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Preview Response

VIRTUES / THEOLOGY

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I enjoyed reading Prof. Herdt's preview of her forthcoming Theological Brief on the Virtues, and particularly appreciated the way she connects the virtues to human flourishing. In the full Brief, I would be interested in seeing some engagement by Prof. Herdt with the empirical evidence for the relationship between moral character and flourishing; one recent paper by our team at the Human Flourishing Program found that even the self-assessed "commitment to promoting the good in all circumstances" is highly predictive of future flourishing in many domains, including social relationships, life satisfaction, and even physical health (<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0890117120964083>).

I'll also mention two broad questions which I would be glad to see discussed in the full brief. First, Prof. Herdt notes that, "Things do not always go well for virtuous people"; I hope she'll defend this position against (or perhaps rather, clarify its relation to) the classic Stoic insistence that virtue is sufficient for happiness, a position more often pilloried than refuted. In *The Morality of Happiness*, for instance, Julia Annas helpfully shows how the Aristotelian alternative to Stoic self-sufficiency also yields apparent paradoxes, such as that the virtuous person can be made continuously happier by the addition of external goods.

And second, I hope that Prof. Herdt will offer some discussion of how common the virtues are. This is a question which has generated a great deal of debate among contemporary psychologists and philosophers (under the heading of "situationism"), but much less so (so far as I can tell) among theological ethicists. This is unfortunate, because if the virtues are rare, that would have significant implications for their potential role in shaping the character of society as a whole.

Strikingly, there seems to have been a virtual consensus among classical and medieval theorists that the virtues (and indeed the vices) are quite rare: Aristotle, for instance, insisted that "the many...do not abstain from bad acts because of their baseness but through fear of punishment" (*NE* 1179b7-13). (In *Aristotle and the Virtues*, Howard Curzer comments that, for Aristotle, "the category of 'the many' includes not only children, but also the majority of adults, for [in Aristotle's view] these adults are morally childish" (333). And, as Thomas Osborne notes, "Following Aristotle, Thomas [Aquinas] thinks although some agents are virtuous and others are vicious, there are many agents who are neither.

Continent agents act well, but they think about what they should not do because their desires are disordered. Incontinent agents act poorly, but they are generally aware of what they should do" (*Human Action in Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham*, 77, cf. *De malo* q. 3, art. 9, ad 7).

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