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The Virtues of Taking Time, Taking Time for the Virtues

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Abstract: The virtues are now of central concern to most ethicists. But confusions arise when important virtues like "justice" are discussed without reference to the narrative traditions (e.g., Christian or Libertarian) which give real context and specificity to virtues. Whatever one's narrative tradition, the virtues it elaborates and nurtures will only be vital if adherents of that tradition have the capacity for taking time for one another. The virtues are "a language" that enables us to describe our lives. Without time-consuming conversations (with fellow adherents and non-adherents) the self will remain either incompletely defined or self-deceived. The good life within a narrative tradition is a well-crafted life, one focused more on ends than means, a life of attcntiveness rather than distraction. Invoking Neil Postman, Mother Theresa and other critics of American mass culture, the author describes the barriers placed before those who would take time for the virtues.

WHATEVER ELSE HAS HAPPENED in contemporary philosophical and theological ethics, people can no longer legitimately claim that the virtues suffer from a lack of attention. The claim may have been true, or at least appeared to be true, earlier in this century when ethicists were entangled in seemingly interminable disputes between utilitarian and deontological accounts of morality. But one of the notable features of recent decades has been a resurgence of interest in an "ethics of virtue."

The resurgence of interest has been stimulated by the arguments of such philosophers as G.E.M. Anscombe, Alasdair Maclntyre, and Martha Nussbaum, and such theologians as Stanley Hauerwas, Gilbert Meilaender, and Joseph Pieper. Other notable books and articles on the virtues have been written by such philosophers as Philippe Foot, Peter Geach, Edmund Pincoffs, Nancy Sherman, and James Wallace.

As a result, almost no author in ethics now writes as if the virtues are not a central issue. Indeed many authors whose primary mode of ethical reasoning is deontological or utilitarian now include a place for the virtues within their larger framework. To be sure, in a few cases ethicists have responded to the interest in the virtues with a more polemical critique. But the larger picture seems to suggest that the virtues will continue to have, at the very least, a place in the horizon of moral philosophy and theology.

But of course the crucial question is what place the virtues will have and how they will be understood. It is not altogether clear what diverse theorists mean when they invoke notions of "virtue" and "character," much less how they think those notions are related to wider conceptions of ethics and politics. Moreover, there is a tendency to carry on the discussions at such a level of abstraction that it is difficult to discern what is being proposed or opposed.

Thus in what follows I will do three things: (1) I will identify some problems with the resurgence of interest in the virtues; (2) I will suggest that the virtues are best characterized, and identified, in relation to the idea of "taking time" with people, and 1 will argue that such "taking time" requires narrative construal; and (3) I will identify some criticisms of contemporary American life which suggest that our ability to take and give time is being undermined and/or impoverished. In the conclusion, I will suggest how "taking time" for virtue contributes toward a recovery of the "common life" of community.

Learning Not to Have Character and Possess Virtue

There is a tendency to think of virtue in general, and the virtues in particular, as something which people "have" or "possess." In contemporary discourses such a claim seems typically to be based on an essentialist reading of human nature. The claim gets spelled out in diverse ways.

For example, the virtues are sometimes characterized as that which we "innately"—or perhaps less strongly put, "naturally"—have (Pincoffs, 1986). But such a claim confronts the obvious epistemological problems of a foundationalist account of human nature. Not only have such foundationalist accounts failed to be persuasive, they also have demonstrated their inability to deal adequately with philosophical and anthropological counter-arguments. This has not only to do with the discovery that people in other cultures have ordered their lives in ways quite different from the various foundationalist conceptions of human nature, but also with the counter-arguments that those conceptions themselves can be shown to arise out of the narratives of particular cultures and traditions.

Because of the difficulty in specifying a precise content of the "virtues" without reference to particular cultures and/or

narrative traditions, there has been a countervailing tendency to describe the virtues in a way that ends up providing iittle more than "platitudes" that people have and share across cultures. So, for example, in American culture people think that "truthtelling" is a virtue—but they don't ever specify what that would entail more concretely for how any of us live. And studies have suggested that, despite the widespread sense that we all believe in and—at least most of us have—the virtue of truthtelling, the average American tells approximately two lies each day.

So there are at least two ways in which a foundationalist understanding of human nature leads to an inadequate and distorted conception of the virtues. Even when they aren't rooted in a foundationalist argument, however, some conceptions of the virtues are still caught, albeit in a different way, in the bifurcations of modernity's understanding of human nature. On such views, we need the virtues in order to understand our own personal, subjective values over-against the world of reason and public, objective facts. The virtues thus are important in helping to provide the background motivation and nurture we need to act rationally in public.[3]

The problem with all of these accounts is that they fail to recognize that we only understand human life as it is contextualized within narratives. This is soon two levels.

