frequent, and more continual, they bring about either an increase or diminution of virtue’ (1968, p 231). In stating it thus, like Vermigli, Ames adopts an Augustinian view according to which we can grow in virtue while at the same time being flawed in various ways.

In conclusion, this Augustinian–Protestant account may have a liberating, merciful effect, whereas, in contrast, the virtue ethical ideal can

have an unmerciful aspect to it due to the constant pressure arising from the interpretation that human beings *have to* be as virtuous as possible, while in practice it is impossible to be so perfect. Neither classical nor Thomistic and neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics is able to deal well with shortcomings in the virtuous person. In a Protestant view, in contrast, it can be acknowledged that the moral life of most people exhibits virtues alongside moral flaws or even deep-seated vices without the pursuit of a virtuous life being abandoned. This does not discourage us by our believing that we are completely abandoned to our own failures. Instead, we are lifted up time and again by divine grace in continuous renewal, which puts us in the wide space of divine goodness that is present for us despite our failures and flaws. This is simultaneously both realistic and encouraging. In this way, the radical nature of the divine grace and human failure of the Reformation can play a promising role in a viable contemporary virtue ethics.

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