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Colloquium:

HOW TO BE GOOD

Spring 2021



Medieval Christians understood virtue as both a habit and a gift of grace. In this course, we will test this understanding by comparison with the definitions of virtue found in three complementary traditions: Confucian, Greek, and Jewish. Readings will be taken from the *Analects*, Plato, Aristotle, the Old and New Testaments, the Rule of St. Benedict, the Talmud, and Thomas Aquinas. Our purpose will be to discover how each of these systems of training the soul works, along with their similarities and differences.

BOOKS AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT THE SEMINARY CO-OP BOOKSTORE

Confucius, *Analects*, trans. D. C. Lau (Penguin Classics) ISBN: 0140443487

Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Walter Hamilton and Chris Emlyn-Jones (Penguin Classics) ISBN: 0140449043

Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J.A.K. Thomson; rev. Hugh Tredennick (Penguin Classics)
ISBN: 0140449493

Holy Bible (Douay-Rheims Version) (St. Benedict Press) ISBN: 1935302051

Benedict of Nursia, *Rule*, trans. Timothy Fry (Liturgical Press) ISBN: 0814612725

The Talmud: A Selection, trans. Norman Solomon (Penguin Classics) ISBN: 9780141441788

Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on Virtue*, trans. Jeffrey Hause and Claudia Eisen Murphy
(Hackett) ISBN: 0872209253

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COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. **Reading and participation in class discussion.** This course is designed as a colloquium, meaning, a seminar intended to help you develop research questions. Think of it as a practicum in how to think about how to be good—the *theoria* of virtue, if you will. Readings have been chosen to offer a survey of sorts; the selection is designed to be comparative, but obviously not comprehensive, although it is expected that a narrative will emerge from our discussions, as we think about the way in which talking about virtue developed in the ancient and medieval Eurasian tradition on which (arguably) our modern thinking about virtue still depends. In this respect, we will be participating in the tradition much as the ancient and medieval authors and readers of our texts did: testing theory through dialogue, and commenting on traditional texts. Reading and participation in our class discussions is essential to this process—just ask Socrates!

2. **Practice.** Each week, in conjunction with the assigned reading, you will be given an exercise to help you prepare for our class discussion. The exercises are intended to help you think about the readings, but also test your own understanding of virtue. Is it possible to contemplate virtue without also applying it to behavior? What is the relationship between ideals of virtue and the tests of everyday life? Is it possible to understand virtue without being able to live virtuously? Is it possible to live virtuously without an ideal of virtue? While the exercises themselves are critical, it will also help to write about them. **Reflections (500-750 words each) are due by 10pm Sunday evening on Canvas: Discussions.** Expect to be able to talk about your experience in class!

3. **Project.** The readings and discussions for the quarter should lead you to a project testing the definition and practice of virtue. The form of the project is open, although it is necessary for the purposes of academic evaluation that it include a written component. You may choose to conduct an experiment in virtue, perhaps modeled on one of our exercises. You may choose to write a dialogue, perhaps modeled on one of our discussions. Other forms of instruction and/or experiment are also possible: a story or a play, in which the characters demonstrate and/or test a particular virtue; a commentary on one of our primary texts, modeled on a scholastic disputation or a monastic rumination. The written portion of your project should be 12-15 pages long (typed, double-spaced), with 3-4 pages dedicated to a meta-analysis of your own practice in the project. You will be asked **mid-quarter (May 3) for a short description (about a paragraph, via Canvas: Assignments)** of what you plan to do for your project.

Grading: As all three of these requirements are meant to build cumulatively to a fuller understanding of “how to be good,” final grades for the course will be calculated cumulatively, with greater emphasis placed on the final project (approximately 55%), but with the expectation that the final project clearly reflect engagement with our readings and exercises over the course of the quarter (approximately 35%). Attendance and participation count (approximately 10%)! Bluntly: to get an A, you will need to attend class, do all the assignments, and impress me with your insight. *How dare you!* (And, yes, I am happy to give feedback in office hours.)

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READING AND DISCUSSION ASSIGNMENTS

March 29 How dare you

Discussion with Jacob Telling about his book on training in virtue [previously recorded video, 3 hours, on Canvas: Panopto Video]: Watch before our first class meeting.

Exercise: Make a list of the virtues that you think are most important in your own life, both those that you try to live by and those that you find oppressive.

April 5 How to be a gentleman

Confucius, *Analects*, trans. D.C. Lau, pp. 59-160

Exercise: Choose one saying from the *Analects* to live by for the three days before class; report on your experience.

April 12 How to be persuasive

Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Walter Hamilton and Chris Emlyn-Jones, pp. 3-138

Exercise: Find an example in current media of politicians speaking persuasively; analyze according to Socrates's criteria of "goodness."

April 19 How to be moral

Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, book I, chapter xiii; books 2-6; trans. Thomson, pp. 27-166

Exercise: Pick one of the virtue-vice pairs described by Aristotle (Appendix I, pp. 285-86). Spend one day practicing excess, one day practicing deficiency, and one day practicing the mean. Could you do it?

April 26 How to be righteous

Numbers, 3 Kings 1-13 (1 Kings 1-13 RSV), Proverbs, Wisdom of Solomon, Isaiah 56-66, Daniel, in *Holy Bible* (Douay-Rheims), pp. 139-84, 349-70, 658-82, 696-713, 807-814, 949-73

Exercise: Identify your God/god. What sacrifices are you willing to make to serve your God/god? What, if anything, do you expect in return? Notice how this affects your decisions about how to behave.

May 3 How to be saved

Matthew 5-8 (Sermon on the Mount), Acts of the Apostles, First and Second Letters to the Corinthians, Letter to the Hebrews, Apostolic Epistles (James, Peter, John), in *Holy Bible: The New Testament*, Douay-Rheims, pp. 6-12, 133-69, 187-212, 247-77

Exercise: "But let your yes be yes, and your no be no" (Matthew 5:37). Watch your speech this week. Are you able to live by this rule? Why, or why not?

May 10 How to be humble

Rule of St. Benedict, trans. Timothy Fry

Psalms 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129, 142; 118; 92, 99, 62, 148-150 (Septuagint/Vulgate numbering); 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143; 119; 93, 100, 63, 148-50 (Masoretic/KJV/RSV numbering)

Daniel 3:51-90 (Septuagint/Vulgate)

Exercise: Pick one psalm to read daily for the week; keep your head down, and pay attention to your feelings about wearing or not wearing a mask.

May 17 How to be pure

The Talmud: A Selection, trans. Norman Solomon, pp. 3-37 (Blessings), 94-138 (The Sabbath, Boundaries), 461-80 (Middle Gate), 497-564 (The Court, Flogging, Oaths, Testimonies, Idolatry, Wisdom of the Fathers, Decisions), 662-719 (Purities)

Exercise: Keep a record this week of every time you wash your hands. Notice how it changes your sense of what it is permissible and impermissible to touch.

May 24 How to be virtuous

Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on Virtue*, trans. Jeffrey Hause and Claudia Eisen Murphy, pp. 1-95, 258-315 (“On the Virtues in General,” with commentary)

Exercise: Revise your list of virtues from our first discussion. How has your thinking on virtue changed over the past eight weeks? Are virtues habits? Does virtue lie in a mean? Answer in the form of a *quaestio*.

Final projects due June 10, 11:59pmCST, in Canvas: Assignments (file format: YourLastName HTBG.pdf)