First, diverse and competing yet overlapping narrative traditions have similarly diverse and competing yet overlapping accounts of what it means to be a human and what virtues people ought to have if they are to live well. Because those accounts typically do both overlap and conflict, conversation and argument are both possible and necessary. For example, a Christian and a libertarian American might agree that "justice" is an important virtue for people to live well; but the Christian's conception of justice (informed as it should be by such texts as Amos and Luke) ought to be considerably different from the libertarian's conception (informed as it should be by such views as Milton Friedman's).

Hence a recognition of the importance of narrative traditions shows that there will be a plurality of conceptions of the nature and purpose of human life in general, and of the virtues in particular. As I suggested earlier, the existence of conflict between narrative traditions reminds us of the significance of narrative discourses. And the existence of overlap among narrative traditions reminds us of the possibility of non-narrative modes of discourse.

So there are times when we can invoke the "virtues" in general, or a particular virtue such as "justice" in particular, without reference to the narrative(s) which give such notions their intelligibility. But the danger in doing so, however, is that we can so easily detach those notions from their narratives, and they quickly become little more than the pious platitudes mentioned above.

The second level on which we understand human life only in terms of narratives is people's particular and individual lives. Such narratives are, of course, contextualized and embedded within larger narrative traditions. As Alasdair Maclntyre (1984) has argued, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" (p. 216), That is so regardless of whether we want to continue to narrate our lives in continuity with the narratives which have formed us. or whether we want to amend, revise, rebel against, or reject one or more of those narratives.

Moreover, a person's narrative is also constrained by others. So Maclntyre insists that "1 am not only accountable, I am one who can always ask others for an account, who can put others to the question. I am part of their story, as they are part of mine. The narrative of any one life is part of an interlocking set of narratives" (p. 218). Thus we are at best the co-authors of our own narratives. Again as Maclntyre describes it, "We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making. Each of us being a main character in his own drama plays subordinate parts in the dramas of others, and each drama constrains the others" (p. 213).

Our characterizations of our lives are thus inextricably interrelated with the perspectives others (including God) have of us.[4] This is shown quite powerfully in a poem by the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1953) entitled "Who am I?" Bonhoeffer wrote it while in prison, shortly before he was martyred by the Nazis. In the poem he contrasts the calm and cheerful disposition he would present to his jailers with an angry and impotent feeling within. He asks himself, "Who am I? This or the other?" But he asks this question as a way of exposing the notion of my "private" self to suspicion. As Rowan Williams (1988) comments on Bonhoeffer's perspective, "Why should the analysis be in terms of a false exterior persona cloaking a 'real' weakness; what if the truth is that the interior self is in flight from the 'victory already achieved' of the visible person?" (p. 43). Bonhoeffer acknowledges that others may have a better perspective on his life than he does, and he concludes the poem by noting that "Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine."

In this light, I want to suggest that it is a mistake to think of virtue and/or character as something which we "possess" or "have," or that depends on the continuity of my own self-understanding. That language relies on bad understandings both at the level of narrative traditions and, more particularly, at the level of the narratives of personal lives. There is no private self where 1 can be said to "have" or "possess" particular virtues. And indeed, as Bonhoeffer's poem suggests. I may not—and frequently am not—the person best equipped even to identify what virtues 1 may or may not have.

Rather I want to suggest that the virtues are a language best understood as a way of characterizing and identifying our relations with others that result from our "taking time" with them.[5] Indeed I think it is the case that, at least on an account of the virtues which I would want to defend, timefulness is intrinsic to the very description of particular virtues.

The Virtues of Taking Time

Central both to the attack on Cartesian foundationalism and to the constructive attempts to move beyond modernity's bifurcations has been the rejection of dualisms. That is, it is a mistake to bifurcate mind and body, reason and emotion, facts and values, objects and subjects, principles and virtues, private and public selves. But the danger here is that, by rejecting dualisms, we might all too easily end up with a totalitarian monism that obliterates any distinctions.

I have already suggested in the first essay that it is in and through narratives that such notions should find their distinctive significance without lapsing into bifurcations (though, of course, there are narratives which celebrate those bifurcations). But now I want to specify that it is in and through particular kinds of narratives that we should learn to speak of the virtues—namely, narratives that invite the taking of time. As Rowan Williams (1988} has suggested,

> We show our 'inner life' not by the desperate effort to say everything, to externalize the stream of unspoken fantasy or dialogue that accompanies our material and public speech, but by so speaking and acting as to invite the taking of time. (p. 49)

On such a view, the virtues (or, correlatively, the vices) are not so much "possessions" that we "have" as they are ways of characterizing patterns of relating with others discovered through "taking time" with them.

