

**The Virtues of a Christian Realist:
Toward a Niebuhrian Virtue Ethics
in Conversation with Martha Nussbaum**

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Abstract

The objective of this project is to articulate a Christian realist virtue ethics, based on the theological anthropology of Reinhold Niebuhr, and elements of the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition, emphasizing Martha Nussbaum.

For Christians it is impossible to avoid two conspicuous facts: that fragility is a primary quality of the human condition, and that Christians are called to serve neighbour as self. Virtue ethics explores the habits of perception, feeling and action that we should cultivate so that we may live out this vocation, even in the midst of our fragility? This project aims to develop a virtue ethics which will address the life situation of liberal Protestant justice-seekers. It does this by combining key elements from the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics with the framework of theological anthropology found in Niebuhrian Christian realism. The goal of the project is to develop a Christian realist virtue ethics.

The organization of the research follows three broad steps. First, it analyses Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realist framework of theological anthropology, as adapted by Rebekah M. Miles, to determine the appropriateness of a virtue ethics treatment. Second, it seeks in the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition, with special emphasis on Martha Nussbaum, the key elements of virtue ethics which will augment this framework. Third, using David Tracy's methodology of critical correlation, it places the findings of the two resources together, combining key elements from virtue ethics with the Christian realist framework of theological anthropology in order to formulate a Christian realist ethics of virtue.

The project identifies a theological-ethical cycle which emerges in both Niebuhr and Nussbaum as they describe the dynamism of the human condition. The purpose of virtue is to moderate and maintain the unstable equilibrium of the cycle. Its objective is to allow us to live with our fragility rather than escape it. In the constructive exercise, using Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer as an organizing structure, the thesis presents a Christian realist version of the four cardinal virtues: courage, temperance, prudence and justice, and identifies the corresponding excesses and deficiencies. It identifies the primary emotion that is implicated in each virtue.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: VIRTUE ETHICS AND THE CHRISTIAN REALIST

1.1 The Fragility of the Human Condition and the Call to Justice

It is something of a truism to observe that human beings are fragile. We are vulnerable both outwardly and inwardly. Like other creatures, we are subject to disease and weather, to war and famine and violence. Even apart from catastrophe, human life is short, and depends upon the well-being of both the human and the biophysical communities in which we live. Moreover, human beings are also vulnerable to the inner conditions of our life. Our anxieties and our fears, and no less than these, our desires and our attachments, make us susceptible. The human man or woman or child is a creature which can be harmed, and which – in order to thrive – needs assistance and protection. From the smallest tribal society to the emerging globalized world order, the project of human civilization responds to our shared insight it is the human predicament to be fragile.

“Fragility” is not a formal term in philosophical or theological discourse.¹ It is defined in the Oxford dictionaries as “the quality of being easily broken or damaged”.² This project takes this very basic definition as a starting point for its exploration of concepts of fragility in Reinhold Niebuhr, Martha Nussbaum and other writers. It adds to

¹ There is no entry for “fragile” or “fragility” in the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, the Routledge Dictionary of Philosophy or the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

² <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/fragility>. 28 December 2011

this thin description the details, qualifications, and elaborations which they develop both explicitly and implicitly, to build a thicker description of fragility and its impact in the individual and collective lives of human beings.

At the same time, human weakness is not the whole story. Human fragility entails a subtle and complex constitution. What is fragile is both delicate and valuable. We know that human beings also have the capacity to be generous and creative – to learn, and to grow, and to create societies in which human talents and resources are nurtured for the sake of a common good. We observe that human beings, with all our faults, seem to be oriented toward the good, and toward the goodness of God. Fragile human beings are endowed with gifts of ingenuity and imagination, along with rationality and perseverance.

The Christian faith calls us to use these gifts constructively to contribute to the creation of a wholesome society. Christians worship a God who prefers justice to incense, and whose Son insists that we best love God by loving neighbour as self – in particular, by seeing and serving our neighbour in the least of these. To be effective, however, such love will have to take into account the fragility of the human predicament. The urgent need for justice in a difficult and broken world requires Christians to function with both heroism and humility, an ambiguous combination of energetic agency and radical openness to grace. This thesis explores the question of how a fragile justice-seeker may be strengthened to persevere in the task. It asks what motivations, habits, and qualities of character we should cultivate in order to live responsibly in the midst of fragility. The objective of this project is to articulate a

Christian realist virtue ethics, based on the theological anthropology of Reinhold Niebuhr, and elements of the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition, emphasizing Martha Nussbaum.

1.2 Reinhold Niebuhr as a Theologian of Fragility

Twentieth century liberal Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr developed a picture of humanity in which the twin themes of fragility and the call to work for justice are central. As a Christian realist, Niebuhr based his assessment on what he called the “obvious facts” of the human predicament.³ Although the word was seldom used in the lexicon of his day, this study reads Niebuhr as a theologian of fragility. It delineates the particular ways in which Niebuhr’s theological anthropology analyses the human condition as fragile – simultaneously bound and free, poignantly balanced between helplessness and responsibility. Niebuhr finds the human condition fragile in three ways. First, he emphasizes human finitude, and the vulnerability that results not only from human mortality but from the limits imposed by a finite world.⁴ Second, he focuses on human contingency, and the restrictions placed on both our understanding and our actions by the fact that we live in a specific historical and social context.⁵ Third,

³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, vol. 1, *Human Nature* (New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1941; reprint Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 3, 4, 94, 95, 299.

⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, vol. 2, *Human Destiny* (New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1943; reprint Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 1.

⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1937; reprint 1965), 28.

Niebuhr sees fragility in the inevitability of human sin.⁶ Niebuhr observes that for these reasons, humanity is its own “most vexing problem.”⁷ At the same time, Niebuhr made it clear both in his writing and in his own life, that it is a Christian obligation to work unceasingly toward social and political justice in the world.⁸

The question that arises, given a conviction of human fragility and also the call to work for justice, is how to sustain the effort. What are the qualities of character – the motivations, habits, skills and abilities – that will make it possible for the fragile justice-seeker to live out his or her calling? These are the questions of virtue ethics.

1.3 The Need for Virtue Ethics

It is the human problem presented by the fragility of the human condition – its peculiar mixture of weakness and strength, agency and vulnerability – that has given rise to the research concerns of this project. It asks, if Niebuhr’s analysis of the human condition is accurate, how will we live responsibly in the midst of this ambiguous fragility?

This question points to virtue ethics, and concern for the person of the moral agent.⁹ The project explores the intuition that the moral life of fragile human beings is

⁶ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 250.

⁷ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 1.

⁸ His biographer Fox summarizes the conviction of his followers, left and right, “All Niebuhrians united on the bedrock conviction that there could be no ultimate fulfillment in the political realm, yet no salvation apart from the life of political commitment.” (Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), xi.

⁹ According to David Solomon, “Internal Objections to Virtue Ethics,” in Daniel Statman, ed. *Virtue Ethics: A Critical Reader* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1997), 166, virtue

more than the sum of individual decisions and actions. It seeks a more durable moral response to the continuous flow of challenges that a complex world presents to fragile humanity. It shares what Gilbert Meilaender has called “a wide dissatisfaction with an understanding of the moral life which focuses primarily on duties, obligations, troubling moral dilemmas and borderline cases.”¹⁰ Instead of asking what should I do in case a, b, or c, virtue ethics asks what kind of character should I have? What qualities of character make me a reliable moral agent, even when confronted by new moral quandaries? Virtue ethics tracks continuities rather than discrete events. It reflects on the nature of our habitual dispositions to perceive, to feel, and to act. Moreover, virtue ethics assumes that these habitual dispositions are the result of intention, and not random traits of personality, or fixed cultural artifacts. “We can choose to become, with attentiveness and disciplined practice, persons disposed to engage the world in one way rather than another, upholding certain values rather than others.”¹¹ Virtue ethics observes that what we do will both reflect and form us into the persons we are.

This project takes the theological anthropology of Reinhold Niebuhr, and poses the questions of virtue ethics. Given the reality of human fragility, what does it mean to

ethics may involve a general concern with human qualities, or may develop an account of virtue as a component of an ethical system, or at its most forceful it may claim that “the assessment of human character is, in some suitably strong sense, more fundamental than either the assessment of the rightness of an action or the assessment of the value of the consequences of the action.” Some writers differentiate in terminology between ‘ethics of virtue’ which refers to the second category, and ‘virtue ethics’ which refers to the third stronger description in Solomon. This project corresponds to the second category and uses the terms interchangeably.

¹⁰ Gilbert C. Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 4-5.

¹¹ Diana Fritz Cates, *Choosing to Feel: Virtue, Friendship and Compassion for Friends* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 13.

live honourably, to live well? What are the qualities of human character that are most relevant to the Christian realist, and how can they be fostered? Where are our most likely failures and how can we mitigate them? If justice is to be attempted by fragile human beings, what will we need to be like as persons?

The project's goal is to articulate a Christian realist virtue ethics by adding key elements of Aristotelian virtue ethics to the theological framework of Reinhold Niebuhr. It begins with the picture of the human being presented in Niebuhr's theological anthropology. It then seeks an approach to virtue ethics which is relevant to the primary concerns of Niebuhr – fragility and justice.

1.4 The Target Group of the Project

Before beginning to address these questions, it is important to be as specific as possible about who the human being in question is. It is now a commonplace to note that an uncritically essentialist picture of the human condition may conceal important differences by elision, and may seriously distort our perceptions about moral issues. While it is my conviction that there are some insights here into the human condition, the good life, most valuable qualities, and priorities for formation which qualify as what Charles Taylor calls human constants,¹² this project attempts to describe and consider a particular group.

¹² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2007), 2-3.

This group has no official designation, but will be named here as ‘liberal Protestant justice-seekers’. This is a subset of a larger more amorphous group. Drawn from the global upper middle class, the larger group is represented in every race and nationality, and both sexes. It is affluent by world standards, well-educated in the global educational tradition called ‘modern’, which originated from Christian Western Europe and North America and is now operating in a secular mode world-wide.

Arguably, despite its geographic and professional diversity, this larger group operates as a privileged elite, with a broadly shared worldview, and significant sense of involvement in the institutions and political life of the globalized economy. Its members are highly conscious of global problems, and the challenges posed by environmental degradation, poverty, and global political instability. Moreover, the members of this group recognize that in many respects they themselves – in their affluence, their privilege – are a significant part of the problem.

The project focuses especially on the subset of this group that finds itself motivated toward the improvement of society for the benefit of its most vulnerable members. They are justice-seekers: politically engaged, often active in the non-profit sector, leaders in civil society and non-governmental organizations, officials in governments and international institutions.

Even more narrowly, the project addresses those practicing a liberal Protestant faith. Although the group includes members who belong to any religion, or none, this study focuses on members of this group who find sustenance in the Christian faith, and whose background and religious commitments are found in mainstream liberal

Protestantism. While the term liberal is rather broad and will be discussed further in Chapter 2, for the purposes of this research I refer generally to the formulations of Christian faith found in the historic Protestant denominations worldwide. Markers for this formulation include non-literal interpretation of scripture, reservation with respect to doctrinal and ecclesial authority, emphasis on faith experience, and commitment to social justice.

Part of being a mainstream liberal Protestant involves being secular, in the sense that Charles Taylor describes. That is, the justice-seekers live in a part of society in which religion is relatively absent from the public space, in which there has been a ‘falling off’ in religious belief and practice, and in which there has been a move “from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed unproblematic, to one in which [faith] is understood to be one option among others and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”¹³

This project addresses the life situation and concerns of these liberal Protestant justice-seekers, asking how we ought to live, if we recognize both the fragility of the human condition, and the Christian obligation to work for justice.¹⁴ Questions about the good life and the qualities of character needed to live it are the subject matter of virtue ethics. The objective of the project is the articulation of a virtue ethics for Christian, specifically liberal Protestant, justice-seekers.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ The writer is a member of this group.

1.5 Methodology

In general, this project identifies a problem – human fragility – and a possible response – virtue ethics. The hypothesis of the project is that a virtue ethics appropriate for the target group can be developed and defended, relying on the theological anthropology of Reinhold Niebuhr and an approach to virtue ethics which shares his focus on fragility and justice. The general method of the project is to investigate Niebuhr’s work to identify his particular understanding of fragility, to explore whether it will be possible and appropriate to develop it along the lines of virtue ethics, and to determine the approach to virtue ethics most helpful for this task. Finally, the project brings the resources together in order to articulate a Christian realist virtue ethics, which can both address the fragility of the human condition and also sustain the Christian obligation to work for justice.

Methodological issues will be reviewed at three levels. In the first place, I specify the requirements for the articulation of a virtue ethics, and outline the way the study will meet these requirements. Second, I present the approach to be followed in gathering the resources for the study. Third, I explore the specific methodological issues which arise from the decision to engage a theologian and a philosopher as primary dialogue partners, and indicate the specific steps by which the research will proceed. In this I rely on David Tracy’s method of critical correlation.¹⁵

¹⁵ David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1975).

1.5.1 The Requirements for a Virtue Ethics

According to David Solomon, in its conceptualization of the good life for human beings, an ethics of virtue will have three central goals.¹⁶ First, it will develop and defend some description of the quintessential person. Second, it will develop and defend some list of qualities of character or virtues that are necessary for being a person of that type. Third, it will defend some view of how persons can come to possess the appropriate virtues. The research of this project sets its sights on these goals, while adding the requirement that this ethics of virtue explicitly address both human fragility and the obligation to work for justice.

Following this outline, the project first develops a picture of the quintessential human being – defined for this project as a member of the target group of liberal Protestant justice seekers. It bases its description of the quintessential person on the theological anthropology of Reinhold Niebuhr. It explores the question of whether Niebuhr’s Christian realism, with its particular understanding of fragility and justice, can appropriately be extended along the lines of virtue ethics. It then develops and substantiates a list of virtues, based on an analysis of the key elements of virtue ethics, and on the specific approach to virtue of Martha Nussbaum. Finally, it proposes a conception of how these virtues are to be achieved and cultivated by the members of the target group. To do this, two sets of resources will be explored in the project, and placed

¹⁶ David Solomon, “Internal Objections to Virtue Ethics,” in Daniel Statman, ed. *Virtue Ethics: A Critical Reader* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1997), 166.

in conversation, based on David Tracy's method of critical correlation, described further below.

1.5.2 Gathering the Resources

To investigate the most significant qualities of character for justice-seekers, and the constituents of the good life, the project poses three general research objectives. To meet Solomon's first requirement, it seeks first a liberal Protestant theological anthropology of fragility to serve as the description of the quintessential person. It looks for a framework of theological anthropology which describes the human being and the human condition in a way that takes fragility seriously, is relevant to the target group, and resonates with the group's preoccupations and challenges.

To do this, the project selects relevant parts of the work of mid-century American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr as its major resource. Niebuhr is chosen because his Christian realism presents a type of liberal Protestantism which does emphasize both the fragility of the human condition and the Christian obligation to work for justice. It thus provides a resource for the question of how the justice-seekers should live.

Without attempting a comprehensive study of the vast opus of Reinhold Niebuhr, nor of Christian realism, the project investigates Niebuhr's distinctive understanding of fragility and explores whether his Christian realist framework of theological anthropology can justifiably be interpreted as a theology of fragility. The research reviews the critiques of Niebuhr's framework which have relevance for the project. Based on this review, it introduces a significant revision suggested by Rebekah M. Miles, which extends the scope of the Christian realist framework of theological

anthropology. It then explores whether Niebuhr's Christian realism, adapted by Miles, may be open to the addition of key elements from virtue ethics. It concludes that Niebuhr's Christian realism, thus adapted, does provide a framework of theological anthropology to which key elements of virtue ethics may be added. The study of Niebuhr occupies Chapter 2, 3, and 4.

The next part of the research seeks to identify from the many approaches to virtue ethics a number of key elements which can structure our questions and insights about the motivations, habits and character of the person who belongs to this group. As its minor resource, the project examines the historical virtue ethics tradition to specify the key elements of that tradition which are essential to the development of a virtue ethics relevant to the target group, and which may be added to the framework of Christian realist theological anthropology, based on Niebuhr and Miles. It reviews possible approaches and identifies elements from the contemporary interpreters of Aristotle and Aquinas as central building blocks for a Christian realist virtue ethics. In order to find a voice within contemporary virtue ethics that shares Niebuhr's focus on fragility and on social justice, the research then turns to the work of the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum. It examines the relevance of Nussbaum's insights to the concerns of Christian realism, while recognizing that her formulation is not theological. It concludes that Nussbaum's own focus on fragility, and on an interpretation of the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics which emphasizes deliberation, makes her work especially relevant to the task of a Christian realist virtue ethics. The study of virtue ethics occupies Chapters 5 and 6.

Next, the project asks how these key elements of virtue ethics may be combined with the chosen framework of theological anthropology. Using Niebuhr's well known Serenity Prayer as an organizing structure, the project identifies the cardinal virtues and the theological virtues as the initial list of virtues that comprise Solomon's second requirement. In doing this, the project also develops a model of how this quintessential person may come to possess these virtues, Solomon's third requirement. The major features of this Christian realist virtue ethics are elaborated in Chapters 7 and 8.

To anticipate the outcome, the research indicates that Niebuhr's (and Miles') Christian realism develops a framework of theological anthropology which addresses the moral and political situation of the target group of justice-seekers. The research finds a particular understanding of fragility in Niebuhr, and a fundamental openness to key elements of virtue ethics. The Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics structures a reflection on the qualities that person may need in order to sustain a responsible life amidst fragility as understood within the Niebuhr framework. Within contemporary virtue ethics, Nussbaum's emphasis on fragility and social justice is especially relevant for Christian realism. This makes it possible to identify the key elements of the virtue ethics tradition which can be suitably developed within a Christian realist framework of theological anthropology. These key elements will be added to the substantive picture of the human being developed by Niebuhr and amplified by Miles. Niebuhr and Nussbaum are explored and brought together using a method of critical correlation. The research identifies a theological-ethical cycle which operates in both Niebuhr and Nussbaum, and which is formative for the person of virtue. The result will be a Christian realist account

of virtue ethics, which includes a picture of the quintessential person, a list of virtues of that person, and an account of how those virtues are achieved.¹⁷

1.5.3 Tracy's Model of Critical Correlation

The third level of methodological reflection responds to the underlying methodological difficulty posed by the decision to rely on resources which belong to the study of theology on the one hand and of philosophy on the other. In this project, the central conversation is held between a theologian, Niebuhr, and a philosopher, Nussbaum. The methodological difficulty is not a straightforward matter of theology on one side and philosophy on the other. Both in the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, and in the Christian virtue ethics tradition, there is a constant fluid motion between the categories and preoccupations of theology and philosophy, and this fluid motion is substantially unproblematic.¹⁸ It remains for the project to identify and reflect on the relationship between theology and philosophy under which the project operates.

The project proceeds from the assumption, taken from David Tracy, that the central task of contemporary Christian theology is ongoing conversation between the Christian tradition and other formulations of the values and claims of human

¹⁷ Although Christian realism includes many other theologians, Niebuhr is its most prominent voice. See Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity 1900-1950* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); Gary Dorrien, *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Langdon Gilkey, *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Robin W. Lovin, *Christian Realism and the New Realities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁸ Indeed, Tracy identifies Niebuhr's *Nature and Destiny of Man*, a primary text for this project, as already containing elements of the revisionist model of critical correlation which Tracy proposes.

experience.¹⁹ That is, to do theology properly it is essential, and not optional, to be in critical and respectful dialogue with resources, such as philosophy, outside theology. Tracy's method of critical correlation seems especially apt for this task. As will be shown, both Niebuhr and Nussbaum remain broadly, though critically, liberal, and modernist. Therefore, the project of placing them in dialogue will benefit from a method which is 'revisionist', in that it is "committed to continuing the critical task of the classical liberals and modernists in a genuinely post-liberal situation."²⁰

David Tracy's method of critical correlation arises from his revisionist model for contemporary theology. Very briefly, Tracy's revisionist model comprises five theses.²¹ First, he proposes that the two principal resources for theology are Christian texts and common human experiences and language. This implies that a theological or ethical claim must be both appropriate to the Christian tradition²² and also adequate for the "common human experience".²³ Second, the theological task will involve a critical correlation of the results of the investigations of the two sources of theology, and will require an explicit method of doing this. Third, the method of investigation of the theologian into the second source is a phenomenology of the religious dimension present in everyday and scientific experience and language. It is the theologian who has the

¹⁹ Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 34.

²⁰ Ibid., 32.

²¹ Ibid., 43 ff.

²² Ibid., 32.

²³ Ibid., 44. Tracy was criticized for imagining an undifferentiated 'common human experience', and later refined his view and his terminology. In subsequent writing he refers to the 'contemporary situation'. For this project, the term 'common human experience' can refer to the experience of the target group identified in Chapter 1.3.

responsibility to show that Christian explanations respond to this ‘common human experience’ and not only to experience within the confessional community. Fourth, the principal method of investigating the first source is through historical and hermeneutical methods which are intelligible to the broader community. Fifth, the truth claims made by the theologian must be based on a transcendental or metaphysical mode of reflection. That is, there must be an underlying hypothesis in operation about what it means to say that a claim is truthful.

Investigating the two sources of theology through critical correlation will involve the “dramatic confrontation, the mutual illuminations and corrections, the possible basic reconciliation between the principal values, cognitive claims, and existential faiths of both a reinterpreted post-modern consciousness and a reinterpreted Christianity.”²⁴ It is this sort of conversational model, which is a form of what Tracy describes as critical correlation, which the project proposes for Niebuhr and Nussbaum.²⁵

In order to do this in a way that is respectful of the differences, the project attempts first to investigate both Niebuhr and Nussbaum on their own terms, without artificially mixing. Tracy’s model includes three phases of analysis for critical correlation in his revisionist model. The interpretive phase, in which each interlocutor is read on its own terms seeking adequacy and appropriateness, is followed by a dialectical

²⁴ Ibid., 32.

²⁵ Critical correlation as developed by Tracy in *Blessed Rage for Order* refers to fundamental theology, rather than systematic or practical theology. In Tracy’s terms this project is a project of systematic theology. In addition, Niebuhr’s theological anthropology is already, as noted above, a type of critical correlation. Therefore, the process in this project is somewhat modified. It retains the primary goal of bringing theological and philosophical resources together in a mutually intelligible, respectful and constructive way.

encounter between the two, with a reiteration of questions of adequacy and appropriateness. In particular the method poses the question of limit-language to the non-Christian source, to establish its significance for the religious dimension of the ‘common human experience’.²⁶ A third phase is constructive, allowing “a critical reformulation of both the meanings manifested by our common human experience and the meanings manifested by an interpretation of the central motifs of the Christian tradition.”²⁷ The project proceeds from interpretation of Niebuhr, to dialectical encounter between Niebuhr and virtue ethics/Nussbaum, then back to interpretation of the virtue ethics tradition and Nussbaum, and in turn a dialectical encounter between virtue ethics/Nussbaum and Niebuhr. The dialectical move sets Niebuhr and Nussbaum directly together, and leads to the constructive phase of articulating a Christian realist virtue ethics.

This mutually critical and constructive correlation offers insights both to Niebuhr and to Nussbaum. It allows the articulation of a Christian realist virtue ethics on the one hand, expanding the scope of Niebuhr’s ethical reflections in the direction of a proposal for the formation of virtue. On the other hand, the conversation offers to the secular Nussbaum the possibility of a theological anthropology which is focussed not on escape from but on embrace of the fragile human condition.

In the interpretive phase on Niebuhr, Chapters 2 and 3 reflects on the adequacy of Niebuhr’s theological anthropology for the real life needs of the target group, and

²⁶ Tracy, *Blessed Rage*, 93-94.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

concludes that while it identifies human fragility and the call to work for justice, it lacks a clear investigation of the skills, habits, abilities and character traits necessary to live out this calling given the fragility of the human being. That is, it lacks a virtue ethics. In the first dialectical move, Chapter 4 then examines Niebuhr's theological anthropology from the standpoint of the concerns and priorities of virtue ethics to determine its appropriateness for development along the lines of virtue ethics. It concludes that its focus on meaning, embeddedness, and realism make Niebuhr's anthropology appropriate for a particular approach to virtue ethics, as found in Nussbaum.

In the interpretive phase on virtue ethics, Chapters 5 and 6 examine the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition to identify key elements relevant to this project, and to choose a particular approach to virtue ethics which will best serve the objective of developing a Christian realist understanding of virtue. It presents the work of Martha Nussbaum as a virtue ethics which stresses fragility and social justice. In Tracy's terms, the project asks, dialectically, whether Nussbaum is describing limit-situations, and proposing responses that move her ethic into the comprehensive realm of religious discourse.

Then, in another dialectical move, the project sets Niebuhr and Nussbaum side by side in order to analyse significant similarities and differences. The project identifies points at which one may shed light on the other.²⁸ Without falsely confusing the

²⁸ Tracy relates this final moment of interpretation to Hans-Georg Gadamer's fusion of horizons, in which "the reader overcomes the strangeness of another horizon not by empathizing with the psychic state or cultural situation of the of the author, but rather by understanding the basic vision of the author implied by the text, and the mode-of-being-in-the-world referred to by the text." *Ibid.*, 78.

objectives or commitments of either Niebuhr or Nussbaum, the project finds parallels which spark new insights about the operation and processes of virtue.²⁹ In specific, the correlation proposes a theological-ethical cycle observed in both Niebuhr and Nussbaum as the primary operation of habituation in virtue in a Christian realist virtue ethics. The explication of the theological-ethical cycle and a discussion of the role of grace in virtue occupies Chapter 7.³⁰

In a final constructive move, Chapter 8 continues this critical correlation as it begins to sketch out the basic elements of a virtue ethics based on a Christian realist understanding of *eudaimonia*, virtue, the four cardinal virtues and the three theological virtues. Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer is a structuring device for this sketch. Critical correlation between Niebuhr and Nussbaum thus allows us to place key elements of virtue ethics from Nussbaum alongside Niebuhr's framework of theological anthropology in the search for a Christian realist virtue ethics. It determines that there is a kind of synergy possible which offers a theology that responds both adequately and appropriately to the simultaneous realities of human fragility and the call to work for justice.

²⁹ The idea that this dialectical encounter should "spark new insights" is an image borrowed from a reference to Ricoeur and Barth in Boyd Blundell, *Paul Ricoeur between Theology and Philosophy: Detour and Return* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 11.

³⁰ In the Thomistic tradition, the distinction is made between uncreated grace, *gratia increata* and created grace, *gratia creata*. Related as cause and effect, uncreated grace refers to the state of union with God, while created grace refers to the effects in the creature of the presence of uncreated grace. This project uses the word grace to refer to created grace, in this sense.

1.6 Introduction to the Project Resources

1.6.1 Reinhold Niebuhr's Framework of Theological Anthropology

The fragility of the human condition, and the way it mars our human aspirations toward righteousness, preoccupied twentieth century American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. As a liberal Protestant, and inheritor of the Social Gospel tradition, Niebuhr took for granted that attentiveness to questions of justice and social transformation are the principal goals of the Christian faith. Yet Niebuhr belonged to the generation whose confidence in human progress was shattered by the Great War, the Depression and the rise of totalitarianism.

Niebuhr's Christian realism insists that the goodness of humanity is fragile – that humans are both radically limited by the contingency of particular historical and social location, and yet also radically free to transcend these limits.

Man [sic] is and yet is not, involved in the flux of nature and time. He [sic] is a creature, subject to nature's necessities and limitations, but he is also a free spirit who knows the brevity of his years, and by this knowledge transcends the temporal within himself.³¹

This freedom exponentially increases the human potential for both good and evil. He saw that human beings are grounded in nature, and relativized by context, yet able to reflect and conceptualize beyond the confines of their concrete given reality. In the spirit of modernism, Niebuhr insisted that human societies are not divinely ordained or

³¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 1. The project addresses in Chapter 2 the question of whether Niebuhr's 'man' is actually a very particular kind of man, rather than the universal person Niebuhr may have been attempting to talk about. Nevertheless, for ease of reading, subsequent quotations from Niebuhr will assume the 'sic'.

immutable. Rather, society is a product of human efforts and is thus subject to modification and reform in order to realize human aspirations. However, he also observed that such social gains were likely to introduce new social evils. Such was the conundrum of human progress – both good and evil develop. Niebuhr found himself completely unable to share the sanguine expectations of his liberal mentors, and he rejected utterly the proposal that by moral effort Christians could ‘bring in the Kingdom’. His theology attempts to examine the impact of human fragility on the work of social transformation that he takes to be the primary imperative of the Gospel. He insists that, in practice, the realities of persistent self-interest and of power have more impact than pious hopes and moralistic lectures. Christian praxis must be based not on idealistic dreams, but on realism.

The centre of Niebuhr’s work is theological anthropology. Working as a minister for fifteen years at Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit, Niebuhr became convinced that the critical meeting point of Gospel and world is the human person. His most important work, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, is a sustained theological reflection on human nature, and on the impact of the fragility of the human character on our collective history and life.

Even so, Niebuhr’s concern for our fragile condition was not primarily pastoral or therapeutic. In this sense, Niebuhr paid little direct attention to theoretical questions of individual praxis in his consideration of fragility, or how to help people improve their behaviour. He wrote almost nothing about virtue as habituation or qualities of character. His priority was to participate as a forceful Christian voice in the public policy debates

of his day. In this he was unexceptional. Liberal Protestant social ethics is relentlessly extroverted, and concerned with norms and prescriptions for society as a whole. As such, liberal Protestant social ethics has neglected questions about the character or virtues of the ethical agent. Questions about what kind of human qualities are needed to persevere in the work of social justice, or of how we can engender compassion in our children, are seldom raised. There is in Protestant ethics almost a reluctance to consider virtue, on the grounds that preoccupation with self and self-cultivation is too inward-looking for a Christian. Thus, mid-twentieth century Christian realism did not fully address the question of the virtues – the habits, skills and qualities of character required for living out a Christian calling to social engagement while taking seriously the limitations imposed by our fragile state. Niebuhr himself did not ask the question posed by this dissertation.

Like those of his contemporaries, Niebuhr's account of human existence takes as its standard the experience of agency of the (male) person of privilege. Some of his critics, in particular feminist critics, noted that this is a significant gap in any description of the human condition. Rebekah M. Miles analyses the critique and proposes an adaptation of Niebuhr's Christian realism which she calls "more Niebuhrian than Niebuhr."³² It is this adapted Niebuhrian framework of theological anthropology that the project seeks to develop.

³² Rebekah M. Miles, *The Bonds of Freedom: Feminist Theology and Christian Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 154.

To summarize, in Niebuhr's framework of theological anthropology, adapted to include the insights of Miles, we find a substantive conceptualization of the human condition which is not developed into a reflection on virtue. However, in Chapter 4 I will argue that it is open to such development through the addition of key elements from virtue ethics, in particular in the work of Martha Nussbaum. Niebuhr's framework provides a distinctive understanding of fragility and a theological anthropology which is open to being pushed forward towards a virtue ethics which is identifiably Christian realist. As a dialogue partner in Tracy's revisionist method of critical correlation Niebuhr represents the first source, based on the Christian tradition.

1.6.2 The Aristotelian Virtue Ethics Tradition

Aristotelian virtue ethics is an approach to moral philosophy which reflects systematically on the content and formation of the character of the moral agent. Philosopher David Solomon notes that in every action subject to moral reflection we can separate out our consideration of the action itself, of the consequences of the action, and of the person performing the act.³³ Virtue ethics concerns itself with the person performing the act – the moral agent, and the life that he or she is living. It considers the nature and goal of the good life for humans. It describes the qualities of character – virtues – which are the source of a stable tendency to deliberate and act with moral skill, and which thus constitute human flourishing. A virtue is a habitual disposition to perceive, to feel and to act, and to do these things well. Virtue ethics provides a number

³³ Solomon, *Internal Objections*, 171.

of key elements for reflection on the good life for humans, and the virtues that constitute it.

While there is a wide range of perspectives among contemporary writers on virtue ethics, Martha Nussbaum identifies three elements that form a common ground:

A. Moral philosophy should be concerned with the agent, as well as with choice and action.

B. Moral philosophy should therefore concern itself with motive and intention, emotion and desire: in general, with the character of the inner moral life, and with the settled patterns of motive, emotion and reasoning that lead us to call someone a person of a certain sort (courageous, generous, moderate, just, etc.)

C. Moral philosophy should focus not only on isolated acts of choice, but also and more importantly on the whole course of the agent's moral life, its patterns of commitment, conduct and also passion.³⁴

In the Western philosophical and religious tradition, concern with virtue was central through classical antiquity, and into the early and medieval Christian periods. Thomas Aquinas' systematic reappropriation and reworking of Aristotle's understanding of virtue remains foundational in Roman Catholic ethics. As noted above, Protestant ethics has historically been more reserved in its approach to virtue, based on its extroversion, and on what Jennifer A. Herdt calls the "hyper-Augustinian"³⁵ suspicion that emphasis on moral effort detracts from the full dependence on grace that Christian faith requires. However, since the twentieth century, both Christian theologians and

³⁴ Martha Nussbaum, "Virtue Ethics – a Misleading Category?" *Ethics* 3 (1999):170.

³⁵ Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting On Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 18.

secular philosophers have appropriated forms of virtue ethics which have recognized human limitations, and dependence (in the Christian formulation) on grace.

In order to situate contemporary discussions of virtue with respect to both modern moral philosophy and Protestant social ethics, it is important to recognize that since the Enlightenment period, a primary controversy has played out between deontological formulations derived from the work of Emmanuel Kant, and utilitarian formulations derived originally from Jeremy Bentham and J.S. Mill, and developed through the work of Moore and Sidgwick.³⁶ These two moral philosophies have been intimately connected with and have supported the development of liberal political philosophy, and its theoretical reflections on the nature of democracy. In a sense they function as an invisible backdrop for contemporary public ethics, a kind of philosophical wallpaper which until recently has been taken for granted in modern social and political discourse, as well as liberal Protestant theology. They have also provided the foundation of concrete governance and administrative systems in the Western world. In contemporary political philosophy, the work of John Rawls is associated with the Kantian deontological tradition, while the implicit basis of most public policy in the modern state is consequentialist. Because Protestant social ethics, including the work of

³⁶ Within the field of ethics it is customary to distinguish between deontological, consequentialist, and virtue ethics. Each of these approaches serves as a window on ethical reflection, and raises a characteristic set of questions. Deontological ethics is primarily concerned with the determining principles or rules which govern the rightness of actions, and the obligations and duties which arise from these principles. Consequentialist ethics – of which utilitarian ethics is an important subset – seeks to provide moral guidance by examining the possible outcome or consequences of the action.

Niebuhr, has largely reflected this political and philosophical discourse, the concerns of virtue ethics have been relatively absent.³⁷

In the past fifty years, there has been a revival of interest in the question of the moral agent, and the qualities of character which are significant for the moral life. G.E.M. Anscombe's article "Modern Moral Philosophy,"³⁸ published first in 1958, and included in many collections since then as the germinal insight for the revival of virtue ethics, launched a debate which has attracted analytical philosophers, classical scholars and Christian apologists. Part of the effort to reopen questions of virtue has been a renewal of philosophical interest in Aristotle and the Stoics. Martha Nussbaum is a prominent voice in this renewal. In parallel, there has been a revival of interest among Christian scholars in Thomas Aquinas' comprehensive theological treatment of virtue ethics. In Protestant Christian ethics, discussions of virtue have been centered in what might broadly be called the neo-traditional conversation,³⁹ with its links to non-foundational, post-modernist reflections on Christian community and narrative theology.⁴⁰

³⁷ Herdt offers a nuanced treatment of this broad generalization in *Putting on Virtue*.

³⁸ G.E.M Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* Vol 33/No. 124 (1958): 1-19.

³⁹ The question of nomenclature for Protestants is difficult. See Jeffrey Stout, "Commitments and Traditions in the Study of Religious Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25, no. 3 (1998): 23-56, where he identifies neo-traditionalists and Dorrien, *American Liberal Theology*, 531ff., where he refers to post-liberals. I opt for the term neo-traditionalist because it captures the notion of tradition that is so important to MacIntyre's followers, and because post-liberal is often identified more narrowly with the cultural-linguistic focus of Lindbeck.

⁴⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1975); Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1985). Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997); Stanley

In order to determine an approach to virtue ethics that can be used within a liberal Protestant context, and Christian realism in particular, it will be necessary to survey the virtue ethics tradition. The research will have to take account of the fact that much of the contemporary revival of interest in virtue positions itself as anti-liberal and anti-modern. Among some writers, including MacIntyre, Hauerwas, Pinches and Murphy, this development in ethics echoes a more general critique of the universalist posture of Enlightenment philosophy.

This project identifies Martha Nussbaum's approach to Aristotelian virtue ethics as most valuable for its purpose, based on her focus on fragility and on social justice. Given the theological framework of Niebuhr, the project also follows contemporary interpreters of Aquinas building on Aristotelian virtue ethics in order to explore theological elements relevant to the project. It will rely primarily on Jean Porter and Diana Fritz Cates for an interpretation of the Thomist tradition.⁴¹

Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2001); Stanley Hauerwas, *Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth Century Theology and Philosophy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999); Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey Murphy and Mark Nation, eds. *Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994); Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, Mark Thiessen Nation, eds. *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition*. (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, 1997); Lutheran and Mennonite treatments of virtue are to be found in Gilbert C. Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) and Joseph J. Kotva, Jr., *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1996), respectively.

⁴¹ Jean Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1984); Jean Porter, "Virtue Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Robin Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2001), 96-111; Jean Porter, "Virtue" in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 205-219; Diana Fritz Cates, *Choosing to Feel: Virtue, Friendship, and Compassion for Friends* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997). See also other interpreters of the Thomist tradition, Bernhard Häring *The Virtues of an Authentic Life* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori Publications, 1997); Joseph Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press,

In order to find an approach to virtue ethics which has significant affinity with Niebuhr's Christian realism, the project will explore the work of contemporary classical scholar and political philosopher Martha Nussbaum. Within the tradition of virtue ethics, the project chooses Nussbaum as the primary conversation partner in developing a Christian realist virtue ethics because of her emphasis on fragility and on social justice. Her reflections on the role of the emotions in moral deliberation, and on the critical function of compassion add significantly to Niebuhr's picture of the self as constituted by dialogue. Nussbaum provides an approach to virtue which is neither anti-liberal, anti-modernist, nor anti-universalist. As a dialogue partner in Tracy's revisionist method of critical correlation she represents the second source, based on 'common human experience'.

1.7 Challenges for Linking Christian Realism and Virtue Ethics

Tracy's revisionist model for contemporary theology is specifically aimed at the necessity and the difficulty of doing theology in a pluralist and secularized world. The challenges posed are both generic and specific. As the study proceeds, the research will address a number of specific challenges which arise in the task of placing Reinhold Niebuhr in conversation with virtue ethics in general, and Martha Nussbaum in particular. These are: anti-virtue in liberal Protestant ethics, anti-liberalism in virtue ethics, and the role of God's grace in a secular society.

1966), Romanus Cessario, *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), Ralph McInerny *Aquinas* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

1.7.1 Anti-virtue in Liberal Protestant Ethics

The first challenge for the project is to determine whether virtue ethics is an appropriate approach at all, given the concerns of Christian realism. As noted, Niebuhr himself did not pose the questions of this project. Although Niebuhr was certainly busy with other things, his neglect of virtue signifies more than simple oversight. His lack of concern for the categories and insights of virtue ethics reflects the broader liberal tradition of disregard and distrust. The stress that virtue ethics places on self-improvement and perfectionism has ironic parallels with the unrealistic aspirations of Social Gospel liberals that Niebuhr found superficial and infuriating.⁴²

Niebuhr's suspicion resonates with the history of western Christian thought. Christian concern that emphasis on virtue may be a problem – that it implies that we can make ourselves into the people who deserve salvation – dates back to the letters of Paul and is formulated forcefully in Augustine. Augustine rejected the pagan virtues as 'splendid vices', on the grounds "that ordinary habituation in virtue simply entrenches the vices of pride and self-love."⁴³ Especially in Protestantism, the idea has persisted that God's grace and human effort are somehow a zero-sum game. The notion that grace can (and perhaps must, to make theological sense) work alongside human effort – that in Aquinas' terms, both acquired and infused virtue are part of the human picture – is a source of anxiety and ambivalence. In tracing the development of this ambivalence

⁴² Niebuhr, *Nature*, 93; Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 88.

⁴³ Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 2.

through the centuries, Herdt shows how a hyper-Augustinian logic eventually, in Hume, detaches virtue from Protestantism altogether, and places it in the secular world.⁴⁴ The irony here is that it is the liberalism that Niebuhr criticized as naïve tends to operate with a strong ethos of civic virtue. Arguably, part of Niebuhr's disagreement with Social Gospel liberals was his critique of the implied pagan virtue ethic that he believed they embodied. Any Christian realist virtue ethics, to be true to Protestant tradition, will have to retain a strong sense of human sinfulness and fragility, and the role of grace. It will avoid both self-sufficiency and perfectionism. The virtue ethics which is to be developed here will not be an ethics of perfection, but a more modest exploration of the virtues required for living in a state of imperfection, amidst fragility.

The research will explore in Chapter 4 the question of whether Niebuhr's Christian realist framework of theological anthropology is implicitly open to a virtue ethics treatment. It reviews Niebuhr's use of virtue terms in relation to the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics, and explores in more detail the possibility that Niebuhr's theological anthropology implies substantive antagonism to virtue ethics. It further reviews the question of whether the conceptualization of the self as developed in Niebuhr lends itself to a virtue ethics treatment. It looks at Niebuhr's emphasis on realism, embeddedness, and meaning to find parallels with the attention virtue ethics pays to *telos*, community, practice and tradition. It looks to Gilbert Meilaender's analysis of the difference between substantive and relational understandings of virtue in

⁴⁴ Ibid., 314.

Luther to establish that a Protestant virtue ethics is possible.⁴⁵ It notes that Geoffrey Scott has demonstrated that a concept of virtue emerges within Niebuhr's theology such that "neither the reality of sin nor the possibility of realizing human goodness are denied."⁴⁶ The research of this project aims to follow up this insight by adding key elements from the virtue ethics tradition to the Christian realist framework of theological anthropology.

1.7.2 Anti-liberalism in Virtue Ethics

The second challenge for the project arises from the significant grain of truth in the complaint of inappropriateness above, from the other side of the equation. Part of the reason liberal Protestant theologians have not focused on virtue ethics, in the same way that Roman Catholic and neo-traditional Protestants have, is its anti-liberal, anti-modern rhetoric. In general Protestant writing on virtue is ecclesiocentric – it proposes "a rigid and static line between Christian virtue and liberal vice."⁴⁷ This virtue ethics has envisaged the life of the Christian community as a community called out from the world, with particular practices and traditions which set it apart. It focuses on Christian particularity – the sources and resources of scripture, liturgy, and the church – as the basis of coherence (in MacIntyre's terms) and intelligibility of Christian ethics. In

⁴⁵ Meilaender, *Theory and Practice of Virtue*, 100 ff.

