



VIRTUES IN THE ETHICS OF LIFE



PONTIFICAL ACADEMY FOR LIFE



# VIRTUES IN THE ETHICS OF LIFE

XXII GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF MEMBERS  
2016

EDITED BY

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PONTIFICAL ACADEMY FOR LIFE







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# VIRTUES IN THE ETHICS OF LIFE

PROCEEDINGS OF THE XXII GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
OF MEMBERS

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Edited by

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## Introduction

The birth of bioethics in recent decades of the last century has contributed to the further development of an ethical-anthropological reflection in the field of biomedicine. Above all, it has led to the elaboration of methodologies of moral analyses regarding ethical questions that emerge with the application of new technology in human life. Bioethical developments notwithstanding, today there still persists widespread practical confusion and dissatisfaction with respect to the possibility of giving adequate responses to such ethical challenges.

On the other hand, the intrinsic vulnerability of the human condition – particularly accentuated in existential circumstances of illness, disability, and premature or old age – requires that care for human life is not entrusted to technical biomedical possibilities, but (and above all) to the good acts – or better, the virtuous acts – of the doctor and researcher who intervene in human life. The scientist is virtuous when he or she knows not only what to do in concrete situations but does it effectively and with constancy and firmness, without falling short when faced with obstacles. Indeed, the moral virtues imply excellence as much in one's reason as in one's character when he or she acts. The ethical reflection on human life acknowledged by bioethics is instead characterized by the development of ethical procedural approaches that, in general, reject taking on a clear vision of the human and professional good that is to be pursued. With respect to the latter, something largely interested in the "correctness" of an action, virtue ethics seeks to render the person who acts "good". Today, then, in order to advance virtue ethics as a model for the development of praxis, ethics and biomedical research means to refocus attention above all on the being of the doctor-researcher inasmuch as this is the source of his or her acts. At any rate, there are many reasons that favor a recovery of virtue ethics in contemporary scientific culture. An initial reason is of an anthropological nature and pertains to the necessity of promoting a unitary vision of human rationality – the only possibility for grasping the good in all its depth – over its reductionism in the purely instrumental sense. Ethical-proceduralistic settings, which are widely spread in areas of clinical ethics born of a reductive vision of action, are incapable of highlighting the complexity of moral life. Rather, they ultimately betray the specificity of that which is properly moral in human acting.

At the basis of proceduralistic ethical orientation one observes a very carefully made meta-ethical choice: avoid all reference to a theory of ethics, that is, to a theory of the “good” for mankind. In life ethics it becomes evermore urgent to recover a unitary vision of reason, yet to pursue it as a priority in reestablishing the necessary relationship between logical-rational thought and metaphysical thought. In reality, only the latter allows reason to develop in all its depth. Intelligence in fact is not limited to the collection of empirical information, and furthermore not to the elaboration of purely logical-formal models that are derived from such information. The intelligence possesses a constitutive hermeneutic dimension. This is why in practical knowledge there is not only rational certainty, but also other modes of reason such as prudential judgment, the very heart of virtue ethics, which implies recognizing what meaning a free act has and not only indicating an explanation on the basis of the network of causality. What the most common ethical-clinical perspectives lack is precisely this openness to arrange factual data along a metaphysical plane.

A second reason that urges us to look at virtue ethics is of a cultural variety: the crisis of rationality that the contemporary epoch is experiencing has made way for an irreducible polarity between scientism and skepticism, which in the concrete existence of many people translates in fact into a crisis of meaning even beyond a practical disorientation. Everyone can see how the cognitive relationship with ourselves, with others, and with the world today is mediated in large part by scientific culture. To a great extent, public opinion is aware that experimental sciences constitute an authentic representation of the world and the ultimate explanation of reality: science and technology can resolve all of society’s problems because human beings, the only master of his or her destiny, know how to construct a better world with scientific rationality. Scientism presents itself as an all-encompassing ideology in that scientific knowledge conditions all other knowledge and the very roots of culture. It refuses to acknowledge the validity of forms of knowledge different than those properly belonging to the positive sciences. All other forms of knowledge (religious, ethical, esthetic, etc.) are relegated to the confines of mere imagination. Values are hereby expressions of emotivism, and questions regarding the meaning of life belong to the realm of the irrational and imaginative.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. Giovanni Paolo II, *Lettera enciclica “Fides et Ratio”* (14 settembre 1998). AAS 91 (1999), pp. 5-88, n. 88.

A third reason that might motivate work dedicated to virtue ethics, and in particular the virtue of prudence in the field of biomedicine, emerges from the exigency of the intrinsic humanization in these areas of human action, which are presently overrun by technical logic and urgently demand the placement of the “good” at the fore of one’s actions.