In one sense, this is because others may know us better than we know ourselves. Self-deception is a perennial temptation in narrating human life. Others who have taken the time to become familiar with us often have a perspective on our lives, our virtues and vices, that we often lack. This may be either because we have an excessively high perception of our selves or because—as in Bonhoeffer's example—our own self-perception is lower than it ought to be.

But "taking time" is crucial also because of the possibility that by engaging in dialogues with friends, strangers and even enemies, people might discover understandings, convictions, and patterns of speech and action from which we have become either marginalized or have allowed to become sedimented. Thomas Frentz (1985) has shown, in the film *My Dinner With Andre*, how the central characters are put back in touch with the narratives of their own moral traditions through a rhetorical conversation.

By taking time, the perspectives of others can call us out of our own fragmentation, isolation, or perhaps even our rejection of the notion that our lives can be narrated in any coherent way. Once again Williams's (1988) comments are instructive:

> 'I do not really know myself' must be heard as 'I don't yet know what to say: how to speak so that others listen and answer and build up in their words a way for me to go on speaking so that others may answer; how to become a partner in the world.' The sense of a choked or imprisoned or elusive inferiority is, on this account, a sense of skills not yet learned and nourishment not given, of not knowing what it might be to be *heard* and so set free. (p. 50)

Through "taking time," we are enabled to learn how to speak and act so that we can remember the past and have hope for the future. The conjunction of memory and hope provides people with a way of seeing in their present lives an emergent narrative unity (albeit a unity that lies on the other side of complexity).

Thus taking time enables people to recover a sense of the virtues of their narrative traditions in at least two ways. First, for those who know us and share the commitments of our narrative traditions, the time they have taken and continue to take with us enables them to help us (and others) characterize our lives as being, for example, just or unjust, patient or impatient, hopeful or despairing. They help us (and others) describe our lives in relation to particular virtues and vices, and to develop those skills and that nourishment that will enable us to live well.

Second, when we take time in conversation and argument with those whose understanding of life differs significantly from ours, they can help us rediscover our own convictions and sense of the virtues by enriching our conception of what it means to live well and/or forcing us to defend and to think more critically about why we understand our lives in one way rather than another. For example, rhetorical conversations between a committed Aristotelian and a committed Christian might enable each person to discover (and/or rediscover) why, on the one hand, both traditions identify courage as a virtue and why, on the other hand, Aristotelians think humility is a vice and Christians think it a virtue.

And yet, there is a danger in invoking the ideal of "taking time." After all, that can sound like little more than a nostalgic wish for the "good old days" when people spent "quality time" together. It is all too easy to forget that, at least since the turn of the century, each generation has thought that the previous generation had more time and thus had it easier. It is clear that an exercise in nostalgia not only will not help, it actually will contribute to our inability to understand the significance of "taking time."

But if we cannot pretend to live in the past or to wish for days gone by, neither ought we to be content with the present. For various social critics have argued that significant features of contemporary American life are helping to undermine the possibility of "taking time" with others, I cannot do justice here to the complex and difficult issues about how we understand

the notion of "time" in modernity, particularly in capitalist modernity. Even so, it is important to note the ways in which we have turned time into a commodity—something we "spend," "waste," "buy"—and have also ended up commercializing our social relations.

The Commercialization of Social Relations

In his recent book *The True and Only Heaven*, Christopher Lasch (1991) has argued that American culture is marked by an obsession with both a cult of progress and a nostalgia which—while appearing to be opposed to progress—is actually its mirror-image. Lasch shows how this focus on progress and nostalgia creates a sense of optimism and/or pessimism among people, both working against an appreciation of the significance of hope and memory. Although Lasch does not put the point this way, it could be said that his narrative of Americans' obsession with progress and nostalgia works to undermine those narratives which invite "taking time" as an exercise of memory and hope.

What Lasch has described in terms of historical developments, others have described in more specific relation to contemporary life. For example, Barry Schwartz (1986) has argued in *The Battle for Human Nature* that Americans are increasingly describing their lives economically in utilitarian and consumerist terms. Thus the *time* required for personal relationships is undercut by the calculus of time-loss in terms of work (generating income, advancing careers, etc.) and the consumption of market goods. Schwartz illustrates his argument with reference to a number of interesting features of contemporary life, including the loss of front porches as a locus of conversation and argument. Most of us are no longer willing to take the time for conversations and arguments that typically—though certainly not exclusively—would take place on such front porches.