⁴⁶ Geoffrey Scott, "Christian Realism and the Viability of the Concept of Virtue in Protestant Moral Theology," *Religious Studies in the Pacific*. Auckland, New Zealand: Colloquium Pub. (1978): 105.

⁴⁷ Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press in Association with Hebrew Union College Press, Cincinnati, 2004), 154.

addition, Stanley Hauerwas, the most prominent voice in Protestant virtue ethics, is a particular critic of Niebuhr.⁴⁸

Indeed, much of this discussion is actively hostile to the general project of liberal ethics. “In short,” Hauerwas writes, “it has been the project of liberal political and ethical theory to create just societies *without just people*, primarily by trying to set in place social institutions and/or discover moral principles that insure cooperation between people who share no common goods or virtues.”⁴⁹

The challenge will be to demonstrate that there is openness in the liberal theology of Niebuhr, with its low ecclesiology and its determination to engage fully in a secular society, to the addition of key elements of a particular approach to virtue ethics. This project attempts to frame virtue in a Christian person whose life is lived in the secular society composed of multiple interlocking communities, including but not even primarily the church. I will argue (following Nussbaum in a general way) that the key here is to look at virtues and practices of deliberation which do not depend only upon the particularities of a Christian community, but relate also to secular modernity. Christian realism assumes that there is significant continuity between the values of a certain part of secular society and a Christian realist perspective, and that a major part of the task of a Christian is to discern God at work in the world.⁵⁰ In the language of a certain part of the virtue ethics literature, it takes liberal secular society as the *polis* or moral

⁴⁸ Hauerwas, *Grain*, 87-140. One of his primary complaints is Niebuhr’s low ecclesiology and his skepticism about all ‘claims of sanctity’, 136.

⁴⁹ Hauerwas and Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues*, 149, emphasis mine.

⁵⁰ This is entirely in keeping with the aims of David Tracy’s method of critical correlation.

community, encouraging the justice-seekers to become involved in issues of public education and political life as sites of habituation and formation in virtue. It is in this public space that moral community is formed and becomes formative.⁵¹ Niebuhr's views about the moral ambiguity of community, and the dangers of idealistic beliefs about society are well known.

The brotherhood of the community is indeed the ground in which the individual is ethically realized. But the community is the frustration as well as the realization of individual life. Its collective egotism is an offense to his conscience; its institutional injustices negate the ideal of justice; and such brotherhood as it achieves is limited by ethnic and geographic boundaries. Historical communities are, in short, more deeply involved in nature and time than the individual.⁵²

It could be asked whether Niebuhr lacks a sufficiently positive view of the social life required to support the development of virtue. As will be seen in Chapters 4 and 7, Niebuhr's realistic view of society includes assumptions which imply that society is the site of the formation of virtue. The project will attempt to develop a virtue ethics which stresses Christian engagement in the wider society, focused on the framework of theological anthropology which emerges in Niebuhr's work, rather than emphasizing the church as the principal site of formation in virtue.

To do this it will seek within the literature of virtue ethics an approach which does not denounce liberalism or modernism, but affirms with Protestant social ethics the

⁵¹ Although both Niebuhr and Nussbaum are critical of liberal modern society, and of the distortions of individualism, and of moral ambiguity of community, both also see the interlocking social and legal institutions of family, community, nation and global community as offering the possibility of wholesome formation in character. They do not share the pessimism of MacIntyre and others about fractured consciousness or moral unintelligibility.

⁵² Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 310.

broad aspirations toward social justice which are part of the liberal tradition. It explores the work of Martha Nussbaum as an example from the virtue ethics tradition which meets this requirement.

1.7.3 God's Grace in a Secular Society

A third challenge for the project will be to pose the question of the relevance of Christian faith to the kind of account of virtue developed here. This question is a key aspect of Tracy's method of critical correlation. Martha Nussbaum's formulation of the key elements of virtue ethics which this project finds critical to a Christian realist virtue ethics, is developed entirely without reference to God or to faith. Hauerwas' main charge against Niebuhr is that in the end there is no God there. Niebuhr's work certainly found proponents among those who were not concerned with its theological foundations – there was literally a group of supporters who called themselves, perhaps in jest, 'Atheists for Niebuhr'. His insights are still invoked in the absolutely secular space of US political discussion. The question is, why not just ignore the theological aspect and explore the parallels in Niebuhr's and Nussbaum's thought?

The project will approach this question in three ways. First, as part of the interpretive phase, based on its study of Niebuhr's Christian realism it will argue that his anthropology arises directly out of his theology and his faith commitments. Christian faith was integral and not incidental to Niebuhr's views on humanity, and a virtue ethics based on Niebuhr's framework of theological anthropology will be Christian. Second, in its dialectical phase, it will identify ways in which Nussbaum's insights on natural virtue

may give insights into Niebuhr's understanding of the function of grace. Third, it will propose that the approach to virtue explored here is relevant, and even essential, to Christian realism as it relates to the secularized world in which we all live. Returning to its 'mother tongue' of theology,⁵³ the project will argue that habituation in realism, compassion and corrigibility are congruent with, and not a negation of, the grace of God.

1.8 Summary and Map of the Project

The goal of the project is to find resources for a liberal Protestant response to the problem of human fragility and the obligation to work for justice. It aims to develop an ethics of virtue which will address the life situation of Christian justice-seekers. It does this by introducing key elements from the tradition of virtue ethics into the framework of theological anthropology found in Niebuhr's Christian realism.

The organization of the research follows three broad steps. First, it analyses Niebuhr's Christian realist framework of theological anthropology, as adapted by Miles, to determine its openness to a virtue ethics treatment. Second, it seeks in the virtue ethics tradition, with special emphasis on Martha Nussbaum, the key elements of virtue ethics

⁵³ Using the terminology of Paul Ricoeur, this project finds the two 'languages' of theology and philosophy separate though not 'watertight'. Following him, it notes that theological or religious language will embrace a notion of anteriority "of the order of the fundamental rather than the chronological." (Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction*, trans. Kathleen Blamery (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 147.) Thus, the mother tongue of the project is theology – specifically the liberal Protestant idiom of Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism. The project takes the philosophical contributions of Martha Nussbaum as its 'second language' for the development of Christian realist virtue, because of her emphasis on fragility and on social justice. Having received (and translated) this input from another language, it interprets and concludes in the mother tongue. While retaining a sense of their separation, the project notes with Ricoeur that one of the places where the two languages of theology and philosophy most fruitfully intersect is in "the fact of compassion." *Ibid.*, 159) For this reason the project gives a detailed review of Nussbaum's formulation of compassion.

which can be added to this framework. Third, it places the findings of the major and minor resources together, adding key elements from virtue ethics to a Christian realist framework of theological anthropology in order to formulate a Christian realist ethics of virtue.

The project proceeds by a methodology of critical correlation based on the revisionist model for contemporary theology outlined in David Tracy's *Blessed Rage for Order*. The following paragraphs outline this research process in more detail.

Chapter 2: *Niebuhr: Theologian of Fragility*, is the first interpretive step in the discussion of Niebuhr. It presents an overview of the general framework of Reinhold Niebuhr as a Christian realist theologian of fragility, in order to distil a core set of insights relevant to the tasks of virtue ethics. It investigates Niebuhr's specific understanding of fragility. Given the breadth of Niebuhr's own writing and the very large secondary literature, this analysis will necessarily be selective, focusing only on matters relevant to the question of fragility and its openness to a virtue ethics treatment.

Chapter 3: *Niebuhr's Framework of Theological Anthropology*, is the second interpretive step in the discussion of Niebuhr. It focuses more narrowly on Niebuhr's description of the human person, along with his account of the underlying dynamic of moral life, human sinfulness and grace, as a framework of theological anthropology. It explores Niebuhr's use of the metaphor of dialogue with self, other and God as a description of the formation of the human self, and of the repetitive action of grace as forgiveness and empowerment. It notes that Niebuhr's account of the human condition lacks a specific treatment of virtue as habitual disposition. The chapter concludes with a

review of the major criticisms of Niebuhr, again focusing on those critiques pertinent to his theological anthropology, and highlighting the feminist critique as most relevant. It presents the work of Rebekah M. Miles as a helpful response to that critique, and a significant amplification of the scope of Niebuhr's framework of theological anthropology, which will be essential to the development of a Christian realist virtue ethics.

Chapter 4: *From Niebuhr's Christian Realism to Christian Realist Virtue Ethics* is the first dialectical phase of the project, asking whether it is appropriate to develop Niebuhr's Christian realism along the lines of virtue ethics. It notes three objections to the project – lack of attention to virtue as habituation in Niebuhr, implicit antagonism toward to virtue ethics, and the question of a self capable of habituation in Niebuhr. It argues that all these objections can be met. Situating Niebuhr within the history of Protestant social ethics as a liberal critic of liberalism, it highlights the themes of meaning, embeddedness, and realism which are also highly significant in virtue ethics. It argues that these themes, which recur in Niebuhr's treatment of the human being, the Christian religion, and Christian ethics, indicate that his work is open to a virtue ethics approach.

Chapter 5: *Mining the Virtue Ethics Tradition*, is the first interpretive chapter on virtue ethics. It identifies the particular approach to virtue ethics which will be most useful in the formulation of a Christian realist virtue ethics and argues for an approach that highlights Aristotle, interpreters of Aquinas, and Martha Nussbaum, as the most relevant interpreter of Aristotelian virtue ethics for this project. It identifies key elements

in the classical and historical Christian treatment of virtue ethics. Focussing first on Aristotle, and Porter's interpretation of Aquinas, it reviews concepts of *telos*, *eudaimonia*, virtue, habituation, deliberation and the mean.

Chapter 6: *Virtue Ethics as Fragility, Emotion and Compassion: Martha Nussbaum*, is the second interpretive chapter on virtue ethics. It turns to contemporary philosopher Martha Nussbaum, whose approach will be a helpful resource in the search for a virtue ethics that can be integrated with the Christian realist picture of the human being. Like Niebuhr, she emphasizes human fragility yet also presupposes social obligations and political engagement in a democratic, multicultural, and secular society. Her reading of Aristotle elucidates the way human vulnerability to loss and suffering determines the requirements of virtue. The chapter emphasizes her discussion of deliberation in *Fragility of Goodness* and the reflections on the role of emotion and compassion she develops in *Upheavals of Thought*. As preparation for a discussion of the role of grace in a Christian realist virtue ethics, it presents Nussbaum's views on love and transcendence.

Chapter 7: *Niebuhr and Nussbaum in Critical Correlation: The Theological-Ethical Cycle*, is the second dialectical phase of the project. It begins the process of joining the Christian realist framework of theological anthropology with key elements of the tradition of virtue ethics in order to generate a Christian realist virtue ethics. An exercise in critical correlation, it places Niebuhr and Nussbaum in conversation to explore areas of resonance and dissonance in their work. It examines significant parallels in their depiction of the dynamism of the human condition, and identifies a

theological-ethical cycle which is common to both. This cycle of four moves – anxiety, escape, recognition of loss, and re-embrace – animates and moderates the moral life. The chapter examines various ways in which virtue is cultivated in community, and presents both Niebuhr and Nussbaum as ‘pessimistic optimists’ on the formative potential of the community. In a review of their differences on human sinfulness and the role of grace, it explores ways in which Nussbaum’s treatment of natural virtue may provide insights that illuminate Niebuhr’s conception of grace, and contribute to Christian realist virtue ethics.

Chapter 8: *The Virtues of a Christian Realist*, draws on the analysis in chapters Two through Five to examine what the research implies for a Christian realist form of virtue ethics. It notes that Christian realist virtue ethics serves to enable us to live with integrity in the midst of fragility, rather than escaping it. It adds key elements from the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition into the framework of theological anthropology of Christian realism. Using the elements of Niebuhr’s Serenity Prayer as an organizing structure, it examines the classical cardinal virtues: fortitude as courage, temperance as serenity, justice as compassion, and prudence as realism or wisdom. It presents each virtue as positioned between two corresponding errors or vices, and identifies the emotion most relevant in each case. It reviews the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. It explores the role of grace, and the relationship of natural virtue to infused virtue, concluding that the two work together.

Chapter 9: *Conclusion: The Fragile Justice-Seeker and Christian Realist Virtue Ethics*, summarizes the findings of the project and identifies further lines of questioning and research which arise from the project.

CHAPTER 2

NIEBUHR: THEOLOGIAN OF FRAGILITY

The purpose of this chapter is to offer support for the claim that Reinhold Niebuhr can be read as a theologian of fragility, and to explore the precise meaning of fragility in his writing.¹ It begins to identify the Niebuhrian theological framework which is to serve as the basis of a Christian realist virtue ethics. In terms of Tracy's method of critical correlation, it is the first interpretive phase of the project.

After a short introduction, the chapter turns to a description of the *Sitz-im-Leben* of Reinhold Niebuhr, on the grounds that his work both arises from and reflects back into the existential conditions of his own life and times. Highlighting his social-historical location (Section 2), and identifying the implied reader of his work (Section 3) will assist in the task of retrieving what is most useful for the present task. Section 4 of the chapter provides a detailed review of the core theological ideas which animated Niebuhr's thinking, as it considers his articulation of the elements of Christian faith. This section will analyse the major ways in which the theme of fragility appears in Niebuhr's theology.

¹ The concept of fragility is drawn in part from Martha Nussbaum, whose depiction of the ambiguity of the human condition echoes Niebuhr. "If it is true that there is a lot about us that is messy, needy, uncontrolled, rooted in the dirt and standing helplessly in the rain, it is also true that there is something about us that is pure and purely active, something that we could think of as 'divine, immortal, intelligible, unitary, ever self-consistent and invariable'." Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 4.

The primary source for this review is the corpus of Niebuhr's major theological and ethical works – *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, *Beyond Tragedy*, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, (Vols. I and II), *Children of Light and Children of Darkness*, *The Irony of American History*, *The Self and the Dramas of History*.

Much, even most, of Niebuhr's theological writing was activist – his religious insights and ethical admonitions were aimed at practical questions and concrete decision-making in the area of social, economic, and political life in the United States.² Niebuhr himself insisted that he was not a systematic theologian, but a teacher of Christian ethics.³ While Niebuhr's political interests and preoccupations changed through the decades, I follow Lovin, Dorrien and Gilkey in maintaining that his core theological ideas are consistent.⁴

2.1 Introducing Reinhold Niebuhr

Reinhold Niebuhr is the most prominent figure among the twentieth century Protestant theologians known as Christian realists.⁵ Niebuhr's prodigious opus reflects the role of the mainline Protestant churches in North America during the first sixty years of the century. In a context which brought a number of Christian leaders (most of whom

² Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, eds. *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 453-478.

³ Niebuhr, *Intellectual Biography*, in Kegley and Bretall 3.

⁴ Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, 33; Dorrien, *American Liberal Theology*, 436ff; Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 16.

⁵ Dorrien, *Soul In Society*, 146.

were Protestant ministers and all of whom were men) into public prominence as commentators on current issues, Reinhold Niebuhr emerged as the outstanding example of a public theologian. His primary stance was that of ‘insider critic’ of liberal Christianity and liberal American politics. Niebuhr excoriated his liberal predecessors and contemporaries as naïve and self-deluded to think that society could be transformed by goodwill alone. Writing and speaking at universities and seminaries all over the United States, Niebuhr published nonstop. While his works encompass a wide range of political, historical and theological topics, in his primary commitments he remains, even by his own account, a liberal.⁶

The centre of Niebuhr’s theological insight is that the situation of humanity is fragile. It is the human condition to live at once in a contingent and an ultimate reality. The human being is ambiguously both vulnerable and resilient, both child of nature and spirit standing outside of nature, both great and weak.⁷ It is the difficulty of untangling our greatness and our weakness that puts us most at risk.⁸ He argues that it is precisely when we confuse what is contingent with what is ultimate that we go wrong. When we mis-identify our provisional and limited efforts at progress as bearing transcendent or eternal significance, human society opens itself to severe distortion. The distortion

⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Quality of Our Lives,” *Christian Century* 77 (May 11, 1960), 568. He writes, “...I find that I am a liberal at heart, and that my broadsides against liberalism were indiscriminate ...and am now inclined to become much more empirical, judging each situation and movement in terms of its fruits.”

⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, vol. 1, *Human Nature* (New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1941; reprint Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 181.

uppermost in Niebuhr's mind during the 1930s, 40s, and 50s was the aberration of totalitarianism in both fascist and communist forms.

Niebuhr had many differences of opinion with colleagues during his lifetime, and after he died, his intellectual legacy was disputed among neo-conservatives, liberationist and left-liberals.⁹ Half a century later, he is still considered a worthy opponent. Since his death, his work has been partly eclipsed in Protestant thinking by the rise of liberation theologies, and the critique of the disembodied, male 'magisterial voice' of the mid-century theologians. However, interest in Niebuhr, and more especially in how his work can provide insights relevant to current issues, has resulted in a number of recent publications.¹⁰ To a great extent the academy has forgiven him for being a man of his

⁹ Matthew Berke, "The Disputed Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr," *First Things* 27 (November 1992), 37-42.

¹⁰ J. Benson, "A Quiet Reminder from Reinhold Niebuhr," *Dialog – A Journal of Theology* 48, no. 2 (2009): 117-118; Michael Bourgeois, "Hope, History and Redemption in the Theology of Richard Roberts (1874-1945)," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 19/2 (2003): 157-172; John D. Carlson, "Is There a Christian Realist Theory of War and Peace? Reinhold Niebuhr and Just War Thought," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 133-161; John D. Carlson, "The Morality, Politics, and Irony of War: Recovering Reinhold Niebuhr's Ethical Realism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 36, no. 4 (2008): 619-651; Mark Douglas, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Two Pragmatisms," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 22/3 (September 2001): 221-240; Gabriel J. Fackre, "Was Reinhold Niebuhr a Christian?" *First Things* 26 (October 2002) 25-27; Douglas John Hall, "Rasmussen on Niebuhr on Power: Reflections from the Edge of Empire," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 58, no. 1-2 (2004): 46-65. William Kostlevy, "The Illusions of Perfectionism: E Stanley Jones and Reinhold Niebuhr," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 42, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 182-191. Robin W. Lovin, *Christian Realism and the New Realities*; Robin W. Lovin, "Reinhold Niebuhr: Impact and Implications," *Political Theology* 6 no. 4 (2005): 459-471; Jane Barter Moulaison, "Theology, Church and Political Change: Engaging Reinhold Niebuhr's Ecclesiology," *Didaskalia (Otterburne, Man.)* 19, no. 1 (2008): 179-190; Daniel Rice, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau: A Friendship with Contrasting Shades of Realism," *Journal of American Studies* 42, no. 2 (2008): 255-291. Daniel Rice, ed. *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited: Engagements with an Original*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2009); Traci C. West, "Constructing Ethics: Reinhold Niebuhr and Harlem Women Activists," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 29-49.

times and is more interested than disparaging.¹¹ Now in the news again as Obama's favourite theologian,¹² Niebuhr has been brought back into many conversations.

2.2 Niebuhr's *Sitz-im-Leben*

Born in 1892 to immigrant parents, Niebuhr grew up in a German Protestant family in the American Midwest. He learned theology and Greek from his father – a German Evangelical Synod pastor, whose “essentially pietist faith combined liberal and evangelical commitments.”¹³ He studied at an unaccredited denominational college and seminary until transferring to Yale Divinity School in his third year of the Bachelor of Divinity program. He was ordained in 1915 to Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit, where he served until 1928. Bethel was a small suburban middle-class parish of the Evangelical Synod of North America.¹⁴ During these war and post-war years in the boom time of the American auto industry, the congregation expanded from 65 to over 700 members, and struggled with the question of how (and whether) to evolve from an ethnic, community-based German-speaking denomination into the mainstream of English-speaking American Protestantism.¹⁵

¹¹ West (ibid.) is a good example. In “Constructing Ethics” she recognizes Niebuhr's limitations but is more interested in setting side by side the two methods of working for social justice to see how they illuminate each other.

¹² David Brooks, “Obama, Gospel and Verse,” *New York Times*, April 26, 2007.

¹³ Dorrien, *American Liberal Theology*, 436.

¹⁴ An ethnic German denomination now part of the United Church of Christ.

¹⁵ Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996), 42-43.

The challenge of a bilingual upbringing, in which he later claimed he had mastered neither German nor English completely, and of what he considered a mediocre education, may have contributed to a not-completely-ironic chip on the shoulder with respect to the theological academy.¹⁶ As noted, he insisted that he was a teacher of ethics, not a professor of theology.

In general, Niebuhr's theological education had been liberal – from Harnack with his father to the Social Gospel of Rauschenbusch. Working in a parish where all the elements of the Social Gospel commitments were highly relevant – class, race, exclusion, material insecurity and hardship – he came to consider his own liberal formation as inadequate for the depth and persistence of the human difficulties that he saw. He was shocked when the Ford Motor Company simply laid off thousands of workers pending the development of a new model, while boasting of its excellent wages. From the vantage point of his Detroit congregants and neighbours, Niebuhr was appalled by the hypocrisy of the Henry Fords of this world, and moved toward a more radical stance by the plight of the workers.¹⁷

Even before leaving the congregation in 1928 for an appointment as Professor of Practical Theology at Union Theological Seminary, in New York, Niebuhr became extremely active in the preaching and lecture circuit, a practice by which he honed his rhetorical skills as well as his insights. His exposure to the human fallout from the developing auto industry confirmed his critical appraisal of capitalism. At the same time,

¹⁶ Ibid., 28.

¹⁷ Niebuhr, *Christian Century* April 21, 1965, 487-489.

his ideas evolved in response to the observations he made about the changing landscape of international politics. On an invited tour of Europe in 1923, his shocked reaction to the depredations of both war *and* reparations atrocities moved him further in the direction of pacifism and socialism.¹⁸ However, his relentless curiosity and his willingness to adjust his ideas to what he saw as new realities moved him away from this stance. Into the Depression era of the 1930's, his disillusionment with idealist and utopian claims came to include the rising totalitarian regime in Stalinist Russia as well as Nazi Germany. As the Cold War developed in the 50's he identified the idealism of America's 'false innocence' as ironic and potentially tragic for humanity.

Niebuhr was one of a number of young liberal men in the years between the two world wars who responded to the deep crises of Western society – the brutality of World War I, reparations injustice, oppressive industrialization, Depression, totalitarianism – with a profound rejection of the superficiality and lack of engagement with tough realities of traditional liberalism. The 'crisis theologians' (Barth, Bultmann, Bonhoeffer, and Tillich among them) accused liberal theology of blandness, and of a simple optimism that if everybody would 'be nice' things would keep getting better and better until we reach the Kingdom of God. They were morally affronted in particular by the unwillingness of the liberal voice to recognize the self-serving bias inherent in this confident picture, and to critique the larger culture.¹⁹ The identification of Christian liberalism with the dominant culture, and how that was problematic, became crashingly

¹⁸ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 79-81.

¹⁹ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 140-141.

clear to the Europeans because of the First World War and ensuing political disasters. The more subtle situation in North America evoked a slightly different critique from Niebuhr. Impatient with the focus of the Social Gospel movement on social regeneration through such projects as prohibition, Niebuhr concluded that “to be truly progressive, liberal Protestantism had to give higher priority to economic justice than to moral purity.”²⁰

Niebuhr wrote his *magnum opus*, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* in the late thirties, and delivered it as the Gifford Lectures in 1939. He delivered at least one of the lectures with Nazi bombs literally falling in Edinburgh. For both his audience and himself, the question of how humanity is constituted and what this implies for us was not in the least academic.

Niebuhr remained at Union until the end of his career, teaching Christian history and ethics to generations of students preparing for ministry. Throughout his lifetime, he wrote and lectured tirelessly on political and social issues, and on a wide array of current events. The scope of his interests, the breadth of his knowledge (sometimes inaccurate, by his own admission), the power of his insights, and his rhetorical genius combined to make him something of a household word in both the intellectual and the popular culture. The archives of the religious periodicals *The Christian Century*, *Christianity and Crisis*, *Radical Religion*, and a wide range of secular publications overflow with his articles over a fifty year span. For decades, he preached almost every Sunday in university chapels and ‘major pulpits’ around the country. A prayer of Niebuhr’s was

²⁰ Dorrien, *American Liberal Theology*, 446.

adopted by the burgeoning Alcoholics Anonymous movement.²¹ In March 1948, *Time Magazine* pictured him on its cover as an oracle. In a way that is not imaginable today, Niebuhr held forth as a privileged interlocutor with the centres of political and cultural power. This kind of celebrity could only have occurred at a time when, as Martin Marty points out,

there *was* a mainstream in theology and religious life, a penumbral culture surrounding the Niebuhrs and Union and liberal church life. When Niebuhr criticized, he could call on a kind of covenant, a collective conscience, represented by major Protestant and, increasingly, Catholic and Jewish denominations and segments of secular culture surrounding them. These together made up "the" culture. Today each theologian must create a context, develop a vocabulary, find an audience and make an impact on a fluid constituency that may have little voting power or cultural force. These contexts do not intersect or overlap as they did in Niebuhr's prime.²²

In Niebuhr's setting, his background, and his gifts made him the quintessential public theologian of late Protestant Christendom.

2.3 Niebuhr's Implied Reader/Listener

Because of Niebuhr's prominence within the larger culture as well as within the church, it is useful to reflect on what literary criticism calls his implied reader. Like all rhetoricians, Niebuhr adjusted his 'voice' in different settings. Yet in lecture, article,

²¹ Over the years there have been various claims and counterclaims that Niebuhr was or was not the originator of the prayer. He himself wondered whether he might have been unconsciously reiterating something he had heard. Based on new evidence, the most recent conclusion of the editor of the Yale Book of Quotations is that Niebuhr was the originator. Goodstein, *New York Times*, November 27, 2009.

²² Martin E. Marty, review of "Remembering Reinhold Niebuhr: Letters of Reinhold and Ursula M Niebuhr" by Ursula M. Niebuhr, *Christian Century* 108, no. 21 (07/10) 1991: 690-691.

sermon and prayer a consistent ‘listener’ is constructed and engaged. Even though Niebuhr was writing from the position of Professor at Union Theological Seminary, his audience is not really the university. Only part of his audience was the academic Protestant theological establishment. Niebuhr’s reader is well educated, and familiar with the elements of Christian religion, yet not necessarily an academic theologian. Possibly a liberal minister wondering how to link the conventions of Protestant piety to the lived realities of the congregation. Possibly a Christian layperson who has become accustomed to considering the church more of an agency for social improvement than a spiritual home. While there may be a quiet undertone of alienation and theological melancholy, the primary interests of this person are issues of public concern. He or she is not primarily looking for private salvation, or spiritual consolation, but for a guide to reflection on social and political questions of the day. He or she takes for granted that the provision of ‘the Christian perspective’ to any matter of public interest is an appropriate and important task for the church, and would agree that the “subject of Christian ethics in America is America.”²³ He or she may find it disconcerting to be told that it is the human condition to be fragile.

In this context of priority given to social and political concern, it is Niebuhr who is saying that it is about God. He is making the case to his listener that the secular matters he refers to must be understood theologically, and that the most likely errors of socio-economic and political judgment arise from bad theology and in particular from

²³ Stanley Hauerwas, “Christian Ethics in America (and the JRE): A Report on a Book I Will Not Write,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25, no. 3 (1998): 65.

bad theological anthropology. The implied reader is operating in the modern, secular world whose presuppositions are culturally Christian, but whose operating principles are in significant ways agnostic and optimistic. The spiritual struggle of this person is to find meaning, and to avoid both idolatry and despair – the idolatry, on the one hand, of uncritical absorption in the world of secular politics and economics, and the despair, on the other, which finds the grim realities of the world overwhelming. Niebuhr the apologist addresses this person with arguments for a faith that will offer to the fragile Christian more than either magic, mental hygiene or moralism.²⁴

2.4 Niebuhr's Christianity

This overview of Niebuhr's theology highlights the ways in which he may be understood as a theologian of fragility. His insight into the inner tension of the human condition – its ambiguous and dynamic life lived at once in eternity and in history, in nature and in spirit – was primarily an insight into the inescapable vulnerability which human fragility implies. I argue that his Christian theology proceeds from that starting point.

In Niebuhr, the human being is fragile in three ways. First, through human finitude, we are vulnerable not only to death, but to the limitations imposed by a finite world. Second, the human being is fragile through its contingency – its inescapable embeddedness in a particular time, culture, and place, with all the restrictions on

²⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), 6, 32.

knowledge and action that arise from this concrete location. Third, human beings are fragile because we are sinful.

As explored more fully in Chapter 4, these three aspects of fragility are related to each other. For Niebuhr, sin arises precisely because of the attempt to escape finitude on the one hand and contingency on the other. Human beings sin partly through weakness, but also and especially as a response to the recognition of vulnerability. The anxiety produced by this recognition gives rise to an untruthful assertion of strength. The primary sin, in Niebuhr's reckoning, is the sin of pride, in which the human being falsely claims ultimate validity for a contingent reality.

The theological fundamentals of Niebuhr's Christianity can best be contextualized as a response to the failings of the liberal Protestant mainstream, with what he saw as its idealistic, even promethean, claims to moral, social and political progress. His sense of the fragility of human goodness led Niebuhr to turn toward realism. His Christian realist theology is a unique combination of liberal epistemology, classic theism, high christology, and low ecclesiology. He is more than anything, a theologian of the cross, which he sees as "a symbol of ultimate reality."²⁵ In the cross, the futility of our striving is both revealed and overcome, as the divine reality fully embraces the fragility of the human condition.

²⁵ Niebuhr, *Leaves*, 70.

2.4.1 Niebuhr's Faith

For Niebuhr, theology functioned as a way to express and explicate faith, not a way to find faith. In the warmth and depth of his Christian faith, he was a child of German pietism.²⁶ He preached faith, not politics or theology, to new ordinands,

Somehow or other, God dwells in this mystery. If anybody thinks the world is self-sufficing and self-explanatory, and self-fulfilling, he is very far from the Christian faith. But the Christian faith is not just a reaction to mystery ... it is presumed and affirmed that there is meaning in the mystery. Here is one of the points of biblical doctrine: that in meditation we are not just digging into the depths of our unconscious until we have reached the divine level, but that finally, there is a dialogue with another; the one we call the Holy Spirit. The dialogue goes on constantly. I have to comprehend and find Christ in the dialogue. The same God who is Christ is the same God who is the Holy Spirit. I comprehend the mystery not primarily by intellectual effort. I cannot think myself into the Christian faith.²⁷

Faith, for Niebuhr, is our response to a disclosure within experience of a reality that transcends experience.²⁸ Faith is more concerned with trust than with propositional truth statements. "Without faith in God's providence, the freedom of man is intolerable."²⁹ Theology is not a speculative matter and much less a method of doctrinal disputation – he never develops a full system, and never intended to. To the dismay of his colleague Paul Tillich, he didn't seem to care about epistemology – he "begins

²⁶ Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 84.

²⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Justice and Mercy*, ed. Ursula M. Niebuhr (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1974), 128-130. He added, "I *can* think myself out of it ...". This passage counters the claim by Hauerwas that in Niebuhr "God is nothing more than the name of our need to believe that life has an ultimate unity that transcends the world's chaos ..." in Hauerwas, *Grain*, 131.

²⁸ Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 66.

²⁹ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 289.

knowing.”³⁰ As noted, a large proportion of Niebuhr’s writing consists of occasional pieces, in the form of essays and sermons, lecture notes and letters to the editor, and prayers.³¹ The theology implicit and explicit in all this work is consistent but not systematic – and the motor of his thinking about religion was his profound and fervent faith. Notably, for a liberal writing mid-twentieth century, the problem of doubt is largely absent from Niebuhr’s concerns.³²

2.4.2 A Liberal Critique of Liberal Christianity

One area of particular consistency is Niebuhr’s impatience with liberalism in general and liberal Protestantism in particular. He deplores the easy conscience of modernity. In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr gives a narrative of European history in which the medieval synthesis of Biblical and classical thought in Thomist Catholicism separates mid-millennium into Renaissance and Reformation streams. It is the Renaissance view of human possibility and progress, with its irenic view of nature and rationality, and its sense of natural virtue, which underlies the optimistic picture that emerges in a long line of philosophers into the modern period. Niebuhr’s basic theological project was to reintegrate a Reformation understanding of human fragility as sinfulness with Renaissance optimism about the capacity of the human being to

³⁰ Paul Tillich, “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Doctrine of Knowledge,” in Kegley and Bretall, 36.

³¹ Kegley and Bretall, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 455-478.

³² Fox comments, “whereas many members of his generation grew up with the experience of doubt, while understanding (and even yearning for) faith, [Niebuhr] grew up with the traditional experience of faith while understanding the appeal of doubt.” *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 33.

understand nature and to flourish within a good creation.³³ Though Niebuhr himself did not follow this logic through into virtue ethics, it is his critique of liberal optimism that implies the need for formation in virtue.

It seems to Niebuhr in 1940 that the inheritors of the Renaissance tradition have incomprehensibly failed to note the plain facts of their current circumstances. “The modern man is involved in social chaos and political anarchy,” he observes, as the bombs fall. “Contemporary history is filled with manifestations of man’s hysterias and furies; with evidence of his daemonic capacity and inclination to break the harmonies of nature and defy the prudent canons of rational restraint. Yet no cumulation of evidence seems to disturb modern man’s good opinion of himself.”³⁴

In religious terms, what the liberal perspective tends to lack is a sense of human fragility, and therefore it lacks a sense of human sinfulness. Niebuhr observes that the perspective of modernity not only overlooks the plain facts of social chaos and anarchy, but when a glimmer of awareness begins to dawn, it finds a way to transfer the blame to institutional failure or to lack of education among the population. Oddly enough, while claiming tremendous capacity for control of our destiny, this same modern person “considers himself the victim of corrupting institutions which he is about to destroy or reconstruct, or the confusions of ignorance which an adequate education is about to

³³ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 300; Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 156. He never actually says that he wants to become a liberal Protestant Thomist, but that is what he seems to imply.

³⁴ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 94.

overcome. Yet he continues to regard himself as essentially harmless and virtuous.”³⁵

Such a being certainly has no need of forgiveness, since the fault lies elsewhere.

When Niebuhr wants to re-emphasize sin, it is not out of old-fashioned moralism or guilt-mongering, but because the notion of sin gets at the facts as he assesses human existence. Niebuhr’s complaint, against Dewey and other philosophers as well as the liberal theologians, is of naïveté or lack of realism.³⁶

Even those liberals who propose that the human spirit both resides in nature and also transcends natural processes make the mistake of identifying the transcendent with the good. Human freedom, Niebuhr insists, is freedom over reason as well as over nature, and will by no means inevitably lead to unqualified improvement. There is nothing inevitable about ‘progress’, as the rise of totalitarianism and the ironies of American imperialism amply demonstrate. While these glaring examples come from Niebuhr’s era, a similar observation can be made about many aspects of the current global situation. The moral ambiguity of the Green Revolution, of the unfolding of the decolonization processes in the developing world, of the collapse of community following ‘integration’ in the United States,³⁷ and of the devastating environmental impact of increased human technological capacity and wellbeing all throw any simplistic idea of progress into question.

³⁵ Ibid., 94.

³⁶ Ibid., 111.

³⁷ Elizabeth M. Bounds, *Coming Together/Coming Apart: Religion, Community and Modernity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 98.

Moreover, once this is recognized, a bland confidence in progress has no resources to respond. Reality, if it is taken seriously, breaks the hearts of the idealists. The disenchantment (which Niebuhr identifies as culminating in Freud) that inevitably comes with an honest reckoning will lead to despair, “for under the perpetual smile of modernity there is a grimace of disillusion and cynicism.”³⁸ No one observing, for example, contemporary Africa, could doubt this.

When he turns to the liberal Protestant church which lives within and reflects this attitude of the perpetual smile, he sees its assimilation to the dominant culture. In its embrace of an optimistic, progress-minded worldview, it rejects as outmoded and irrelevant the classical notions of original sin, grace, forgiveness and justification. In its relentless activism in good causes, the church can practice a kind of functional atheism which Niebuhr finds both self-important and preposterous.³⁹ Niebuhr’s rhetorical flourish came close to caricature when he accused the liberal church of trying “to live in history without sinning.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 121.

³⁹ “...functional atheism, [is] the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with us. This is the unconscious, unexamined conviction that if anything decent is going to happen here, we are the ones who must make it happen – a conviction held even by people who talk a good game about God. It often leads to burnout, depression and despair, as we learn that the world will not bend to our will and we become embittered about that fact...” Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 88.

⁴⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, "An Open Letter to Richard Roberts," *Christianity and Society*, 5 (Summer 1940): 30-33, reprinted as "An Open Letter (to Richard Roberts)," in *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, edited by B.D. Robertson (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, 1967), 267-271.

2.4.3 Niebuhr's Understanding of God, God-talk and Myth

Niebuhr understands the encounter with God as a given, primary in human experience. He considers it an observable fact that any person, with or without benefit of Christianity, would have an experience of the divine reality which includes a sense of reverence and dependence, a conviction of moral obligation arising from outside the self, and a longing for forgiveness.⁴¹

In his autobiographical reflections, Niebuhr calls attention to the importance of Augustine in his thinking.⁴² Like Augustine a “negative theologian,”⁴³ the primary assertion that Niebuhr makes about God is that God is beyond our knowing. At the same time, Charles Mathewes notes that this Augustinian strain in Niebuhr also emphasizes love. Niebuhr maintains that the overarching love of God is the background against which all human life and activity are played out, and that the failings of humanity happen not outside but within the context of God's love. It is the love of God toward which humans are naturally oriented, a love which encompasses both the ‘temporal’ and the ‘eternal’, and which holds them together. “Niebuhr's project, like Augustine's, subverts the whole language of natural versus supernatural.”⁴⁴ For Niebuhr, the transcendent love of God is expressed most fully in the cross, where absolute freedom and absolute finite reality lock definitively.

⁴¹ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 131.

⁴² Reinhold Niebuhr, “Intellectual Autobiography,” in Kegley and Bretall, *Niebuhr*, 9.

⁴³ William D. Dean, “Niebuhr and Negative Theology,” in Daniel F. Rice, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited*, 94.

⁴⁴ Charles T. Mathewes, “Reading Reinhold Niebuhr Against Himself,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 19 (1999): 80.

Niebuhr used traditional God-language with ease. His fluency in doctrinal and scriptural categories may obscure the fact that Niebuhr remains entirely liberal in his understanding of the need to receive all human speech about God, including the stories of the Bible, as myth. To be caught in wrangles over literal interpretations is to miss both the point and the profundity. By referring to them as myth, Niebuhr does not diminish the significance of the stories of the Bible and the doctrines which have arisen over time, or attempt to dismiss them as deceptions. On the contrary, he argues that a permanent myth, which he distinguishes from primitive myth,⁴⁵ makes intelligible a narrative which may otherwise evoke a merely superstitious response. "Every Christian myth," he says, "expresses both the meaningfulness and the incompleteness of the temporal world, both the majesty of God, and his relation to it."⁴⁶ Understanding Biblical narrative as myth directs our attention to meaning. In language, narrative engaged as myth is the closest approximation we have to the integrating power of God's love. "Myth alone is capable of picturing the world as a realm of coherence and meaning without denying the facts of incoherence."⁴⁷ Only myth can carry the freight of a reality that both fully transcends reason and experience, and also grounds us in the embedded fragile life we live.

⁴⁵ Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 68. Niebuhr described primitive myths as naively literalist interpretations of Biblical stories and symbols. He believed that such interpretations of events such as the flood, or creation in six days, which imply that they are scientific descriptions, actually obscure rather than reveal the truth they point to.

⁴⁶ Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, 7.

⁴⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1935. Reprint 1963), 16.

2.4.4 Niebuhr's Understanding of Jesus, Christ, and the Cross

Niebuhr sees that the logic of optimism, innocence and progress that liberal Protestantism embraces will find the notion of redemption somewhat unfathomable – saved from what? The place of Jesus as Christ is thus problematic, and in a rationalist, de-mythologizing context, the idea of Christ as God is even more challenging. If there is a need for a saviour it would be as a guide to help us understand timeless truths, and to show us how to be good. Niebuhr charges that in liberalism, Jesus is presented as the loving, self-sacrificing person whom we should all try to be like. As a result, Niebuhr accuses, the liberal Christian church evades the awkward, old-fashioned, and “rationally absurd orthodox doctrine”⁴⁸ of the two natures of Christ by focusing on Jesus as teacher and exemplar.

Since the orthodox doctrine is rejected, the Christ of orthodox faith is transmuted into the “historic Jesus” who “incarnates values worthy of our highest devotion”. The whole problem of whether there can be anything in the flux of history which is worthy of our highest devotion and by what criterion we are to determine that it has this special eminence and significance is not clearly recognized ...⁴⁹

Niebuhr rejects this strategy of making the Christian narrative more manageable and more palatable, complaining that, “these moderns do not understand that they cannot transcend the relativities of history by the number of superlatives which they add to their moral estimate of Jesus.”⁵⁰ What is most wrong with this for Niebuhr is that it effectively reduces even Jesus to categories that do not allow for the larger truth of the

⁴⁸ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 145.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 146.

divine mystery. And in casting Jesus as friend and brother only, the liberals refuse to recognize the seriousness of “the full stature and freedom”⁵¹ not only of the man from Nazareth but of all humanity.

Niebuhr finds another difficulty in the low christology of the liberal church. In *The Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, Niebuhr presses the point that the ethic of Jesus as presented in the New Testament is an ethic of impossible perfection, and clearly not in any way suitable as a simple moral primer. The Beatitudes simply don’t work as a way to live. Cutting off your hand when it offends you isn’t actually a norm we would agree with. Niebuhr says that what we have in the gospels is something very different from Sunday school moralism. “It must be confused neither with the ascetic ethic of world-denying religions nor with the prudential ethic of naturalism, designed to guide good people to success and happiness in this world.”⁵² The human condition is more complex and problematic – more fragile – than either the escape to asceticism or to a Dale Carnegie program of self-improvement will recognize. Hence, his appeal to realism.

Niebuhr points to what he calls the unprudential rigorism which appears throughout the Gospel depiction of Jesus,⁵³ and accuses the liberal church of bad reading when it claims to find this depiction straightforwardly inspirational. The Jesus of history

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Niebuhr, *Ethics*, 22.