## **Workshop Papers**

The first session of the Workshop was dedicated to “The Dynamics and Completion of the Moral Act in the Virtues”. Professor Cruz Prados (“Knowledge and the Experience of the Good: Analogy, Difference, and Synergy Between Speculative and Practical Reason”) shed light on how contrary to all that is implied in many contemporary ethical attitudes, it is not theoretical knowledge that determines action or that moves the action itself. Rather, one needs to recognize the specificity of practical reason, as practical, so as to avoid reducing it to theoretical reason.

Professor Rodriguez-Luño’s presentation (“The Intentionality of the Human Act: Good and Evil from a Moral Perspective) clarifies that virtue ethics means an ethics elaborated from a first-person perspective and considers human action as it is viewed from within the acting subject and thereby in the subject’s intrinsic intentional dynamic. The first person perspective maintains that the object of a choice is not a “thing”, but an action. The latter encounters its moral value in relation to that which in a given situation the agent can reasonably propose and, consequently, choose. This reasonableness facilitates neither “claims” nor “intentions” that are freely or randomly acquired, rather objective criteria and that which is inherent in practical reason. To be precise, moral virtues are the natural principles of practical reason. Therefore, what determines the moral meaning of freely chosen acts is their conformity or contradiction to the fundamental exigencies of the moral virtues.

The paper given by Professor Da Re (“Virtue Ethics and Moral Life”) explores the specificity of virtue ethics with respect to other contemporary ethical attitudes, a specificity which can be known precisely when one assumes a first person perspective. That does not exclude the formulation of judgments and moral norms, yet one maintains a priority of attention on the acting person and his or her responsibility. Hence, virtue ethics is not simply a theory of action, but a work of formation of one’s own being – in both desire and rationality – and care given to oneself that extends throughout a person’s life.

Professor Sandrin (“Mercy and Compassion”) offers a reflection on his titular items, mercy and compassion. In Scripture there is an understanding that mercy is the characteristic most proper to God, his mark of identity or “ID card” to use the words of Pope Francis. Mercy is, then, an attitude that renders the Christian person recognizable. Mercy and compassion are simultaneously human attitudes that express the universal vocation of love and constitute the only efficacious way of humanizing reality. Today the compassionate and merciful heart meet with the challenge of universal openness against the criteria of calculation and reciprocity, and the challenge of seeing others as God sees them – namely, with the dignity that befits them as his children.

The second session was dedicated to “Biomedical Ethics from a Virtue Perspective”. Professor Bishop (“Medical Decision Making and the Problem of Proceduralistic Bioethics”) revisits how the secularized and pluralist character of contemporary culture favors a proceduralistic approach to the solution of moral issues that emerge in the practice of medicine. Such an approach from the perspective of its proponents would facilitate reaching “adequate” moral decisions even alongside an anthropological vision or metaphysical interpretation of human action. Relation highlights how procedures that are adopted as a guide in any decision-making process on an ethical plane are never neutral. Rather, they incorporate specific moral and cultural values. For example, in the context of the Oregon Death with Dignity Act, on a procedural plane there is guaranteed respect for a patient’s “right” to choose death, yet this does not mean it legitimizes procuring death on an ethical level. It is precisely on account of the inevitable connection between procedural and moral meaning that it will likewise happen that certain procedures will promote virtuous behavior and others vices, according to the moral content that these facilitate. As is noted, procedures are not morally neutral.

Professor’s Condit’s paper (“Virtues Beyond the Utilitarian Approach in Biomedical Research”) centers on the theme of biomedical research and elucidates how if on the one hand this research appears morally neutral in that it is based on the use of an “experimental method” or one that is fundamentally descriptive, on the other hand it always possesses a context of ends and human and social values that have moral connotation inasmuch as one is dealing with human activity. Utilitarianism certainly represents the main cultural and social framework within which much of biomedical research takes place today.

Beyond restrictions that might be placed on unethical research, there are virtues that are to the researcher keys that ensure that he or she overcomes a purely utilitarian perspective.

Professor Reiko's presentation ("Ethical Virtues in the Nursing Profession") is dedicated to the nursing profession, a profession that contains an intrinsically vocational dimension. Yet as Prof. Reiko explains, it is also a task and requires the responsibility to express by way of concrete actions everyday not only what is by nature professional but also the commandment of love. Today the nurse meets the most difficult ethical challenges in the defense of human life, both in its initial stages and when it nears its end. The ethical formation that leads to an appreciation of the value of life is therefore a fundamental element when building the professional identity of the nurse.

Lastly, the third session was dedicated to "The Discovery of Virtues".

In Professor Dell'Oro's paper ("Professionalism and Virtues") one sees how from a methodological point of view the plausibility of a virtue ethics in medicine depends on a certain conception of the nature of the latter, of its ends. All this is expressed concretely in the context of the doctor-patient relationship. Today it is quite difficult to talk of virtue ethics in medicine for the simple fact that medicine is experiencing a crisis of its professional identity. Above all, the fact emerges that the doctor-patient relationship has evolved in a contractualistic direction, based on the logic of the provider-client relationship. Instead it is necessary to recover the bilateral nature of a reciprocal personal recognition in which acting is an expression and function of the realization of the specific identity of the subjects involved in the relation.