The commercialization of our culture exacerbates our tendencies both toward an instrumental rationality and a utilitarian morality. By turning time into a commodity, we subject it to economic calculation in ways that undermine an appreciation of the virtues of "taking time." I want briefly to identify three ways in which the commodification of time is corrupting our lives and our capacity to understand and embody the virtues as they are discovered in and through particular competing yet overlapping narrative traditions.

First, we live in a culture where an appreciation for craftsmanship, for the goods internal to such practices as cooking and reading and taking time with one another, are being eroded. For example, there is a story about a young MBA starting out in a large corporation. He goes up to the CEO of the corporation and says to her, "Tell me, ma'am, in your wisdom, how does one go about becoming CEO of a corporation like this?"

"Well," responds the CEO, "first you must take the time to become acquainted with your fellow-workers. Then you must be willing to embody the virtues of loyalty, discipline, and truthfulness in all that you do. And of course you will be expected to practice your craft and develop your skills with the greatest of care."

"Oh,"says the young MBA, "whatever happened to wholesome good looks and a nice personality?"

We are a people who do not want to have to take the time to leam a craft, to embody particular virtues, to become a good colleague. Rather we tend to see things in instrumental terms, trying to discern how we can get ahead as quickly as possible—or even worse, fearing that we have to work non-stop even to keep up. As a recent article in *Time* magazine (1989) commented,

> Time bestows value because objects reflect the hours they absorb: the hand-carved table, the handwritten letter, every piece of fine craftsmanship, every grace note. But now we have reached the stage at which not only are the luxuries of time disappearing—for reading meaty novels, baking from scratch, learning fugues, traveling by sea rather than air, or by foot rather than wheel, but the necessities of time are also out of reach. Family time. Meal time. Even mourning time. In 1922 Emily Post instructed that the proper mourning time for a mature widow was three years. Fifty years later, Amy Vanderbilt urged that the bereaved be about their normal business within a week or so. (pp. 58-59)

Time has become such a precious commodity that we are increasingly unable even to know how to mourn, much less to understand other virtues which require the taking of time. After all, the longer you mourn, the more likely you are to lose time in the race to get ahead.

Second, we live in a culture where the images we project tend to be more important than the ideas we develop or the people we are. The dominant medium of discourse in our society is the television, and in such a medium language and ideas are subjected to the tyranny of the thirty-second sound bite and the incessant presence of commercials. It is no wonder that Neil Postman (1985) has dubbed contemporary American culture "The Age of Show Business."

Television's preoccupation with time segments affects us in multiple ways. Of course there is the familiar lament of teachers that students' attention spans are so short. But there are also the ways in which our reliance on image fuses with the demand for immediacy to provide an insistent focus on the present. In Bill Moyers's words, "1 worry that my own business... helps to

make this an anxious age of agitated amnesiacs . . . We Americans seem to know everything about the last twenty-four hours but very little of the last sixty centuries or the last sixty years."[6] It is not simply that our memories are faulty, or even that they are too short; it is rather that we are being rendered incapable of remembering. We are gathering together more and more information, but we have less and less of an ability to put it together into a coherent narrative that draws on the past in order to help guide us toward the future.

Third, we live in a culture where we all too often try to "buy" time by acquiring an increasing number of things. To put it polemically, we love things and use people. We are an acquisitive people, and nothing seems to satiate us. The t-shirt slogan "Whoever dies with the most toys wins" is not an inaccurate description of the way in which many of us try to live. We are consumed by an unending desire for more and more goods, often in the hopes that increased automation will enable us to be "freed" up to have some kind of leisure time.

In an interview with *Time* magazine in 1989, Mother Teresa was asked about the materialism of Western societies. She suggested that "the more you have, the more you are occupied, the less you give. But the less you have, the more free you are." That would seem to suggest that it is perhaps those who are least tied to "things" who often are the most willing and most able to have the freedom to take time to be with other people. To be sure, we must not romanticize what it means to be poor, nor ignore the ways in which the lives of the poor are often structured by other people's time. Even so, Mother Teresa also noted how corrupting the attachment to things can be.

> I find the rich much poorer. Sometimes they are more lonely inside. They are never satisfied. They always need something more. I don't say all of them are like that. Everybody is not the same. I find that poverty hard to remove. The hunger for love is much more difficult to remove than the hunger for bread. (p. 13)[7]

Ironically, on the same pages in which *Time* printed the interview with Mother Teresa there are advertisements for a Cross pen and pencil set, J & B Scotch, Amaretto di Saronno, a "Youthair" product that reduces gray hair, Benson & Hedges cigarettes, a new room heater sold by "The Lifestyle Resource," and—last but not least—an advertisement for Las Vegas that promises "Sultry sexy nights" and "Lazy summer days."