⁵³ Ibid., 25.

cannot serve as the norm of life.⁵⁴ His teaching is too shocking, and his person too remote, for a cozy ‘be like Jesus’ approach to the Christian life. The uncompromising words – cut off your hand, hate your mother and father, give away everything, love your enemies – cannot be collapsed into a practical system for good living without taking the edge off their insights.⁵⁵ Niebuhr insists that identifying the Gospel too closely with the concrete moral aspirations of the current generation, laudable as they may be, “the original tension of Christian morality is thereby destroyed; for the transcendent ideals of Christian morality have become immanent possibilities in the historic process.”⁵⁶ To the sermon commonplace that ‘if Jesus is like me, then maybe I can be like Jesus’, Niebuhr replies, no you can’t.

For Niebuhr, the low christology of the liberal approach gives insufficient purchase for the truth which may break in, and which allows for the insights and new visions which continually renew and transform society. Christ does much more than give good advice or set a good example.

Christ, in Niebuhr’s formulation, is both revelation and fulfillment of the human predicament. In classical language, Jesus Christ is fully human, and fully divine – fully engaged in the limitations of human life yet not ultimately limited. He both discloses and resolves the paradox of human life through the embrace of fragility in his death. For Niebuhr, the cross reveals God’s action in history as decisive not through victorious

⁵⁴ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 162.

⁵⁵ Niebuhr, *Ethics*, 25.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 6. This is impossible for Niebuhr, because the law of love cannot be fulfilled except by grace.

empire-shattering, but through uncompromising solidarity with the fragile human condition. In Christ's journey to the cross we see a God, in Douglas John Hall's words, "whose suffering illuminates the divine nature and redeems from absurdity the strange and nearly impossible creaturehood of humankind."⁵⁷ Christ saves by taking away our need to be right, and powerful, and dominant – this redemption embraces fragility.

Niebuhr's theology of the cross is central to understanding his Augustinian sense of the completeness of God's love. "The perfection of *agape* as symbolized in the cross ... is the final norm of human nature, which has no final norm in history because it is not completely contained in history."⁵⁸ God's own solidarity with humanity itself transcends the fond but mistaken optimism of a superficial faith. True faith calls Christians both to the recognition of fragility and into a more tough-minded encounter with the world.

The life of the Christian is lived in the light of this absolute claim and norm, and yet ought also to be lived without the self-delusion that what we can do will respond fully. "Every facet of the Christian revelation ... points to the impossibility of man fulfilling the true meaning of his life and reveals sin to be primarily derived from his abortive efforts to do so."⁵⁹ The connection between the absolute claim and the defective response is made through grace, and not through knowledge or works.⁶⁰ It is this fact

⁵⁷ Douglas John Hall, "The Logic of the Cross: Niebuhr's Foundational Theology," in Rice, ed. *RN Revisited*, 74.

⁵⁸ Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 75.

⁵⁹ Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 98.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

that Niebuhr accuses the liberal church, and in particular its most devoted social activists, of overlooking.

If anything, it is those most dedicated to the cause of justice who are most likely to overlook both fragility and grace. The self-delusion of the righteous is a special weakness of Christians, especially when they are insufficiently seized of the cross. Precisely because of the conscious orientation of Christians to Gospel truth, the temptation is always present to overestimate the human capacity for uncomplicated goodness. In Niebuhr, it is the cross that can move the Christian from do-gooderism to genuine engagement in the complexities and tragic realities that the world presents. “Without the cross men are beguiled by what is good in human existence into a false optimism, and by what is tragic into despair.”⁶¹

The theology of the cross, and not the theology of glory, is what makes it possible to stay the course. Hall notes that in Niebuhr, “the difference between *theologia gloriae* and *theologia crucis* is the difference between salvation as resolution and salvation as engagement.”⁶² Niebuhr understands redemption not as freedom from sin, but as the revelation of God’s mercy.⁶³ Christian hope, then, arises not from false optimism, but from a daily living out of the work for change, even “within the kingdom of death.”⁶⁴

⁶¹ Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, 20.

⁶² Hall, *Logic of the Cross*, 71.

⁶³ Niebuhr, “Open Letter,” 268.

⁶⁴ Douglas John Hall, *Remembered Voices* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 59.

2.4.5 Niebuhr's Understanding of Grace

Niebuhr asserts that God's grace does two things for fragile human beings – it forgives, and it empowers us to do good. When Niebuhr says that redemption is not freedom from sin, he warns against the “Pharisaic pride” that may result if we have too much confidence that we can claim Christ as our possession, and our actual life perfected.⁶⁵ This he finds refuted by the ‘obvious facts’. The sense of continued incompleteness which attends the quintessential faith experience means that the true encounter with God results not in the peace of achievement but the peace of forgiveness and hope.⁶⁶

At the same time he stresses that God's grace does operate as power for good within us, and that we have responsibility to be open to it. In contrast to the classical reformation doctrines and some readings of Augustine, grace does not destroy agency but empowers and enables it. He affirms Thomas Aquinas' analogy of the light of the sun and the seeing of the eye, in which the sunshine may only be experienced by the conscious turning of the eye toward it.⁶⁷

The equipping grace of God allows the human being to reach beyond the centre of the self in ways that are indeterminate and entirely open to new possibilities. Yet, like the power of forgiveness, this regenerative power must not be understood to offer the possibility of simple perfection.

⁶⁵ Niebuhr, “Open Letter,” 269.

⁶⁶ Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 100.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

Niebuhr's priority is to remind his readers that the two forms of grace are held together dynamically, supporting each other, and not experienced side by side as if one without the other would be meaningful.⁶⁸ This will prove to be critical for a Christian realist approach to the tasks of virtue ethics.

2.4.6 Niebuhr's Understanding of the Church

The Gospel, Niebuhr repeated, always draws attention to the unrighteousness of the righteous, and also calls for perfection in ways that always outstrip our capacity to perform, even when upheld by the grace of God. This is a significant clue to his ecclesiology. Although he himself was a churchman in every sense,⁶⁹ Niebuhr holds a low estimate of the capacity of the church to fulfill the promise of Christian faith, and a high estimation of its capacity for self-importance. He views the vocation of the church as primarily prophetic rather than priestly,⁷⁰ but he is as harsh in his assessment of its prophets as of its priests. He is especially severe on the claim the church in any form may make for its own capacity to embody or implement the divine reality.

Instead the church serves as a place of clarity, where

men may be disturbed by the eternal word of God, and a place of solace for those who have recognized the 'facts' of their condition. Here those who sense themselves as but a 'shadow that declineth' may find a place of affirmation and an intimation of mercy. The church will be a sanctuary

⁶⁸ Ibid., 125.

⁶⁹ He was an ordained minister with many years' experience in pastoral ministry, he taught in a seminary, and he participated regularly in public worship, most often as preacher.

⁷⁰ Niebuhr moderated this view somewhat toward the end of his life, as he reassessed the role of liturgy. See David R. Bains, "Conduits of Faith: Reinhold Niebuhr's Liturgical Thought," *Church History*, 73, no. 1 (03) 2004: 168-194.

in which the ‘poetic apperception and appreciation of the total meaning of reality’ may be cultivated through prayer.⁷¹

In the liturgy, the mythic elements of faith find appropriate expression. “Here human incompleteness is transcended though not abolished,”⁷² as fragile human beings are encouraged and empowered.

Niebuhr considers any claim that the church or any part of the church is or ought to be functioning as an ‘outpost of the Kingdom’ – that is, a place which already, proleptically, embodies the love of God and the reconciliation of the world to God’s self in Christ – to be pernicious nonsense. Even the aspiration to such a vocation he rejects. “Every interpretation of the church which promises an ‘efficient grace’ by which man ceases to be man and enters prematurely into the Kingdom of God, is a snare and a delusion. The church is not the Kingdom of God.”⁷³ The church is neither the bearer of the meaning of history, nor the bearer of God’s grace.⁷⁴

It is the pretension of the liberal church to be in the process of ‘bringing in the Kingdom’ in the larger society, without a clear enough grasp of the true human condition of fragility, which Niebuhr most decries. He finds it falsely innocent as well as demonstrably untruthful. Not only does it lend itself to self-righteousness,⁷⁵ but it fails, paradoxically, because as well as overestimating the capacity of humanity, it also

⁷¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, “Religion and Poetry,” *Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod of North America* July 1930); reprinted in *Young Reinhold Niebuhr*, 220-22, 224-26 and quoted in Bains, “Conduits,” 179.

⁷² Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, 62.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 196.

⁷⁵ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 202.

underestimates the stature of humanity. It fails to recognize that human beings are created with an openness to the genuinely new, and never irrevocably restricted by human organizations and traditions. “Standing in his ultimate freedom and transcendence, beyond time and nature, he cannot regard anything in the flux of nature and history” – not even the church – “as his final norm. Man is a creature who cannot find a true norm short of the nature of ultimate reality.”⁷⁶

Niebuhr’s frustration with the liberal Protestant version of Christian faith is that it opts for good intentions in a simplistic way that both evades the reality of self-serving interest, and negates the depth dimension of fragile human life.⁷⁷ What Niebuhr’s

⁷⁶ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 146.

⁷⁷ Despite this profound critique of what he considered the superficialities and failings of liberal Christianity, Niebuhr is still best understood as belonging to the tradition of liberal Protestantism. His objective is to improve rather than depart from the liberal formulation of Christian faith.

Historian of American liberal theology, Gary Dorrien locates Niebuhr within rather than outside the general parameters of liberal tradition. To make this observation, he contrasts Niebuhr (and John Bennett) with the Roman Catholic tradition on the one hand and on the developing Barthian neo-orthodoxy on the other. Following Bennett, Dorrien recognizes four primary markers and achievements of liberalism. First, he identifies the liberal tradition as a ‘cleansing force’ which attempts to remove the intellectual limitations imposed by biblical literalism, doctrinal rigidity and ecclesiastical authoritarianism. Second, liberalism insists on the primacy of individual insight and experience as the ultimate source of religious authority. Third, liberal Christianity attempts to remove some of what Niebuhr called the ‘primitive myths’ of traditional Christianity, and pay attention to the findings of literary criticism and historical scholarship, in particular with respect to the historical Jesus. Fourth, liberal Christianity proposes a basic “continuity between God and humankind, grace and nature, revelation and natural religion, faith and reason, Christianity and other religions.” (Dorrien, *American Liberal Theology*, 462-3)

In all four of these areas Niebuhr remains unequivocally liberal in his theology. He understands religion to be a humanly constructed response to the good creation of a loving God, and that its primary goal must be social transformation to realize justice. He assumes that test of a religion is its ethical effectiveness. He takes for granted that the experience of the individual must be the source and the norm of faith. This experience must be tested by reason and by dialogue with others, and most particularly by the observation of its fruits, but it is primary. With the historic liberal project, he considers as ‘excess baggage’ the emphasis of the Reformation on doctrinal purity and of the Roman Catholic church on ecclesiastical authority. His theological reflection focuses on the Bible as authoritative but not literal.

Niebuhr’s liberalism is political and social as well as theological. His early socialism gives way to avid support for Roosevelt and the New Deal. He is an early (though not a radical) proponent of

realism wants to add to the liberal rendering of faith, and its optimistic sense of its own virtue, is a dose of contrition.⁷⁸ He is acutely conscious of our fallibility, and of the corresponding need to develop an attitude of corrigibility. Where he most radically departs from the liberal formulation he criticized is his insistence that despite humanity's unique capacity for good, human beings are also inevitably sinful. This realism about human strength and human fragility he underlined by means of his description of the human being and the dynamic of the human condition.

2.5 Summary and Conclusions

As the first interpretive step of the project of critical correlation, this chapter has presented an overview of the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr. As a Christian realist theologian of fragility, he grapples with the central insight that humanity lives with both radical freedom and radical limitation. In its interpretation of Niebuhr, it offers support for the claim that Niebuhr describes the human condition as fragile, and explores the precise meanings of fragility given in his depiction of human finitude, contingency, and sinfulness. The chapter situates Niebuhr within the context of twentieth century Protestant thought, as a liberal critic of liberalism, and shows how his intellectual

feminism, racial justice and colonial divestment. Although he disparages simplistic notions of progress, Niebuhr believes that human society is not God-given, but the product of human efforts – and thus open to historical change and improvement. Although he criticizes what he considered the misplaced individualism of modernity, he considers the flourishing of the human individual – and the social and political freedom required to promote that flourishing – to be a primary collective goal.

In all these emphases – the reality of history, the significance of the individual, and the understanding of Christianity as a life, not a doctrine (Ibid.) – Niebuhr remains a liberal.

⁷⁸ Dorrien *Soul in Society*, 96, 148.

preoccupations reflect the major historical events of his time as well as certain aspects of his personal context. Niebuhr's primary complaint was against the denial of fragility and false pretensions of innocence made by modernist politics, philosophy, and religion. He urged his listeners and readers to recognize the operation of self-interest in all social and political efforts toward justice.

Niebuhr's theology, though never presented as a system, gives theoretical underpinning to his social and political critique. As a liberal theologian and Biblical interpreter, he combines a classical view of God's overarching love with a high christology, a low ecclesiology, and a strong focus on the obligation of Christians to work for social justice. The cross is central to his sense of the human condition.

Niebuhr's understanding of the dual nature of God's grace as forgiveness and power to act points to his analysis of human agency. He understands as essentially congruent the basic pattern of pretension and sin which operate at personal, religious and political levels.

This is the theological approach which will serve as the basis of a Christian realist virtue ethics. Niebuhr's theology combines a strong sense of the fragility of the human condition and the obligation to work for justice, yet it lacks a proposal for how to persevere in this work, which could be provided by a virtue ethics. Virtue ethics focuses on the characteristics, habits, and formation of the person. Therefore, the next step in preparing to develop a virtue ethics which reflects Niebuhr's theology of fragility is to explore in more depth his picture of the human person. Niebuhr's framework of theological anthropology will be presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

NIEBUHR'S FRAMEWORK OF THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Chapter 3 turns from a general presentation of the themes and preoccupations of Niebuhr's Christian realist approach to theology and ethics, and focuses on his framework of theological anthropology. This chapter continues the interpretive phase of the project. It seeks Niebuhr's theological picture of the human person, and his conception of the underlying dynamism of moral life. It is interested especially in his particular understanding of the fragility of the human condition, and in how the unique blend of freedom and limitation that constitutes us as human functions as the centre of this dynamism. The chapter gives special attention to Niebuhr's conception of human sin and the operation of grace. The chapter also takes into account criticisms of Niebuhr's anthropology, and examines ways of responding. The objective of the chapter is to establish a robust framework of theological anthropology into which key elements from the virtue ethics tradition may subsequently be integrated to generate a Christian realist virtue ethics. It underlines areas in Niebuhr's thought which have parallels in virtue ethics.

The first two sections of the chapter present Niebuhr's description of the human predicament and follow his narrative of how things go wrong. This will be critical for the development of a Christian realist virtue ethics which is non-perfectionist, and which strengthens us to live with integrity amidst fragility. Section 3.3 focuses on Niebuhr's understanding of the self. It reviews Niebuhr's use of the metaphor of dialogues to

depict the way moral life is lived out. Niebuhr presents the self as developing through its interactions with self, with other and with God. It is through these dialogues that the self is formed in virtue. Section 3.4 analyses the implicit picture that Niebuhr paints of the good human life as full, and endlessly dynamic. This picture is linked to the virtue ethics concepts of *eudaimonia* and the *telos* of a human life, in which the goal is not perfection but learning to live fully within the constraints of fragility. It notes that for Niebuhr human flourishing involves full engagement in the ambiguity generated by human freedom and limitation.

Section 3.5 reviews the response to Niebuhr and Section 3.6 analyses the critique of Niebuhr's theological anthropology, emphasizing the feminist critiques, as central to the task of using Niebuhr's insights as the basis of a Christian realist virtue ethics. Section 3.7 then examines the work of Rebekah M. Miles, and introduces the adaptation she proposes as an amplification of Niebuhr's framework of theological anthropology which will be useful in the construction of a Christian realist virtue ethics.

3.1 The Essential Predicament

In the opening line of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr observes that "man has always been his own most vexing problem."¹ Self-consciousness brings consciousness of that which is not-self, and the impulse to wonder about it. The radical ambiguity of a fragile, dependent being who yet flourishes with brilliance and creativity is a source of perplexity. The recognition that every accomplishment and every virtue is

¹ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 1.

seeded with fragility brings anxiety.² The suspicion that the primary source of our fragility may lie within us raises the stakes.

Niebuhr's Christian realism sees the essence of the human predicament as the paradoxical relationship of human freedom to human limitation. While the human self is uniquely free to imagine and to create, Niebuhr insists that all human striving is also radically limited. Our endeavours are tainted in particular by self-interest.³ The human failing he most deplores is self-aggrandizing pride⁴ – yet he recognizes that self-aggrandizement arises at least in part from anxiety about fragility.⁵ Even the most successful and powerful person or nation is motivated not only by competence and healthy energy – there will always be a discordant note of unease. Niebuhr stresses the relationship between human grandiosity and human fragility, observing that “man seeks to make himself God because he is betrayed by both his greatness and his weakness; and there is no level of greatness and power in which the lash of fear is not at least one strand in the whip of ambition.”⁶

As described in Chapter 2, Niebuhr has a strong sense of the various forms of human fragility. Human vulnerability to illness, loss and death is the most obvious of these – life in the ‘flux of nature’ makes us fragile.⁷ In addition, fragility increases

² Ibid., 244.

³ Ibid., 195.

⁴ Ibid., 186 ff.

⁵ Ibid., 184-185.

⁶ Ibid., 194.

⁷ Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 1.

because human life is ‘embedded’ and contingent.⁸ For Niebuhr, the essence of the human predicament arises from the paradox that we are simultaneously fully embroiled and embedded in a concrete historical existence, and yet also alive in and oriented toward the ultimate reality, which he called ‘the eternal’.

To the essential nature of man as a creature imbedded in the natural order belong, on the one hand, all his natural endowments and determinations, his physical and social impulses, his sexual and racial differentiations. On the other hand his essential nature also includes the freedom of his spirit, his transcendence over natural process, and finally his self-transcendence.⁹

Both limited and unlimited, bound and free, human beings have the capacity – indeed, are constructed with the necessity – to transcend self and social location, while at the same time remaining bound by these particularities.

With the capacity for self-transcendence, human beings reflect, and see, and conceptualize beyond the confines of a given reality, beyond what Niebuhr called ‘the flux of nature’, even while grounded in that given reality.¹⁰ This capacity to ‘be’ outside history is what makes it possible to propose that there is history, that things happen and change in ways that can be understood and influenced. If we were not outside it as well as inside it, we could not even see it. Thus humanity exists at all times on both temporal and eternal planes, and because of this we are conscious of death and anxious about our fragility. We have enough freedom to be worried by our lack of total freedom, and appalled by the messes that our freedom allows us to get into.

⁸ Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 70; *Beyond Tragedy*, 250.

⁹ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 270.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 125, 134.

Partly related to the recognition and fear of our own death, partly identifiable in our persistent intuitions of something ‘more’, and partly observable by the facts of our memory and of our social transformations and plans, Niebuhr posits this self-transcendence not as a theoretical postulate, but as a fairly straightforward observable experience. As Robert McAfee Brown recalls, Niebuhr noted that while birds and humans both sing, birds do not write histories of bird music.¹¹

Niebuhr insists that both aspects of human nature are essential – and reminds us that this integrity is captured in the Biblical view of the human being as always manifesting the integration of mind and body. He rejects various classical and mystical dualisms that would dismiss or escape either side of the equation.

On the one hand he rejects those who find nothing in human experience but the flow of time and nature, and who seek to locate all meaning within the historical process. Niebuhr rejects this ‘what you see is what you get’ approach to human life because it fails to recognize the reality of human self-transcendence.

Naturalism loses the individual because it does not view life in sufficient depth to comprehend the self-transcendent human spirit. This spirit is a reality which does not fit into the category of natural causality which is naturalism’s sole principle of comprehending the universe.¹²

Identifying the absolute either as non-existent, or as fully disclosed within the contingent, removes all purchase for personal or social critique, and all explanation of human striving.

¹¹ Robert McAfee Brown, ed. *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), xvii.

¹² Niebuhr, *Nature*, 81.

On the other hand, Niebuhr also rejects an interpretation of the essential nature of humanity which would deny the meaning or importance of this contingent messy reality of ours, and claim that the only thing that matters is the eternal dimension of our relationship to the absolute.¹³ He rejects both classical and modern forms of idealism because of their inadequate grasp of the value both of what is unique and of what is arbitrary in individual and social life. This aspect of his realism parallels the focus on the concrete particular found in the virtue ethics of Aristotle. His rejection of mysticism, and in particular of ascetic practice, was based on his insistence that creation is good and history meaningful.

If classical materialism reduces history to the proportions of natural sequence and temporal process, classical idealism and mysticism seek to flee the world of history precisely because they find no more meaning in history than classical naturalism finds ...the natural and the temporal process is merely something from which man must be emancipated.¹⁴

Niebuhr has no interest in escape from the embedded, limited reality in which we live.

The two aspects of human experience – “a creature, subject to nature’s necessities and limitations; but ... also a free spirit who knows the brevity of his years and by this knowledge transcends the temporal within himself”¹⁵ – stand in dialectical relation to one another. That is, they are not simply two aspects of the same person. In particular, they are not in a moral hierarchy in which a fragile part situated bodily in the accidents of history and geography is essentially a problem, while the part which is

¹³ Ibid., *Nature*, 4.

¹⁴ Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 11.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1.

oriented to the eternal is essentially good. On the contrary, the two interact and inform and illuminate one another. We are spiritually as well as physically fragile. The meaning of life cannot be discovered within our bodies or in history but beyond, while the meaning of life cannot be meaningful except within this concrete reality. “The eternity which is part of the environment of man is neither the infinity of time nor yet a realm of undifferentiated unity of being. It is the changeless source of man’s changing being.”¹⁶ For Niebuhr, the orientation of the changing being toward its changeless source is given in the structure of creation, and to be sought in the social and political order.

Niebuhr is emphatic that the quality of spirit that orients and connects the human being to the eternal is not rationality, but freedom.¹⁷ He views rationality as part of nature, not its antithesis – as a tool with which human beings create, in freedom, the myriad of technical and social forms and systems by which human life is differentiated from the life of plants and animals. The uniqueness and the ambiguity of the human self reside in its freedom, a freedom which Niebuhr believed a liberal culture underestimated. Both human creativity and human destructiveness arise from the freedom of human beings to modify the conditions of their life. Failure to recognize the ambiguity of humanity’s uniqueness leads to confusion about our fragility.

He does not see that he has a freedom of spirit that transcends both nature and reason. He is consequently unable to understand the real pathos of his defiance of nature’s and reason’s laws. He always imagines himself betrayed into this defiance either by some accidental corruption in his past history or by some sloth of reason. Hence he has hopes for

¹⁶ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 124.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

redemption, either through a program of social reorganization or by some scheme of education.¹⁸

To Niebuhr, these fond hopes simply could not stand up to the weight of historical evidence, because they were based on a misapprehension of human nature.

Misapprehending the basic predicament in turn makes it hard to understand what goes wrong.

3.2 What Goes Wrong – Human Sinfulness

When the genuine goodness of human nature is misapprehended as more innocent, more able, more perfectible than it really is, then sin follows. In Niebuhr, “evil was always a good that imagined itself to be better than it was.”¹⁹ The essence of human sinfulness is the denial of fragility, and the attempt to escape it.

Niebuhr sees that human beings exist in a state of power and powerlessness, able to grasp the implications of our weakness in the same movement through which we exercise our greatest strength. That is, it is precisely in the human actions of self-transcendence – love, memory, compassion, prayer – that we are most aware of our fragility. For Niebuhr, recognition of this fact is part of the “general revelation of human experience,” in which “there is, in all human consciousness, at least a dim recognition of the insufficient and dependent character of all finite life, a recognition which implies the

¹⁸ Ibid., 96.

¹⁹ Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 96.

consciousness of the reality upon which dependent existence depends.”²⁰ In such moments of insight, according to Niebuhr, we human beings perceive our predicament and are filled with anxiety. Anxiety predisposes human beings to sin.

This anxiety is two-fold – in the first place we are anxious because of our sense of frailty and fearfulness, of our smallness before the greatness and goodness of the divine reality. But we are also anxious because we perceive the potential of our freedom – that we could do great good *and also* great harm. The urgent desire to allay this anxiety leads to the staking of a false claim – we apply a claim for transcendent, unlimited validity to the concrete, limited reality of our concrete human enterprises. For Niebuhr, this is the primary locus of sin, arising from the structure of consciousness of the human being. It is anxiety that predisposes to sin, through tempting us to establish a false security. The sin that follows is *original*, in the sense that it originates in the structure of the human being. Niebuhr views original sin not as biologically based, but as an inevitable outcome of the twin realities of embeddedness and the capacity for self-transcendence.²¹ As Langdon Gilkey points out, in Niebuhr, “sin connotes the fallenness not of the unrespectable sinner in a respectable society, but of the ambiguity and warped character of ordinary life, of even the respectable, the powerful and the good.”²²

²⁰ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 128. He is following Schleiermacher here.

²¹ Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 96.

²² Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 24.

With Paul and Augustine, Niebuhr sees that evil is chosen in the first instance not out of deliberate preference for wrongdoing, but under the misapprehension that it is good.²³ "All human sin seems so much worse in its consequences than in its intentions," he writes.²⁴ But when the human spirit misidentifies its own projects – historically conditioned, self-interested, and worldly – as carrying ultimate significance, then what is laughably pretentious in a small child quickly becomes, for example, the Nazi party.

The way this most often unfolds is in pride.²⁵ Niebuhr develops a very elaborate analysis of pride as the primary sin of humanity.²⁶ He distinguishes three interrelated types of pride – pride of power, pride of intellect, and moral pride. Pride of power operates in the powerful as overbearing self-confidence and willfulness, while in the less powerful it appears as aggressive striving toward security at the expense of others. Pride of intellect not only claims a more comprehensive knowledge than it actually has, but also conspires to conceal the degree of its own self-interest embedded in that knowledge. Moral pride functions as self-righteousness, and mean-spirited condemnation of the failings of others. Niebuhr identifies moral pride as a particular weakness of those who speak in the name of religion.

²³ Mathewes, "Reading Niebuhr Against Himself", 78.

²⁴ Niebuhr, *Leaves*, 43.

²⁵ The other side of the coin of pride is what Niebuhr identifies as the sin of sensuality – in which the opposite error causes a person to misidentify that which is transcendent as contingent. His development of this thought is deficient and influenced by the sexism of his era. I discuss this further in Chapter 3.6.

²⁶ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 186 ff.

The easy conscience of which Niebuhr accused modernity arises because we fail to recognize the patent absurdity of our claims both to ultimacy and to pure goodness. We overlook the facts when we claim that the change we create is all progress – purely positive, in one direction only, simple improvement. The freedom and creativity of the human spirit can engender chaos as well as order, in a way that tame ‘reason’ will not.

In making this false ascription of ultimacy to human projects, the human being is not simply making a mistake. Part of the ‘work’ of sin is self-deceit – the attempt to evade honest appraisal of our situation.

Sin is not merely the error of overestimating human capacity... [Man’s] sin is never merely the ignorance of his ignorance. It is always partly an effort to obscure his blindness by overestimating the degree of his sight, and to obscure his insecurity by stretching his power beyond its limit.²⁷

In the end, this is the sin of pride. Pride is based on the denial of fragility. It places humanity at the centre of meaning, and escalates inexorably toward the pretension that human beings can and will become God. The striving and the false claim arise both from the aspiration to God’s goodness and the desire to escape our own vulnerability, from longing and from fear – ambiguity is at the core of human identity.

But this conceit, again by the nature of the human being, cannot ultimately hold sway, even in our own minds.

Man who is made in the image of God is unable, precisely because of those qualities in him which are designated as “image of God”, to be satisfied with a god who is made in man’s image. By virtue of his

²⁷ Ibid., 181.

capacity for self-transcendence he can look beyond himself sufficiently to know that a projection of himself is not god.²⁸

Ultimately, the suspicion will arise that self-glorification is filled with falsehood. It is the sense of self-deceit which may engender intensified and ever more desperate attempts to mislead ourselves. At some point, however, the “vestige of truth which abides with the self in all its confusion”²⁹ will lead to the contrite recognition that only God is God, and that it is God’s goodness, and God’s reality, and these alone toward which the human spirit is oriented.³⁰

3.3 The Dialogical Character of the Self

Niebuhr pictures the ethical life of the human being as unfolding in dialogues which shape the developing self.³¹ Three primary dialogues – with the self, with the neighbour, and with God – work together to produce a self that is both stable and dynamic. This is not a prescription but a description – that each of these metaphorical dialogues exists is for Niebuhr a matter of observation. In virtue ethics terms, the self is the ongoing home for the virtues as they develop.

In the dialogue of self with self, the ‘only animal that talks to itself’ continually observes and evaluates. With its “constant internal dialogue... the self pities and glorifies

²⁸ Ibid., 166.

²⁹ Ibid., 203.

³⁰ Ibid. Niebuhr notes that this provides “an interesting refutation of [the Calvinist doctrine of] total depravity.”

³¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955), 4-5.

itself, accuses and excuses itself.”³² This is primary site of ethical deliberation. It is the place where emotion is experienced and makes its contribution to ethical life. Part of this dialogue is a dialogue between the will and the conscience, in which the self discriminates between the sense of obligation and the sense of inclination.³³

Obligations are formed concretely in a particular originating community – “the ‘content’ of conscience is obviously very relative to time and place”³⁴ – although Niebuhr also observes that some minimum obligations are fairly universal.

Moreover, Niebuhr reiterates his insistence on the ultimate freedom of the human being. Even though we all live within communities, are raised according to community standards, and learn to judge ourselves by the standards of our community, it is a matter of observation that persons often defy communities, and communities change in response.³⁵ Yet, even in an individualistic culture, humans seem to be reluctant to claim the true individuality that we do have. Niebuhr notes that even such defiance of community “usually undertaken in the name of another, more inclusive or more worthy community even though that community makes no overt claims upon him, or may exist only in his imagination.”³⁶

The other side of this coin is the second dialogue, that of the self with others. Niebuhr saw the dialogue of the self with others as evidence both of dependence upon

³² Ibid., 6.

³³ Ibid., 12ff.

³⁴ Ibid. 14.

³⁵ Ibid. 15.

³⁶ Ibid.

others and of independence over all relationships, in a way that parallels the general structure of human nature. In this dialogue, the first move is simple acceptance – assent to the otherness of the other.³⁷ In the encounter, the self recognizes itself as separate (and the other as mysterious), and is drawn to the other instrumentally for its own fulfillment. Yet paradoxically, the self in dialogue cannot be complete without another move of recognition and connection. The human being must go beyond mere recognition of the other, and create a relationship. A human life in isolation is not really a human life – it is not fulfilled unless drawn “out of itself into the life of the other.”³⁸ This reaching out, which is more than merely a method of getting our needs met, actually constitutes our humanity.³⁹ Here Niebuhr sees in non-prudential *agape*, or compassion, a description of normative mutuality requiring “something beyond calculated mutuality to initiate it and preserve it.”⁴⁰ That is, in order to be human, we need something that we would normally call ‘more than’ human to be operative. While this may appear to be a contradiction, it in fact conforms to the self-transcendent nature of the human being as Niebuhr has described it.

In his view, this self-transcending love can be experienced in a limited way within family relationships, but can never be a serious part of group relations – an element of his political realism. “An individual may sacrifice his own interests without

³⁷ Ibid., 29-30.

³⁸ Ibid., 31.

³⁹ Ibid., 32.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

hope of reward ...but how is an individual, who is responsible for the interests of the group, to justify the sacrifice of interests other than his own?”⁴¹

The third dialogue – of the self with God – undertakes the “task of penetrating the ultimate mystery.”⁴² Niebuhr notes that the Christian faith construes God as person-like – that is, “characterized by both a basic structure and a freedom beyond structure.”⁴³ This assists the self to discover its own genuine self-awareness, and “to resist either usurping the place of the divine for itself or from imagining itself merged with the divine.”⁴⁴ The encounter with God will always produce a sense of awe – a combination of dismay at what are now recognizable as the self’s pretensions, and consolation that God’s mercy can bring fulfillment where human pretension cannot.

The encounter provides a corrective to both the over- and under-estimation of the self. It makes it possible for the person to assert that the meaning of life is both much greater than ‘my little life’, and also completely relevant to the specific details of the earthbound life I am living.

⁴¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1932; reprint 1960), 267. The logic is that persons bring self-sacrificial commitments from their private lives into a group or community life and that the group itself is not able to act with genuine self-sacrifice without betraying those very commitments its members already have. This view leads to a rather pessimistic assessment of the stated altruistic goals of nations. At the same time, Niebuhr was criticized for holding an unduly positive assessment of the possibility of self-sacrifice within the family. Chapter 3.5 introduces feminist and other writers who support this claim.

⁴² Niebuhr, *Self*, 62.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 65, 71.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

3.4. The Good Human Life

For Niebuhr, the entire ethical problem arises from the fragile nature of the human being. Its resolution will require fulfillment, not negation, of the human reality.⁴⁵ Niebuhr asserts that fulfillment, which parallels Aristotle's *eudaimonia* or flourishing, is to be achieved when the human being is functioning in its most uniquely human way. In the unique dynamism of the human condition as Niebuhr describes it, human freedom plays out in both creativity and destructiveness. The dialectical relationship between the two core dimensions of human existence – freedom and limitation – is the locus of moral life, and therefore the place where *eudaimonia* is to be found.

Human fulfillment involves the embrace of life's particularity. Niebuhr sees the human being as imprinted with the law of love, and aware of it, both through the mutual dependence of persons, and through the intuition of the divine reality.⁴⁶ This implies, in the Christian tradition, that the good life is a life that is abundant – a life rich with activities, relationships, and ideals. The gift of life is to be taken on wholeheartedly, with family and schooling and sports and music and literature and politics and faith. These commitments may sometimes compete for time and priority, in ways that defy a simple calculus of commensurability. In particular, a full life will include work toward the betterment of society, and toward the provision of abundant life to society's most

⁴⁵ Lovin calls this a form of ethical naturalism, and asserts that "Christian Realism agrees with the broad and basic premise of natural law that the moral life is lived in accordance with nature. . . . To live according to human nature is to have an imaginative grasp of possibilities as well as an accurate picture of its realities." *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, 17, 107-11. He notes that the naturalism Niebuhr railed against was reductive naturalism. See also Paul Ramsay, "Love and Law" in Bretall, 79-123.

⁴⁶ Niebuhr, *Self*, 14.

vulnerable members. Part of the task of virtue will be to assist the individual to balance these competing commitments. Niebuhr's own life with its high energy and enthusiastic embrace of family, friends, students, ideas and causes reflected this whole-hearted – *eudaimonistic* – approach to the world.

For Niebuhr the scriptural command to love 'your God with all your heart, mind and soul, and your neighbour as yourself' is not superimposed on a fragile frame, but is given in the structure of created humanity in its orientation toward God. In this sense it is also part of the essential nature of humanity to be subject to the law of love, which as he points out with Paul, is not merely revealed or legislated by society, 'but written in the heart.' Niebuhr thus understood the human condition to include an intimation of its 'original righteousness', *justitia originalis*, not as a memory of a past time but as an element of everyday life. "When the Fall is made an event in history rather than a symbol of an aspect of every historical moment in the life of man, the relation of evil to goodness in that moment is obscured."⁴⁷ The temptation and tendency to go wrong is not something that happened in Eden, but is an everyday reality with everyday consequences. The human being, being fully itself, will recognize both its relation to the divine reality and the fragility of its daily life, denying neither.

It is simply the truth that humans must do this work of recognition in order to be fully human – because we are born to be grounded as well as self-transcendent, we must self-transcend in order to be ourselves. Yet we can't. For it is also the simple truth that human beings cannot implement the law of love – it derails in self-interest and in

⁴⁷ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 269.

pretension, in anxiety and in fear. Having risen to the heights, we tumble back to the ground. Having entered the very depths, we find ourselves on the surface again. The paradox arising from humanity's twofold nature – that only in loving God and neighbour is the human being fulfilled, and yet the human being cannot love adequately except aided by grace – is for Niebuhr the primary fact underlying the ethical life.⁴⁸

Using the metaphor of dialogue allows Niebuhr to present the human condition as dynamic, because the human being is indeterminate and self-transcending⁴⁹ Caught in an endless conversation, the fragile human being is oriented by nature toward the reality which is beyond history and contingency, while fully engaged in the life of history and contingency. Each human life is lived in the tension and ambiguity generated by this inherently unstable position, and betrayed into sin by it. Sin is overcome not by us, but by God, in Christ's self-giving and forgiving love on the cross. Through the grace of forgiveness and the grace of power to act for good, humanity is restored to itself – but to its true, imperfectible self. "This same cross which symbolizes the love of God, and reveals the divine perfection to be not incompatible with a suffering involvement in historical tragedy, also indicates that the perfection of man is not attainable in history."⁵⁰

Grace, for Niebuhr, does not swoop down to rescue us from the toils and travails of our earthly reality. On the contrary, it is grace that gently removes us from the glittering towers of false transcendence and brings us back to the world that God so

⁴⁸ Niebuhr, *Self*, 65-66.

⁴⁹ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 4.

⁵⁰ Niebuhr *Destiny*, 68.

loves. Grace forgives our pretension, and grace empowers our reengagement with reality.⁵¹ In Hall's terms, Niebuhr proposes salvation as engagement, which "encompasses a non-triumphalistic perspective on every dimension of the Christian account of existence."⁵² This is a theology of the cross.

Because of Niebuhr's understanding of this primary Christian narrative of redemption as myth, he sees it occurring simultaneously and always, even as history unfolds. This is the constant working out of the human reality in relation to the divine reality, and constitutes human self-realization. "For the Christian faith is not only an answer to the human situation of self-contradiction; it is a fuller and clearer revelation of that contradiction."⁵³ Grace discloses our fragility.

Self-realization for Niebuhr is not a matter of becoming better and better, but of moving more deeply and more consciously into the redemptive reality of a fragile life lived dynamically both in history and in transcendent relationship to God. Thus "the Christian statement of the ideal possibility does not involve self-negation, but self-realization."⁵⁴ It is here that Niebuhr comes closest to agreeing with Aristotle that the objective of the good human life is *eudaimonia*, the flourishing of a human life lived fully. This is the abundant life promised by Jesus.

Ironically, for the human being to flourish, and to operate in full accord with its own human nature, it must allow itself to be guided to circle back to humility. "We

⁵¹ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 100ff.

⁵² Hall, "Logic of the Cross," 67.

⁵³ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 290.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 251.

cannot escape, therefore, the ultimate paradox that the final exercise of freedom in the transcendent human spirit is its recognition of the false use of that freedom in action. Man is most free in discovering that he is not free.”⁵⁵ This discovery, which happens again and again, by grace, is the quintessential human experience of reality.

It is important to note that although Niebuhr refers to this process of paradoxical experience as repetitive and continuous, like the dialogues with self, other and God, he nowhere develops this insight into a reflection on habituation in virtue.

3.5 Critiques of Niebuhr’s Framework of Theological Anthropology

Over many decades, liberal Protestant social ethics was dominated by the dynamic figure of Niebuhr, who embodied the role of the church as a privileged interlocutor within the corridors of civil power. The irony – or scandal, in the view of his subsequent critics – was that in attempting to evade the false hope of idealism, Niebuhr sometimes found himself associated with the forces of *realpolitik* which dominated United States defense policy in the 1950s. He made himself vulnerable to the charge of assimilating the values and ethos of the most powerful imperial nation on earth. When he raised his voice, toward the end of his life, to protest the war in Viet Nam, some thought he was losing his grip, while others breathed a sigh of relief that the critical edge had returned.

My purpose here is not to enter a decades-old debate about the strengths and weaknesses of Niebuhr’s social, economic or political views. As noted in Chapter 2, the

⁵⁵ Ibid., 260.

general appreciation of Niebuhr has moved beyond critique to retrieval. This section notes the major critiques of Niebuhr, as a means of situating his thought within the development of Protestant Christian ethics. Principally, however, it focuses attention on the liberationist and feminist critique of his theological anthropology because these are highly relevant for the project of linking Christian realism to virtue ethics.

In the years since Niebuhr wrote and taught, a very major sea-change has taken place in the context for Christian ethics and theology. In the first place the process of secularization, well underway in Niebuhr's time, has now almost fully removed the church in its institutional identity from the public space. The Christian church no longer holds a place as honoured consultant to the policy makers and leaders of society. At the same time, within the church, instead of an identifiable 'mainstream' with identifiable voice and perspective as described by Marty above, there has arisen a plethora of voices and an array of perspectives. Many commentators have documented the fracturing of the Protestant theological scene (as well as a number of other scenes) in the late 1960s and beyond.⁵⁶ "Liberation theology gave notice that the reign of Christian realism was over" and as Gary Dorrien points out, "In theology, no less than in politics, the *zeitgeist* is often a vengeful spirit."⁵⁷ In that atmosphere, Niebuhr's work was a lightning rod for criticism on various fronts.

⁵⁶ Hauerwas, "Christian Ethics in America"; Larry Rasmussen, "A Different Discipline," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 1996: 29-51; Jeffrey Stout, "Commitments and Traditions in the Study of Religious Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25, no. 3 (1998): 23-56.

⁵⁷ Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 164.

From different angles, Niebuhr was seen as exemplifying and propagating an ideology of the establishment.⁵⁸ In general, the complaint was that the magisterial voice of Niebuhr both personified and addressed the socially powerful – overlooking the increasingly articulate concerns and voices of the marginalized. In particular, these new theological insights have been spoken in the voices of groups excluded from the previously dominant culture – among others, feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, First Nations, African-American, Latin American, Han, gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgendered, and racialized persons of many origins. Much of liberation theology is written by those who are not within the audience of ‘implied readers’ identified here as Niebuhr’s

⁵⁸ This depends to some extent on how you see the establishment. See Michael Sandel, “The Political Theory of the Procedural Republic,” in *Reinhold Niebuhr Today*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 28-29 ; Rubem A. Alves, “Christian Realism: Ideology of the Establishment,” *Christianity and Crisis* 33 (September 17, 1973): 176; Bill Kellerman, “Apologist of Power: the Long Shadow of Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian Realism,” *Sojourners* 16 (March 1987): 15-20; Herbert O. Edwards, “Racism and Christian Ethics in America,” *Katallage* (Winter 1971): 12, 15-24; Henry B. Clark, *Serenity, Courage and Wisdom: The Enduring Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 160; Beverley Harrison, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, Carol S. Robb, ed. (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1985), 59; Herbert O. Edwards, “Niebuhr, ‘Realism’, and Civil Rights in America,” *Christianity and Crisis* 46, no. 1 (02/03) 1986: 12.