The presentation given by Professor Gambino ("Care and Justice") clarifies how medical ethics distinguishes but does not separate the therapeutic intervention in an illness (cure) from the having and taking *care* of the ill person. A closer look shows that it is precisely this attitude that constitutes the foundation of medicine, a foundation that is clearly ethical even before it is scientific or technical. Inasmuch as it is a specific disposition toward the suffering other, care can constitute a virtue. A perspective that overcomes the conflicts or aporias that are now so frequently seen emerging in ethical perspectives based on the confrontation of *prima facie* principles (the most noteworthy is certainly the polarity between beneficence and autonomy). Care, therefore, even in professional medicine, has anthropological relevance and precisely for this can become on the ethical plane an expression of justice. In other words, care is justice in the face of human vulnerability.

Professor Amado Fernandez (“Educating in Virtue Within the Bio-medical Disciplines”) highlights how education in the virtues does not consist in the teaching of ethics, as the formation of virtues is inseparable from a certain intellectual formation. Rather, virtue is formed by example. The privileged setting for this training is a human community, since the moral formation of man is inseparable from his communion with others.

The presentation given by Professor Farag (“The Virtuous Institution in the Service of Life”) focuses on healthcare systems, which over time have to deal with the problem of the quality of attention, a problem that includes a clinical dimension, but also those that are organizational, economical, managerial, ethical, and juridical. All these factors run together to determine the evermore widely diffused violations in the safeguarding of human life and health denounced on behalf of a growing number of healthcare institutions in the world. The way that leads to the acquisition of virtue is long and not without its own difficulties. It requires constant diligence to not be discouraged by failures and errors, to be ready to start again without resigning oneself to mediocrity. One can proceed along this way if one sets off “together”, each person helping the other, sharing experiences and learning from the one another. It is in this relational disposition and in this “communitarian” way that a virtuous institution assumes its concrete form.

Professor Pinsent (“Current Research Trends in Virtue Ethics”) shows how the recent efforts to recover a virtue ethics move mainly along the lines of an Aristotelian perspective. Different aspects of this elaboration unfolding in the field of traditional Aristotelianism today receive interesting contributions from various disciplines – particularly psychology and neuroscience – that likewise provide points of research for a re-reading of the notion of virtues in moral acting. Such contributions give evidence of, on the one hand, the inadequacy of certain explanations of the Aristotelian perspective, and, on the other hand, allow the prefiguration of a “Copernican revolution” – which Pinsent explains also involves Aristotelian cosmology – above all in relation to the formulation of moral virtues in the subject by way of his or her relations with others.

Professor Rybicki (“The Defense of Life Between *Parresia*, Mercy, and Forgiveness”) illustrates how in the Christian perspective human virtues find their fullness when anchored in the theological virtues – namely, in divine life. Strength and sincerity before God that human and theological virtues instill are the foundation of the defense of human life in the world. They also render mankind capable of living the for-

givenness that conquers indifference and in turn the harshness of the contemporary world.

Professor Schockenhoff ("The Christian Perspective on the Virtues") underlines the role of grace, understood as the creative relation between human beings and God. Indeed, grace is not added on to the being and action of the human creature as if an extrinsic factor, rather it gives "form" to a new creature. In this perspective the moral virtues are not annihilated by grace, rather fortified and perfected by it.

## Conclusions

The ethical perspective of the moral virtues, understood as acquired dispositions to make a determined good, are a great help both regarding knowledge, as much as, action. Here we see converging both the need for the establishment of an internal order within the acting subject and in practices that he exercises consistently, as well as, the moment to incorporate – in an organic perspective – the role of emotions and passions in ethical life.

Virtue ethics implies, therefore, a unified project of life intentionally geared toward its own intrinsic order, on the basis of a hierarchy of values, and willing to recognize and achieve the ends-goods of human activities.

As Pope Francis underlines in his opening remarks during the workshop, "in the sphere of the ethics of life, the necessary norms, which support respect of the person, are not enough on their own to fully ensure man's good. The virtue of one who works for the promotion of life is the ultimate guarantee that the good will really be respected".

Being the *habitus* of concretely choosing what is good for human beings, the moral virtues perfect the moral agent and solidify instances of universality and completeness proper to the moral agent in the context of the plethora of human experiences (which include all those that are professional), giving him the chance to recognize and to meet the real needs of the suffering person in a fully humane way.

"Today scientific knowledge and technical instruments – beckons Francis – are not lacking, and they are able to offer support to human life in weakest aspects. But humanity is so often lacking. Good actions are not the correct application of ethical wisdom, what is needed is a real interest in the frail person. The doctors and all health workers must always combine science, technology and humanity".