A consumer mentality—complete with the commodification of time, an instrumental rationality and a utilitarian morality—tends to turn us into a people who increasingly see the world as something to be used and possessed, not something to be loved in all of the vulnerability that love entails. Contrary to some of the most cherished presumptions of our society, not everything ought to be subjected to economic calculations or be managed. We have turned sex into a commodity, we are turning babies into commodities, and we don't know what to do with our elderly or with the homeless or with the poor because they are not, or at least are no longer, of any "use" to our disposable society.

In subjecting time to economic calculation, we have failed to remember that it takes time to foster personal relationships and community. It takes time to learn to live as people of memory and hope, time that cannot—or at least ought not—be managed. If we are constantly evaluating what time "spent" with the homeless or with the elderly is "costing" us in other ways, we become incapable of the very timefulness that is central to what it means to be a part of a community.

These criticisms of our society are not unlike those of Maclntyre, Brown, Benjamin, and Jameson that I discussed in the first essay. The commodification of time is one of the crucial ways in which the significance of narrative coherence, and thus also of the virtues, is undermined and/or impoverished in contemporary culture. But just as before I suggested that I am not completely persuaded of the hopelessness of contemporary culture in regard to coherent narratives, so 1 am also not completely persuaded of the hopelessness of contemporary culture with respect to the notion of "taking time" for the virtues.

Conclusion: Taking Time for the Virtues

In order to recover an appreciation for the virtues and for the narrative traditions which are the carriers of those virtues, we need to become a people capable of taking time. In particular, I think that we need to recover the internal goods of the practices of specific narrative traditions. We need also to recover the centrality of rhetoric, of recognizing the ways in which our discourses construct our conceptions of ourselves as well as our relations with one another. Those discourses often are fragmented and chaotic, making it difficult in many cases for us to know how to be truthful with one another.

But there are also other discourses that we can recover, discourses that invoke different sorts of narratives and run counter lo the commodification of time in our society. For example, such counter-narratives can be found in the discourses of a tradition such as Christianity. To be sure, those discourses have often been co-opted and/or distorted by the commodifieation of time and the commercialization of social relations in contemporary culture. Even so, ingredient in Christianity's counter-narratives and discourses is—or at least ought to be—an appreciation of the limits of human life. Such limits invite the taking of time. Indeed some of the most powerful narratives and discourses of the Christian tradition are found in accounts of saintly people, people whose lives challenge our instrumentalist and consumerist mentality. The counter-narratives of Christianity invite us to, in

Stanley Hauerwas's provocative phrase, "take time for peace." The peace of God takes time, and the willingness of Christians to resort to violence (in all of its forms) is a striking indication not only of our attitude toward the taking of time but also of our unbelief.

By becoming more acutely critical of the narratives and discourses which structure our lives, and thus recovering and rediscovering alternative narratives and discourses, I think we can also recover those narratives and discourses which invite us to take time for the virtues. For we are likely to discover the common life of community precisely by recovering our own narratives in and through conversation and argument with others. And in the culture in which we live, there is perhaps no more urgent task than to take the time to foster and cultivate such a common life.

Endnotes

1. See, for examples, the third edition of Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, (1989), *Principles of biomedical ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press; also J. Philip Wogaman, (1989), *Christian moral judgment*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press.
2. See, for examples, J. B. Schneewind (1990), The misfortunes of virtue. *Ethics, 101,* 1, 42-63; Robert M. Veatch (1985), Against virtue, in Earl E. Shelp (Ed.), *Virtue and Medicine* (pp. 329-346), Dordrecht: D. Reidel.
3. For an example of such an argument, see Wogaman, *Christian moral judgment*.
4. The material in this paragraph is taken from my essay, For all the saints: Autobiography in Christian theology.
5. I am indebted to Rowan Williams, The suspicion of suspicion, for enabling me to see the significance of "taking time" for human life and also to Stanley Hauerwas, 1988, Taking time for peace, *Christian Existence Today* (pp. 253-266), Durham: Labyrinth Press, See also Philip D. Kenneson's 1990 review essay of Hauerwas's book, Taking time for the trivial. *The Asbury Theological Journal, 45,* 1, 65-74.
6. Bill Moyers, cited in Postman, p. 137.
7. Mother Teresa, cited in A pencil in the hand of God, p. 13.

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