Niebuhr was criticized by the right for favouring a statist, welfare-liberal approach to politics, and also excessive individualism. From a communitarian standpoint, his liberalism seemed to emphasize the role of the individual and denigrate the community. From this perspective he was seen as defending an establishment that was “too liberal”. Primarily, however, he was criticized from the other side, as fostering repressive conservative ideology, as an ‘apologist of power’ – reactionary on economic analysis and too timid on racial justice. As reported by Clark, from both Beverly Harrison’s Marxist and L. Katherine Harrington’s Keynesian perspective, Niebuhr was criticized for his tendency to underestimate the importance of economic questions because of his emphasis on a balance-of-power analysis of political life. For Harrison, the impact of his anti-Marxist bias goes beyond economic analysis to introduce an “all but impenetrable closed-mindedness about any and all ... [Marxian] social theory”, which for her limits the utility of his contribution to all social justice thinking.

On race, Herbert O. Edwards notes that despite Niebuhr’s progressive in-principle support of civil rights, and his polemic against racial pride, in practice he responded to “increasing restiveness among blacks and to the civil rights movement by overemphasizing their disruptive impact on the white southern social structure, and by cautioning blacks against demanding too much too soon.” Edwards contends that this response reflected not only his fear of civil disorder, but also a persistent unconscious sense of Anglo-Saxon superiority. Traci C. West notes that despite the risks he took to promote the cause of racial justice in America, Niebuhr’s unfortunate readiness to interpret human behaviour “through the notion of superior and inferior racial qualities” persisted.

primary target. In principle, Niebuhr recognized the difficulty: “What no civilization or culture has ever done ... is to admit that the force of a new condition, necessity or power in history, incompatible with its own established presupposition and privileges, had an equal or superior right to existence within itself.”⁵⁹ Yet, as Ruth Smith points out, Niebuhr’s work falls prey to the same problem. The persistent difficulty of achieving a point of purchase for liberal self-critique – “the complexity of [Niebuhr’s] distance from liberalism, and the distance he was unable to achieve”⁶⁰ – is instructive for any attempt to criticize the society to which we belong.

Many of the critiques of Niebuhr were focussed on his political and economic views. As a social ethicist and very public theologian, both his positions and the criticisms were highly contextual, and timely, as he entered into public debates on a wide range of topics. True to his emphasis on human fragility and on corrigibility, Niebuhr modified his views both in response to changing circumstances and new information. It is his more basic insight into the fragility of the human condition, and his theological grappling with the ramifications of fragility for the Christian call to social justice which this project wants to retrieve.

The critique that must be answered in order to proceed with the project of establishing a framework of theological anthropology suitable for a Christian realist virtue ethics is the critique of Niebuhr’s anthropology. A number of critics find his

⁵⁹ Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, 225.

⁶⁰ Ruth L. Smith, “Reinhold Niebuhr and History: The Elusive Liberal Critique,” *Horizons*, 15, 2 (1988): 298.

description of 'the human condition' deficient because it leaves out too much of the human moral experience. Dennis McCann summarizes the problem,

No doubt, Niebuhr's diagnosis [of the self] has the ring of truth for most of his North American readers. But his 'self' is not the only personality type, and for today's social activists perhaps not the most immediately relevant. Recent psychological studies suggest that persons suffering the effects of oppression tend to react submissively to their situation. Typically, their aggression is directed not against their oppressors but against themselves. It is as if they must become 'selves' in Niebuhr's sense before they can begin to change their situation. Thus the oppressed may have to overcome paralysis more often than the self-righteousness emphasized by Niebuhr.⁶¹

This insight was most clearly articulated and most forcefully pressed in a number of feminist critiques of Niebuhr's anthropology.

Feminist critics noted that the description Niebuhr gave of the quintessential 'man' really was a man and an elite white man at that.⁶² Beverly W. Harrison called him "the prototypical liberal male chauvinist."⁶³ Dorrien notes that "for all his insistence on the importance of power and interest, Niebuhr failed to recognize that his understanding of what was 'real' or 'realistic' reflected the perspectives of the privileged white male

⁶¹ Dennis McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1981), 125.

⁶² Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *Journal of Religion*. Vol. 42. No 2. (April, 1960), 100-112; Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 121-27 and 138; Daphne Hampson, "Reinhold Niebuhr on Sin: A Critique," in Richard Harries, ed. *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 46-60; Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 38-44; Beverly Harrison, *Making the Connections*, 27-28 and 58-67; Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1979); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman/New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 199-200; Judith Vaughan, *Sociality, Ethics and Social Change: A Critical Appraisal of Reinhold Niebuhr's Ethics in the Light of Rosemary Radford Ruether's Works* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983).

⁶³ Harrison, *Making the Connections*, 28.

American academic.”⁶⁴ Many feminists saw in Niebuhr’s ‘man’ an independent, autonomous actor, struggling with pridefulness and the need to be humble before God. Reinscribing that isolated and dominating person as the human prototype implicitly validates the sexist, exclusive society that he represents. While acknowledging Niebuhr’s concern for social relationships, the feminist anthropology of the critics suggested that this conventional picture evades what Niebuhr himself might have called the ‘obvious fact’ that human experience is primarily constituted by relationship and relationality. Although it is clear from his preoccupation with the embedded nature of human life, and his description of the dialogues which constitute the self, that Niebuhr took relationship as central, it is also true that his depiction of the human condition makes the (then) conventional assumption that the human being is in some essential way independent.

Moreover, feminist critics point out, by proposing a significant difference between social and personal ethics, Niebuhr overlooks the parallels between life in public and life at home, and thus conceals the injustices that may prevail within families and in private relationships.⁶⁵ Consequently, it is argued, in practice, keeping such injustices hidden serves a conservative social agenda by removing from the public discourse patterns of domination and abuse which urgently require change.

⁶⁴ Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 347.

⁶⁵ Harrison, *Making the Connections*, 54-70.

Niebuhr recognized that the “sin of male arrogance” was likely to have an impact on all definitions of the natural relation between men and women.⁶⁶ He could see the tendency of dominant males to consider male domination normal, and “as permanently normative.”⁶⁷ Even so, his own efforts to overcome sexist bias were not completely successful.

The feminist critique which developed disagrees that pride is the predictable and most destructive sin which is inevitably implied by the structure of the human being. Indeed, the autonomous, self-transcendent individual Niebuhr describes is not ‘realistic’ at all, but the product of false consciousness, in which women especially are likely to misidentify their subjugation as virtuous.⁶⁸ His characterization of pride as the besetting sin paid scant attention to those whose sin is to be not proud enough. A number of writers point out that the quintessential sin for a person (such as a woman) who is relatively powerless in a community is not overweening pride, but its opposite. The need is not to become more humble, but to step up to the plate and make a claim to full humanity. Niebuhr, Valerie Saiving charged, “exemplified a widespread tendency in contemporary theology to describe man's predicament as rising from his separateness and the anxiety occasioned by it and to identify sin with self-assertion and love with selflessness.”⁶⁹ On the contrary, the basic human predicament for those not so privileged

⁶⁶ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 282.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Vaughan, *Sociality, Ethics and Social Change*, 194.

⁶⁹ Saiving, *Situation*, 100.

may be “underdevelopment or negation of the self.”⁷⁰ While selflessness in imitation of the divine reality may be a legitimate aspiration, there is a kind of confident selfhood which is also part of being made in the image of God. Where the temptation for Niebuhr’s ‘man’ may be to overestimate his freedom, or the transcendence of his goals, the temptation for many others is to underestimate freedom.

3.6 Miles’ Helpful Adaptation

This section reviews the response to the feminist critique made by Rebekah M. Miles, as an approach that offers a way to retrieve, amplify, and make use of Niebuhr’s primary insights in a Christian realist virtue ethics. In responding to Solomon’s first requirement of a picture of the quintessential human being, the picture developed must be sturdy. In *The Bonds of Freedom: Feminist Theology and Christian Realism*, Miles develops a feminist Christian realism which engages the insights of both feminist theology and of Niebuhr.⁷¹ She takes as primary interlocutors for the “new models of theological ethics designed to lessen domination and promote mutual empowerment”⁷² the naturalist moral realist Rosemary Radford Ruether and relativist political realist Sharon Welch. While accepting the basic premise, Miles presses the logic of the feminist critique in its dismissal of human self-transcendence, and identifies aspects which are overstated or misdirected. She argues that the rejection of radical freedom and self-

⁷⁰ Ibid., 109.

⁷¹ Miles, *Bonds of Freedom*.

⁷² Ibid., 2.

transcendence as central to the human experience undermines the very objectives of feminism.⁷³ Feminism requires that humans exercise the ability to judge the assumptions and modify the practices of the interlocking oppressions which constitute patriarchy. “Indeed,” she writes, “radical freedom is a condition for the possibility of feminism and other movements for liberation.”⁷⁴

At the same time she presses Niebuhr’s Christian realism for a more thorough analysis of the meaning of God’s immanence. She offers the insight that in fact, Niebuhr’s conventional understanding of gender relations causes him to accept a view of women’s role in motherhood which is inconsistent with his own basic project. This stops him from developing the symmetry of his own logic. She asks whether meaning is to be discovered only in freedom or also in boundedness, since by Niebuhr’s own account, human freedom exists only in creatures who are also fully embedded in social and cultural realities.

Niebuhr’s picture of the fragile human being includes both freedom and embeddedness, but he remains ambivalent about the moral valence of the bonds imposed by nature and community. While he sees the family as a limited locus of self-giving love, he says that self-interest will always animate the larger society, where injustice is the price of harmony.⁷⁵ Coming from the other direction, Miles points out that some of Niebuhr’s feminist critics, in stressing the moral primacy of our boundedness to nature

⁷³ Ibid. , 17.

⁷⁴ Rebekah M.Miles, “Freeing Bonds and Binding Freedom: Reinhold Niebuhr and Feminist Critics on Paternal Dominion and Maternal Constraint,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1996): 122.

⁷⁵ Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 129.

and community, fail to provide a point of purchase for the social critique which is their primary objective. Without the possibility of transcendence, social and cultural transformation becomes impossible. “Feminist critics neglect radical freedom; Niebuhr neglects boundedness, particularly as a positive expression or ground of freedom.”⁷⁶ Using the experience of parenthood to explicate her argument, Miles develops an alternative model of the self which attends to these symmetrical flaws, in which “freedom can find in boundedness its positive fulfillment and source as well as its limit.”⁷⁷ Her model reconnects the freedom of the self with its embeddedness, in what she calls a cycle of creative transformation. Her feminist Christian realism offers what she calls an anti-essentialist essentialism – in which “the person is always transforming and critically evaluating claims about the essential.”⁷⁸

Although neither Miles nor Niebuhr explores it fully, the symmetry of her “more Niebuhrian than Niebuhr’s”⁷⁹ picture of the human condition plays out in the picture of sin which it implies. On the one hand the person that Niebuhr was most concerned with will be betrayed into sins of pride – anxiously misidentifying our contingent, limited projects and goals as bearing transcendent significance, and then cast deeper into pretentiousness through self-deceit.

But the socially less powerful person, whose situation feminist writers Saiving, Vaughan, Plaskow, Hampson and others have added to the equation, may make the

⁷⁶ Miles, “Freeing Bonds and Binding Freedom,” 126.

⁷⁷ Miles, *Bonds of Freedom*, 142.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 154.

opposite mistake – misidentifying the call to freedom as impossible. This error takes the constraints of particularity as absolute. The outcome here Niebuhr identified as sensuality. He linked it with such failings as alcoholism and sexual licence as a “more apparent and discernible form of anarchy than pride,”⁸⁰ and as a distorted form of self-love. However, following the line of Miles’ analysis, if the sin of denying limit is pride, then the sin of denying freedom may be closer to the classical sin of *acedia*, the sloth that signifies spiritual apathy or lack of purpose.⁸¹ It would also incline toward moral relativism, in which the norms of a particular group or community are considered absolutely fixed, and thus immune from critique or change.

In both cases, the sin arises out of the basic human orientation to the good – confusing from opposite directions a proximate good with an ultimate good. Chapter 5 will explore more fully the way a theological-ethical cycle which may be considered transformative underlies the human dynamic that Niebuhr describes in his portrayal of the human condition. It will take as its starting point the more symmetrical picture that Miles presents in her feminist Christian realism.

3.7 Summary and Conclusion

Continuing the first interpretive phase of the project of critical correlation, this chapter has presented Niebuhr’s description of the human condition, along with his

⁸⁰ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 228 ff. I would agree with Miles that Niebuhr’s conventionality prevents him from being fully ‘Niebuhrian’ as he struggles with this.

⁸¹ See Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, 147 ff., for a discussion of sensuality as sloth.

account of the underlying dynamic of moral life, as a framework of theological anthropology which can form the basis of a Christian realist virtue ethics. This picture of the human condition takes fragility seriously, is relevant to the target group of justice-seekers, and resonates with the group's preoccupations and challenges. Niebuhr views the human being as paradoxically strong and weak, free and limited, transcendent and contingent. The primary error, which most often plays out as the sin of pride, is that human beings misidentify their limited goals and achievements as bearing ultimate significance. The element of self-deceit inherent in this misplaced claim increases the tendency to make the claim.

The chapter then traces Niebuhr's use of the metaphor of dialogue – with self, with other and with God – to describe the way human self develops as an ongoing home for the virtues. It explores Niebuhr's contention that human well-being is achieved through self-fulfillment rather than self-negation, a conception that has clear parallels with the *eudaimonia* of the virtue ethics tradition. Instead of overcoming the realities imposed by human limitations, the grace of God both forgives and empowers toward human flourishing. The full human life will thus embrace both the contingent and the transcendent as inextricably linked aspects of the human reality.

The chapter continues with a brief review of some of the critiques of Niebuhr's framework of theological anthropology, among which feminist critiques are most pointed and most important for the project. These critiques focus on the importance of including in the analysis persons who are less socially powerful. It introduces the work of Rebecca M. Miles as a corrective both to that critique and to Niebuhr's description of

the human condition. With this correction we see that the misidentification can go either way – what is ultimate may equally be misidentified as contingent and its transcendent claims denied.

With this framework for understanding the fragility of the human condition in mind, we have a sense of what the questions are to which a Christian realist virtue ethics must respond. Before turning to that task, the next chapter enters a dialectical phase, examining in detail the appropriateness and plausibility of the attempt to develop Niebuhr's Christian realism along the lines of virtue ethics.

CHAPTER 4
FROM NIEBUHR'S CHRISTIAN REALISM
TO CHRISTIAN REALIST VIRTUE ETHICS

The purpose of this chapter is to argue that it is appropriate and plausible to attempt to develop Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism along the lines of virtue ethics. It begins the dialectical phase of Tracy's method of critical correlation by identifying areas in which Niebuhr's Christian realism has specific parallels with Aristotelian virtue ethics.

This thesis claims that because in Niebuhr's view, humanity is both fragile and also called to work in a secular world toward social and political justice, Christian realism needs to develop a virtue ethics. It will have to propose a set of virtues – habitual dispositions to perceive, to feel and to act – which allow the person to persevere and to thrive. This is not to say that there is a virtue ethics to be found in Niebuhr, but that there is potential to develop a virtue ethics which could be considered 'Niebuhrian'.

This chapter explores the question of appropriateness and plausibility. It identifies three primary objections to the development of a Christian realist virtue ethics, and proposes that these are not insurmountable.¹ It then reviews three primary themes in

¹ A fourth objection may be raised, that it will be impossible to propose a Christian realist virtue ethics without a strong conception of the *polis*, or moral community. While it is true that Niebuhr underlines the moral ambiguity of community, he also unequivocally stresses that the formation of the self is crucially influenced by its location in a particular family, church, school, and society, as will be noted in 4.2.2. Moreover, not all interpreters of Aristotelian virtue ethics emphasize the *polis*. Martha Nussbaum, whom Chapter 5 identifies as the primary virtue ethics dialogue partner for this project, highlights

the work of Niebuhr which are in fact highly relevant to the project of developing a form of virtue ethics based on Niebuhr's theological anthropology. It indicates the links between Niebuhr and *eudaimonia*, *telos*, focus on the concrete particular and the deliberative realism of the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition.

4.1 Three Objections

The first objection to the development of a Christian realist virtue ethics is the lack of attention to virtue ethics in Niebuhr. In general, Niebuhr did not engage the question of virtue or virtue ethics in an explicit or systematic way, nor reflect on virtue as habitual disposition. The revival of interest in Aristotelian formulations in philosophical and theological circles occurred largely after his retirement and death. Niebuhr's few references to virtue use the word in a much more general sense than is meant by the term virtue ethics. Langdon Gilkey's description of virtue as "a minimal sense of moral adequacy, of being in the right, and being on the right side"² gives a sense of Niebuhr's semantic field in his use of the word virtue. This minimalist idea of virtue as a general synonym for goodness, referring to any behavior showing high moral standards, is not unexpected by an American Protestant writer of his time.

In the same way, Niebuhr's use of terms which are also used in virtue ethics – love, justice, wisdom – must be read in his semantic context. In general he does not use these terms to describe settled habits which both arise from and contribute to the

formation in cosmopolitanism through liberal education, and shares Niebuhr's sense of the moral ambiguity of community. Chapter 7 discusses the formative role of the community. .

² Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 8.

development of good character. In Niebuhr, these are principles or values more than virtues. He uses the word wisdom to mean a certain kind of especially insightful knowledge.³ Justice means fairness or equitable conduct.⁴ Love refers to well-intentioned attachment, or goodwill toward the other. He describes love as a law which is a “harmonious relation of life to life in obedience to the divine centre and source of his life. This law is violated when man seeks to make himself the centre and source of his life.”⁵ There is a semantic disconnect between Niebuhr and Aristotelian virtue ethics. The argument this thesis makes is that although Niebuhr does not use virtue ethics terminology, even when he uses words that also appear in virtue ethics, there is nonetheless ample material within Niebuhr’s theological writing to derive a virtue ethics which does involve settled dispositions. As noted in Chapter 3, without using the words, he describes *eudaimonia* or flourishing, to be achieved when the human being is functioning in its most uniquely human way, that is, both bound and free. Human well-being is achieved is through self-fulfillment rather than self-negation, clearly a eudaemonist conception. . More will be said below about the role of Niebuhr’s self as suitable for the habituation of virtue. Further, Niebuhr’s Christian realist anthropology, with its emphasis on embeddedness, is correlated with the focus on the concrete particular found in the virtue ethics of Aristotle. This chapter will develop the argument

³ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 16, 32, 34, 41, 57, 122, 135, 168; *Destiny*, 11,54,60-63, 98 ff., 206, 212, 220.

⁴ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 61,102,110-111, 132, 168; *Destiny*, 244 ff.

⁵ Niebuhr, *Nature*,16. See also 147, where he refers to love as a “principle of harmony”.

that in all these ways, Niebuhr's work indicates an openness to development along the lines of the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics.

A second objection to the development of a Christian realist virtue ethics is the possible substantive antagonism to virtue ethics that is implicit in Niebuhr, apart from the semantic disconnect. Despite his relative lack of attention to virtue, it seems that Niebuhr may be genuinely hostile to certain aspects of the virtue ethics tradition. What Niebuhr does say directly about the minimalist idea of virtue reflects his critique of what he considers the naïve ideas of self-sufficiency found in both secular and theological liberalism. For Niebuhr, the idea of virtue is linked with optimism, one of the very opposites of faith (the other being despair). "Most optimistic creeds, when reduced to their essentials, prove themselves to be confidence in some human virtue or capacity."⁶

Niebuhr's reading of history also reveals his doubts about virtue. He criticizes the classical formulation of virtue as both lacking a sense of the "defect in the centre of human personality",⁷ and as elitist.⁸ He finds that virtue in medieval mysticism is to be achieved "only by the annihilation of the will,"⁹ and by escaping from the world through absorption into the divine.¹⁰ His argument against virtue that is based either on nature or on rationality, as found in philosophers as diverse as Rousseau, Hegel and Marx, is that

⁶ Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, 115.

⁷ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

it fails to take seriously the ‘obvious facts’ of sin and chaos.¹¹ He charges that such an approach minimizes the problem of sin by imagining that virtue will definitively overcome it. In his suspicion of virtue, Niebuhr also reflects the traditional Protestant bias which combines a tendentious misreading of medieval Catholic moral theology with a sense of virtue as “an expression of pride, self-love, and thus as inherently hypocritical or false.”¹²

Granted that Niebuhr expresses these reservations about virtue, there are grounds to argue that his theological anthropology can nevertheless serve as a basis for a Christian realist virtue ethics. Geoffrey Scott has noted that despite his ostensible rejection of virtue ethics, Niebuhr’s construct of the human being implies and entails a concept of virtue, understood as “the human response which grace elicits” and affirms true human agency.¹³ Robin Lovin also points out the resonance of Niebuhr’s description of the ‘attitude’ appropriate for a Christian with contemporary understandings of a virtue as habitual disposition.¹⁴ While these are not evidence of the

¹¹ Ibid., 93-94.

¹² Herdt, 341. Niebuhr was less virulent than some of his colleagues. Protestant skepticism of virtue can be summed up in this quote from Emil Brunner, “Today we are rightly suspicious of all talk of ‘virtues,’ indeed we are tired of all such language. For the ancient conception of virtue, which also dominates the whole medieval morality . . . , turns a quality which depends for its very existence upon the reality of the Divine action into a human acquisition . . . all this talk of “possessing virtues” or “being virtuous”, indeed even the striving after such virtue, and even the mere ideal of virtue is presumptuous. The idea of virtue leads man to justify himself – and this is the very opposite of genuine goodness.” *The Divine Imperative*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), 165.

¹³ Scott, 105.

¹⁴ Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, 95-96. It is this intuition that the current project follows up.

existence of a reflection on virtue ethics in Niebuhr, they point to the plausibility of such a development.

Moreover, Niebuhr also stresses fragility. Niebuhr's emphasis on the need to be open to correction, and to be active in the effort to self-correct, suggests an orientation toward virtue that goes beyond his critique of optimism. Niebuhr explicitly rejects the Calvinist Reformation doctrine of total depravity, and affirms that human freedom implies human responsibility.¹⁵

Though he was not a Lutheran, Niebuhr's liberal Protestant background may have been more influenced by Lutheranism than by Calvinism.¹⁶ To explore whether Luther rules out virtue, Gilbert Meilaender analyses Luther's *Against Latomus*, and concludes that Luther postulates two different ways of thinking about virtue, and holds them in tension.¹⁷ First, he finds a substantive understanding of virtue, in which traits of character can and should be developed over time by intention. At the same time, he finds in Luther a relational understanding of virtue, in which, through grace, the traits of character are integrated and the human being is brought into right relationship with God. Both moral agency and passivity before God play a part in this model, which implies a continual surrender to the divine initiative. Meilaender concludes that, "Luther's view seems to be that the examined life is necessary but not, finally, worth living – that we

¹⁵ Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 119; *Nature*, 266.

¹⁶ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 4, 140.

¹⁷ Meilaender, *Theory and Practice of Virtue*, 118ff.

should make what progress we can in virtue but always without anticipating that it could make of us what we want to be.”¹⁸

In this sense, even considered as a Lutheran, Niebuhr too can be interpreted as open to a virtue ethics which affirms notions of habituation and character development. Nevertheless, any virtue ethics based on Niebuhr will have to take human sinfulness very seriously, and eschew any claim that the virtuous person can become self-sufficient. That is, Christian realist virtue ethics will be anti-perfectionist, and will emphasize corrigibility. Virtue will refer to the habits required for living amidst fragility, rather than the sustained achievement of excellence. Along with human efforts, this will involve a continual return to reliance on God’s grace.

A third objection to the development of a Christian realist virtue ethics is the question of whether Niebuhr’s conception of the self lends itself to this treatment. In virtue ethics the self is to be cultivated and developed through education and habituation, such that the moral product is not an act or set of acts but a life. Even if there is scope in Niebuhr’s theology for a virtue ethics, it will still need to show that his theological anthropology proposes a self that can be cultivated and developed into virtue in a way that is analogous to habituation in virtue ethics. Niebuhr’s understanding of the self as dialogical, described in Chapter 3, makes clear that he believes that the self develops continuously through self-reflection, through interaction with other people, and through communion with the divine. In each of these three dialogues the person is formed, and reformed, in relation to the social, historical and physical context. The

¹⁸ Ibid., 120.

stable self identifies its life goals dynamically, both within the ethos of the community in which it lives its life and through its powers of deliberation. Consistency is achieved not by reason, but by a more integrated and integrating action of the self toward an overall purpose, or *telos*.¹⁹

Niebuhr identifies conscience as a critical element of this continuity. “The self’s capacity to view itself and to judge either its short-range or long-range purposes gives rise to a reality in its life which is usually termed ‘conscience’.”²⁰ This judgment involves reflection on thoughts, feelings and actions in which the sense of obligation and the sense of inclination are at odds.²¹ Moreover, the sense of obligation and the sense of inclination are formed not only by reason but in the ambiguity of community life. “Reason is not the sole basis of moral virtue in man. His social impulses are more deeply rooted than his rational life.”²² Thus the self is developed by deliberation and in community such that it can sustain the habitual dispositions of virtue.

Niebuhr is leery of any human claim to goodness. If there is to be a virtue ethics derived from Niebuhr’s theology of fragility, it will be more interested in proficiency in living a human life amidst fragility than it will be in perfectionist accomplishment. It will be anti-perfectionist, non-elitist, and it will not counsel withdrawal from the secular world. The purpose of good character in such a virtue ethics is not to overcome fragility, but to provide a resource to sustain us in our fragility. That is, the Christian realist will

¹⁹ Niebuhr, *Self*, 12.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 13.

²¹ *Ibid*.

²² Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 19.

be more interested in living responsibly amidst fragility than in achieving moral perfection. Character will allow us to continue to work for justice even when we are aware of the impossibility of achieving, decisively, the things we are working for.

4.2 Themes Related to Virtue Ethics in Niebuhr's Christian Realism

Three underlying ideas at work in Niebuhr's writing are strongly correlated with key elements of Aristotelian virtue ethics. Meaning, realism and embeddedness operate as cross-cutting themes in Niebuhr's work in all genres. I interpret Niebuhr's focus on meaning as correlated to the virtue ethics focus on the *telos*, his preoccupation with embeddedness as a signal of his attention to the concrete particular, and his realism as a method of deliberation with significant parallels to those of the Aristotelian tradition.

4.2.1 Meaning

Niebuhr assumes that the question of meaning is the primary question for the modern person.²³ Without the sense of a coherent universe, and of some needful attachment to that coherence, the fragile individual drifts from autonomy into anomie, vulnerable to the lies of a totalitarian state on the one hand and to cynicism and alienation on the other.²⁴ Chapter 8 will present the *telos* in Niebuhr as the divine reality, expressed as the law of love. The human impulse to meaning is the evidence of our orientation toward this *telos*.

²³ Niebuhr, *Christian Ethics*, 63; Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 53.

²⁴ Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, 152-153; *Nature*, 83ff.

For Niebuhr, meaning resides in both the created order and the realm of the transcendent – that is, meaning in the world is not imposed by us, but inherent within a created universe.²⁵ He identifies two historical errors which play out in the history of western Christianity. Mysticism, of whose quietism and superstition Niebuhr is suspicious, arises when all meaning is ascribed only to the transcendent. Naturalism, of which he considers rationalism a modern form, results if meaning is apprehended only in the created world. Thus, while meaning resides in ‘nature’, it is not given by ‘nature’, but is disclosed from beyond and fulfilled by the transcendent.²⁶ This disclosure and fulfillment human beings may apprehend, but not comprehend, except by faith.²⁷

Because of its central place in modern consciousness, Niebuhr identifies meaning as “the basic problem of religion.”²⁸ It is through the effort to discern and establish meaning that humanity comes face to face with the deepest questions and most significant truths about life, both on a personal and a collective level. The purpose of religion in this sense is to give form to the human quest for understanding – and for reassurance – in the face of the complexities of individual, community, and historical life.

Niebuhr’s insistence that history has meaning – that human societies move and change and develop in ways that are neither haphazard nor merely repetitive – keeps him

²⁵ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 164 ff; *Christian Ethics*, 16.

²⁶ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 77, 83.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 183; Niebuhr, *Self*, 61.

²⁸ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 164

anchored in a modern view of the world.²⁹ He is acutely conscious of the contradictions and moral ambiguities of history. His sense that history matters not merely for us but in God's grander scheme of things holds the tension between life as lived and life as fulfilled. However, the riddles of historical reality as Niebuhr identifies them cannot be solved "without the introduction of a principle of meaning which transcends the world of meaning to be interpreted."³⁰ For him, it is only in the encounter with God's transcendent reality that a person apprehends the true meaning of the historical world in which we live our concrete, daily lives. It is the experience of faith that illuminates reality.³¹

Niebuhr's focus on meaning is parallel to the emphasis on *telos* as purpose or end in the tradition of virtue ethics. Meaning in Niebuhr points to the overall goal to which human life is oriented, the divine reality expressed as the law of love.

4.2.2 Embeddedness and Contingency

Niebuhr's insight that meaning arises outside history should not suggest that he underestimates the extent to which human life is embedded in the flow of concrete daily reality. On the contrary, he identifies context and contingency as critical aspects of our individual, community, intellectual and religious reality.³² He is focused on concrete particularity in a way that is correlated with Aristotle's realism. In Niebuhr, human

²⁹ Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 1.

³⁰ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 164.

³¹ Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 99-100; *Nature*, 164.

³² Niebuhr, *Nature*, 270.

beings are defined by our circumstances as well as by our essence. Our fragility is specifically based on our inevitable dependency on our context.³³ He identifies the failure to recognize this contingency as a primary source of both individual and collective sin.³⁴ Formation in virtue takes place within the specific context of the family, social, religious and political communities in which we live. For this reason, attention to social and political justice, in order to promote a wholesome society, is key to the Christian vocation.

4.2.2.1 Embeddedness and the Individual

For Niebuhr, ‘genuine individuality’ is the primary characteristic of a human life.³⁵ He sees this individuality as arising both from the particular circumstances of a person’s life, and also from the ‘freedom of the spirit’ with which all humanity is endowed.³⁶ However, Niebuhr is gravely suspicious of individualism in all its modern forms.³⁷ He insists that the freedom of the individual, which he affirms, does not imply that there is such a thing as a free-floating, unconditioned human who is somehow more real than the one living out the details of existence. “Man is a creature of time and place, whose perspectives and insights are invariably conditioned by his immediate

³³ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 170, 175.

³⁴ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 185.

³⁵ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 55.

³⁶ *Nature*, *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁷ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 61 ff.

circumstances – a creature as well as a creator of history.”³⁸ The freedom that Niebuhr also affirms “starts somewhere and views that starting point in relation to other possibilities.”³⁹

Niebuhr is hard on the pretensions of contemporary individualism. He points out that among the ironies of the historic development of bourgeois society is the paradox that in reality, “the more the individual emerges from the community to establish his own independence and uniqueness, the more he becomes dependent upon a wider system of mutual services.”⁴⁰ The psychic and physical requirements of modern individualism can only be fulfilled by a very complex and competently functioning society, which supports economic specialization and an elaborate institutional infrastructure in education, science and government.⁴¹ The ‘modern’ individual is far less able to survive ‘off the grid’ than a tightly linked community living in comparative simplicity far from the metropolitan centre. Neither Annie Dillard nor Henry David Thoreau can really survive without the backup of a complex society. Niebuhr’s recognition that extreme individual autonomy as idealized by modernity is ultimately not merely undesirable but in fact not possible is an element of his realism.⁴²

³⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1937; reprint 1965), 28.

³⁹ Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, 125.

⁴⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Children of Light and Children of Darkness* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944), 54.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

The contemporary celebration of individual self-sufficiency, in Niebuhr's view, is not only a misapprehension of reality but in traditional terms, a source of sin. It gives rise to a form of distorted self-love which cuts two ways – in the first place, individualism encourages practices of overbearing and domination in human relationships, and in the second it permits a false isolationist consciousness to emerge. It denies the reality of fragility.

The idea of individual self-sufficiency, so exalted in our liberal culture, is recognized in Christian thought as one form of the primal sin. For self-love, which is the root of all sin, takes two social forms. One of them is the domination of other life by the self. The second is the sin of isolationism. By the responsibilities which men have to their family and community and to many common enterprises, they are drawn out of themselves to become their true selves.⁴³

In the experience of living with others, the human being is not merely tethered to a set of limitations and compromises. In Niebuhr's estimation, these very limitations are the only means by which to develop and to express the fullness of a human life.⁴⁴

4.2.2.2 Embeddedness and the Community

The significance of human embeddedness is cultural as well as individual – that is, the pressures of the immediate circumstances are not simply a matter of personal setting and family quirk, but a function of the particular community in which an individual lives. Niebuhr understands community as primordial.⁴⁵ It shapes the

⁴³ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 53.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

individual, not only in values and norms of behaviour, but also in the more qualitative area of self-consciousness.⁴⁶ The kind of self-awareness one experiences is a function of the collective self-awareness of one's culture and community.

The highest reaches of individual consciousness and awareness are rooted in social experience and find their ultimate meaning in relation to the community. The individual is the product of the whole socio-historical process, though he may reach a height of uniqueness which seems to transcend his social history completely. His individual achievements grow into as well as out of, the community and find their final meaning in the community.⁴⁷

Paradoxically, the accomplishments of the promethean 'rugged individual' of American legend are a cultural phenomenon, both shaped and interpreted by a particular cultural identity.

Niebuhr describes human communities as both organism and artifact.⁴⁸ On the one hand they evolve and develop and behave unconsciously as organisms do. At the same time they can be changed and manipulated consciously – new rules, new forms of government and new institutions can be invented and implemented. But Niebuhr the realist cautions against the "excessive voluntarism" of "confident rationalism"⁴⁹ which imagines that with enough education and a little skill you could simply remake society according to a new insight or plan. He criticizes idealistic reformers of communist and liberal stripe for underestimating the resilient strength of the particular communities in

⁴⁶ Ibid., 50.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 163ff.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 165.

which humans live out their lives.⁵⁰ In imagining that the community is a neutral launch-pad for either autonomous individuals or brave new worlds, Niebuhr charges that they fail to “... appreciate the significance of the organic aspects of society. The organic forces of historic tradition, national sentiment, cultural inheritance and unconscious loyalties have a more stubborn vitality than mere social mechanisms.”⁵¹

Niebuhr identifies the false neutrality of liberal thinking in perceiving itself as ‘everyman’. The inability to recognize the contingent quality and the particularity of one’s own society and social situation he views as a part of the ‘covert religion’ of bourgeois secularism. “It does not understand the perennial power of particularity in human culture....it regards its characteristic perspectives and convictions as universally valid and applicable.”⁵²

4.2.2.3 Embeddedness and Intellectual Life

Niebuhr insists that reason itself is historically conditioned and subject to the limitations of contingency. “Bourgeois society imagines itself free of prejudices. Its cultural ideal is that of a presuppositionless science.”⁵³ He observes with skepticism the optimistic doctrines which propose to use reason as the tool to overcome the conflicts

⁵⁰ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 213.

⁵¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1935; reprint 1963), 118.

⁵² Niebuhr, *Children*, 131.

⁵³ Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, 34.

and disharmonies of particular communities.⁵⁴ He rejects all forms of utopian political thinking, in which it is imagined that the application of reason to a historic situation will permit a political construction that is disengaged or objective.⁵⁵ On the contrary, he argues from the observable facts that “there is no evidence that reason is being progressively disembodied. It always remains organically related to a particular centre of vitality, individual and collective.”⁵⁶

This tendency to self-delusion is not restricted to political thinkers, but extends to philosophy:

The philosopher who imagines himself capable of stating a final truth merely because he has sufficient perspective upon past history to be able to detect previous philosophical errors is clearly the victim of the ignorance of his ignorance. Standing on a high pinnacle of history he forgets that this pinnacle also has a particular locus, and that his perspective will seem as partial to posterity as the pathetic parochialism of previous thinkers. This is a very obvious fact, but no philosophical system has been great enough to take full account of it.⁵⁷

What Niebuhr sees in the refusal to recognize contingency is not simply poor quality thinking, but the cardinal sin of pride.⁵⁸ He identifies intellectual pride as arising from a self-deluded reason, which “forgets that it is involved in a temporal process and imagines itself in complete transcendence over history.”⁵⁹ It forgets its fragility. But this is not merely a mistaken sense of objectivity. Niebuhr sees here a dishonest attempt to

⁵⁴ Niebuhr, *Self*, 165.

⁵⁵ Niebuhr, *Self*, 154.

⁵⁶ Niebuhr, *Children*, 66.

⁵⁷ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 195.

⁵⁸ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 186 ff.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 195.

obscure the real nature of political and philosophical reflection as controlled and limited (sometimes unconsciously) by the self-serving interests of the powerful elements in a society.⁶⁰ He counsels the thoroughgoing exercise of what has come to be known as a hermeneutic of suspicion. Continuing, he writes, “Intellectual pride is something *more* than ignorance of ignorance. It always involves, besides, a conscious or sub-conscious effort to obscure a known or partly-known taint of interest.”⁶¹

The way reason functions to provide an interpretive framework to any set of events and activities leads Niebuhr to a critique of Western historiography as well. He identifies two primary categories of the effort to understand history ontologically – the classical idea of the historical cycle, and the modern idea of historical development – and notes that both are both true and false. True in that they describe patterns that can certainly be observed, and false in that they ascribe positive meaning to those patterns without recognizing their own ideological investment in this ascription. He argues that “nothing can give any observer such detachment from the historical scene as would endow his views with the same unchallenged and unchallengeable validity which the conclusions of the natural scientists may well claim.”⁶² In Niebuhr’s terms, it is more accurate to identify both the historical cycle and historical development as conditions for the historical drama. At the same time, quoting H.A.L. Fisher, he urges his reader to

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Niebuhr, *Self*, 53. Even the detachment and freedom from systematic or ideological bias of the natural sciences has come under critique – Niebuhr himself notes this in *Self*, 114.

“recognize in the development of human destinies the play of the contingent and the unforeseen.”⁶³

4.2.2.4 Embeddedness and Religion

Niebuhr’s perception of the particularity and limitation of any human perspective extends to include religion and the church. “No church can lift man out of the partial and finite history in which all human life stands.”⁶⁴ He is critical of any attempt, and in particular the Barthians’ attempt, to claim for even the Christian faith a perspective that is fully detached from its moorings in the community in which it lives.⁶⁵ This full disengagement he sees as self-deluded and prideful. The purpose of religion is precisely to enable people to live without the false security promised by simplistic and self-satisfied faiths whether classical, liberal, or even secular.⁶⁶ He wants religion to be a source of appropriate humility with respect to the difference between the unconditioned character of the divine and the conditioned character of all human enterprise. With a vision of religious diversity within a democratic society, he calls on

each religion, or each version of a single faith [to] seek to proclaim its highest insights while yet preserving an humble and contrite recognition of the fact that all actual expressions of religious faith are subject to historical contingency and relativity... It ought to teach then that their religion is most certainly true if it recognizes the element of error and sin,

⁶³ Quoted in Niebuhr, *Self*, 50.

⁶⁴ Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, 62.

⁶⁵ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 201-2, 220.

⁶⁶ Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, 193 ff.

of finiteness and contingency which creeps into the statement of even the sublimest truth.⁶⁷

Given the critiques of Niebuhr that developed in the 1960s and subsequently, in which he is depicted as the quintessential person of privilege, unaware of the narrowness of his perspective, it is interesting to see the degree to which at least in principle he stresses embeddedness. Reinhold Niebuhr is a harbinger of postmodernity in his insistence that “frames of meaning determine the interpretation of facts.”⁶⁸ In contrast to the prevailing modernist view of human beings as creatures of nature and creators of history, he insists that human beings are also creatures of history – fragile beings subject to the exigencies of social location, accidents of birth and education, and formed within particular communities.⁶⁹

Niebuhr’s insistence on the moral significance of the embeddedness and particularity of human life, as against universal or abstract theoretical principles, is correlated with the concern of virtue ethics for attention to the concrete particular.

4.2.3 Realism

Niebuhr’s realism is parallel to the realism of Aristotelian virtue ethics and functions as a form of deliberation. Robin W. Lovin identifies three realisms at work in

⁶⁷ Niebuhr, *Children*, 135.

⁶⁸ Niebuhr, *Self*, 56.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 204.

Niebuhr's thought – theological realism, moral realism and political realism.⁷⁰ These operate as underlying presuppositions in all his writing.

Theological realism assumes that there is a God, that God's existence and nature matter, and that it is possible to be wrong or right in our theological claims.⁷¹ Moreover, because in Niebuhr's mid-century secular context as in ours, the underlying sensibility of the public space is non-religious, this has particular implications. In this setting, theological realism "illuminates the specific difference that it makes to affirm that God is at the centre of meaning in a morally coherent universe."⁷² The challenge for theological realism is to hold to this while recognizing that the reality of God is beyond the fragile human capacity to grasp and express.⁷³ Niebuhr "sees a God who transcends all our efforts to understand as God transcends our creaturely being; yet this God is continually in essential and intimate relation to us."⁷⁴

Moral realism maintains that genuine moral knowledge is possible.⁷⁵ It proposes that moral claims are not delivered or guaranteed by the commands of an authority, but must be derived from deliberation. True moral ideas are more than merely statements of preference or cultural artifacts, even though they are these too.⁷⁶ While justification for

⁷⁰ Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, 33 ff.; He develops this theme in *Christian Realism and the New Realities*, 189 ff.

⁷¹ Ibid, 10.

⁷² Ibid., 33.

⁷³ Niebuhr, *Christian Ethics*, 5.

⁷⁴ Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 57.

⁷⁵ Lovin, *Christian Realism*, 12.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

moral ideas is always “relative to our place in history and the particular sets of beliefs that place offers us,”⁷⁷ the moral realist claims that moral ideas can be true as well as justified. The difficulty is that because as fragile beings we can only have access to our own moral ideas through our own justifications, we must recognize that we may not always have it right, and that our current moral ideas may need to be corrected over time.⁷⁸ Moral knowledge thus understood is not given, but worked out through deliberation – it is contestable and it “grows and develops through investigation and discussion.”⁷⁹ For this reason Niebuhr urged a ‘fallibilist’ attitude, and insisted that pronouncements, including his own, should be open to correction.

Political realism insists that human social and political transformation will always and only be achieved through processes which involve power, self-interest, and conflict.⁸⁰ It assumes that political arrangements and institutions always embody a structure of power – for managing interpersonal and inter-communal relations through the use of power to organize, to persuade and ultimately to compel. This is not a simple *realpolitik*, however. While power and self-interest will always be in play, Niebuhr’s political realism insists that idealism and genuine aspirations toward goodness are also present in political processes.⁸¹ Indeed it is the kernel of idealism which gives even a pernicious political impulse its moral potency. Niebuhr’s political realism holds together

⁷⁷ Lovin, *Christian Realism*, 52.

⁷⁸ Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1988, with new postscript 2001), 25.

⁷⁹ Lovin, *Christian Realism*, 9.

⁸⁰ Lovin, *New Realities*, 8.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 196.

this apparent contradiction, and links it to fragility. Many forms of political power are vulnerable to the tendency to identify the contingency of the current project with what is ultimate, or embodies a transcendent divine will. Niebuhr identifies this reality as a form of collective *hubris* which is definitive for the human condition.⁸²

In a more general sense, Niebuhr's realism is a form of empiricism. He sees the fragility of the human condition and states that what he is doing is descriptive more than prescriptive. He attends to the particulars of a situation. He bases his analysis of history and of human nature on what he repeatedly calls the 'obvious facts'.⁸³ Almost as a joke, he often pointed out that original sin is the one Christian doctrine that is readily empirically verifiable by everyone. His apology for the Christian faith is based on his claim not that it is very inspiring or profound (though he considers that it is), nor that it is revealed in the word of God (though he absolutely believes it is), but that it most accurately responds to reality. Christian faith attends to the truth of the human condition, and of its relationship to the divine reality. It is this realism which allows and empowers ethical action. "We are able to act morally, and we are able to sustain that action in the face of failure and tragedy, because we believe that the meaning of life is grounded in a reality that transcends both our momentary successes, and our inevitable failures."⁸⁴ Niebuhr's realism resonates with the emphasis on deliberation and practical wisdom that the virtue ethics tradition develops.

⁸² Niebuhr, *Nature*, 208 ff.

⁸³ Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 308. *Nature*, 3, 4, 95, 99; *Self*, 127 ff.

⁸⁴ Robin W. Lovin, "Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man*," in *Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, ed. Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 491.

4.3 Summary and Conclusions

Recognizing that Niebuhr did not elaborate an explicit treatment of virtue ethics, this chapter opens the dialectical phase of the project by raising the question of whether it is appropriate or plausible to attempt to develop a form of virtue ethics based on his theology.

It has reviewed three objections, and argued that each can be met. It argues despite that a semantic disconnect with virtue ethics terminology as such, Niebuhr's description of a flourishing life is correlated to *eudaimonia*, that a non-perfectionist understanding of virtue highly relevant to Niebuhr's theological anthropology can be found in the Lutheran Protestant tradition, and that Niebuhr's picture of the development of the self in three dialogues is well suited to the habituation of virtue.

The chapter then identifies three central themes of Niebuhr which have special relevance to virtue ethics: Niebuhr's concern with meaning as the overriding question of religion, Niebuhr's emphasis on contingency and 'embeddedness in time and place' as determinative of human experience, and Niebuhr's realism, framed by Lovin as theological, moral, and political. What is of special interest for this project is the way the three Niebuhrian themes are correlated with the insights of an Aristotelian approach within the contemporary revival of interest in virtue ethics (which will be explored in Chapter 5). Niebuhr himself, as mentioned, did not develop an explicit treatment of virtue ethics. Nevertheless, recognizing the correlation of meaning with purpose (*telos*), embeddedness with concern for concrete particulars, and realism as a method of

deliberation indicates the plausibility of placing his theology in conversation with virtue ethics.

This chapter is the first dialectical step of the project following Tracy's method of critical correlation. The next chapter turns to the second interpretive phase. It takes up the task of identifying an appropriate approach, and a set of key elements in the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics which will be relevant to the final objective of constructing a Christian realist virtue ethics.

CHAPTER 5

MINING THE VIRTUE ETHICS TRADITION

Following the presentation in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 of a Christian realist framework of theological anthropology, the project now turns to the second major step of the interpretive phase of Tracy's method of critical correlation, which is to examine the virtue ethics tradition for concepts and approaches which will lend themselves to the construction of a Christian realist virtue ethics. The purpose of this chapter is to identify the particular approach to virtue ethics which will be most useful in the formulation of a Christian realist virtue ethics based on the theological anthropology of Niebuhr, and to identify the key elements from this virtue ethics tradition which are to be incorporated. Among these elements is a list of virtues which a Christian realist virtue ethics must include as a minimum.

The first part of the chapter argues for an Aristotelian approach to developing a Christian realist virtue ethics that highlights Aristotle, contemporary interpreters of Aquinas, and Martha Nussbaum. It begins with the assumption that the basis of the western Christian tradition in virtue ethics is found in the work of Aristotle and Aquinas, and that Christian realist virtue ethics will need to encompass the primary elements of that tradition. It identifies the special requirements of a Christian realist virtue ethics – focus on fragility, and the call to work for social justice. It then explores contemporary approaches to virtue ethics and concludes that Nussbaum's reading of Aristotle, Porter's

reading of Aquinas, and Nussbaum on contemporary virtue ethics issues will provide helpful resources for the development of a Christian realist virtue ethics.

The chapter then begins to assemble the concepts which will be reformulated and integrated with Niebuhr's framework of theological anthropology in order to generate a Christian realist virtue ethics. In order to lay the groundwork for the constructive task which follows, the chapter presents *telos*, *eudaimonia*, virtue, deliberation, and the mean as the elements of Aristotle's virtue ethics relevant for this project. It introduces the four cardinal virtues, which will later be considered in the framework of Niebuhr's Serenity prayer in a Christian realist virtue ethics. From Porter's reading of Aquinas, the chapter specifies the general theory of goodness, the human good, the theological virtues, and the distinction and relationship between acquired and infused virtue as the critical elements for Christian realist virtue ethics.

5.1 The Virtue Ethics Traditions

Having established that Niebuhr's Christian realism is open to a virtue ethics treatment, the next task is to identify the particular approach to virtue ethics which will be most useful in the construction of Christian realist virtue ethics. In reviewing the possibilities for critical correlation with the Niebuhr's theological anthropology, the starting point for the western Christian tradition of virtue ethics is the work of Aristotle and Aquinas. A Christian realist virtue ethics will be built on the elements of that tradition, and will also have certain special requirements. As noted in Chapter 4, to be appropriately consistent with Niebuhr's theology and theological anthropology,

Christian realist virtue ethics will have to begin with the assumption that human beings are fragile: radically limited as well as radically free, self-deceitful as well as insightful, relentlessly self-interested, and yet called to serve others.

In its realism, a Christian realist virtue ethics will be concerned with ongoing deliberation of theological, political, and moral truths. It will begin with the concrete, and privilege the particular, in ways that resonate with Niebuhr's insistence on embeddedness and limit. Yet at the same time, Niebuhr and Christian realism want to be able to say something more universal, and say it in various communities. What a Christian realist virtue ethics will need is an approach to virtue ethics which attends to the concrete particular as the primary data for ethical reflection, and yet is able to claim significance for insights that will empower work for social change.

In its particular articulation of Christian faith, a Christian realist virtue ethics claims that human sin arises from the misidentification of the contingent and the ultimate. It assumes that the purpose of virtue is to shape us to live responsibly amidst fragility rather than achieve moral perfection. This virtue ethics will also include an account of the role and operation of grace which is consistent with Niebuhr's understanding. It will assume that the good human life is the abundant life promised by Jesus – a life lived in community, filled with incommensurable and sometimes competing goods, lived vigorously in a complex and changing world, and committed to working for social justice.

In order to determine an approach to virtue ethics that is compatible with a liberal Protestant outlook, and with Christian realism in particular, it will be necessary to map the virtue ethics traditions.

In an article entitled “Virtue Ethics – a Misleading Category?”¹ Martha Nussbaum provides an analytical overview of the revival of interest in virtue in modern ethics. She questions the conventional narrative which describes virtue ethics as a completely separate third category alongside deontology and consequentialism. She points out that issues of virtue have never been entirely absent from the great Enlightenment philosophers. Moreover, she disputes the dichotomy which some writers set up between virtue ethics as particularist, and non-virtue ethics as universalist.

As noted in Chapter 1, above, she identifies the common ground among defenders of virtue ethics as comprising a focus on the agent, a concern for intention, and with settled patterns of motive, emotion and reasoning, and on the whole course of a life, rather than isolated decision.² She notes that these concerns are present in writers across a broad spectrum.

In her review of the field, Nussbaum distinguishes between those whose interest in virtue arises from dissatisfaction with Kantian ethics,³ and those who are motivated

¹ Martha Nussbaum, “Virtue Ethics – a Misleading Category?” *Ethics* 3 (1999): 163-201.

² *Ibid.*, 170.

³ She includes among these Alasdair MacIntyre, one of the most prominent figures in the contemporary revival of interest in virtue. MacIntyre repudiates post-Enlightenment ethics on the ground that it is so cut off from its own intellectual roots in theistic traditions that it is literally incoherent. In *After Virtue*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), he calls for a return to Aristotle, while in later works he identifies his own position as Thomist-Aristotelian. MacIntyre’s rendering of virtue ethics emphasizes the role of particular moral traditions in forming the narratives, practices and

by inadequacies in Utilitarian formulations. She identifies herself as one of the latter group, who “like the idea that not only our beliefs, but also our passions and desires, can be enlightened by the critical work of practical reason.”⁴

Her own work highlights the fragility of the human being and the vulnerability of the human character to the exigencies of the outer and the inner life. She notes that it is in its fragility, rather than in its strength, that humanity is at its most human. In a reading of the Greek tragedians, Plato and Aristotle, she traces the tendency to attempt to evade the reality of that fragility through philosophy.⁵ She reads Aristotle as confirming that the role of virtue is not to protect from vulnerability but to allow us to live honourably in our fragile state. It is this reading which makes Nussbaum’s approach to virtue ethics especially suitable as a resource for critical correlation with Niebuhr’s Christian realism to develop a Christian realist virtue ethics.

In contrast to the emphasis of some writers on practice and tradition in Aristotle, Martha Nussbaum highlights “Aristotle’s tremendous stress on deliberation and reflection.”⁶ This virtue ethics is aware of the fragility of the human condition, but it believes in progress – that is, it believes that the first step in social change occurs when a

educational goals of a coherent moral system, as against the pretensions of disengagement and objectivity in modern ethics. His reading of Aristotle emphasizes the orderly life of a society in which each member is well-schooled in the skills, or virtues, that are appropriate to a role. Because of its strong emphasis on norms, practices and the internal coherence of a particular social group or community, this approach to virtue is often associated with relativism, and communitarian political philosophy, though MacIntyre himself disputes this link. Nussbaum’s own emphasis is on deliberation rather than on the *polis*.

⁴ Nussbaum, *Virtue Ethics*, 168.

⁵ Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge,: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3.

⁶ Nussbaum, *Virtue Ethics*, 169.

good deliberator reflects critically on existing social practices. The relationship between habits of reflection and reasoning to determine the good, and the cultivation of the desire and ability to practice the good are at the centre of Nussbaum's consideration of Aristotle. She makes the links among deliberation, action, and virtue in her analysis of the role of emotions in the ethical life, and the relationship of compassion to our experience of fragility. It is precisely these questions that lie at the heart of this project's reflection on the character of the person who works for justice, and Niebuhr's theological anthropology.

In her focus on fragility, deliberation, the importance of the concrete particular, and the need to sustain motivation for social justice, Nussbaum is an apt resource in the attempt to develop a Christian realist virtue ethics. However, she writes in a secular context and does not address or encompass the theological issues that arise in the project. For this reason it will be important to amplify Nussbaum's approach to virtue ethics with a reading of Christian virtue ethics. Therefore, the project also looks to contemporary Christian resources to complement the realist, deliberative social justice-focussed virtue ethics of Martha Nussbaum.

Among Christian ethicists, both Roman Catholic writers and some Protestants have refocused on virtue. Thomas Aquinas' comprehensive theological treatment of virtue ethics has been foundational in Roman Catholic moral theology. The work of Jean Porter, Diana Fritz Cates, Josef Pieper, Bernhard Häring and others have brought a

set of contemporary questions to the Thomist opus.⁷ Porter describes this as “part of a larger effort to free Catholic moral theology from what was seen as an overly legalistic emphasis on the natural law.”⁸ In Protestant Christian ethics, discussions of virtue have been centered in what might broadly be called the neo-traditional conversation,⁹ with its links to non-foundational, post-modernist reflections on Christian community and narrative theology.¹⁰ The work of Gilbert Meilaender gives a Lutheran reading to Joseph Pieper and, as described in Chapter 4, explains Luther’s differentiation between substantive and relational aspects of virtue.¹¹ As also noted in Chapter 4, however, liberal Protestant theology has not emphasized virtue ethics. Niebuhr’s own intention to reintegrate the Reformation with the Renaissance streams of the medieval synthesis

⁷ Porter, *Recovery*; Cates, *Choosing to Feel*; Häring *Virtues*. Pieper, *Cardinal Virtues* ; Cessario, *Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics* ; Ralph McInerney, *Aquinas*.

⁸ Porter, “Virtue Ethics,” 96.

⁹ The question of nomenclature for Protestants is difficult. See Jeffrey Stout, “Commitments and Traditions in the Study of Religious Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25, no. 3 (1998): 23-56, where he identifies neo-traditionalists and Dorrien, *American Liberal Theology*, 531ff., where he refers to post-liberals. I opt for the term neo-traditionalist because it captures the notion of tradition that is so important to MacIntyre’s followers, and because post-liberal is often identified more narrowly with the cultural-linguistic focus of Lindbeck.

¹⁰ Hauerwas and Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues*; Hauerwas, *Grain*; Hauerwas, *Wilderness Wanderings*; Hauerwas, et al., eds. *Theology Without Foundations*; Nancey Murphy et al., eds. *Virtues and Practices*. Hauerwas’ work is the most developed Protestant version of modern virtue ethics. Although it is related to Niebuhr’s critique of modernity, and may even be considered a form of realism, this focus on the church as Christian community and unique site of formation is clearly not compatible with the insights and general aims of Niebuhr’s Christian realism. Niebuhr’s low ecclesiology does not privilege the church as primary community of formation. He is far from the position of Hauerwas and others for whom it is only inside the ‘determinative story’ of the church that Christian virtue can be formed and lived out. Therefore Hauerwas’s formulation cannot serve as the basis for a Christian realist ethics of virtue. Lutheran and Mennonite treatments of virtue are to be found in Meilaender, *Theory and Practice of Virtue*; Kotva, Jr., *Christian Case for Virtue Ethics*, respectively.

¹¹ Meilaender, *Theory and Practice of Virtue*, 119.

lacks an explicit articulation of virtue ethics. This project attempts to respond to that gap.

The project will emphasize Nussbaum's reading of Aristotle, Porter's reading of Aquinas, and Nussbaum on contemporary issues in virtue ethics in order to establish the basic elements of virtue ethics which can be linked with Niebuhr's theological anthropology to develop a Christian realist virtue ethics. With this focus, it now begins the second interpretive phase of Tracy's method of critical correlation, by assembling the elements of virtue ethics which will be adequate and appropriate for the constructive task.

5.2 Virtue in Aristotle

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*¹² is a foundational document in the history of Western reflections on ethics. Compiled as a series of ten essays (probably originally lecture notes), it addresses the question of what is involved in living life well. For Aristotle this is a task which is descriptive before it is prescriptive. He considers ethics to be a subset or prelude to politics. Politics considers the community, the good of which is higher than the good of an individual in Aristotle's reckoning. Like politics, ethics begins with common beliefs and observable facts, building from these to a framework that will not provide a universal law but will hold 'for the most part'.

¹² Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J.A.K. Thomson (London: Penguin Books, 1953). Subsequent references are to line numbers, which are also valid for other translations and editions.

There is a kind of imprecision inherent in the practice of ethics, because the decisions and choices that it involves are particular and variable, with “little fixity.”¹³ The one thing Aristotle says we may be certain of is that right conduct will be found to fall somewhere between two extremes, between excess and insufficiency.¹⁴ Because of this imprecision, what is most important is the capacity of the moral agent to navigate with ethical skill. Ethics is a practical science, of which the aim is not knowledge as such but action. His objective for his students is that not just that they should learn about the concepts, but that they should learn to live well.¹⁵

Each of the following sections presents a key element of Aristotelian virtue ethics which will be required for the construction of a Christian realist virtue ethics.

5.2.1 *Telos*

Translated as ‘end’ or ‘goal’, for Aristotle the *telos* is the objective to which any act or object is oriented. The notion of *telos* comprises both the notion of the target or endpoint and also, more importantly, the action of reaching the objective. The English word purpose most closely approximates this dual connotation.

Aristotle sees proximate ends as necessarily nested in a hierarchy which points toward a final goal. That is, I make a harness with the goal of riding a horse with the goal of improving my health and so on. Ultimately these various goals converge at some

¹³ Ibid., 1103b26-1104a11.

¹⁴ Ibid., 1104a11-32.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1094a22 – 1095a7.

final goal which we want for its own sake, and not for the sake of something else. He specifies this final end, thinly, as “the Good, the supreme good”, and goes on to make the claim that this is the self-evident aim of human action. The task he takes on in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is to “describe what the Good really is.”¹⁶

In a first pass at defining the good for human life, Aristotle rejects pleasure as shallow and political honour as vulnerable to the whims of others. He also rejects as not practically useful the Platonic idea of a universal good, because of the difficulties of definition, and because of the multiplicity of ways that things can be called good. The final good for humans must be different in kind from intermediate goods, and not simply at one end of a scale. It must be more than something that could be delivered by someone else,¹⁷ or a ‘state’ that can be achieved by maximizing something. The final good for humans is not a thing to have, but a life lived.

5.2.2 *Eudaimonia*

Aristotle identifies this final good for human life as *eudaimonia*, meaning literally ‘good spiritedness’, and translated variously as happiness or flourishing. It meets his criteria of being chosen for its own sake, not for the sake of something else, and suitably all-encompassing. The translation ‘flourishing’ captures the sense of unimpeded flow, of being its truest self, and of doing well what it is meant to do that Aristotle wants to give to his notion of the human *telos* as *eudaimonia*. The translation

¹⁶ Ibid., 1094a22.

¹⁷ Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 36.

‘happiness’, provided it is understood as something grander than a pleasant emotional state, conveys the sense of deep well-being and joy that is part of the achievement of *eudaimonia*. It is the quality of *eudaimonia* that makes a human life a good life.

It is impossible to qualify any act or object as ‘good’ or ‘not-so-good’ or ‘bad’ unless one has a sense of its *telos*. A good play, for example, may mean a play that offers dazzling entertainment and diversion, or a play that delivers a heartrending emotional experience, or a play that drives home some moral truth – there may be some plays that can do all three, but it would be unfair to fault “Long Day’s Journey Into Night” for lacking dance numbers, or to criticize the circus for its frivolity. The judgment of goodness depends upon the agreed purpose. Thus the whole question of ethics presupposes some shared understanding of the purpose of human life.

Aristotle turns to a description of the purpose of human life by determining its ‘work’ or function. If the quality of being a good flautist is related to the flute-playing work of the flautist, then the quality of being a good human will be related to the work of being human. It will need to be unique or ‘proper’ to the human – that is, not simply breathing or moving as animals do. Aristotle defines the essence of this human work as “an activity of the soul in accordance with a rational principle.”¹⁸ That is, because the distinctive characteristic of humanity is reason, being successful at being a human being will involve the exercise of rationality, which Aristotle calls virtuous activity. This

¹⁸ Aristotle, *NE*, 1098a8.

activity is a matter of skillful perception as well as skillful action.¹⁹ To do this well, that is, to achieve *eudaimonia*, humans need to develop competencies in being human which Aristotle identifies as the virtues, and to practice them over the course of a lifetime.

5.2.3 Virtue

Aristotle's word *arete*, meaning excellence, is generally translated as virtue. In English, the word virtue is related to the Latin roots *vir*, man and *tus*, the quality of – hence, manliness. It is linked in English to the word virtuoso, which captures the sense of mastery and performance. Aristotle's general theme can be understood as a reflection on how one becomes a 'virtuoso' human being.

A virtue is the quality of a thing which allows it to do well what it most characteristically does. The virtue of a knife used for cutting is its sharpness. The virtue of a clock is that it keeps time well – unless its real purpose is to be a decorative antique, in which case its virtue will be its age, its beauty, and its state of polish. The virtue of a thing encompasses both its capacity to do something well and the activity of doing it.

Virtue is not a series of discrete praiseworthy actions, but a settled disposition to respond in certain ways to certain circumstances. The stopped clock that tells the correct time twice a day is not virtuous. In a human being, virtue requires not the odd flash of brilliance or good behaviour, but a more mundane habit of response. It is understood that this habitual response once established will produce good decisions. The stable

¹⁹ Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle's Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 4.

disposition itself is developed through repetition. “Anything that we have to learn to do, we learn by the actual doing of it.”²⁰ Thus the practice of virtuous actions produces both good actions in themselves and the capacity to perform more good actions. Virtue is acquired through acting virtuously. The more often I sing in tune, the more automatically I do so, and eventually I am a tuneful singer. The more often I behave with courage, the easier and more natural courageous behaviour becomes, until it can justly be said that I am a courageous person. There is a continuous feedback loop between doing and being which reinforces the development of virtuous character in a way that is skill-like. The importance of formation for such an outcome is paramount – the singing and the courage are developed with the assistance of a demanding choir director or a fine school or a good upbringing. By Aristotle’s account, “it makes all the difference in the world.”²¹

Based on his description of the structure of the soul, Aristotle distinguishes in his discussion of human virtue between intellectual virtue, which is developed through education, and moral virtue which is developed through habituation in the customs (*ethos*) of the community. He stresses that while virtues must be cultivated, this cultivation is essentially congruent with the natural endowment of a person. There is no basic incompatibility, since “we are constituted by nature to receive them, but their full development in us is due to habit.”²² Nature and nurture are seen to be not in opposition

²⁰ Aristotle *NE* 1103a14-b1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1103b1-25.

²² *Ibid.*, 1103a14-b1.

but compatible, and mutually reinforcing. Because of this it is both possible and desirable, though not necessarily easy, to achieve a state in which one's virtuous actions are performed without struggle, but with pleasure.

The virtues are concerned with both action and feeling. Julia Annas points out that the “common modern view, deriving from Kant, [is] that virtues are a corrective to our feelings, and consist essentially in the strength of will to overcome feelings.”²³ The capacity to behave well by overcoming inclination is what Aristotle calls continence. In Aristotle's picture of virtue, by contrast, the indicator of moral success is not the victory of action over feeling but the harmony of action and feeling, and this is precisely what makes it challenging.

The cultivation of a virtuous character will involve the development of the capacity to be moved as well as to move. As a matter of observation we can see that the choices a person makes do arise from both feeling and intention, and rely on “an ability that is on the borderline between the intellectual and the passionate, partaking of both natures.”²⁴ That is, a virtuous choice will be based on the right emotional response to a situation coupled with the right action. But to do this well is not easy – Aristotle calls it “a rare, laudable and fine achievement”²⁵ – and therefore it is the goal of formation in virtue. It is this integration of accurate response and appropriate initiative which marks the human virtuoso.

²³ Annas, 53.

²⁴ Nussbaum, *Fragility*, 307.

²⁵ Aristotle *NE* 1109a26.

5.2.4 Choice, Deliberation

Aristotle observes that action which can be called ethical – action which can be praised or blamed – is exercised through choice, and not by rote, through ignorance, or under compulsion. It is our choices and not our opinions which cumulatively form our character.²⁶ Even so, choice involves thought. We deliberate about the things that are in question – not the things that are already settled, or that do not concern us, but about “practical measures that lie in our power.”²⁷

Aristotle notes that at least as learner, we deliberate about means, not ends, by asking how best to approach the goals we have established. Determination of ends forms part of the chain or hierarchy of deliberation about ends and means of which the terminal point is the Good. In Aristotle the relationship of means and ends is not only instrumental but integrative – that is, *arete* and *eudaimonia*, virtue and flourishing, jointly constitute the good for a human.

Choice integrates perception, feeling and action. We perceive the salience of specific aspects by bringing together our observation of the particulars of a question, our memory of similar events, and our imaginative projection of outcomes. To this mix we also bring emotional engagement. “Passionate perception is not perception following closely on the heels of passion. Rather, it is a perception that has within itself an affective component, so that when the appropriate passion is missing, the perceiver fails

²⁶ Ibid., 1111b31-1112a17.

²⁷ Ibid., 1112a18-b5.

to ‘see’ the situation for what it really is.”²⁸ It is our ability to identify what is important, and to evaluate comprehensively the aspects of a situation which are relevant to the choice we are to make, which allows us to choose well.

Each action that is chosen well strengthens the capacity of its chooser to make similar good choices. We attempt both to do good and to become good by making wise choices toward a good end. Aristotle notes a difference between the single act and the series of acts which forms virtue. Our actions are chosen “from beginning to end”, but our virtues are built gradually and chosen only at the beginning – “like an illness the individual stages of their development are unnoticeable.”²⁹ Thus the control we have over actions and over character is not equal. If the actions are bad choices, the same process of habituation that produces a virtuous character may instead ramify into vice.

5.2.5 Virtue, Vice, and the Mean

Aristotle discusses a number of individual virtues one by one, identifying the combination of perception, feeling and action that are most at play in each. He points out that virtue lies in a mean between two vices, and not in a dualistic relation. That is, each virtue has not only one opposite, but two. For each virtue there are two characteristic vices arising from, on the one hand, a deficiency or lack, and on the other from an excess.

²⁸ Cates, *Choosing to Feel*, 10.

²⁹ Aristotle *NE* 1114b15-1115a5.

The notion of the mean applies both to individual actions or choices and also to the qualities of character to which these contribute. The right action will be found in a mean, and the disposition to choose the mean is part of virtue. “Virtue discovers the mean and chooses it.”³⁰

Thus the virtue of courage is the settled habit of making an appropriate response in situations of fear, and this response will be found between two extremes. The opposite of courage is not only cowardice but also recklessness. The virtue of temperance or self-control is a stable disposition with respect to pleasure and pain, and the opposite of temperance is not only self-indulgence but also ‘insensitivity’ or disengagement. The opposite of generosity is not only stinginess but also extravagance. The opposite of truthful self-esteem is not only boastfulness, but also self-depreciation. And so on.³¹

The mean between these extremes is not a simple average, nor easy to identify. It depends upon the circumstances and conditions which impinge on the choice. Indeed because each case is unique and not predetermined, there will need to be openness to self-correction, “inclining sometimes toward excess and sometimes toward deficiency.”³² Aristotle notes three elements which will give us the ‘best chance’ of hitting the mean: first, to choose the lesser of two evils, that is, to note the contrary that is worse and steer away from it; second, be aware of our own most likely errors or

³⁰ Ibid., 1107a1-27.

³¹ Aristotle *NE* books III, IV.

³² Ibid., 1109b26.

weaknesses and steer away from them; and third, “guard especially against pleasure and pleasant things”³³ because they may distract us.

The following subsections present four primary virtues which came to be known as the cardinal or ‘hinge’ virtues. Because of their central position in the history of Western writing about virtue, these four will be re-presented in a Christian realist virtue ethics, structured by the Serenity Prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr.

5.2.6 Courage

Although Aristotle’s discussion of courage focuses on the particular courage that is needed when faced with war and the fear of death in battle, he makes observations which are relevant more generally. Aristotle distinguishes between courage which is motivated by a sense of honour, and five facsimiles. He rejects as true courage: the compelled bravery of soldiers, the bravado of those who believe they will win, the reactive violence of the ‘passionate’, the confidence of the optimistic, and the blitheness of the ignorant. In each of these, either accurate perception or the appropriate devotion to the good, which together constitute virtue, has been set aside.

5.2.7. Temperance

Aristotle’s virtue of *sophrosune* means, literally, soundness of mind, and is most often rendered as temperance. His discussion centres on the appropriate regulation of the

³³ Ibid., 1109a25-b15.

appetites or desires, and notes that although there are many ways to go wrong here,³⁴ excesses in pleasure-seeking are the more common error. However, this vice of licentiousness ought to be more readily avoided than the vice of cowardice, because it is easier to stop seeking pleasure than to stop attempting to avoid pain. Temperance is important because it “preserves practical wisdom.”³⁵

5.2.8 Justice

In his discussion of justice, Aristotle notes that this virtue unlike others must always refer to the good of other persons. He observes the ambiguity of the usage of the term justice when it refers both to “complete virtue ... in relation to somebody else,”³⁶ encompassing other virtues, and to the particular questions of fairness in distribution which may arise in the life of a community. Injustice occurs when someone profits unduly, or is advantaged unfairly by a decision or choice. He notes that in cases of injustice a means will be needed for evaluating competing claims which may not be strictly comparable – the use of money allows for a rough and flexible approximation of commensurability between different goods and services. He distinguishes in matters of political justice between natural justice which is universal, and legal justice which is based on the conventions of a particular society. Justice falls in a mean between its two contraries – suffering an injustice and doing injustice – but both are not vices. Because

³⁴ Ibid., 1118b6-28.

³⁵ Ibid., 1140b12.

³⁶ Ibid., 1129b6-30.

intention is paramount in virtue, and being treated unjustly cannot be voluntary, it is worse to commit injustice than to suffer it.³⁷

5.2.9 Practical Wisdom – *Phronesis*

For Aristotle, the primary human ‘work’ or function is reason, and therefore good choosing, or good deliberation is a primary virtue of the human being. Good choosing, however is not a set of rules to be applied universally, nor yet a personal preference which is ‘simply’ subjective. Rather, it will require us to find ‘the mean relative to us’, that is, relative to the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves. To do this will require the exercise of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom.³⁸

In a definition that circles continuously from the doing to the being he defines virtue as “a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical intelligence would determine it.”³⁹ Somewhat frustratingly, he says that to become a *phronimos* you must act as a *phronimos* would – for “in a virtuous person the ability to reason and the virtuous state of character are inseparable.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Ibid., 1138a30-b14.

³⁸ Annas (*Morality*, 73) points out that *phronesis* lacks the notion of self-interest implied by the traditional translation of prudence, and the thoughtful inactivity implied by the translation practical wisdom. Calling *phronesis* practical intelligence emphasizes the active problem-solving aspect of the virtue.

³⁹ Aristotle *NE* 1107a1.

⁴⁰ Annas, *Morality*, 89.

It is the expertise of a *phronimos*, or person of practical intelligence that is the critical element not only in particular decisions, with respect to particular virtues, but as the integrating disposition to make right moral judgments in all spheres. It is this intellectual virtue that allows good deliberation on “what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general.”⁴¹ Its role is not only to work out individual cases or dilemmas, “such as health or strength,”⁴² but also to do the work of weighing and then balancing the considerations from all aspects of life. To be truly a good life, the life we live must be comprehensively good, and not just good in a series of unrelated and unstructured events and experiences. When a person correctly perceives a situation which calls for courage and acts bravely, she will also as a *phronimos* recognize “how acting bravely, while done for its own sake also forms part of her overall good in her own life; indeed, understanding this is part of what it is to understand what bravery is.”⁴³ In this sense, *phronesis* is the virtue that unifies all the virtues and is the source of the coherence of a virtuous life.

5.3 Virtue and Theological Ethics

By the time Aquinas was writing, in the thirteenth century of the Common Era, Christian theologians and church leaders had wrestled for centuries with the ambiguities that virtue theory presents for Christian faith. Augustine famously rejected the pagan

⁴¹ Aristotle *NE* 1140a24-b12.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 1140a24-b12.

⁴³ Annas, *Morality*, 75.

virtues of Roman society, as ‘splendid vices’, in which the utter dependency of humanity on God’s grace is obscured by pride, and in which every form of eudaimonism is revealed as narcissism.⁴⁴ In the twelfth century, Peter Lombard called virtue something that God brings about in us, ‘without us’, while Peter Abelard argued that in addition to virtue by grace, there could be human virtues attainable through effort, whose effects, however limited, are genuinely good.⁴⁵ These ‘political’ virtues were identified with the four cardinal virtues of classical antiquity – courage, temperance, justice and prudence. The virtues which come from God by grace alone were those identified in the Christian scriptures as faith, hope and love. Both are required for the moral life.⁴⁶

In *The Recovery of Virtue*, Jean Porter shows how Aquinas put these ideas together in a new and more comprehensive way.⁴⁷ This section will outline elements of Porter’s reading of Aquinas’ theory of the good, his reformulated understanding of the virtues, and of the operation of grace, as they are described in Jean Porter’s reading of the *Summa Theologica*. The *Summa*, written over the course of the decade 1265 to 1274, is the latest and most complete of Aquinas’ theological works, in which he reintroduces and reintegrates the insights of Aristotle into Christian theological ethics as inherited

⁴⁴ Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 49.

⁴⁵ Porter, “Virtue Ethics,” 214.

⁴⁶ Cessario, *Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*, 96.

⁴⁷ Porter, *Recovery*, 5. This discussion emphasizes Porter, including “Virtue Ethics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, and, “Virtue” in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, but also benefits from Cates, *Choosing to Feel*; Häring, *Virtues*; Pieper, *Cardinal Virtues*; Cessario, *Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*; Ralph McInerny, *Aquinas*.

from the Bible and the church fathers, primarily Augustine. This is the medieval synthesis to which Niebuhr refers.

5.3.1 The General Theory of Goodness

Goodness in Aquinas is understood as a transcendental – that is “a concept of such ubiquity and generality that it can be applied to anything whatever, in any category of real existence.”⁴⁸ It is the goodness of God’s own self that exerts a kind of magnetic pull on everything in the created universe, calling forth order and category and system. For Aquinas, the human being is, like other creatures, naturally oriented toward the goodness of God and, unlike other creatures, disposed to have a sense of the good. As part of the ordered universe, a theory of moral goodness, or goodness for humans, will presuppose and require a general theory of goodness.

Aquinas’ general theory of goodness begins with a discussion of what a thing is. He emphasizes a notion of ‘kind’ or species as the primary category by which a thing is to be known and assessed. To be able to recognize a thing as a ‘something’, as an instance of a ‘kind’, one must have a sense of what a good version of that thing is.⁴⁹ It may be somewhat counterintuitive and jarring to our post-Enlightenment presuppositions, but for Aquinas this insight is not propositional or optional. It is a straightforward matter of observation. If I say, ‘This is a washcloth’, I am invoking not

⁴⁸ Porter, *Recovery*, 36 (referring to Aquinas, *Summa*, I 5.1-3). She notes that this excludes logical propositions such as mathematical propositions which while they may be true or false, which cannot have substantive goodness or badness.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

only a set of objects but a notion of what those objects ought to be like. I am saying that I know what a washcloth is, what a washcloth is for, and what constitutes a good washcloth. Thus, in the realism of Aquinas, being and goodness are intimately connected, and the way things exist is intrinsically normative.⁵⁰ Each species carries within it the elements of, and is oriented toward the good of, its own nature. To be a thing X is to be a thing naturally oriented toward complete, fulfilled, or perfectly good X-ness. This goodness is concrete and individuated, so that for Aquinas, the existence of a thing is prior to the essence of it, and instantiates the ‘kind’ of which it is a member. Aquinas grants ontological priority and thus normative content not to forms, nor to ‘mere’ concepts, but to discernible species.⁵¹

We discern in general what a thing is by observing it. What makes a thing intelligible as a member of a species is its way of interacting with its environment. Inanimate, plant, animal, and human things interact with the environment in ways that are different from each other – increasing progressively in activity and complexity. The differentiated levels of this interaction – or causality – generate a hierarchy of being in which the inanimate and simple are superseded by the animate and complex. Porter notes that “this hierarchy of being is also a hierarchy of goodness and intelligibility in that higher creatures are more distinctly individuated and more intelligible than lower creatures.”⁵²

⁵⁰ McInerney, 99.

⁵¹ Porter, *Recovery*, 39ff.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 42 (referring to Aquinas I 109.2 ad3).

Humanity stands near, though not at, the apex of Aquinas' hierarchy – which includes all creatures (including angels), but not God. Importantly, this hierarchy is non-instrumental – each species, including humanity, is ordered toward its own good, and not as an instrument toward the promotion of some other species. While he does suppose sub-rational creatures to be in some way at the service of human beings, Aquinas also understands the higher orders as obliged to promote the well-being of lower orders as a means of promoting the order of the whole. The theological anthropology of Aquinas' account of moral life rests on this non-instrumental view of the relationship between humanity and the other orders of creation. Moreover, the hierarchy of being Aquinas proposes does not specify precedence within the human species, such as man over woman or lord over peasant.⁵³

5.3.2 The Human Good and the Moral Order

In his account of the human good, Aquinas draws out the implications for human beings of his general theory of goodness. Because the human being is oriented toward the good in a specific (that is, species-ish) way, moral theory must be built on an accurate account of what is distinctive about the human being.⁵⁴ This emphasis on accuracy has great resonance with the concerns of Niebuhr's Christian realism.

In the first instance, the human being is like other creatures oriented to its own natural fulfillment. An animal or even a plant will seek its own perfection by being

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ McInerney, *Aquinas*, 97.

unambiguously drawn to food or light. But the human is unlike other creatures in the proportion of its actions which are self-generated or willed.⁵⁵ Thus for a human, the carrying out of deliberate good actions is itself a part of the species goodness toward which the human is oriented.⁵⁶ Because much if not all of the challenge of being a person arises in precisely the acts that are willed, determining what a good act is becomes a significant aspect of human functioning. The effort to produce a moral system is thus a major and ‘natural’ part of the human task.⁵⁷

Porter notes that for Aquinas the moral system flows out of and reflects the nature of reality.⁵⁸ The human being is oriented toward one end, which is the goodness of God.⁵⁹ However, because of the particular nature of humanity, this end is approached in two ways, both naturally and supernaturally. All the activities and wholesome pleasures and healthy desires which form part of our daily lives contribute to our happiness as creatures at home in a good creation, in much the same way as other creatures are at home. In this way we participate in God’s goodness. Yet at the same time, as a spiritual creature,⁶⁰ the human being is in a sense indeterminate or open-ended, and in that quality oriented to God’s own self. Unlike other creatures, the human being is capable of “supernatural happiness, [as] she attains God as he is in himself, and

⁵⁵ Porter, *Recovery*, 71.

⁵⁶ Cessario, *Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*, 36, 39.

⁵⁷ Porter, *Recovery*, 78 ff.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 50; Cessario, *Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*, 109 ff.

⁶⁰ Porter, *Recovery*, 64 (referring to Aquinas I 75.1).

not merely as the principle of her created existence.”⁶¹ The natural life is not banished or diminished by the supernatural in Aquinas, but fulfilled.⁶²

Again, the relationship of being to goodness, and of description to prescription, is intuitively difficult to grasp in our modern, post-Enlightenment setting. Porter shows that Hume’s distinction between moral and factual statements about human behaviour, or between the ‘is’ and the ‘ought’, dissolves in Aquinas’ view that the dynamism of any species toward its own perfection presupposes human motivation toward fulfillment and happiness.⁶³ Thus true self-interest by human beings will promote the moral order.⁶⁴ A just community, as the environment which most promotes the individual well-being of its members, will thus by corollary also evoke the motivation of self-interest. That is, the private good of the individual and the common are generally complementary rather than competitive.

5.3.3 The Virtues, Acquired and Infused

Aquinas’ irenic view of God’s creation, and humanity’s place in it, does include the recognition that achieving the goodness to which we are oriented requires virtue. He follows his predecessors in identifying the four cardinal or ‘political’ virtues – courage, temperance, justice and prudence – and three theological virtues – faith, hope and love.

⁶¹ Ibid., 65. She is making an argument following Stacy (referring to Aquinas I-II 3.2 *ad* 4; I-II 5.3, esp. *ad* 3, 5).

⁶² Cessario, *Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*, 105.

⁶³ Porter, *Recovery*, 47 (referring to I-II 1.7,8).

⁶⁴ Cessario, *Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*, 46.

These virtues are structured to enable a human being to enjoy the well-being *specific* to humanity. Courage and temperance concern the feelings – they correspond to situations in life in which one’s immediate response of desire or fear may cause a person to react in ways “contrary to one’s overall aims or commitments.”⁶⁵ The two virtues allow us to curb automatic responses and practice self-control in ways that eventually become habitual and without inner conflict. Like Aristotle, Aquinas’ objective is ordered passions as well as ordered responses. Where courage and temperance involve the life of feeling and passion, the virtue of justice summons the will. More than the more personal virtues, justice is concerned with relationships among human beings and with the common good. For Aquinas the common good and the individual good are intrinsically inclusive of each other.⁶⁶ It is the virtue of justice, with its regard for other and for the common good, which gives substantive shape to the exercise of courage and temperance. By recognizing the need to defend his fellow citizens the soldier is able to show courage in battle. Because he values the harmonious family relationship in which he rears his children, he does not seek out romantic company while away from home. However, in order for the virtue of justice to result in these practical solutions to the challenges of finding either the individual or the common good in concrete situations, the fourth cardinal virtue, prudence, is required.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Porter, *Recovery*, 111.

⁶⁶ McInerney, *Aquinas*, 110-111; Porter, 126 ff.

⁶⁷ Various translated as prudence, practical wisdom, and practical intelligence, this is the virtue known as *phronesis* in Greek. See above n. 38.

While justice directs courage and temperance toward the common good, in turn prudence, “regulates [all] the other virtues by directing them toward their true end.”⁶⁸ The only genuinely intellectual virtue, prudence integrates and holds together the universal with the particular, permitting adequate judgments of merit. It is prudence which empowers the deliberative processes of practical reasoning, and attends to concrete reality – that is, prudence gives substantive content to the general orientation of the human person toward its specific good. But this substance itself comprises virtue. It not only chooses the actions which lead to our proximate goals, but it chooses them in a way that they can be undertaken virtuously.⁶⁹ When I recognize that I must lose weight to promote my own health, it is prudence that tells me to do so not by a crash diet, but by a determined and sustained change of eating practices. Means as well as ends are made virtuous by prudence. It is in this sense that prudence can be said to unify the virtues.⁷⁰

Porter observes that in Aquinas the cardinal virtues encompass all other virtues and are linked together – not as a list but as a unified and unifying structure which corresponds to the wholesome human personality.⁷¹ Because the specific good of the human being is actually constituted by the use of the rational capacity, the overriding importance of the virtues is in creating the conditions for subjective appropriation by a

⁶⁸ Porter, *Recovery*, 155 (referring to II-II 47.7; 58.5, 6).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 159 (referring to II-II 47.7).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 136ff.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 136.

human being of his or her own orientation toward the good. The virtuous life requires consciousness, a form of self-awareness which is beyond self-absorption.⁷²

However, for Aquinas the fully or perfectly virtuous person will not only have the skill and habit of rationality, but also be open to the dynamism and the actions of the Holy Spirit. Consciousness goes beyond daily life. Thus, virtue is not only a matter of discipline and striving, but itself includes receptivity to grace.⁷³ Aquinas with Augustine understands faith, hope and love, the theological virtues, to be infused, through grace, and not acquired by training and habit. “Theological virtues are habits that are infused by God habits that direct persons toward God.”⁷⁴ They are the necessary and sufficient conditions for salvation, and the Christian cannot develop them through effort. But they remain virtues – that is, settled dispositions to perceive accurately, to feel appropriately and to choose well.⁷⁵ As received virtues, they are complemented by the gifts of Holy Spirit, which are “contributions of habitual grace”, allowing the person to continually renew the orientation to the divine reality.⁷⁶ These virtues give support and orient the human being not only to human flourishing but to the more ultimate good for which we are created. This final end is our direct encounter with the divine reality: in

⁷² Ibid., 72.

⁷³ Cates, *Choosing to Feel*, 32.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Cessario, *Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*, 104; Cates, *Choosing to Feel*, 33.

⁷⁶ Cates, *Choosing to Feel*, 32.

Aquinas' terms, union with God in the Beatific Vision, an "Archimedean point around which the infused virtues operate in the moral life".⁷⁷

In particular, the virtue of charity or love functions as the overall unifying quality of character. Given by grace, it is the settled disposition to be loving which holds all together – the proximate with the ultimate end, natural happiness with supernatural happiness, human flourishing with divine union.⁷⁸ Aquinas characterizes this virtue as having the nature of friendship with God, a kind of mutuality which endlessly reproduces itself in the relationship of friendship "with all persons, since everyone is either an actual or a potential sharer in the grace of God which generates the primary friendship between God and the individual."⁷⁹

Where Aquinas departs from his predecessors is that he also sees the action of the Holy Spirit in the infusion of the cardinal virtues – that is temperance, courage, justice and prudence are both acquired and infused. In the same way that reason is the operating principle by which acquired virtues tend us to human flourishing, grace is the operating principle by which infused virtues tend us to the union with God. Even so, the infused cardinal virtues do this work not by a sudden jump to another reality, but "via the proper pursuit and enjoyment of the diverse objects and activities proper to the human life."⁸⁰ As infused by grace the cardinal virtues are not so much altered as

⁷⁷ Cessario, *Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*, 105.

⁷⁸ Cates, *Choosing to Feel*, 37.

⁷⁹ Porter, *Recovery*, 170 (referring to II-II 25.1, 6, 8, 12).

⁸⁰ Porter, "Virtue," 216 (referring to I-II 65.3).

reoriented toward a more comprehensive end.⁸¹ For Aquinas, the infusion of virtue “effects a transvaluation of human value,” through which we are granted the perception, the passion and the capacity to act in this life in ways which reveal and embody what is of ultimate value.⁸²

5.4 Summary and Conclusions

This chapter has established the particular approach to virtue ethics which will be followed in order to generate a Christian realist virtue ethics. The objective is to find virtue ethics resources adequate and appropriate for critical correlation with Niebuhr’s theological anthropology. As presented in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, this will highlight a focus on fragility, deliberation, the primacy of the concrete particular, the call to work for social justice, and the role and function of grace.

The chapter then presents the key elements of virtue ethics as they are found in Aristotle and Porter’s reading of Aquinas, which will need to be added to Niebuhr’s framework of theological anthropology to generate a Christian realist virtue ethics. The list of virtues identified (Solomon’s second requirement) includes the four cardinal virtues and the three theological virtues.

From Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*, the chapter identifies what have become building blocks of virtue ethics in Western philosophy: *telos*, *eudaimonia*, virtue, deliberation, the mean, and the unity of the virtues. These elements are linked to

⁸¹ Cates, *Choosing to Feel*, 39.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 45 (referring to II-II 23.1).

counterparts in Niebuhr – *telos* as meaning, *eudaimonia* as abundant life, deliberation as realism, and attention to the concrete particular as embeddedness. A brief introduction to the four cardinal virtues, and their unity, establishes the basis for focusing on them in the Christian realist virtue ethics to be developed in Chapter 8. Aristotle’s understanding of habituation provides critical insights on how Niebuhr’s dialogues can animate and form a self that will act in ways that are indeterminate but reliable.

From Porter’s reading of Aquinas the chapter focuses on his notion of the good, on the theological virtues, and on the concepts surrounding infused virtue. The reason for examining Aquinas’ understanding of the good is to see more clearly what it means to propose that a normative picture can arise from within existence. This is a vitally important insight for critical correlation of Aristotelian virtue ethics with Niebuhr’s realism. The theological virtues of faith, hope, and love are central to any Christian account of ethics, while Porter’s description of Aquinas’ understanding of infused virtue gives a way to get at Niebuhr’s notion of divine and human freedom.

The classical formulation of virtue ethics found in this reading of Aristotle and Aquinas provides the key elements which will be reformulated in a Christian realist virtue ethics, through Tracy’s method of critical correlation. In order to develop a Christian realist virtue ethics it will be essential to reflect on how a focus on fragility may be handled in a reading of Aristotle, and examine the place of compassion in the call to social justice. We find resources for these questions by continuing the second interpretive phase of Tracy’s method, in a review of the approach to virtue ethics of philosopher Martha Nussbaum, the subject of Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 6

FRAGILITY, EMOTION, AND COMPASSION IN VIRTUE ETHICS:

MARTHA NUSSBAUM

The purpose of this chapter is to present aspects of the work of contemporary philosopher Martha Nussbaum, as a resource which provides further elements of virtue ethics to be incorporated into the framework of Christian realist theological anthropology developed in Chapters 2 and 3 on Niebuhr. Following the first dialectical phase in Chapter 4, and the introduction of the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition in Chapter 5, it is the continuation of the second interpretive phase in Tracy's method of critical correlation, in which the non-theological resource is probed for adequacy and appropriateness.

In order to generate a Christian realist virtue ethics which responds to the life situation of the target group of liberal Protestant justice-seekers, I draw on Nussbaum's approach to virtue, which affirms both the fragility of the human being and the call to responsible engagement in work for justice. More than that of other contemporary writers on virtue ethics, Nussbaum's interests and reading of virtue resonate with the two themes of human fragility and concern for social justice that animate Niebuhr's Christian realist anthropology. This chapter revisits the key elements of virtue ethics identified in Chapter 5, and enriches the analysis of what may be required by a Christian realist virtue ethics with Nussbaum's discussion of fragility, emotion, compassion and transcendence.

Nussbaum is the Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics, appointed in the Philosophy Department, Law School and Divinity School at the University of Chicago. She is an Associate in the Classics Department, a Member of the Committee on Southern Asian Studies and a Board Member of the Human Rights Program. She is the founder and Coordinator of the Center for Comparative Constitutionalism.¹ Nussbaum may be called a public philosopher, participating in both academic and non-academic conversations on matters of law, democracy, development, disability, feminism, and multiculturalism as well as in her original subject area of classical studies and philosophy. In collaboration with economist Amartya Sen, she has contributed to the development of what is called the Human Capabilities Approach to questions of international development. This is an approach which links Aristotelian conceptual insights on human flourishing and on non-commensurable goods to the problems of planning, implementing and assessing programs aimed at social and economic development. She identifies herself as both Aristotelian and universalist – turning to Aristotle “for the idea that in both ethics and science we have available a notion of truth and objectivity that is robust, and yet at the same time ‘internal’, from the perspective of standing human interests and capacities.”² In this approach to truth and objectivity, Nussbaum is highly resonant with Niebuhr’s realism. In terms of Tracy’s method of critical correlation, it establishes Nussbaum as addressing limit questions, and

¹ The Law School, University of Chicago website, www.law.uchicago.edu/faculty/nussbaum/, 8 April 2010.

² Martha Nussbaum, “Tragedy and Human Capabilities: A Response to Vivian Walsh.” *Review of Political Economy* 15, no. 3 (2003): 413.

as proposing a “metaphysical mode of reflection.”³ This makes her an appropriate conversation partner.

Nussbaum has also written extensively on women’s rights, justice issues for persons living with disability, the significance of religion-based communal conflict in India, the role of higher education in forming the citizens of a democracy, and the relationship of literature and the arts to political and philosophical education.⁴

Martha Nussbaum offers a finely wrought picture of the human being, making the case that the person of virtue will recognize and even embrace the fragility of our condition, while at the same time working tirelessly for social justice. Nussbaum’s central insight is that “human limits structure the human excellences, and give excellent action its significance”.⁵ As Martin Kavka notes, “whether treating legal, literary, social or political matters, she has consistently argued that any comprehensive ideology that claims to understand the good and the perfect leads to hatred and disgust unless it is accompanied (but not replaced) by a love for that which is finite, incomplete, and

³ Tracy, *Blessed Rage*, 32.

⁴ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997); Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence and India’s Future* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁵ Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 378.

imperfect in humanity.”⁶ Nussbaum’s insistence on holding perfect and imperfect together parallels Niebuhr’s basic anthropological claim that humanity lives in both eternal and temporal realms.

The good character which Nussbaum wants to cultivate will retain a kind of openness and receptivity in which the emotions contribute to perceptive deliberation and also serve as a source of energy for social transformation. Nussbaum explores the role and relevance of luck, the nature and impact of tragedy, and the function of compassion as both form and constituent of the ethical life. These insights complement and fit well with the framework of theological anthropology found in Niebuhr. In her reflections on the emotions Nussbaum extends and enriches the key elements of virtue ethics presented in Chapter 5 in a way that is congruent with the concerns of Christian realism.

This project focuses somewhat narrowly on the particular aspects of Nussbaum’s work that will assist in the articulation of a Christian realist virtue ethics. This chapter is divided into six sections, reviewing first Nussbaum’s reflections on human fragility, on the function of emotion in the moral life, on compassion and love as potentially ‘civilizable’ emotions, and on transcendence. These elements will enrich the picture of virtue ethics derived in Chapter 5 from Aristotle and the Thomist tradition. The chapter will look in particular at *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, as well as Nussbaum’s discussion of emotion and compassion in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, and a number of shorter works

⁶ Martin Kavka, “Judaism and Theology in Martha Nussbaum.” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31.2 (2008), 343.

which shed light on her understanding of transcendence. To illustrate the practical application of this account of virtue, the chapter concludes with a brief discussion of Nussbaum's work on questions social and political justice as a resource for the development of a Christian realist virtue ethics.

6.1 Human Fragility and the Ancient Greeks

A Christian realist virtue ethics will require an account of virtue which embraces the reality of human fragility. In *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Nussbaum recounts the efforts of ancient Greek drama and philosophy both to understand and to determine a strategy to deal with human fragility.⁷ The book explores the role of luck, or happenstance, on the good human life. She begins with the Aristotelian assumption that our central objective is to plan and carry out our life in the best way possible. The life we aspire to is the one that could reasonably be called not just the good but the 'best' life for a human being.⁸ She points out that many of the aspects of such a life – indeed, the aspects which we value most highly, and which contribute to what Aristotle called *eudaimonia* – are by definition not within our control. The peace of the nation, the health of our children, the loyalty of our friends, and the strength of our own bodies – all these are vulnerable, and so we are vulnerable.⁹

⁷ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹ *Ibid.* 2.

Moreover, because our fundamental well-being depends upon the well-being of those we love and upon a range of other external factors, the impact of death or disease, of war or poverty, of betrayal or oppression will be doubly harmful. Our losses may damage us in a way that is more subtle and more dangerous than simple subtraction. That is, what we lose in the exigencies of life may be a part of our own self.¹⁰

Nussbaum begins with three questions.¹¹ First, what about vulnerability to fortune or luck? Just how vulnerable *is* our wellbeing to things outside our control? When we plan and carry out our lives with a view to *eudaimonia*, or deep happiness, can we reasonably strive for autonomy and some sort of safety? Or should we just accept that that our attachments to persons and places – as well as all our commitments in love, in family, in career and in politics – will make us dependent on others and thus on good fortune for our happiness? As we increase our vulnerability, does this merely decrease our self-sufficiency, and make our lives worse? Or is there a countervailing ‘upside’ – do our commitments and associated vulnerabilities actually make our lives richer and ultimately better? If the latter, how much vulnerability should we want to have – or, if the former, would there be a way to devise a life whose goodness cannot be touched by ill fortune?

Second, she asks, are the various areas of strength and vulnerability in our lives always harmonizable? What if I have to choose between love and career, or family and country? What is the best calculus for decision-making? Could I face a choice in which

¹⁰ Ibid., 10.

¹¹ Ibid., 6 ff.

no alternative is unequivocally better than the others? Might there arise a genuine conflict between the elements of my good life such that they cannot be measured on the same scale or traded off against one another? Or could I find myself in a dilemma which cannot be resolved without significant wrong-doing – a tragic conflict? If so, what might that do to *me*?

Third, if part of the vulnerability we experience arises from the passions within us – from our tendency to fall in love, to care about our family or our country, and to devote ourselves to a cause – how can we live serenely? Is there something we should do to structure and orient ourselves away from the instability caused by these passions? What can we do to mitigate the inherent volatility of moral life?

Nussbaum's major thesis is that the goodness of human life is vulnerable to the impact of good or bad fortune, and that this vulnerability is a source of richness and depth rather than a distortion to be minimized or evaded.¹² Tragic moral conflict – in which irreconcilable moral claims require actions that genuinely damage not only the good life but the good character of the moral agent – happens.¹³ Further, such conflict can arise not only from circumstances without, but from inside us – from the impulses of our 'irrational' parts, and the passions which arise in the inner life of the human being. Because of this, the objective of formation in virtue will need to include the cultivation of tolerance for ambiguity, and perseverance in the face of complex difficulty.¹⁴

¹² Ibid., 2.

¹³ Ibid., 418-19.

¹⁴ Ibid., 421.

She depicts her philosophical position as a rendering of Aristotle, and makes the case for this by tracing the development of Greek thought on questions of luck, human self-sufficiency, and happiness.¹⁵ The book presents a narrative of the unfolding dialogue within ancient Greek ethics on the role played by *tuche*, or luck, broadly understood, in both the composition and the living out of a life which could be considered the good human life. In a way that MacIntyre would say illustrates the formation of a tradition, she narrates the development of the argument beginning with the fifth century BCE tragedians, through Plato, and then Aristotle. Nussbaum rejects the traditional view that the tragedians are morally primitive. She contends that consciousness of moral vulnerability and of the possibility of tragic conflict is a critical component not only of the tragedies and of the political-ethical insights of Aristotle, but also of the later works of Plato. She argues (somewhat controversially¹⁶) for the underlying continuity between the perspective of the tragedians and the philosophers – that although they came to different conclusions, they were wrestling with the same problem.

Nussbaum presents the development of Greek philosophy as a response to moral complexity – and implicitly addresses “those in many areas of the humanities who

¹⁵ Ibid., 10.

¹⁶ See for example, reviews of *The Fragility of Goodness*: Sophie Botros, “Precarious Virtue,” *Phronesis* 32/1 (1987): 101-131; Malcolm Heath, “Tragedy and Philosophy,” *Classical Review*, New Series, 37/1 (1987): 43-47; Charles T. Mathewes, “The Rebirth of Tragedy,” *Anglican Theological Review* LXXIX 2 (1990):253-261; Frisbee C.C. Sheffield, “Alcibiades’ Speech: A Satyric Drama,” *Greece and Rome*, Second Series, 48/2 (October 2001): 193-209; Paul B. Woodruff, Review of *Fragility, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50/1 (September 1989): 205-210. On continuity in Greek ethics, see A. A. Long, review of *The Fragility of Goodness*, in *Classical Philology* 83/4 (October 1988): 361-369; Nicholas P White, “Rational Self-Sufficiency and Greek Ethics,” *Ethics* 99/1 (October 1988): 136-146.

nowadays concern themselves with the place of philosophy in our culture.”¹⁷ Her underlying question, both historical and contemporary, is, ‘what is the purpose of philosophy?’ To any simplistic answer, ‘it protects us’, she replies, ‘but it can’t, and it mustn’t.’ This project finds compelling Nussbaum’s insight into the persistence and even necessity of moral ambiguity for the flourishing human life. It has strong parallels with Niebuhr’s Christian realist theological anthropology, and will be helpful in establishing a Christian realist virtue ethics.

6.1.1 Nussbaum’s Critique of Modernity

Based on this insight – that Greek philosophy squarely confronts the problem of *tuche* or moral luck – Nussbaum criticizes the modern Kantian tradition of philosophical interpretation which places questions of luck and tragedy outside the domain of moral reflection. She questions the validity of the distinction made by Kant and modernity more generally between moral and non-moral value.¹⁸ While Nussbaum is operating primarily as a classics scholar in *Fragility*, she situates the main thrust of her inquiry critically with respect to modern philosophical literature. Although her major dialogue partners are Plato and Aristotle scholars, her stated intention is to write for a non-

¹⁷ John M. Cooper, review of *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, by Martha C. Nussbaum, in *The Philosophical Review*, Vol.XCVII, No.4 (October 1988), 550. Cooper criticizes Nussbaum’s reading of Plato and Aristotle on various counts, and in particular her (intentional) rhetoric. He notes that “anyone who chooses to write ... employing emotional appeals as part of the fabric of textual exegesis, assumes a heavier burden of responsibility to those texts than a more conventional writer bears,” 564. His point that the whole book addresses the question of the purpose of philosophy is helpful.

¹⁸ Nussbaum, *Fragility*, 4-5.

specialist audience. Her implied reader is anyone who finds the problem of human vulnerability to misfortune philosophically engaging.

It is helpful to understand her project as partly related to the critique of modernity, and to the array of feminist writing that has mistrusted the disembodied authorial voice. With Niebuhr and many others she questions the tradition that has preferred and pretended to impartiality over partiality, and has viewed dependency as a weakness to be avoided. Her concerns resonate with the ethics of care debate launched by Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, Catherine Keller and others.¹⁹

While the discussion in *The Fragility of Goodness* makes no explicit reference to the revival of interest in virtue ethics, Nussbaum establishes herself as operating outside and in opposition to the ambit of both the Kantian and the Utilitarian projects so influential in modern philosophy.²⁰ As a result, this book along with Nussbaum's other works has become a reference point in many different discussions of the 'new' virtue ethics, including those in theological ethics.²¹ With her ancient interlocutors, Nussbaum takes for granted that the cultivation of good character is a primary means of orienting the moral agent toward its own 'target', which is the excellent fulfillment of our human purpose (*telos*). The horrifying decisions foisted by fate upon the protagonists of the

¹⁹ Guy A. M. Widdershoven and Marli Huijer, "An Encounter between Nussbaum's Aristotelian Ethics and Ethics of Care," *Bijdragen* 62: 3 (2001), 304-316.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4-5, 31-32, 329.

²¹ See Roger Crisp, ed. *How Should One Live?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Roger Crisp and Michael Slote, *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, ed. *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). Sherman, *Fabric*; and Michael Skerker, "Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach and Religion," *Journal of Religion* 84/3 (July 2004):379-409; as well as Cates, *Choosing to Feel*, 86-89; Hauerwas, *Christians among the Virtues*, mainly 70-88; and Kotva, *Christian Case for Virtue Ethics*, 27, 29.

Greek tragedies are problematic not so much for the failure of reason to find a way through, nor for the feckless disregard of duty, as they might be in Kant – nor even for the sake of the victims, as in a consequentialist world. It is the ruin of the protagonists themselves which attracts and appalls in the tragedies, just as it is the good life of the quintessential person that is the concern of Plato and Aristotle. The objective is not merely to make good decisions, but to do so out of a ‘settled disposition’ – to become a person in whom wisdom and insight are a habit. The virtues (or as Nussbaum refers to them, excellences, *aretas*) function as building blocks which constitute and sustain the *eudaimonia* of individuals, and in turn constitute and sustain the good life of the community. In this sense, Nussbaum writes within a virtue ethics framework.

6.1.2 The Tragedians

Nussbaum begins with chapters on Aeschylus and on Sophocles’ *Antigone* in which she probes the nature of moral conflict, and the attempts of modern philosophy to deny it. Tragic conflict she defines as “wrong action committed without any direct physical compulsion and in full knowledge of its nature by a person whose ethical character or commitments would otherwise dispose him to reject the act,”²² and claims that the objective of the tragedians was precisely to give the audience a means of struggling with the pain this engenders. She notes attempts since Socrates to dismiss the concerns raised in tragedy as morally primitive, and describes the role of Kantian and existentialist ‘solutions’ to the problem of conflict as both a signal of the pain the tragic

²² Nussbaum, *Fragility*, 25.

view evokes, and as a symptom of our need to master it.²³ Nussbaum's reading insists that the tragedies require us to acknowledge tension and disharmony, and the fear that underlies our attempts at control. Aeschylus presents King Agamemnon's dilemma over the requirement to sacrifice his young and innocent daughter Iphigenia as a means of releasing the wind so that the ships may sail to Troy. The demands of piety and the demands of fatherly love are irreducibly at odds. Aeschylus does not so much try to solve the moral problem of competing ethical demands as to insist that we recognize the complexity of it, and at the same time, be prepared to blame Agamemnon as he capitulates to the demands of piety, and proceeds without remorse. The chorus is shocked at his lack of painful emotion. Even though the choice may be right, the feeling is wrong. The playwright insists, according to Nussbaum, that part of the objective of the play is to increase our understanding of life – but “to grasp either a love or a tragedy by intellect is not sufficient for having real human knowledge of it.”²⁴

The attempt of Hegel to resolve the tensions of conflict by seeking an underlying harmony, Nussbaum also rejects.²⁵ She presents Sophocles' *Antigone* as another reflection on the problem of premature closure in the face of competing and incommensurable requirements. Antigone's sense of the love and honour owed to her brother Polynices compels her to bury his body against the express command of the city's ruler, Creon. Nussbaum argues that both Creon and Antigone are shown as being

²³ Ibid., 31-32, 48-49.

²⁴ Ibid., 45.

²⁵ Ibid., 52, 63, 67-68.

at fault for their willingness to create (falsely) a world where insoluble conflicts cannot arise. It is single-mindedness itself – whether on behalf of civic love or family love – which distorts. Real life, and the fundamental mystery of the human being, more appalling (*deinon*) even than the gods,²⁶ are recalcitrant to the false simplification of a supreme law, and the price of harmonization is moral impoverishment.

Non-commensurable goods give rise to irreducible conflicts, but, even worse from a moral standpoint, this may lead to resignation – “a passive abandonment of the human aim to make an orderly life.”²⁷ Nussbaum calls Schopenhauer’s depiction of moral resignation more “nearly correct than Hegel’s,”²⁸ yet then notes that the *Antigone* does not end with this paralyzing conclusion. Citing the entrance of a blind man with a sighted child, she proposes a way beyond immobilization of the will which will combine self-protection with willingness to learn – for “each is in the company of a friend on whom he can rely.”²⁹ As the tragedian leads the audience to ponder the value of an ordered conflict-free life against the tensions and disharmonies of strife, Creon’s voice turns to the traditions of a community as a guide. “They offer no solution in bewildering tragic situations – except the solution that consists in being faithful to or harmonious with one’s sense of worth by acknowledging the tension and disharmony.”³⁰

Acknowledgment is the key.

²⁶ Ibid., 73.

²⁷ Ibid., 78.

²⁸ Ibid. 79.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

6.1.3 Plato

Nussbaum continues her narrative of the ancient Greek attempts to come to grips with the problem of human vulnerability in a discussion of four of Plato's major works. In response to the dramatists' depiction of endless calamity, Plato seeks to find a means of keeping humanity safe. Nussbaum traces the development of the idea in the *Protagoras* that philosophy is a *techne* – a human art, craft or technical method – for reducing our human exposure to *tuche*. “*Techne*, then, is a deliberate application of human intelligence to some part of the world, yielding some control over *tuche*.”³¹ An adequate *techne* will find a way to measure competing values and commitments against each other, and offer a practical means of making choices among alternatives. It will enable us to order our commitments in such a way that we can live without confusion. This science will be universal, teachable, precise and explanatory, so that it allows the human being to reach the human *telos*, or natural end. In the voice of Protagoras, Plato argues that the salient characteristic of the human being – a characteristic which is not merely additive or instrumental to some other goal, but constitutive of humanity – is to reason. Thus, the *techne* required for human excellence will be the one which most develops the powers of reason.³² Plato therefore proposes philosophy as a means to overcome confusion and conflict among our commitments, and the insecurity that arises from human vulnerability. A further constitutive characteristic of the human is its social,

³¹ Ibid., 95.

³² Ibid., 101.

and therefore political, nature. Therefore fostering social excellence – good citizenship – is one of the goals of this *techne*.³³

In chapters on Plato's *Republic* and the *Symposium*, Nussbaum goes on to describe the 'god's eye view' that Plato wants his readers to adopt by the use of this *techne*. In order to achieve freedom from neediness and attachment to activities which have no intrinsic value, the philosopher must practice ascetic self-restraint, seeking "a place where reason, free of pain and limitation, can stand alone, above the restrictions imposed upon thought by a merely human life."³⁴ The god's eye view provides the perspective of purity, stability, and truth which will support the development of philosophy. In turn, philosophy teaches that this 'standpoint of perfection' will confer upon the one who chooses it a comprehensive protection from the excesses of passion.³⁵ Nussbaum points out that this perspective is "nothing like the standpoint of the normal human being,"³⁶ and notes that this is the basis of Plato's stress on the need for education.

The problem with this, as Nussbaum observes, is that there is something precious which is lost – the possibility of love. The *eros* that Plato has described here isn't in the end very erotic, as the comic/tragic plight of Alcibiades shows – for a person cannot really be in love with a statue, however impressive. What makes this problem even harder is that the dialogue indicates that it is not possible to retain openness to a particular, living, breathing love while embracing the philosophical standpoint – it is a

³³ Ibid., 103.

³⁴ Ibid., 147.

³⁵ Ibid., 136.

³⁶ Ibid., 153.

general posture toward life and not simply one of a number of virtues. “One sort of understanding blocks out the other. The pure light of the eternal forms eclipses, or is eclipsed by, the flickering lightning of the opened and opening body.”³⁷ Nussbaum argues that the *Symposium*, instead of presenting a simple case for the god’s eye view, shows us both what we gain and what we lose when we opt away from *tuche* to *techne*. “We see now that philosophy is not fully human; but we are terrified of humanity and where it leads to.”³⁸

Nussbaum finds that in the *Phaedrus* Plato himself revisits the question of whether such god-like self-sufficiency is, ultimately, desirable. Nussbaum describes his “recantation”³⁹ of the stable and safe. In the end, Plato embraces the riskiness and depth of passion as a significant component of the fullness of life, and therefore an essential element of good philosophy.

6.1.4 Aristotle

In her discussion of Aristotle, Nussbaum deals thematically rather than by individual work. In describing Aristotle’s starting point, Nussbaum stresses the way in which his teaching responds to the difficulties, questions, and unfinished business that Plato’s teaching raises. In this sense she presents ancient Greek ethics as a sustained and internally coherent dialogue on persistent questions. Because the basic outline of

³⁷ Ibid., 195.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 203.

Aristotle's framework for virtue ethics has been given in Chapter 5, the following focuses on three themes which Nussbaum develops – Aristotle's method, the relation of the particular to the universal in Aristotle's realism, and Nussbaum's assessment of Aristotle's conclusions on luck.

6.1.4.1 Aristotle's Method

One of Nussbaum's concerns is to undo the general and false impression that Aristotle's method of inquiry was fundamentally similar to Baconian empiricism, which proposes that untheorized, 'hard' data exist 'out there' as the basis of science. Aristotle's attention to the *phainomena* establishes his view of what philosophy is for – not for getting beyond the 'appearances', the triviality of the concrete. In contrast to Plato and others, whose goal in philosophy is to discover an underlying, hidden and eternal dimension of reality which is purer and truer than what we experience, Aristotle attempts to discern the intelligibility of the concrete, including the concrete data of ordinary belief. What this means in the area of philosophy is that he takes as a serious starting point for reflection the common perceptions and interpretations that people have. He intends to "set out the puzzles or dilemma with which the *phainomena* confront us ... and bring conflicting opinions to the surface."⁴⁰

Three principles guide this method. First, begin with what is universally believed. Second, hold on to what we will need for further insight. Third, determine who we would consider a competent judge in the case of disagreement – that is,

⁴⁰ Ibid., 246.

recognize expertise. The philosophical task is thus not a solitary, ivory tower pursuit, but indissolubly linked to the language and life of the community – “Philosophy, at the level of basic principles, seems to be a matter of bringing the isolated person into line, of dispelling illusions that can cause the breakdown of communication.”⁴¹ This approach highlights the role of linguistic and cultural practices as concrete – and hence, the importance of education in cultivating the capacity to perceive accurately. Judgments of value are explicitly oriented toward the practical or specific, and moreover, stated in relation not to the cosmos, but to the human – “good, not *simpliciter*, but for us.”⁴²

6.1.4.2 Aristotle’s Realism

Nussbaum characterizes Aristotle’s claim that appearances and truth are not opposed but aligned as a form of realism.⁴³ This realism involves deliberation which is not scientific in the ‘god’s eye view’, fully commensurable, disengaged sense of Plato, which he rejects as futile and destructive: “futile, because such a vantage point is unavailable, as such, to human inquiry; destructive, because the glory of the promised goal makes the humanly possible work look boring and cheap.”⁴⁴

Nussbaum shows how this account of the process of making judgments of value and the account of the vulnerability of the valued things are linked. The function of the general rules or universal principles in this setting is as “perspicuous descriptive

⁴¹ Ibid., 253.

⁴² Ibid., 292, quoting Aristotle.

⁴³ Ibid., 257.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 258.

summaries of good judgments, valid only to the extent to which they correctly describe such judgments.”⁴⁵ That is, norms are ‘normals.’ Universal principles are not in themselves authoritative, but are derived from experience, and ultimately must be correctable against better accounts of experience. “There is in effect a two-way illumination between particular and universal.”⁴⁶ It is the orientation toward some particulars (as opposed to others), and the requirement of openness toward contingency and change which reintroduces vulnerability. The *eudaimonia* of Aristotle’s good human being requires expression and activity in concrete living, which necessarily includes the risks that *tuche* poses.

6.1.4.3 Aristotle on Luck

Nussbaum concludes with Aristotle (and possibly beyond him), that the good human life, in order to be good, must embrace rather than flee from the adventures which *tuche* brings. The pity and fear that we feel when we see, in life or in drama, the suffering that humans fall into give us insight into the very things we value. The only protection we have is the rather light raincoat of practical reason, which informs itself by careful observation of our actual circumstances, including our emotional responses, and draws general conclusions from contingent particularities. These judgments must be open to correction. We can train and direct our attention to the *phainomena* of reality as our source of understanding. We can school ourselves in moderation such that even the

⁴⁵ Ibid., 299.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 306.

force of our passions and appetites may be constructively channeled within a moral community. However, there are limits to safety we may wisely seek.

In her final chapter, Nussbaum returns to the tragedies to recall that the *eudaimonia* of a human being will always involve the exposure to risk and suffering that a rich array of commitments and loves will bring. The good person must remain open and receptive to the pain that life delivers. In Hecuba's implacable rage over the murder of her son, she is entirely undone and ceases ultimately to be human. Driven mad by sorrow and revenge, she strikes out to blind and to kill, and in the end is transformed into a dog.

Human flourishing, as human, is constituted at least in part by the possibility of its own destruction by irresolvable moral conflict. There is nothing that can prevent such conflict arising from without and within, and it is the condition of good character to be fragile in its presence. That is, what we lose may be not simply our beloved, or our country, or our good name, but our own self – “If we could not be turned into dogs, we would no longer be human.”⁴⁷ Nussbaum remembers that the human being is, in the end, *deinon* – appalling to behold – and that *tuche* is ever recalcitrant to the works of *techne*. This insight, which resonates strongly with Niebuhr's sense of the person as both bound and free, will be critical in the construction of a Christian realist virtue ethics

⁴⁷ Ibid., 421.

6.2 Emotion

In *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions*,⁴⁸ Martha Nussbaum elaborates and explores the implications of her claim in *The Fragility of Goodness* that the emotions are a certain kind of thought, and that they will form a necessary element in any acceptable system of ethics. Nussbaum constructs an account of emotion which places it at the centre of moral reasoning, and thus of virtue.⁴⁹ She identifies emotions as being like “geological upheavals [that] shape the landscape of our mental and social lives.”⁵⁰ The emotions function as constituents of the flourishing human life in two ways – they operate both as a means of enhancing our perceptions and as the experience of wellbeing in itself. It is through the emotions that humans have the most compelling experiences of being alive.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁴⁹ *Upheavals of Thought* participates in an ongoing philosophical debate about the nature of emotions and the role in particular of compassion. This project traces Nussbaum’s line of argument rather than entering the debates. See Aaron Ben-Ze’ev, “Emotions Are Not Mere Judgments,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. LXVIII, No. 21 (March 2004): 450-457; Diana Fritz Cates, “Conceiving Emotions,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31/2 (2003): 325-341; Roger Crisp, “Compassion and Beyond,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice: An International Forum* 11/3, (June 2008): 233-246; John Deigh, “Nussbaum’s Account of Compassion,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. LXVIII, No. 21 (March 2004): 465-472; Bruce Maxwell, “Naturalized Compassion: A Critique of Nussbaum on Literature as Education for Compassionate Citizenry,” *Journal of Moral Education* 35/3 (September 2006): 335-352; Sean McAleer, “An Aristotelian Account of Virtue Ethics: An Essay in Moral Taxonomy,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 88(2007): 208-225; Nancy Sherman, ““It Is No Little Thing to Make Mine Eyes to Sweat Compassion”: APA Comment s on Martha Nussbaum’s *Upheavals of Thought*,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. LXVIII, No. 21 (March 2004): 458-464; Nancy E. Snow, “Compassion,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 28/3 (July 1993): 195-204; M. Weber, “Compassion and Pity: An Evaluation of Nussbaum’s Analysis and Defense,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 7 (2004): 487-511.

⁵⁰ Nussbaum, *Upheavals*, 1.

⁵¹ Moreover, as Gilman points out, Nussbaum’s construal of emotion can help to address the dilemma in Christianity of the relationship between religious meaning and universal truth claims, one of the principal goals of Tracy’s critical correlation. “Whereas emotions mediate a practical kind of

The task of education for social and political justice is a form of virtue training – in which elements like emotion, which are already naturally present in the person, are cultivated for the common good. Her conclusions have concrete implications for public policy and are intended to foster a discussion of “what it might mean for a political community to extend to its citizens the social bases of emotional health.”⁵²

Anticipating resistance to these claims from a reflexively ‘Kantian’ modernist reader, Nussbaum continues by examining two prominent emotions to see whether they have, or can be made suitable for, a role in public ethics. First she looks at compassion – surely a strong contender for such a role, though in practice often opposed as ‘bleeding heart-ish’. Then she tackles the more difficult emotion of love, tracing through Western intellectual history the tortured efforts of theology, philosophy and literature to bring the energy of love into our ethical life while evading its notoriously partisan, disruptive, and anti-social tendencies. Throughout these discussions, the story of Nussbaum’s grief at the death of her mother, and her musings on the love affair between Marcel and Albertine in Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* recur as counterpoints and touchstones in the exploration of complex concepts, to remind us that whatever other public and political tasks moral philosophy may attempt, it is about us.

universal truth, and whereas narratives mediate meaning distinctive to a faith community, emotion and narrative are nevertheless independent, mutually conditioning each other.” James E. Gilman, “Refranchising the Heart: Narrative Emotions and Contemporary Theology,” *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 72. No.2 (April 1994):219.

⁵² Nussbaum, *Upheavals*, 15.

6.2.1. Emotions as Thoughts

Nussbaum begins by defending a cognitivist picture of the emotions as evaluative thoughts, in which I make the judgment that an event or person is important not only in its own right, but as a constituent of my own flourishing. The urgency of feeling – its salience – arises from my recognition that this important object is not within my control.

Nussbaum rejects the traditionally held view of emotions as gushes of thoughtless energy, pushing each of us hither and yon in defiance of our best laid plans and programs. She develops a conception of emotions as cognitive appraisals of value, which judge that something outside one's control is important to one's own well-being or *eudaimonia*. She notes that feelings have an object – they are about something, and about something that one has certain beliefs about. In grief, she believes that her mother is important to her and that her mother has died – if either of these two beliefs were to change, the emotion of grief itself would evaporate. Without the thought, there is no emotion. The salience, the sense of intensity, is based on a second judgment which I make – that this thing which I judge to be a source of *eudaimonia* is vulnerable, and that therefore by extension I am vulnerable.

Even so, any such account of emotions as cognitions central to philosophical reflection may seem counterintuitive. Emotions don't feel like mental exercises. If emotions are thoughts, why do they seem to be so scalding, and to take over the personality? How can babies and animals seem to have emotions when 'thought' requires language? How is it that we feel passive and far from mature ethical agency

when we are ‘in the grip’ of our emotions? Why are emotions expressed so differently in different cultures? Why are emotions so often in conflict within one person? Through reflections on animal emotions, cultural difference, child development and music, Nussbaum expands the scope of her questioning to develop a more universal foundation for human emotional life. She reaches the conclusion that emotions need not be structured by language, and that the specific content of emotion is constructed socially.⁵³ It is our community that teaches us what to fear and what to love.⁵⁴

Therefore, she argues, because emotional health both constitutes human well-being and contributes to the resilience and productive capacity of the community, it will be in the interests of society to promote conditions of emotional health among its members.

6.2.2 Emotions as Narrative

Nussbaum traces the paradigm case of human infancy as it sets the groundwork for our evaluation of experiences of pleasure and pain. A human baby has the experience of weakness and the cognitive skill to recognize it. The adult experience of being overwhelmed by inchoate and unmanageable feelings arises because we bring to our evaluation of current life events material that belongs to events from a past which seems

⁵³ As noted above, this bears on the question of the meaning of objectivity, and on the interpretive problems of interdisciplinary discussions communication. See Gilman, “Re-enfranchising the Heart,” 226ff. Links to Aquinas on emotion are explored by Carlo Leget, “Martha Nussbaum and Thomas Aquinas on the Emotions,” *Theological Studies* 64 (2003): 558-581; and Diana Fritz Cates, “The Religious Dimension of Ordinary Human Emotions,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 25, 1 (2005): 35-53.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 173.

non-cognitive because it was non-linguistic. The ambivalence of the early dependent relationship forces a crisis of growth. Nussbaum describes the emergence of shame at our own incompetence, anger at those we love and need, but cannot control, and the value of guilt in setting a limit on our badness.⁵⁵ Yet such guilt feelings protect a child from omnipotent ambitions and the shame of not accomplishing them – and these infantile coping skills prefigure and prepare us for adult moral reasoning. The imagination plays a large part in coming to terms with neediness, limitation and ambivalence, both for children at play and for adults through the arts. By setting the problematique of life in a narrative which is ‘just a story’, we come to see that emotions "are intelligent pieces of human normative activity of the sort that can, in principle, within certain limits, be changed by more intelligent human activity."⁵⁶

6.2.3 Emotions as Philosophy

In contrast to an appraisal which opposes feeling to thought, and makes emotion the enemy of reason, Nussbaum proposes that emotion is a critical component of reason and of our capacity to reflect on morality. If this is so, then our estimate of human emotion must be integrated as a source of normative reflection within moral philosophy, both in whatever comprehensive ethical system we order our lives by, and in the political discourse to establish agreed norms.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 216.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 173.

In this Nussbaum's method remains Aristotelian, beginning with the assumption that people have commonsense capacity to identify what emotions are, and a grasp of how they function. She stresses that "relying on people's ability to classify instances of emotion does not mean relying on people's theories about what emotions are."⁵⁷ She wants to build up the conceptual framework from grouped instances of the concrete, rather than beginning with a theory.

Despite the Aristotelian method, Nussbaum identifies her project as a neo-Stoic account of emotion in content. That is, she affirms with the Stoics the cognitive function of emotions as *eudaimonistic* evaluations. Noting that the Stoics, like Plato's Diatoma, sought to reduce the power of emotion by relocating the sources of *eudaimonia* away from external goods, Nussbaum proceeds in a different direction. Where the Stoics turn to philosophy to rescue us from the power of emotion, Nussbaum seeks to affirm that the very neediness, messiness, ambivalence and concreteness of our emotional life is precisely the material of philosophy. "Seeing emotions as forms of evaluative thought shows us that the question about their role in the good human life is part and parcel of a general inquiry into the good human life."⁵⁸ Emotions provide us with important information about our well-being. She affirms that this is a critical element of philosophical reflection.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 11.

6.2.4 Emotions as Part of an Ethical System

Nussbaum adds depth and scope to the Stoic analysis while maintaining its insight that the emotions are a type of cognition. The ancient Stoics turned away from emotion, complaining that these ‘upheavals of thought’ encompassed the false belief that our *eudaimonia* depends upon external goods. But Nussbaum’s conclusion differs from theirs, when she insists that many of the goods of a good human life are good – our *eudaimonia* does depend, critically, on things outside ourselves and outside our control. To Nussbaum, the whole point is that emotions are accurate thoughts when they identify our vulnerability. They are useful when they tell us that our flourishing depends upon people and things we cannot be sure of. We should want to be the kind of people who live with confidence in the terrain of emotion.

In order to explore the significance of this insight for society at large Nussbaum asks how emotions can make a valid contribution to the broader issue of ethical deliberation. This will not necessarily be a completely simple exercise, as we recognize that some emotions expand the scope of our concern while others contract it.

Nussbaum identifies three specific problems that emotions as such present for any attempt to develop a normative view of human flourishing and the social ethics that would support it.⁵⁹ First, emotions reveal to us our vulnerability to persons and events outside our control – reveal us as so needy and unstable that ethical agency itself may be undermined. Second, emotions draw our attention to our own needs from our own perspective, surely too narrow a view for a social ethic. Third, emotions seem to be

⁵⁹ Ibid., 12-13.

laden with ambivalence. We don't simply love – we are jealous, angry, and selfish. The recognition of our dependence gives rise to anxiety which she calls 'morally subversive'. How can a conception of the good life for humans include emotions if these are their attributes? The question is, "how and whether ethical agents can live with the facts of their own interdependence and incompleteness – venturing out into the world and engaging evaluatively with it – without being stifled by shame, disgust and hate."⁶⁰ To begin to explore this question she turns to a consideration of compassion.

6.3 Compassion

Nussbaum takes up compassion as the most 'normatively attractive' example of the possible usefulness of emotion in the construction of a social ethic. Following Aristotle, she defines compassion as "a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person's misfortune".⁶¹

Nussbaum's depiction of compassion begins with the cognitive realism common to all emotion. The first step is to make a judgment which the Stoics call "an assent to an appearance".⁶² The onlooker must take in and acknowledge the reality of what is being looked at. This implies that cognition is dynamic – it is not inert observation, but active pursuit through wondering, reflecting, and comparing possibilities. The first question the onlooker asks is, 'What is this?' Nussbaum calls this a "good way of thinking about

⁶⁰ Ibid., 300.

⁶¹ Ibid., 301.

⁶² Ibid., 37.

what reasoning is – an ability in virtue of which we commit ourselves to a view of the way things really are.”⁶³

The specific emotion of compassion arises when the onlooker goes on to make three cognitive evaluations of a situation. To evoke compassion, the situation will need to meet these three criteria: seriousness, desert and similar possibility.

First, the misfortune in question must be deemed to be serious. The loss of a pencil would not normally arouse compassion, whereas having one’s house burn down would. Nussbaum records that there is significant convergence across cultures as to what constitutes a serious central loss. Note, however, that the degree of seriousness is not completely free-standing, but related to the particular circumstances in which the misfortunes occurs. If you are an African child from a family living on 2 dollars a day, and the annual gift of a pencil is needed for schoolwork, it may be that you do deserve compassion if you lose it. One of the critical factors in assessing seriousness seems to be replaceability. The loss of something difficult or impossible to replace is serious.

Nussbaum also points out that it is the onlooker’s view of the seriousness or ‘size’ of the misfortune that determines the compassionate response. She cites the example of a woman in a rural village in India, badly malnourished and with a very rudimentary education. She herself may not have a sense of loss at all, but may be satisfied with her life, because she “believes she is living a good and flourishing life, as

⁶³ Ibid., 38.

a woman should live one”⁶⁴ – however, an outsider from the rural development agency will feel compassion. Thus the cognitive judgment about the misfortune is an evaluation of what the situation is, understood within the context of the onlooker.

The judgment of seriousness also includes within it an implicit picture of what human flourishing should consist of. If the onlooker has an idiosyncratic or distorted conception of human flourishing, this will have an impact on compassion. Clearly then, the matter of how we evaluate the conception of flourishing held by another culture becomes a very challenging question in cross-cultural moral dialogue.

The second criterion is fault. If the misfortune you suffer is your own fault, the onlooker will be more likely to blame you than to feel compassion. If you are innocent, his compassion will be evoked. When you lose all your money at the casino, a stranger may consider you a fool. However, your friends may know that you are an habitual and compulsive gambler, who suffers from an illness-like addiction, and they may feel compassion for your weakness. Nussbaum points out that a compassionate response also implies innocence on the part of the onlooker – if your friends, knowing your addiction, took you along to the casino and encouraged you to bet your last dollar, compassion would be hypocritical. The misfortune has to seem genuinely exogenous. Just as in the case of seriousness, on the topic of responsibility and blameworthiness, the evaluation takes in many aspects of the whole situation. It makes this judgment in the larger context of a conception of overall fairness or justice.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 309.

Nussbaum modifies Aristotle's definition of the third criterion. Aristotle emphasizes the judgment of similar possibilities. The onlookers must be persuaded that the same misfortune might befall them, and recognize in themselves the same vulnerability that has proven so dangerous to the victim. This implies the knowledge of misfortune or the ability to imagine it. The compassionate response is thus subtly linked with fear. Looking at you suffering a misfortune gives me a frisson of fear for myself.

If this is the case, Nussbaum asks, what could we say about a divine or perfect being who could not meaningfully be said to be vulnerable? How would we understand the claim of many religions that the divine nature is compassionate? She notes that in a number of religious traditions, Christianity among them, the divine being does become vulnerable. But she goes on to extend and modify the original insight to say that the onlooker must consider the other person's well-being as an actual constituent of his or her own flourishing. She finds that this *eudaimonistic* judgment, rather than the narrower judgment of similar possibilities is what evokes the emotion of compassion. It is in this broader sense that the fear of harm to one's own self enters the equation.

It is in the end the third criterion of *eudaimonistic* judgment that holds together the judgment of seriousness with the judgment of innocence. Compassion is an emotion which carries within it a comprehensive if implicit picture of what the good life for a human should consist of, and of what our responsibilities are. It is compassion thus understood which draws people to be attentive to and consider themselves connected to the situation of others. Its salience arises from our sense of being implicated – otherwise, we might hear of someone's misfortune and find it serious and not

blameworthy, but ultimately un compelling. It is the ‘quasi-ethical achievement’⁶⁵ of identifying another’s misfortune as impinging on my well-being and calling for my response which makes compassion foundational for social ethics.

6.4 Love

In comparison to compassion, the emotion of love seems to be much more ambiguous in its possibilities for helping to create a flourishing life and a wholesome society. “Too wonderful to remove from human life,”⁶⁶ the intensity of personal love is if anything more partial, more self-interested, and more anxious than other emotions. These complaints apply to love of family, and friendship, and patriotism, but are nowhere more pertinent than in erotic love. Nussbaum finds in Western thought a “recurrent attempt to reform or educate erotic love, so as to keep its creative force while purifying it of ambivalence and excess, and making it more friendly to general social aims.”⁶⁷

She traces the development of this thought through a succession of Platonic, Christian and Romantic forms. Her construction of this unfolding conversation, like her depiction in *The Fragility of Goodness* of the conversation about virtue and vulnerability, is an example of a tradition in the MacIntyrean sense, in which generations engage and criticize the previous formulations (and by doing so reinscribe the

⁶⁵ Ibid., 336.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 469.

boundaries of the discussion). Nussbaum stresses the role of the imagination in wrestling with these questions, and highlights literary and musical examples. She observes the way in which the metaphor of ascending a ladder has been employed repeatedly to describe the effort to make human love into something that can take us from this everyday world to a place that is ‘higher’ – more vivid, more significant, and in a sense, truer.

In following the imaginative constructions of Whitman, Bronte and Mahler, no less than in Plato, Augustine, and Dante, Nussbaum notes the persistent consensus that for love to be morally empowered, it will need to develop a purist, single-minded view that repudiates daily life. She contrasts this with the perspective of Molly Bloom, through whose eyes we see that a single-minded, romantic vision of life is something that people long to have, and do not readily relinquish. “But it informs us as well that life is more fragmentary, less single-minded, and also in some surprising way more fun, in its sheer variety and incongruity, than the vision of the single-minded lets on.”⁶⁸

For Nussbaum, the two impulses define the human experience. Humans aspire to climb the ladder of love to a purer vision. And yet it is the other impulse, this embrace of the vulnerability, ambiguity and limitation that love involves, that she argues will be more ethically fruitful. It is precisely the complexity of love – love’s vulnerability, ambiguity and limitation that make it a plausible and desirable constituent of moral deliberation, both private and public. It is the giving and receiving of love that will train the person in the ways of God.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 707.

Cates notes that although Nussbaum does not raise the question of the religious content of emotion explicitly, her conception of emotion does imply “what scholars of religion would regard as religious elements.”⁶⁹ The ordinary human emotions, as she calls them, naturally open us to questions of the largest horizon of meaning and significance, and bring even the unreflective to confront issues which have a metaphysical scope. Recognizing and reflecting on love, or grief, or death will inevitably lead to reflections on the ultimate, even when such reflections are not couched in elaborate religious or philosophical language. This comprehensive horizon, or limit-language, which Tracy describes as pointing to the religious dimension of common experience, implies the appropriateness of a critical correlation between Nussbaum’s Aristotelian virtue ethics and the theological anthropology of Niebuhr.⁷⁰ The following section on Nussbaum’s understanding of transcendence underscores this.

6.5 Transcendence

Martha Nussbaum’s work looks at the question of the best strategy for us to use in the face of human fragility. She follows the centuries-long arguments of philosophers and theologians – and dramatists and novel-writers and musicians – over what ought to be understood and promoted as the good life for humans. Much of this discussion turns on the question of transcendence, which itself arises from the question of the nature of reality. Is the reality we live in day-to-day the real reality? Or is there some other plane,

⁶⁹ Cates, “Religious Dimension,” 47.

⁷⁰ Tracy, *Blessed Rage*, 92.

some other place, some other perspective, from which we can be assured that all the vicissitudes of life are not the last word? Are the complexity and poignancy of this particular life and its troubles important, or is there a grander scheme in which the ‘slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’ simply do not matter any more? And if the answer is, yes, there is such a place – then how can I get there?

In his review of *The Fragility of Goodness*, Charles Taylor points out that Nussbaum tracks both the negative and the positive impulse to transcendence.⁷¹ It is not only a matter of fleeing the pangs of grief, the uncertainties of love, and the fear of death. There is also, apparently universally in the human spirit, a genuine intimation of this other reality, and an aspiration toward its goodness. He asks her whether her understanding of the good life for the human includes the aspiration toward transcendence as a genuine if complicating aspect of *eudaimonia*, or whether she like some others sees transcendence as the adversary. That is, does she consider *eudaimonia* to be fully encompassed by Aristotle’s human good, “something which we can therefore grasp only from within the human form of life; which we can’t get to by transcending the human viewpoint.”⁷² In a later essay, “Transcending Humanity”, Nussbaum acknowledges the “unexplained silence” of her earlier text, and responds.⁷³

Nussbaum identifies ambivalence at the heart of this human struggle to come to terms with limitation and fragility. We do and we do not want to achieve the god’s-eye-

⁷¹ Charles Taylor, review of *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* by Martha C. Nussbaum, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 18 (1988): 805-14.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 810.

⁷³ Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 365.

view. She notes that it is gods who quintessentially hold the god's-eye-view, and begins her answer by examining the way the ancient Greeks think about gods. Because gods are without limitations in strength and ability, there is oddly enough little to be imitated or even admired in their excellent qualities. What would be the point, for a god, of competing in the Olympics? Excellence and purpose in a human being are in part defined by the encounter with limit.

This objection to the god as a model for human goodness becomes stronger when applied to the moral sphere. Gods have no need of politics, or social justice, because they have no need to support one another – “beings who lack our vulnerabilities to hunger, thirst, heat, cold and disease, beings who don't need to educate their children, to raise an army, to arrange for the fair distribution of life-supporting property and other goods don't really need politics.”⁷⁴ The fellow-feeling and compassion that makes society possible and justice desirable is unavailable to the gods. Indeed, the heedlessness of the gods as we see it in Greek mythology, their insensitivity by human standards, is based on their lack of neediness – immortality and invulnerability make one incapable of virtue. It is, precisely, human limitation which gives virtue its significance.⁷⁵ When humans turn their attention too exclusively to the divine dimension, from which both human anguish and human virtue are absent, efforts to build a wholesome society here

⁷⁴ Ibid., 373.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 375. Nussbaum points out here, without developing her view, that Christianity offers a profound response to this picture of the divine reality through its depiction of a God who intentionally becomes subject to limit and death through incarnation.

will always be in danger of compromise – as they say, becoming too heavenly minded to be any earthly good.

Despite this somewhat severe picture of the moral loss involved in the human aspiration to transcendence, Nussbaum does not finally argue that “in order to pursue the whole human good, we must leave aside our desire for transcendence.”⁷⁶ She identifies a form of transcendence which could be considered “internal and human”, and might be described as descent, as well as ascent. This transcendence is to be distinguished from the desire to escape completely from the “constitutive conditions of our humanity” or “to seek for a life that is in reality the life of another sort of being.”⁷⁷ At the same time, she is not arguing for a simple acceptance of all existing limitations as definitive. Internal transcendence involves engaging and confronting the exigencies of human life, spurred by compassionate appreciation of the way these limitations impose unduly on some. It is precisely in the discernment of the space that exists – between the vulnerability that constitutes us and the vulnerability that we can justly imagine reducing – in which the practical tasks of ethics consist. “What is recommended is a delicate balancing act between the claims of excellence, which lead us to push outward, and the necessity of the human context, which pushes us back in.”⁷⁸

Nussbaum identifies as *hubris* the failure to perform this balancing act well. *Hubris* causes one to abandon the appropriate human striving in order to pursue the

⁷⁶ Ibid., 378.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 379.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 381.

striving to become something that is not human. The good human life, in Nussbaum's estimate, will be a life that does not deny, but instead holds on to the dynamic tension, which she calls "close to a contradiction"⁷⁹ between our longing to be free of grief and limit and loss, and our recognition that it is also our grief and limit and loss which define us as human.

Nussbaum links her reflections on transcendence with her views on the role of emotions in the good human life, and in the creation of a flourishing society. It is emotions as she understands them that tie us to certain persons and events, and remind us that our wellbeing is vulnerable to the unstable realities of the world. It is our emotions and the attachments we have to the concrete particularities not in our control that bind us to earth – this spouse, that child, this job, that city, this family, that profession. The compassion we feel for others arises from the acknowledgment of our connection to the pain and vulnerability of others. We come to recognize our particular lives and loves as instances of a more general humanity, to which we belong. These make it impossible to escape from a human life into a life lived from the god's-eye-view, "for after all, a transcendent life has no hostages to fate."⁸⁰ It is these very hostages to fate that make the human life worth living.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 389.

6.6 Social and Political Justice

Martha Nussbaum has developed an approach to social and political justice which encompasses her insights on human fragility, compassion and transcendence. Her objective is to devise a framework for social ethics which is pluralist, that is, genuinely able to engage cross-cultural realities, and yet is not paralyzed by deference to ‘immutable’ cultural prerogatives which may be adduced to prevent social change. The framework she offers also provides, in a way that social contract theory with its assumptions of equality does not, an approach which elucidates and responds to the reality that both within a society, and across national boundaries the parties may not be equal in natural endowment or political power.

As in other areas of her work, Nussbaum’s method is Aristotelian, in that she insists on using the data of ordinary human experience lived in community, and the norms which arise in human cultures as the primary source of ethical insight. It is virtue-oriented in that it seeks to identify and develop conceptually the elements of *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing. She argues that a virtue-based approach need not inevitably lead to relativism in general, nor tradition-bound conservatism in specific instances. On the contrary, she insists that Aristotle himself used this method as a means to criticize the existing moral traditions of his society. By stipulating *eudaimonia* as a roughly-specified reference point, she argues that Aristotle had “an interesting way of

connecting the virtues with a search for ethical objectivity and with the criticism of existing local norms.”⁸¹

Aristotle’s goal, and therefore hers, is to find a way to make moral claims which are both grounded in the concrete particulars of human experience, yet also arguably objective, and able to serve as a means of ethical progress “in the name of a more inclusive account of the circumstances of human life, and of the needs for human functioning that these circumstances call forth.”⁸² In this sense she defends universal values derived not from theoretical principles, but built up from customs, practices and lived reality. She attempts to devise an approach which avoids paternalist/modernist assumptions about values, and which respects both personal and cultural preferences, but at the same time has something to say.⁸³

Nussbaum links her insights on social justice to the question of tragic choices – choices in which the agent is forced to choose between two evils, or to choose one good at the expense of another. She points out, following Hegel, that in many instances the fact that a tragic choice is required indicates an area for reform. “Sometimes a tragic choice is caused by brute necessity; but more often the causes lie squarely on the human

⁸¹ Martha C. Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, eds., *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 244.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 250.

⁸³ In *Women and Development*, and elsewhere, Nussbaum develops a list of capabilities that will be necessary components of a truly human life, and argues that the role of governments is to create the social conditions in which citizens can exercise these capabilities. She goes beyond her collaborator Amartya Sen in the level of specification of capabilities. Although the list has evolved over the years, the core consists of ten areas of human functioning which move beyond both the conventional reductive analysis of economic well-being, and beyond a statement of human rights. The capabilities approach looks more concretely at how people are actually enabled to live. In keeping with her Aristotelian method, Nussbaum notes that these capabilities are non-commensurable – that is, they are distinct components of well-being, and cannot be fully substituted for one another. Trade-offs will be possible but limited.

side, where stupidity, obtuseness, and malice are amply to be found.”⁸⁴ It is these cases that call for changes in social policy.

6.7 Summary and Conclusions

This chapter has introduced aspects of the work of contemporary philosopher Martha Nussbaum, as a resource for assembling the key elements of virtue ethics which may be combined with the Christian realist framework of theological anthropology developed in Chapters 2 and 3. It continues the interpretive phase of Tracy’s method of critical correlation by presenting Nussbaum’s Aristotelian virtue ethics, and indicating ways in which her work poses questions which are in his terms comprehensive.

The chapter explores the ways Nussbaum’s approach to virtue affirms both the fragility of the human being and the call to responsible engagement in work for justice. She extends and enriches the key elements of Aristotelian virtue ethics explored in Chapter 5. Like Niebuhr, Nussbaum sees the human being as both radically free and radically limited. She is a virtue ethicist with a strong sense of commitment to the kind of universal norms of social and political justice which have been the ongoing project of liberal modernity.

To the basic Aristotelian framework for virtue ethics Nussbaum adds a complex reflection on the way human vulnerability to loss and suffering determines the requirements of virtue. The fact that the things we value most are not within our control, and that we are therefore at the mercy of luck, she identifies as the primary anxiety that

⁸⁴ Nussbaum, “Tragedy and Human Capabilities,” 415.

that drives ethical enquiry through Greek tragedy, Plato and Aristotle. Following Aristotle, she develops a method which insists on the primacy of the concrete particular as the source not only of specific reflections, insights and decisions, but also as the origin of any normative statement we may make. Because our norms are derived from 'normals', they must be considered fallible and open to correction. This insight will be critically important to the development of a Christian realist virtue ethics which insists on an attitude of corrigibility.

She adds to this picture a reflection on the role of emotions as vitally necessary both to accurate discernment of reality, and to the experience of full human living. Her neo-Stoic account of emotion identifies emotions as evaluative thoughts which give us important ethical information. Without emotional acuity, it is impossible to navigate the complexities and vicissitudes of a human life. It is emotions which link us inextricably to other human beings, both those very close to us and farther away. Nussbaum proposes that the emotions of compassion and love will be centrally important for any moral theory, and that the development of emotional health and the capacity for compassion should be an explicit objective of public policy.⁸⁵

Nussbaum shares with Niebuhr a sense of the difficulty of the human condition, and the likelihood of tragic wrongdoing. Like him, she sees in the intuitive longing of human beings for a transcendent reality a tendency which is both based on something

⁸⁵ Her own priority for political action has taken Nussbaum into many public policy conversations. Her work among poor women's groups in India has informed her participation in the ongoing discussion of the Capabilities Approach, in which she develops a substantive notion of the good for humans.

genuine, and also problematic. Like him, she links this insight to suspicion of the claims of any powerful person or system to benevolence.

All these elements will contribute to the search for an ethics of virtue compatible with Christian realism. The next chapter sharpens the search by bringing into greater relief the areas of congruence and difference between Niebuhr and Nussbaum, broadly following Tracy's method of critical correlation.

CHAPTER 7

NIEBUHR AND NUSSBAUM IN CRITICAL CORRELATION: THE THEOLOGICAL-ETHICAL CYCLE

The overall objective of this project is to generate a Christian realist virtue ethics. Through Tracy's method of critical correlation, it aims to develop an approach to virtue ethics which brings together the framework of theological anthropology of Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism with the principal insights of contemporary virtue ethics as found in Martha Nussbaum's interpretation of Aristotle and Jean Porter's interpretation of Aquinas. The project takes as its starting point the dual emphasis on fragility and on working for social justice which we find in Christian realism.

To summarize before proceeding to the more analytical work, Chapters 2 and 3 examined the theological preoccupations of Reinhold Niebuhr, and, with an adaptation from Rebekah M. Miles, described the framework of theological anthropology which can serve as a basis of Christian realist virtue ethics. These chapters respond to Solomon's first requirement – a description of the quintessential person. Chapter 4 posed very specific questions about the appropriateness of developing an Aristotelian virtue ethics based on the theological anthropology of Niebuhr. Chapter 5 surveyed the virtue ethics tradition to establish the particular approach to virtue ethics most relevant to Christian realism, and delineated the key elements of virtue ethics from the Aristotelian tradition. In response to the second of Solomon's requirements – a list of virtues – the tradition suggests that Christian realist virtue ethics will include as a minimum the four

cardinal virtues and the three theological virtues. Chapter 5 refined the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics with the insights of Martha Nussbaum, whose approach to virtue emphasizes the role of the emotions in general and of compassion in particular, as it encompasses both human fragility and concern for social justice.

The purpose of this chapter is to continue Tracy's dialectical phase by placing Niebuhr and Nussbaum more specifically in conversation with each other. This is an exercise in critical correlation in order to move toward the articulation of a Christian realist virtue ethics. Taking Niebuhr's framework of theological anthropology as the substantive basis of a Christian realist virtue ethics, it demonstrates the contribution that Nussbaum's approach to virtue ethics makes to the project. It analyses areas of congruence and points of divergence in their thinking, and identifies places where one may illuminate the other. The chapter proceeds on the assumption that in addition to the important insights provided by Niebuhr and Nussbaum, each also suffers from significant deficiencies, to which the other supplies a corrective response.

In examining significant parallels in Niebuhr's and Nussbaum's depiction of the dynamism of the human condition, I identify a theological-ethical cycle which is common to both. This theological-ethical cycle responds in part to Solomon's third requirement of a hypothesis about how human beings become virtuous. I present the cycle as a process by which the human being is formed in virtue, and which complements the formative role of community norms, religious practice, and education in the *polis*. The cycle forms virtue through repetition and correction, developing in the virtuous person a kind of resilient corrigibility rather than perfection. Rather than

attempting to overcome the limitations of the real world, the cycle increases the ability to live responsibly with our finiteness and fragility.

The chapter is structured in four parts. It begins by setting side by side the basic pictures of the human condition developed by Niebuhr and by Nussbaum. It analyses the dynamism common to both pictures as a theological-ethical cycle. Second, the chapter then explores the implications of this critical correlation for the social formation of virtue, and reflects on what has been called ‘pessimistic optimism’ in both writers. Third, the chapter considers the ways in which Niebuhr and Nussbaum differ profoundly, and explores through critical correlation how they may be appropriately placed in dialogue. It discusses their very different perspectives on human sinfulness. It notes that notions of virtue in Nussbaum are developed without reference to divine transcendence or to grace. Recognizing that Nussbaum is operating in a non-theistic, naturalist framework, it explores the question of how Nussbaum’s particular perspective on natural virtue might shed light on what Niebuhr says about the operation of grace. The chapter reflects further on Niebuhr’s understanding of grace as analogous to the infused or theological virtues of the Thomist tradition, and on the role of grace and virtue in activating and mitigating the theological-ethical cycle. The fourth section of Chapter 7, as part of the critical correlation, reviews the basic limitations in both Niebuhr and Nussbaum and indicates how each is complemented by the other.

It is important to stress at the outset that the encounter between Niebuhr and Nussbaum is an artificial conversation, in the sense that they are separated both by time and by disciplinary focus. Niebuhr was a Christian theologian operating from a

seminary, while Nussbaum is a contemporary philosopher in the secular university. Niebuhr was an ordained Protestant minister, while Nussbaum is a lay person, a convert to Reform Judaism as an adult. Nussbaum was in graduate school when Niebuhr died. However, despite these differences, there are significant similarities in their interests, and resonance in their work. Both might be called ethical polymaths. They engage a wide range of questions, taking part in several conversations at once. Both address a public larger than the context in which they work, and both demonstrate a passionate interest in what might be called, broadly, the development of democracy. They share a perspective on the human condition which combines awareness of human fragility with a forceful call to work for social justice.

7.1 The Dynamism of the Human Condition: A Theological-Ethical Cycle

There are interesting parallels between Niebuhr's and Nussbaum's depictions of the human predicament. They share a sense that what we face is fragility, possibility, and responsibility. The research of the project reveals a pattern that will be key for the development of a Christian realist virtue ethics which draws from both writers. The following analysis takes as its starting point Rebekah M. Miles' insight that in a feminist Christian realism which holds boundedness together with transcendence, there is a cycle of creative transformation, in which "both persons and communities are unceasingly dynamic."¹ Miles does not examine the elements of this cycle, nor make the link to virtue ethics. However, following up the image of a cycle shows that the general

¹ Miles, *Bonds of Freedom*, 155. This analysis of the cycle follows up her compelling idea.

contours of such a process of iteration and the quality of dynamism in the cycle are common to both Niebuhr and Nussbaum. In both pictures, there is a circular dynamic by which humanity attempts to escape the problem of fragility, is confronted by the inadequacy of this move, and then circles around to the starting point, having gained, it is hoped, new insight and appreciation of reality. Both Niebuhr and Nussbaum make this circle in four moves which are roughly parallel. Nussbaum is describing intellectual history, first in ancient Greece and then in the West, while Niebuhr speaks in theological terms – however, the basic pattern is common to both. The elements of the pattern are anxiety, escape, recognition of loss, and re-embrace.

The pattern assumes that human beings live in two dimensions – variously identified as time and eternity, real and ideal, contingency and universality – and that the awareness of both these dimensions is what gives human life its unique character. Because human beings can ponder themselves, remember, and dream of the future, it seems we are uniquely burdened with the gift and challenge of consciousness. Niebuhr identifies this quality as freedom and distinguishes it from simple rationality, which he calls part of nature.² Nussbaum identifies what she calls internal transcendence as a fact of human experience.³

² Niebuhr, *Nature*, 96, 119.

³ Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 368 ff.

7.1.1 First Move: Anxiety as a Response to Ambiguity

The first move occurs when a person recognizes the fragility and ambiguity of the human condition, and responds with anxiety.

As outlined in Chapter 2, Niebuhr describes the human being as both bound and free. We are both critically limited by time and place, by community and obligation, by physical frailty and death, while being at the same time alive in an eternal realm which utterly transcends this earthly life. For Niebuhr, the eternal realm is quite specifically the reality of God. The experience of grasping the truth of our dependence includes also the intimation of a reality on which we do depend, however unfathomable that reality may be. When the human being apprehends this ambiguous truth – which is in itself a moment of transcendence – the response is anxiety.⁴ Knowledge of our limitation, dependence and fragility brings anxiety straightforwardly. Yet this anxiety is compounded by a sense of the enormity of our human freedom to do good or ill. A quintessential example of this two-edged anxiety is the overwhelming experience of new parenthood, with its combined sense of vulnerability and responsibility.

The situation of humanity as Nussbaum presents it is fragile, but ambiguous. In the language of the Greek tragedies, the human being is *deinon* – strange, formidable, appalling. While she observes that “a lot about us is messy, needy, rooted in the dirt and standing in the rain,” she adds that “it is also true that there is something about us that is pure and purely active, something we could think of as ‘divine, immortal, intelligible,

⁴ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 168.

unitary, indissoluble, self consistent and invariable'.⁵ Nussbaum portrays Greek tragic theatre as a complex wrestling with the anxiety that is created when human beings find themselves accosted by misfortune, and forced by circumstances to reconcile impossibly conflicting demands. Humans are made vulnerable to luck (*tuche*) through being attached to objects and persons who are vulnerable. There is dismay and anxiety when this is recognized. She presents the development of philosophy as a response to the anxiety that this truthful depiction of the human condition occasions.

7.1.2 Second Move: Escape from Reality

The second move is the attempt to quell the anxiety of fragility by finding and claiming something else as the 'real' reality which makes this reality less significant.

In Niebuhr's reckoning, in order to make this anxiety more manageable, human beings make a misguided attempt to gain control. We falsely identify some contingent 'earthly' project as bearing 'eternal' significance. We ascribe to God's will our own limited and self-serving goals, a misidentification which is in Christian terms essentially idolatrous.⁶ Even when theism itself is removed from the equation, the false claim to transcendence recurs. From the divine right of kings to the utopian pretensions of communism, Niebuhr sees this idolatry as an escape from the reality of our fragility and as a source of great evil in the world.

The other version of this move, implied by Miles and perhaps more likely to occur in a person who is socially less powerful, is the same mistake made in the reverse

⁵ Nussbaum, *Fragility*, 2 (quoting Plato).

⁶ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 164.

direction. In this case the person falsely denies the possibility of the transcendent, and rejects the freedom (and responsibility) that it implies. This imposes false limits, which can be just as ethically harmful as false freedom.⁷

Nussbaum describes a similar escape move in Plato's response to the observation that the things we most cherish are not within our control, but vulnerable to loss or damage. Plato sees that we are faced with impossible choices and pushed around by our passions. He wants to find a craft or method, a *techne*, that will make us safe from the ravages of *tuche*. He proposes philosophy as the ascent to a 'god's-eye-view', from which we will be able to order our choices without conflict, and be spared the pain of our misfortunes. This aspiration to the standpoint of perfection will deliver a reality that is stable, impartial, and universally true. While Nussbaum sees this move to the god's-eye-view as more mistaken than pernicious, she observes the moral damage that its narrow perspective may inflict. Nussbaum describes a similar move in what she calls the 'ascent' traditions of Western philosophy and literature – "in which the aspiring lover climbs a ladder from the quotidian love from which she began, with all its difficulties, to an allegedly higher and more fulfilling love."⁸

7.1.3 Third Move: Recognition of Loss

The third move is the recognition that in the attempt to escape anxiety, something precious and central has been lost.

⁷ Ibid., 233.

⁸ Nussbaum, *Upheavals*, 469.

Niebuhr sees human beings as inherently structured to recognize the false pretensions of the move to escape. He says that, paradoxically, it is the fact of our genuine transcendence that allows us to glimpse the truth of our self-deceit when we claim transcendent validity for contingent realities. Our self-glorification just won't stand up to honest scrutiny.⁹ He identifies this as the moment of contrition, when the sin of pride, *hubris*, is overcome by the power of grace, and the human tumbles back 'down' to earth. The contrition that Niebuhr describes is not simple repentance for large and small sins, but a kind of existential dismay that can only be met by the greatness of God. Here grace forgives, and brings humility.

In the more symmetric version suggested by Miles, the moment of truth for the person less powerful would be the recognition that limits imposed by self or society are not absolute. Here grace forgives and empowers, and the sin of *acedia* is transformed into responsible engagement.

Nussbaum attributes both to the later Plato and to Aristotle the insight that the god's-eye-view is in the end not sustainable because it leaves out too much that is genuinely important. At the top of the ladder of love, the lover is oddly uncomfortable and out of place – quoting D.H. Lawrence, she notes that “even if you reach heaven, you can't sit down there.”¹⁰ The relationships and belongings and accomplishments which comprise a good human life do have value. It is precisely our tendency to care about people and things over whose well-being we do not have power which define us as

⁹ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 166.

¹⁰ Nussbaum, *Upheavals*, 682 (quoting D.H. Lawrence).

humans. That is, our vulnerability and limitation define our humanity. *Hubris* as Nussbaum uses the word entails a failure to understand what the nature of human life is – it is “the failure, being mortal, to think mortal thoughts.”¹¹ The desire to escape to another life will have negative consequences for moral life here. Aristotle rejects Plato’s notion of the ideal, and insists on beginning ethical inquiry in the here and now, by asking what ‘most people’ think. The fragile deliberator has returned to earth.

7.1.4 Fourth Move: Re-embrace with Humility and Resolve

The fourth move is reengagement with the work for justice without the need for delusions of grandeur.

Niebuhr calls for the embrace of a life that recognizes its embeddedness and its limitation. He insists that we must remain open to correction. He rails against the false innocence of modernity, with its bland expectation of continuous progress by people of good intention. Only self-giving love, in which our own sense of fragility is engaged by the need of others, will serve as the right foundation for justice.¹² Yet we must be constantly vigilant for the possibility of self-serving pretension in the expression of that love. His strongest criticism is for the self-righteousness and self-importance of the do-gooding church, as he calls for a humble recognition of Christian fallibility.¹³ The grace of empowerment allows re-engagement in the tasks of compassion and justice.

¹¹ Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 381.

¹² Niebuhr, *Nature*, 296.

¹³ Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 88.

For those whose *acedia* has been converted by grace into resolve, it becomes clear in this move that within the embeddedness and limitation of human life there will always be found resources for transformation.

Nussbaum follows Aristotle in her account of the value of the life lived in full cognizance of limit. The excellent life for a human will have to include – not evade – the dangers of love here on earth, of activity and striving, and of exposure to risk. Even further, the good life will include a wide compassion – through which our sense of vulnerability extends to include the vicissitudes of others. The fourth move in the cycle brings renewed commitment to the challenges and tribulations of work for the world.

7.1.5 The Significance of the Cycle

For both Niebuhr and Nussbaum the pattern described here is something more fundamental than a correctable mistake or two. It is a genuine part of being human. Both affirm that there is something truthful and accurate about the human impulse toward a reality ‘beyond’ or ‘deeper than’ the everyday world. Moreover, however unfathomable, that reality is apprehended as utterly good. Although only Niebuhr describes that reality as divine, both take it as one of the great mysteries with which humans will always have the need to grapple. Both recognize that our ideas about vulnerability and transcendence will be critically, even determinatively, linked to the question of justice. It is when we perceive both our own fragility and also the possibilities of the greater reality in which we live that we experience the imperative of responsibility. Their objective is not to

erase or deny transcendence, but to understand its place in the life we are called to live.

Transcendence reminds us of the real boundaries of human experience.

In this sense, the theological-ethical cycle functions to form a person in virtue, through repetition and a kind of training in reality. The person is both active and responsive, both impelled from within and adjusted from without. In effect, through the cycle, we are corrected and we gain the habit of self-correction. However, for both Niebuhr and Nussbaum, the result of such habituation is not perfection, but instead a kind of resilience in living responsibly within the limits of the real world.

Both Niebuhr and Nussbaum also see this cyclical pattern as dynamic – that is, there is no final point of stable equilibrium that can be achieved. The question thus arises, if this description of a theological-ethical cycle is accurate, can human beings make progress? Niebuhr addresses the question directly, answering yes and no. For him, as progress is made, new challenges and difficulties appear which follow a similar pattern. At the interpersonal and social level, too, it is a similar cyclical motion that accounts for the fact that even as society progresses, not only the good but evil develop. For Niebuhr this insight is part and parcel of his larger theological reflection on eschatology. He was impatient with a liberal church which seemed to reflect shallow secular optimism when it suggested that if we all follow Jesus we will just keep making things better until we get to the Kingdom. Yet at the same time he was far from quietist – a very public theologian, he recognized and participated with great energy in the political and social issues of his time. What he expects from Christians is engagement *and* humility. The virtue that is formed in the theological-ethical cycle is virtue that

fosters both, and actively discourages the notion that one might definitively overcome weakness or sin.

Nussbaum is also an activist, and yet like Niebuhr seized of the countervailing tendencies in human social and political developments. She writes, “While I do not believe that human beings are originally evil or sinful, it is all too plain that human beings are much of the time, lazy, inattentive, unreflective, shallow in feeling.”¹⁴ Her description of the unfolding of Hindu fundamentalism and inter-communal atrocities in post-independence India observes unremitting human destructiveness on the ambiguous path of political progress, and the complexity of social development.¹⁵ At the same time, her understanding of ‘internal’ transcendence gives her grounds for confidence that social systems can evolve and adapt in ways which foster greater social inclusion, and permit clear progress toward justice, as the cycle continues. The capabilities approach emphasizes the role of imagination, emotion and practical reason as conditions of possibility for the good human life. But the good human life in Nussbaum is not a ‘perfect’ life free of conflict or difficulty.

To summarize, the first result of a critical correlation of Niebuhr and Nussbaum is the identification of a theological-ethical cycle which can be discerned in both pictures of the human condition. This cycle gives shape to the dynamism of human life, both individual and collective, as it embraces both its own fragility and the imperative to work for social justice in the world. The virtue formed by the operation of the cycle does

¹⁴ Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 378.

¹⁵ See for example Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India’s Future* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Bellknapp Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), ix.

not remove the fragile human being from the vicissitudes of life, but gives strength to persevere.

7.2 The Cultivation of Virtue – Pessimistic Optimists

Solomon's third requirement for virtue ethics is a proposal for the formation or cultivation of virtue. As indicated above and will be expanded in Chapter 8, the proposal of a theological-ethical cycle responds partially to this requirement. However, as both Niebuhr and Nussbaum stress, human beings are primarily social beings. Every human life is lived within a social, historical and political context which is formative though not definitive. The community thus plays a critical role in the formation of virtue, both contributing to the formation of the individual and sustaining the ethical life of the community. This section considers the implications of the critical correlation of Niebuhr and Nussbaum for the social formation of virtue, with examples given to illustrate the links to a Christian realist virtue ethics.

7.2.1 Formation in Community

Both Niebuhr and Nussbaum convey a strong sense of the moral ambiguity of community. It is in community that we learn what it is to be human, both for good and for ill. The power of community to form (and de-form) virtue provides both the strongest foundation and the most formidable impediment to human flourishing.¹⁶ It is this fact

¹⁶ Niebuhr explored the contradictions between the operation of self-sacrificial love on a personal level and on a social level in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 169. "These two moral perspectives are not

that makes it urgent for the Christian realist to be engaged in the ongoing transformation of the community through social critique as collective self-critique, and through action for social justice which is not falsely innocent. Christian realists live in multiple communities. It is in the communities of family, school, faith and nation that the virtues are cultivated. The Christian realist is immersed in all these environments of formation. At the same time, it is the virtues of realism which allow us to navigate the complexities of interlocking communities, and to see where the experience of one community may be relevant to another. Critique and action for social justice arise not from some ‘objective’ viewpoint but from this process of navigation.

Many of the practices of social justice undertaken by the target group of justice-seekers operate to form virtue.¹⁷ Both in the individual and collectively, these activities serve both to accomplish a goal and to create increased capacity for accomplishment, the hallmark of formation in virtue. In all the areas of political advocacy, empowerment through literacy and numeracy, rural development and community projects, there is a developing literature about best practices which is precisely based on the recognition that good intentions must be matched by growing expertise. The early days of the Peace Corps and volunteers in other similar programs being sent out ‘to just be there and see how they could help out’ have given way to a more respectful approach to the need for

mutually exclusive, and the contradictions between them are not absolute. But neither are they easily harmonised.” His thesis there that society cannot produce the *ultimate* good should not be taken to imply that he saw no positive formative power in society.

¹⁷ The word practice has both a general and a technical meaning in virtue ethics. According to MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 187, a practice is a set of activities which are cooperative and complex, aimed at a goal but also encompassing internal goods, with agreed standards of excellence, the pursuit of which pushes the practice to new levels of performance.

expertise. This has included a significant movement toward learning from the expertise that exists among the ostensible ‘recipients’. Client-based approaches are well established. Program evaluation with the goal of improvement of norms based on results of concrete practice is now standard.

At the same time these practices will need to recognize the element of self-implication and self-interest which is always a part of our own perspective – the liberal stance of neutrality is false. What Niebuhr might also emphasize in all social justice practices is that they should be modest – non-utopian – in their aims, and even more important, that they operate with the assumptions of fallibility and corrigibility. The pretentious belief that one has all the answers and nothing to learn is a weakness in work for social justice.

Another virtue-forming practice that Christian realist virtue ethics will embrace is the intentional expansion of the breadth and depth of our compassion. Nussbaum highlights the importance for education systems of using every available tool to increase the capacity of young people to see themselves as connected to the wider world, and able to relate to the experience of other people and cultures.¹⁸ This means developing cultural self-awareness as well as awareness of other cultures. Again the starting point is not some falsely ‘objective’ perspective of neutrality that is not implicated in the outcome. Nussbaum emphasizes the role of the imaginative arts – including film and

¹⁸ Nussbaum, *Upheavals*,

theatre, as well as through literature – to increase the scope of our knowledge both of ourselves and of others.¹⁹

The growing practice in schools and churches of ‘exposure’ tours in which people actually visit other countries and intentionally learn about a culture that is different is another means of expanding the capacity for compassion. Learning to do this in a way that is collaborative, respectful, non-intrusive and yet engaged is a challenging task, not yet fully mastered. Even where connections move beyond the exposure stage to partnership, the objective of achieving mutuality where vast differences of financial, social and political power exist requires the exercise of the virtue of realism.

7.2.2 The Community of Faith as Formative Community

The church is a particular community of practice, in which Christians are formed in a tradition of faith. Niebuhr understood that the church forms faith:

Christian preaching is not so much teaching about what Christians ought to do, as it is the induction and the enrichment of people in the Christian faith through sermons, through pastoral experience, through private prayer, and the common prayers and worship of the church.²⁰

By contrast, Nussbaum’s assessment of the formative role of the synagogue is focused on her appreciation of the combination of religious ritual with ongoing ethical

¹⁹ Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*,

²⁰ Niebuhr, *Justice and Mercy*, 132.

conversation. “Always I was asked what I had learned and what I was resolved to do, never what I believed.”²¹

Neither the Christian realism of Niebuhr nor the Reform Judaism of Nussbaum privileges the church or the synagogue as a community of formation. It is one of the sites of formation in a complex pluralist society, and the one specifically charged with the formation and practice of Christian faith. For Niebuhr (and for Nussbaum), the reason for our formation in faith is for the sake of the world. In Niebuhr, faith in a God who goes to the cross directs us back into the world. To love God is to love what God loves, which is the world. Quoting Pascal, Niebuhr asks, “Where but in the simplicity of the Gospel will I know about both the dignity and the misery of man?”²² It is the dignity and the misery of humanity which ought to be the focus of our attention, because it is the focus of God’s attention. The church, when it is not caught in self-protection and self-regard, is the place where Christians learn this. In Nussbaum, the synagogue serves a parallel function for Jews.

Does God’s grace operate outside the faith and practice of the church? Niebuhr believed so. He saw that in every human life, and in the life of every human community, the infinite possibilities of self-transcendence are the fruits of grace, even if, as he put it, “It is the ‘hidden Christ’ and a grace which is not fully known which initiates the

²¹ Nussbaum, *The Nation*, 18 July 2002; “Judaism and the Love of Reason”, in Ruth E.Grounhout, and Marya Brouwer, eds. *Philosophy, Feminism, and Faith*. (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 2003), 16.

²² Niebuhr, *Justice and Mercy*, 137 (quoting Pascal).

miracle”.²³ Thus, it is this complex and concrete world to which the Christian realist must attend first and foremost. It is not only within the church, but in the multiple communities of the fully engaged Christian that the virtues of the Christian realist will be developed.

7.2.3 Pessimistic Optimists

There is an oddly dissonant note in both Niebuhr and Nussbaum – they share a kind of ambivalence in their overall assessment of life. Both see with great clarity the foibles of humanity and the pitfalls of the human condition. Their analysis can be unforgiving. In particular, they see the moral ambiguity of community. Our family, cultural, and national communities give us birth and life and love – and yet it is in community that self-interest may ramify into the power to oppress. Nussbaum and Niebuhr both see the reality of power in the hands of human beings as a source of great agony – yet also a source of much hope. For, as noted above, both Niebuhr and Nussbaum are also energetic and optimistic, both engaged in the public discourse, both busily constructing a wholesome democracy.

Niebuhr wrote extensively about the ironies of personal and political life – he insisted that it is precisely in our most idealistic moments that we are most vulnerable to the self-deceit that gives the lie to our good intentions. His grumpy assessment was famously emblazoned on the cover of Time magazine – “Man’s story is not a success

²³ Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 123.

story.”²⁴ And yet in his hard-headed analysis of political realities, and his frustration with the self-satisfaction of the church, he sees that social change requires not just analysis but passion. He criticizes liberal idealism because it “lacks the spirit of enthusiasm, not to say fanaticism, which is so necessary to move the world out of its beaten tracks. It’s too intellectual, and too little emotional to be an efficient force in history.”²⁵ Niebuhr himself never lost his passion for social reform. Neither his profound critique of his own society, nor his Augustinian sense of the recalcitrant sinfulness of humanity, nor even his recognition that every step in the right direction brings new opportunities for folly prevented Niebuhr from the active pursuit of justice.

Like Niebuhr, Martha Nussbaum sees the human situation as profoundly conditioned by tragedy. She emphasizes the accuracy of the tragic perspective when it recognizes that human flourishing is critically dependent upon goods which are inherently unreliable. There is a house-of-cards aspect to all human well-being, because the persons we love and the things we need may not be there when we need them. We may attempt, as good Aristotelian virtue ethicists, to develop some resilience to the storms of life through the cultivation of qualities of character which mitigate the challenges we face. Courage, patience, self-restraint, and practical wisdom may take the edge off many of our vicissitudes. Yet even with all our effort to become good and wise deliberators, in the end we remain vulnerable to the possibility of tragic conflict – there will be times when there is no good choice to be made. There will be situations in which

²⁴ *Time Magazine* March 8, 1948.

²⁵ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-raushenbush/mr-president-find-your-in_b_444138.html. Paul Raushenbush, quoting from the *New Republic*.

every available alternative involves the betrayal of some cherished value. Moreover, these bad choices may damage or even ruin us. Indeed, she considers this to be a definitive aspect of the human condition – she says that if we were not constituted in such a way that we might risk losing our humanity, we would not be human. At the same time, Nussbaum has a rather hopeful attitude toward social and political progress. She is very active in the ongoing theoretical work on the capabilities approach to evaluating social progress against a set of criteria which define human good in terms more concrete and ‘thick’ than by income alone.

Robert McAfee Brown identifies this ambivalence when he calls Niebuhr a pessimistic optimist. He insists that “the substantive word is optimist and the modifier is pessimistic,”²⁶ and his description applies to Nussbaum equally well. Explicitly in Nussbaum, it is virtue that moves us from pessimism toward optimism and back. Explicitly in Niebuhr, it is grace that takes us from optimism to pessimism and back. Drawing on both, we can see that virtue and grace work together to maintain the dynamism of the human condition. The virtue that is formed in the theological-ethical cycle outlined here will be virtue that holds pessimism and optimism in tension as it encounters the world.

²⁶ Brown, ed. *Essential Niebuhr*, xiii.

7.3 Where They Differ: Sin, Grace and Natural Virtue

Niebuhr and Nussbaum differ significantly in areas which are explicitly religious or theological. In contrast to Niebuhr, while Nussbaum discusses many religious questions, her language is not confessional – her accountability is not to the church or synagogue, but to the academy and a secular public space.²⁷ Niebuhr is an Augustinian Christian, while Nussbaum is a Reform Jew operating in the secular university. For her, “Judaism is above all a moral identity, connected to the love of justice. I felt that I was dedicating myself to a program of moral action aimed at realizing justice in the here-and-now rather than in some dim Christian afterlife.”²⁸

In Tracy’s method of critical correlation, it is the attempt to navigate precisely this territory which lies at the heart of the correlation. In his terms, the project must ask whether Nussbaum is raising limit-questions, and dealing with material that is comprehensive – that is, working with “a certain basic horizon or dimension of our common experience which can justly be described as religious.”²⁹ It seems clear that she is. Quite explicitly, in her claim that Aristotelian virtue is a search for the good, and not just the way of the ancestors, she referring to a comprehensive understanding of the

²⁷ Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 64. Despite his disclaimers to the word ‘systematic’, Niebuhr was undertaking the task of systematic theology defined by Tracy as “reinterpretation of the tradition for the present situation.”

²⁸ Nussbaum, *The Nation*, 18 July 2002. Martin Kavka, “Judaism and Theology in Martha Nussbaum’s Ethics

²⁹ Tracy, *Blessed Rage*, 93

human condition.³⁰ Moreover, her concern for morality is general, and her reluctance to refer to God is principled.

I do not believe morality needs the existence of an eternal or transcendent divinity to back it up. Nor do I think that it is appropriate for us to focus on transcendence of our own mortality in a life after death. Our moral task in this world, and if it should happen that there is a life after death, that would make no difference to what we have to do here and now. I don't think we have any reason to believe that there is such a life, unfortunately, but I also think that this does not diminish us or make our efforts less worthy. Focusing on the other world has, in fact done great harm to this-worldly morality.³¹

This is what Tracy identifies as comprehensive language suitable for critical correlation.

Although Nussbaum is writing in the area of secular ethics, Kavka argues that within Nussbaum there are “resources for importing theology into her ethics.”³² He shows that in her emphasis on material basis of morality, with its focus on this world, she is entirely in line with the tradition of Jewish ethics. That tradition (even if she doesn't go in that direction herself) brings its claim to the primacy of moral action together with the apprehension of “something sublime that transcends us.”³³ While moral action in the world remains the pre-eminent response, it is a response to something which is external to us. This openness to a theological development which Kavka describes suggests the appropriateness for critical correlation with Niebuhr. Nussbaum's resistance to an other-worldly focus is, if anything, especially relevant to

³⁰ Nussbaum and Sen, *Quality of Life*, 259. See also, Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 365 ff;

³¹ Nussbaum, “Judaism and the Love of Reason,” in *Philosophy, Feminism and Faith*. Eds., Ruth E. Groenhout and Marya Bower (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003) , 33.

³² Kavka, “Judaism”, 346.

³³ *Ibid.* 357.

Niebuhr's suspicion of the false claim to transcendence which he finds at the heart of human sin, and to his understanding of grace.

7.3.1 Human Sinfulness

On the question of human sinfulness, Niebuhr and Nussbaum are, at least rhetorically, far apart. In Niebuhr, sin is one of the most significant aspects of human fragility, central to his understanding of the human condition. Much of his frustration with his own liberal tradition is that it so underestimates the recalcitrance of human sinfulness. He has a non-traditional (that is, not biological) but clear conception of original sin. By contrast, as noted above, Nussbaum rejects original sin, "as a doctrine that diminishes the force of this-worldly moral distinctions based on this-worldly conduct and acts."³⁴ That is, if all are sinners, then what is the difference between being a good person and a bad person? Moreover she sees in the notion of radical evil a troubling tendency toward quietism among those who are oppressed. "Thinking Augustinian thoughts of radical evil mitigates the suffering of having to obey the powers of this world. It supplies the powerless with a project – coming into God's presenceInstead of taking action as best we can, we had better cover ourselves, mourn and wait".³⁵ Her complaint about the concept of original sin is that in her view it fails to recognize that "there is a world of difference between the evil and the good."³⁶

³⁴ Nussbaum, *Upheavals*, 550.

³⁵ Nussbaum, *Upheavals*, 556.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 551.

Indeed, Nussbaum does see that people are often ill-intentioned – violent and vengeful, as well as weak and callous. Humans beings are capable of committing acts of great evil against one another. She certainly considers these acts blameworthy, and considers the tendency to do them recalcitrant. Fragility in Nussbaum is not only helplessness and limitation, but also includes vulnerability to the pride and fury which may destroy all that is humanly good. As she argues in her discussion of the *Hecuba*, it is precisely this possibility of moral catastrophe – losing our goodness to “become dogs” – that makes us most human.³⁷ Nussbaum’s quintessential human being must retain this ostensible flaw in order to flourish – it is “constitutive” in her words, or what might be called original. She repeatedly rejects the urge to leave behind the “constitutive conditions of our humanity, and to seek for the life that is really the life of another sort of being.”³⁸ In this she is more like Niebuhr than unlike him.

Nussbaum recognizes Christianity’s picture of a God whose primary self-revelation is by incarnation as a human being, “who has actually lived out the non-transcendent life and understands it in the only way it can be understood, by suffering and death”³⁹ but finds that Christian ethics consistently opts for an other-worldly ‘escape’. Kavka points out that Nussbaum implies (without explicitly stating) that in its failure to follow through on the materiality at its core, “Christian ethics itself rests on a

³⁷ Nussbaum, *Fragility*, 421.

³⁸ Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 379.

³⁹ Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 375.

contradiction.”⁴⁰ This thesis argues that such a contradiction is less evident in Niebuhr, than it is in much of Christian ethics, because of his insistence that the basis of sin is precisely the misidentification of the contingent as ultimate.

7.3.2 Grace and Natural Virtue

In the dynamism of the human condition described above as a cycle, the Niebuhrian picture depends upon grace. There is a limit to the human ability to do what is good – “an inner contradiction even in acts of obedience toward God...insofar as the self is centred in the self, it can only offer coerced obedience.”⁴¹ It is grace that moves us in Aristotle’s sense from continence to virtue. Although for Niebuhr all systems of morals are aimed at the endpoint of love, human love itself is “only a possibility by way of the love of God ... [and when] it is not a possibility, it points to God as the final realization of the possibility.”⁴² Grace in Niebuhr is in this sense analogous to the infused virtue of the Thomist tradition, as it works with and corrects the ‘aim’ of human virtue. In particular, for Niebuhr, grace does not “actually lift man out of sinful contradictions of history and establish him above the sins of the world,” an interpretation he rejects as perfectionist.⁴³ Instead grace is the revelation of divine mercy, which both forgives and empowers. Grace answers the anxiety produced by our apprehension of

⁴⁰ Kavka, “Judaism and Theology ” , 350.

⁴¹ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 293.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 294.

⁴³ Niebuhr, *Open Letter*, 269.

freedom, and enables our responsible re-engagement with the real world of human fragility.

As described in Chapter 4, Nussbaum operates in a natural universe, in which all transcendence is 'internal'. The objective of self-transcendence in Nussbaum's world is to increase the scope of one's humanity through compassion and attachment. Through this self-transcendence we increase rather than decrease our vulnerability, and in a sense take on the fragility of others. She remains sanguine about the capacity of human beings to accomplish this through social formation and cultural education which develops the moral imagination.

One can imagine that Niebuhr might consider Nussbaum an example of the misguided optimism that he criticized in his contemporary liberals. In response to her faith in the cultivation of good deliberation and compassion in the face of human fragility he might insist on the impossibility of natural virtue meeting the need. Relying on the Christian tradition of virtue, he would point to grace as the hidden but utterly real source of the human power to act for good.

Even so, where he might find more congeniality, and where a Niebuhrian may learn from Nussbaum, is in her insistence that virtue does not help us escape the vulnerability of our lives, but instead helps us to accept and embrace it. The virtues we are to cultivate expand our compassion and perseverance in adversity, because they do not deny fragility. It seems clear that this is a helpful way to understand the function of grace in Niebuhr. Grace brings the human being back to fragility and limit, rather than

away from them. It is grace that empowers the work for justice that Niebuhr and Nussbaum agree is the priority of the virtuous citizen and the virtuous Christian.

Nussbaum criticizes any understanding of transcendence which operates as an escape from the world, and in particular from the body. In her discussion of Augustine, she appreciates his rejection of the Platonist ascent, “because [Augustine] situates ascent within humanity and renounces the wish to depart from our human condition.”⁴⁴ She agrees with him that “If you are a human being, the sort of being who does not suffice for its own salvation, it is a deep sin to live and think as if you were sufficient.”⁴⁵ Nussbaum’s account of virtue agrees with Augustine’s suspicion of the “counterfeit flourishing”⁴⁶ provided by the splendid vices, and his reintroduction of the emotions into an account of the good human life. However, she also notes that Augustine’s receptive and responsive Christian is radically isolated, and she complains that in the end for Augustine, “death is irrelevant, real suffering in this world is irrelevant, and all that is relevant is coming into God’s presence.”⁴⁷ For Nussbaum the otherworldly longing, and its association with bodily shame, makes Augustine’s ascent problematic. If compassion is based only on a sense of shared sinfulness, its power for reform will be diminished.

David Dawson argues that Nussbaum misreads Augustine when she focuses on transcendence as a form of escape from the world which is essentially life-denying. He

⁴⁴ Nussbaum, *Upheavals*, 547.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 541.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, quoting Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 552. She is referring to *Hannah Arendt, Love and Saint Augustine*. Ed. and trans. J.V. Scott and J.C. Stark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

notes that Augustinian self-transcendence, viewed in the literary and socio-cultural contexts in which it developed and functioned, is “life-affirming, even with respect to the embodied character of human life that Nussbaum is concerned to protect.”⁴⁸ He points out that in the context of Augustine’s idealist Neo-Platonist culture, and as part of his argument with the Manichaeans, Augustine contends that in the incarnation we see God’s own self-transcendence expressed in becoming embodied. In that sense “Augustine understands human self-transcendence precisely as ‘becoming more embodied’ [not less] as an appropriation of ‘becoming embodied’ by the deity.”⁴⁹

This description of Augustine’s view of transcendence is highly resonant with Niebuhr’s strong emphasis on holding together the ‘eternal’ with the ‘temporal’ aspect of human life. For Niebuhr as well as for Nussbaum, the objective is to engage rather than to flee from the human condition, and it becomes clear that the Augustinian Niebuhr and Nussbaum are not as far apart as might be assumed. Her embrace of vulnerability as genuinely human helpfully illuminates a method of moving toward virtue that is not perfectionist.

To summarize, where Niebuhr and Nussbaum differ most clearly is on the questions of sin, grace and natural virtue. This difference highlights the question of the origin of the virtue which permits us to live a good human life. For Nussbaum, all virtue is natural – it is acquired, through upbringing, education, and the cultivation of habits of imagination and compassion. She insists that one of the functions of virtue is to allow us

⁴⁸ David Dawson, “Transcendence as Embodiment: Augustine’s Domestication of Gnosis,” *Modern Theology*, 10 (January 1994): 2.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

to accept the fragility which makes us truly human. For Niebuhr, virtue is both natural and given by grace – the infusion of virtue through grace is central to the possibility of hope, as it gently reorients us to our true nature as bound and free. Grace empowers natural virtue. Niebuhr insists that the ambiguity of our condition must be lived out and not denied, and that grace helps us to do this. Although they differ on the question of its origin, for both writers the objective of virtue is the abundant human life, fully lived.

7.4 Limitations and Complementarities in Niebuhr and Nussbaum

Both Niebuhr and Nussbaum make a critical contribution to the project of articulating a Christian realist virtue ethics. The contribution of each is, however, limited by the scope and preoccupations of their own projects. To some extent these deficiencies are complementary, and allow the insight of each to be expanded. The following recapitulates limitations in Niebuhr and Nussbaum, and indicates the way in which these limitations affect this project.

The principal limitation of the work of Niebuhr for this project is the fact that he makes no attempt to develop a virtue ethics. As noted especially in Chapters 1 and 4, Niebuhr's reflections on human nature, and even on the development of the self, did not include explicit recognition of the need for virtue as a means of living amidst fragility. It is this lack of a Christian realist virtue ethics that gives rise to the project. I have argued that his work is open to development along these lines, and should be developed along these lines, but not that there is a virtue ethics in Niebuhr. In order to articulate a Christian realist virtue ethics, it is necessary to engage critically with other sources.

This thesis proposes that the most appropriate development of a Christian realist virtue ethics from the theological anthropology of Niebuhr will be through the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition, primarily because of its realism. In particular the Aristotelian virtue ethics of Martha Nussbaum offers a focus on human fragility that is helpful in reading Niebuhr. She elaborates a theory of the role of emotion in virtue which allows the development of a virtue ethics emphasizing both fragility and the requirement for perseverance in work for social justice.

Where Nussbaum is less helpful for the development of Christian realist virtue ethics is her treatment of transcendence as entirely internal. As discussed above, in her discussion of Augustine and the Christian tradition as a whole, Nussbaum assumes that ultimately, all Christian theology opts for flight rather than engagement with the ambiguity and difficulty of the human condition. Her own approach to virtue leaves no room for the theological virtues. In this area, Christian realist virtue ethics will need to make its own claim to the theological virtues – that is, the effects of grace in creating the character that is needed to persist in work for justice.

To summarize, what is lacking in Niebuhr is the recognition of the need for virtue. What is lacking in Nussbaum is the recognition of the possibility of divine transcendence whose object is not escape from the human condition. In this exercise of critical correlation, Niebuhr may gain from Nussbaum an approach to virtue which is non-perfectionist, focused on the concrete particular, and on the world. What Niebuhr may be said to offer Nussbaum is a Christian theology which does not favour flight to

another realm. If, as Kavka suggests, Nussbaum intuits a contradiction in Christian ethics, Niebuhr's ethics could serve as a countervail.

7.5 Summary and Conclusions

This chapter continues Tracy's dialectical phase by placing Niebuhr and Nussbaum more specifically in conversation with each other. It is an exercise in critical correlation in order to set the stage for a Christian realist virtue ethics which will bring together the Christian realist framework of theological anthropology and its understanding of the human condition with the key elements of the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition. Following Tracy's method of critical correlation, it has placed the work of Niebuhr and Nussbaum in conversation, in order to explore parallels, resonances and differences in the pictures of human existence that emerge in their thinking. It finds in Nussbaum an approach to virtue ethics which is in many respects compatible with the Christian realism of Niebuhr, and will contribute to the project of generating a Christian realist ethics of virtue. Nussbaum's work assists the project in its affirmation of fragility, its resistance to perfectionism, and its commitment to social justice. The critical correlation establishes the relevance and the limits of Nussbaum's secular approach to the project of developing a theological virtue ethics which affirms God's grace.

The chapter begins by describing a theological-ethical cycle which emerges in both writers as they describe the dynamism of the human condition. This cycle moves in four steps, in a parallel way in Niebuhr and Nussbaum. The cycle begins with anxiety as a response to fragility, moves through efforts to escape this anxiety, then recognition of

the loss that this escape brings, and finally to a re-engagement with the ambiguous and fragile human condition. A slight modification of the cycle describes the dynamic as it might apply to a person of relatively low social power. The dynamism of the cycle accounts for the paradoxical facts of progress and decline in human affairs. The operation of the cycle forms part of the habituation in virtue. It strengthens the capacity of the human being to persevere amidst fragility.

The chapter then examines the way in which virtue is formed by the community. Both Niebuhr and Nussbaum can be said to be pessimistic optimists in their assessment of the possibility of progress. Both develop a harsh view of the profound and persistent failures of social and political systems, yet also work tirelessly to promote social justice. Virtue does not rise above the moral ambiguity of community, but fosters an attitude of corrigibility.

Third, the chapter examines the fundamental theological differences between Niebuhr and Nussbaum, and explores through critical correlation how they may appropriately be placed in dialogue. It focuses on their divergences and complementarities on questions of human sinfulness, and relationship of grace to natural virtue. It suggests that Nussbaum's particular perspective on natural virtue might shed light on what Niebuhr says about the operation of grace. Where Nussbaum is saying, 'the sense of fragility deepens our appreciation of life's meaning and value,' Niebuhr says, 'grace brings us to a richer engagement with lived life'. Though Niebuhr writes as a theologian while Nussbaum writes as a philosopher, there is a significant parallel. Niebuhr and Nussbaum agree that the objective is to become more fully, or more richly,

human. They disagree about how this comes about. It is Nussbaum's insight into the embrace of vulnerability that helps us to make the parallel move in Niebuhr to grace as what brings one down to earth, rather than up to heaven. Virtue does not overcome fragility, but teaches us how to live responsibly within it.

The chapter concludes with a brief summary of the limitations and complementarities of Niebuhr and Nussbaum. Having explored the deep resonance in the work of Niebuhr and Nussbaum, the next chapter presents a Christian realist virtue ethics which is based on the framework of theological anthropology of Niebuhr and incorporates key elements from the tradition of Aristotelian virtue ethics, informed by the insights of Nussbaum.

CHAPTER 8

THE VIRTUES OF A CHRISTIAN REALIST

The purpose of this chapter is to bring together the framework of Christian realist theological anthropology with the key elements of the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition, in order to put forward a Christian realist virtue ethics. With Chapter 7's clarification of the points of resonance and differences between Reinhold Niebuhr and Martha Nussbaum, it becomes possible to begin to map out an approach to virtue ethics which is specifically a Christian realist approach, and which combines a clear perception of human fragility with commitment to the work of social and political justice.

Taking Niebuhr's Christian realist picture of the human condition, as adapted by Miles, this exercise begins with the intuition that Christian realism has something to learn from the tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas. The general goal here is to take the Christian realist framework of theological anthropology and incorporate key elements of the tradition of virtue ethics. Martha Nussbaum's insights amplify and adjust where that serves to sharpen the twin focus on fragility and social justice.

This is an integrative effort, based on the research outlined in previous chapters. Responding to Solomon's first requirement, Chapters 2 and 3 established a picture of the 'quintessential human being' based on Niebuhr's theological anthropology. Chapter 4 argued for the appropriateness of linking this theological anthropology with Aristotelian virtue ethics. Responding to the second requirement, Chapters 5 and 6 established a list of virtues which arise from the Aristotelian and Thomist tradition of moral philosophy.

Responding to Solomon's third requirement, which is a proposal of how virtue is formed, Chapter 3 described Niebuhr's understanding of the development of the self in dialogues, Chapter 4 highlighted his stress on human 'embeddedness' in cultural, religious, and political institutions as a key determinant of formation, and Chapter 7 proposed the operation of a theological-ethical cycle as a process by which the person is formed in virtue.

This chapter brings the work of the preceding chapters together in the constructive phase of Tracy's method of critical correlation. It begins the "critical reformulation of both the meanings manifested by our common human experience and the meanings manifested by an interpretation of the central motifs of the Christian tradition."¹ In Tracy's terms, it takes Niebuhr's theological anthropology as representative of the Christian tradition and Nussbaum's Aristotelian virtue ethics as corresponding to the "common human experience". It develops a Christian realist virtue ethics which proposes virtue as a means of living responsibly as a fragile being in a difficult world.

The chapter first identifies four themes which will underpin a virtue ethics which is Christian realist. It then reviews the key elements of the tradition of virtue ethics and reformulates them with specific Christian realist features. Using Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer as an organizing guide, it then reviews the cardinal and theological virtues from the perspective of a Christian realist framework of theological anthropology. Finally, it

¹ Tracy, *Blessed Rage*, 34.

asks how the virtues, viewed within this Christian realist framework of theological anthropology, are formed by the theological-ethical cycle described in Chapter 7.

8.1 Themes of Christian Realist Virtue Ethics

Before beginning this constructive phase of integration and reformulation, this section reviews four themes which emerge from the interpretive and dialectical phases of the project as distinctive characteristics of Christian realist virtue ethics.

First, fragility. Christian realist virtue ethics will take as its starting point that the human being is fragile. While it honours the individual life as separate and unique, it rejects the promethean pretensions of modern individualism. It takes human beings to be vulnerable physically and spiritually, and to be dependent upon a complex external environment for survival. Thus, it emphasizes both the importance of community, and its moral ambiguity, as simultaneous source of support and source of constraint. In particular, Christian realism sees the human being as subject to moral luck – that is, it observes that the things most needed for human flourishing are not stably available, or within the control of the person.

Second, work for social justice. This pluralist, agnostic society is of great interest and concern to the Christian realist, who considers engagement in the work of ‘mending the world’ as essential. The habit of commitment is critically important. A Christian realist ethics of virtue will provide support and assistance for its practitioners to become and remain involved in efforts toward social and political justice. The intentional development of the virtue of compassion will be central.

Third, resilience. Christian realist virtue ethics will assume that the human spirit is resilient in its fragility, “perplexed, but not in despair.”² Transformation, both personal and collective, is ongoing, and upheld by the habit of corrigibility. The dynamism of the human condition described in Chapter 7 as a theological-ethical cycle gives shape to this resilience. This perspective sees genuine human progress as an urgent and a realistic goal, yet recognizes every advance as both partial, and vulnerable to further corruption.

Fourth, Christian faith. Christian realist virtue ethics will share the liberal faith of Reinhold Niebuhr. This faith will include Niebuhr’s unique mix of theology of the cross with his modest assessment of the church. It takes God’s presence in the world as most visible in human suffering, and human compassion. It understands God’s grace to be the source of both mercy and empowerment. This faith places the practicing Christian in a pluralist society whose institutions are secular and whose philosophical assumptions are agnostic.

Christian realist virtue ethics will thus combine fragility with resilience, and justice with faith. It will be compassionate, activist, open to correction, and alert to God’s grace.

8.2 The Key Elements of Virtue Ethics

Chapters 5 and 6 presented the key elements of the tradition of Aristotelian virtue ethics as developed through history. This section will add those elements to the Christian realist framework of theological anthropology presented in Chapters 2 and 3.

² 2 Corinthians 4.8.

To do this, the first step is to specify the content of the concepts of *telos*, *eudaimonia*, and virtue which are to be combined with Niebuhr's framework. It highlights his emphasis on the embeddedness of human life within a historical flow which also exists 'in eternity'. In some instances, amplifications are offered which reflect the work of Martha Nussbaum, as she elaborates an Aristotelian ethical method that holds together a strong affirmation of the primary importance of the concrete particular with a sense of the possibility of transcultural norms of justice. Nussbaum's assessment of the role of emotion as both contributive and constitutive of the good life for humans is central to the analysis.

8.2.1 *Telos*

The *telos*, goal, or purpose to which humanity is oriented, in a Niebuhrian formulation, is the divine reality. For Niebuhr the reality of God is overriding. However, he is constantly alert to and suspicious of any attempt to imagine God as the 'great beyond' of undifferentiated being. He understands Biblical religion to stand in contrast to the errors of "self-immolation in mysticism."³ Niebuhr's sense of God's eternal nature is that God is active rather than unalterable, in his words "more completely transcendent than the eternity of mystic faith,"⁴ because God is continually involved and self-revealing in the concrete flow of historical time and life.

³ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 125.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

In order to capture the dynamism of Niebuhr's picture of the divine reality, it is probably more accurate to identify the final *telos* of humanity with what he called the law of love. This law of love, which Niebuhr also refers to as original righteousness, *justicia originalis*, is central to the Christian Gospel – “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, mind, and strength, and thy neighbour as thyself.”⁵ It integrates three elements – perfect love of God, perfect integration of self, and perfect “harmony of life with life.”⁶ No element of these three will suffice on its own as a final end, because the essence of humanity is relational – the *telos* is comprehensive.⁷

Original righteousness as Niebuhr describes it is not by any means in the possession of each human being, but is sensed by its absence, and by the longing toward it. In this sense it is like the concept of the *telos* employed by virtue ethics – a thin description which is utterly basic.

Love is thus the end term of any system of morals. It is the moral requirement by which all schemes of justice are fulfilled and negated. They are fulfilled because the obligation of life to life is more fully met in love than is possible in any scheme of equity and justice. They are negated because love makes an end of the nicely calculated less and more structures of justice.⁸

Love beckons humanity beyond the limits of a legalistic minimum established by human systems. At the same time, by its own nature, love makes those limits obvious, and leaves humanity striving for something more comprehensive. At the same time,

⁵ Matthew 22, Mark 12, Luke 10.

⁶ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 289.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 295.

Niebuhr sees humanity's relationship to this love not as a moral obligation or as something humanity *ought* to strive for, but as a fact of the human condition. It is through humanity's permanent and essential orientation to the law of love that both our best aspirations and our most miserable failures are revealed.

8.2.2 *Eudaimonia*

Eudaimonia is perhaps best translated as 'flourishing'. A Christian realist eudaimonistic ethics of virtue will aim to determine what constitutes the flourishing human life, and to establish what is involved in living that life well. For Niebuhr, because the *telos* is love, the eudaimonistic life will be the one that is most able to live out the law of love in a way that is characteristically human. The goodness of a human life can only be evaluated in the light of its purpose or objective – that is, against the law of love, rather than, for example, great economic wealth or political power. However, in claiming the law of love as the key goal, Niebuhr refutes both the liberal utopianism that would propose this as a simple possibility, and the pessimistic Calvinistic view of total depravity that would call it impossible.

Here it is important to see Niebuhr's understanding of the role of reason – reason is not the quintessential human quality which ought to be optimized (as in Aristotle for example) in order to achieve *eudaimonia*. Niebuhr says that reason is subject to fragility and limitation, much as other human endowments are. The confidence of the rationalists that reason will allow us to identify universal norms of goodness is unwarranted. Our own self-interest and the blinkers of our own background will always bias our

perspective. But the relativism of those who imagine that reason is fully and finally subject to corruption or bias is equally unjustified. Niebuhr places reason in an “equivocal position,”⁹ serving us both in the dynamism of transcendence and in the fully earthbound, fragile and anxious work of everyday life.

For Niebuhr, although reason is always present, the quality that will prove to be the quintessential feature of a fully flourishing human life will not be reason, but the paradoxical mix of freedom and fragility which defines the human condition. The ongoing dynamism between freedom and fragility is preserved, rather than overcome or set aside in the flourishing human life.

The good human life will be one in which the three dialogues described in Chapter 3 – dialogue with self, dialogue with others, and dialogue with God – are fully operating. In Niebuhr’s terms, the life well-lived for a human being consists of multiple components, which are not fully substitutable for each other. The good life for a human being must be something more than the ‘received’ life that is prescribed by culture or society. This life, to be a full life, must include a modicum of self-awareness, a set of actual relationships with family, neighbour and world, and a conscious encounter with what is recognized as ultimate meaning. For Niebuhr, this third dialogue is with God, whom he describes as person-like, an idea “to which Biblical faith clings stubbornly,”¹⁰ and in dialogue with whom, the human being will be confronted by both judgment and mercy. In each of these dialogues, the cycle of transcendence and groundedness which

⁹ Ibid., 284.

¹⁰ Niebuhr, *Self*, 63.

is the principal dynamic of the human condition continuously reiterates the realities of human freedom and human limitation. It is the flow of these dialogues, and their interaction with each other, that establishes the conditions for and constitutes a flourishing human life. It is this Christian realist framework of theological anthropology into which virtues can be introduced.

8.2.3 Virtue

A virtue is the quality of a thing which allows it to do well what it is meant to do. In a human being, virtue is not a single act or set of acts, but a habitual tendency to act. It is developed through repetition, often under the guidance of a teacher or teaching. Repetition establishes a continuous feedback pattern between doing and being, in which the agent is modified by the acts. In a human being, virtue is a settled disposition to perceive, to feel and to act in certain ways which promote human well-being – that is, in Niebuhr's terms, bring the human closer to the *telos* of love.

Logically, then, the virtues that Niebuhr will most want to cultivate are the qualities that will most readily promote the human capacity to engage and navigate the cycle that links freedom and limitation. The virtues will assist in the management of the cycle – both through activating the cycle, and through moderating its extremes. As the pretension to grandeur rises, the virtues will introduce humility and a sense of fallibility. In the other part of the cycle – the part less examined by Niebuhr, but highlighted by Miles – when we are too limited by the specifics of situation and daily life, the virtues will insist that we also remember the greater context in which we live.

In an ethics of virtue which is Christian realist, it will be important to distinguish between the virtue that is natural and can be developed by effort and the virtue that is called infused, as a gift of God's grace. In the Thomist tradition these are distinguished as cardinal and theological virtues. The sections below begin with a reflection on courage, serenity, compassion and realism as cardinal virtues, and continue with a consideration of the theological virtues.

A diagram of the Christian realist framework of theological anthropology which incorporates key elements of the virtue ethics tradition is found at the conclusion of the chapter.

8.3 The Cardinal Virtues

The following section provides a description of the most important virtues, given substantive content from the fundamental insights of Christian realism. The analysis incorporates these virtues into Niebuhr's (and Miles') framework of theological anthropology.

As a means of structuring the presentation, I link the elements of the Serenity Prayer to the classical cardinal virtues, presenting each virtue as positioned between two corresponding errors or vices, and identify the emotion most relevant in each case. While it would be possible simply to list a number of virtues as relevant to the Niebuhrian anthropology, this structuring is intended as a discipline and a means of relating the Niebuhrian framework more closely to the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics. This exercise arises from the intuition that the Serenity Prayer is particularly

Aristotelian in its recognition of the need for balance and the determination of a mean ‘relative to us’. Further, Niebuhr’s call for wisdom to discern is directly parallel to the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* as the integrator of virtues. Identifying the emotion relevant in each case expands the correlation to include the insights of Martha Nussbaum into a disciplined combination of Niebuhr and the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition.

As will be seen below, while this is a somewhat artificial construct, the placing of the Niebuhrian prayer beside the cardinal virtues generates insights both on the Niebuhr and the Aristotelian sides of the correlation. On the Niebuhr side it allows us to explore the notion of serenity as something more than pleasant, calm feeling, and provides insight into Niebuhr as a proponent of discernment as practical wisdom or *phronesis*. On the side of the Aristotelian tradition, using Niebuhr’s prayer takes the classical virtues of courage and temperance out of the context of upper-class ancient Greece, and applies them to the problematique of work for social justice in the modern world. It is this double effect that is the objective of Tracy’s methodology of critical correlation.

Niebuhr’s most famous prayer, known as the Serenity Prayer, reads as follows:

God grant me serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.¹¹

¹¹ Brown, *Essential Niebuhr*, 251. There has been some controversy over the authorship of this prayer, and Niebuhr himself wondered if he had unconsciously remembered rather than composed it. Current consensus is that he did write it.

The section presents courage as fortitude, serenity as temperance, and realism as wisdom or *phronesis*. Following Aristotle, *phronesis* – here elaborated as realism – is seen as a unifying virtue.¹² Finally, it considers justice as compassion. In keeping with Nussbaum’s assessment of the vital role of emotion in the ethical life, this description of the virtues ascertains the aspect of human emotional life which is most relevant in each case.

This account of the cardinal virtues follows Aristotle’s conception of the mean, and identifies the excess and the deficiency between which each virtue will be found to lie. A virtue as depicted here is not primarily an intellectual accomplishment, achieved through deliberative processes of reason, though deliberation is a critical element of the virtuous life. Virtues are qualities of character, habits which predispose their possessor to a certain kind of response in a given situation. The concrete choices that arise from virtue are indeterminate within the range set by the deficiency and the excess. Specific choices and decisions depend upon context.

8.3.1 Courage

Courage is the virtue which allows us to make good choices in situations of difficulty, pain or challenge. Instead of withdrawing, the courageous person will persist. If, in Martha Nussbaum’s terms, the role of emotion as an evaluative thought is both to give us information and to improve our perception of the situation, then the emotion

¹² This is the same virtue that is rendered in English translations of Aquinas as prudence.

most associated with courage is fear. A feeling of fear indicates that in the first place, I am in a situation in which I may be harmed, and in the second place, there is little I can do to modify that risk. If either of those beliefs proves false, then I will not experience fear, and there will be no need for courage.

Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer asks for courage to change the things that ought to be changed – and while Niebuhr himself may have been referring mainly to public political realities, the insight has also been crucial for millions in tackling personal changes.¹³ Whether the investigation is pitched at personal or political level, an account of courage as he might develop it will need to incorporate Niebuhr's analysis of power, and be linked to his political realism. Niebuhr understood that self-interest, self-righteousness, and power dynamics are at the heart of all political reality. (The feminist critiques would extend that claim to the personal arena – hence, the slogan 'the personal *is* political'.) Imagine there is a need for a brother to confront a sister's alcoholism, or for a non-governmental organization (NGO) to set up a public protest against a mining exploration policy. The brother may fear that the relationship with his sister will be irremediably damaged by a quarrel. The NGO may fear that the government grant for a clinic in the mining town may be cut in retribution.

In order to make a courageous choice, the agent will need to make an accurate assessment of the actual power in play. What is at stake in the change that is needed? The analysis applies a hermeneutic of suspicion to moral claims from all parties, on the

¹³ Alcoholics Anonymous and many Twelve Step groups patterned after it use his prayer as a source of personal and collective inspiration in combating addictions.

grounds that such claims may be deceitful. Where is the power located in that situation – with the agent, with others – and how might that power be exercised? Am I facing punishment or retribution if I proceed? Is there a relationship that may have to be given up, or a government grant that could be withdrawn? Can I tolerate that? The sense of vulnerability which the feeling of fear illuminates adds accuracy to the perception.

At this point, there are two different ways to go wrong. On the one hand, one may be overcome by fear, and make a choice that might be seen as cowardly. The brother fails to confront the alcoholic sister for fear of losing the relationship, the NGO fails to demonstrate against the new ruling for fear of losing the grant.

On the other hand, the choice may be one that minimizes the fear in a way that is not deemed courageous but reckless. The confrontation takes place at a moment when the sister is actively on the point of suicide, standing on a ledge, or the NGO proceeds with the demonstration knowing that the loss of that grant will be the end of the NGO. In both these examples the exercise of virtue requires a choice that is made on the basis of perception that is informed by feeling. It may be that there is a modified or middle course available – or not. The virtue of courage in either case will be both shown and further developed by the judicious choice that is found somewhere on the continuum between the two extremes.

8.3.2 Serenity as Temperance

Temperance, often translated as moderation, is the virtue which allows us to make good choices with respect to pleasure and pain in the fulfillment of our appetites

and desires. The natural human appetites for food and drink, for sexual expression, and for material possessions, if indulged in unhealthy ways, may be called gluttony, lust and greed. Temperance is also concerned with the management of the ‘irascible passions’, or anger. Recognizing that this is not the immediate sense of Niebuhr’s Serenity prayer, in which he goes on to ask for the serenity to accept the things that cannot be changed, it is possible to consider serenity as more generally, ‘appropriate restraint’. It is a virtue to show restraint in the face of frustration and anger. It is a virtue to practice restraint in the face of the constant barrage of consumer advertising, in which we are overwhelmed with pressure to eat, drink and buy more things, the things the advertisers tell us we ‘need’ to make us happy.

The emotions which will give guidance here include anger and desire. It is the feeling of anger that informs us that we hold a complex set of beliefs about a situation – we believe that someone has purposely damaged us in a non-trivial way. If it turns out that there is no serious damage, or that it was done by accident the feeling dissipates.¹⁴ (Or if it doesn’t, we may wonder whether we have been ‘hooked’ by some unfinished business from another context.)

It is feelings of desire that link us to the world – they tell us that we find something or someone valuable. Something as simple as an appetite for a hamburger encompasses the thoughts that first, these are hamburgers, second, as a general rule I like the taste of hamburgers, and third, I want to eat some hamburgers now. If any of the three beliefs changes, the desire is gone.

¹⁴ Nussbaum, *Upheavals*, 30.

In both anger and desire, there are also two ways to go wrong. Serenity is to be found between over-reaction and apathy. In the face of damage, one may react with disproportionate anger which drives the dispute further away from resolution. But one may also under-respond, evading the discomfort of confrontation, or withdrawing from participation in the conflict. This will not solve the problem either. Note again that there is not a predetermined correct response. The ‘right’ or virtuous response will be different according to the realities of the context. Aristotle’s golden mean is the mean ‘for us’ and will depend upon the particularities of our circumstances.

The differences in the likely and appropriate response may in particular be a function of the differences in power. The right choice with respect to anger for an emperor may be a very bad choice for a slave. The characteristic flaw of the powerful may be to become ‘too’ angry, while the characteristic error of the less powerful would be disengagement. While it may be that the emperor needs to hold back and say less, it may also be that the virtuous point for the slave will be to come forward and say more – a choice that probably requires courage as well as serenity.

The choice with respect to desire which demonstrates and builds virtue will also be found between overreaction and disengagement. This choice like others will depend upon the particulars of the context. Somewhere between eating twenty hamburgers and eating no hamburgers we find the right number of hamburgers to eat, and this will depend upon our circumstances. Twenty hamburgers will probably always be seen as a sign of greed, while no hamburger at all seems self-denying if you like them. But the right number will depend upon our general state of health and fitness, on the timing of

our last meal, and on the expectations we have about our next meal. Thus the action that will contribute to the formation of a virtuous character is indeterminate within a range.

Neibuhr asks in his prayer for serenity to accept the things that cannot be changed. Because of his emphasis on moral effectiveness and practical impact, he is not interested in empty self-righteous pronouncements on the one hand, nor in psychic capitulation on the other. There is a kind of valour in the acceptance-without-surrender which he seeks – it holds the tension between the desired situation and the actual situation in a way that prevents false closure. It is related to the virtue of patience. This is the virtue that empowers in Gandhi's *satyagraha*¹⁵ and other non-violent political movements of resistance. Serenity, or restraint, whether it applies to anger management, or hamburger eating, or grassroots politics requires the cultivation of this energy of resistance.

It is important to distinguish here between the energy of resistance and the concept of continence in virtue ethics. Continence is the capacity to force oneself to act virtuously, which is an intermediate step in virtue. In the cultivation of any virtue, the objective is to reach a state in which the virtue is practiced without inner conflict, 'for its own sake', and not as a means to another end. In a state (not easily achieved) of virtue, whether in relation to courage or serenity, the energy of resistance is directed outward, not inward. The virtue of serenity, like the virtue of courage, moderates the theological-

¹⁵ *Satyagraha* is a synthesis of the Sanskrit words *Satya* (meaning "truth") and *Agraha* ("insistence", or "holding firmly to"). For Gandhi, *satyagraha* went far beyond mere "passive resistance" and became strength in practising non-violent methods.

ethical cycle by allowing its possessor to develop the habit of appropriate response, and to withstand both pretension on the one hand and self-abnegation on the other.

8.3.3 Justice as Compassion

If the virtues of courage and serenity mould the intentions and the actions of a person toward the goal of a well-lived life, it is the virtue of justice which orients that life toward the more comprehensive life of the society. Justice “ensures that [an individual’s] external actions will be in accord with the norms of a well-ordered community, which harmonizes her private aims with a larger good.”¹⁶ It is important to distinguish between justice as a virtue that a person may cultivate and justice as a state of affairs in a community. Though they are linked, they are not identical. As Niebuhr stressed, the justice operating (or not) in a society is a function of power relations among individuals and groups, often masked by ideological claims which may distort the truth. The virtue of justice, as the capacity and settled habit of a human being will thus have two aspects – it will include both the ability to discern the justice issues which arise in society, and also the ability to be moved toward action to achieve justice. Justice as a virtue will combine political realism with compassion.

In the first aspect the focus is on the qualities of the person which make that person interested in, attentive to and discerning about matters of justice in the community. As Lovin puts it, “Political realism forces you to pay attention to the whole range of interests that are actually at work in a situation, rather than just those interests

¹⁶ Porter, *Recovery of Virtue*, 167.

that your ideology or your moral theory tells you are important.”¹⁷ Justice as a virtue in this sense will be the habit of attending with respect to countervailing and challenging perspectives. It will resist the temptation to view the world through a narrow lens, however ideologically compelling. The virtue of justice lies between two extremes. As will be explored below, the excess of realism is cynicism, while the deficiency is closed-mindedness.

In the second aspect of justice as a virtue, the focus is on the qualities that make a person care about justice. The critical emotion here is love of humanity. It is expressed in the virtue of compassion. Compassion, as Martha Nussbaum has described it, involves a complex interpretation of a concrete situation involving someone else. It says this person or group has been harmed, and that it is not their fault. It further says that their misfortune negatively affects my overall well-being – that is, that I have understood my own flourishing to be at least partly constituted by their well-being in this area.¹⁸ By this move toward claiming their wellbeing as my well-being I transcend the limits of my little world. Or perhaps I recognize the true boundaries of the world I really live in. This recognition will alter my choices in a way that motivates me toward efforts for increased social and political justice. Justice as compassion thus, like the other virtues, integrates perception, feeling and action.

The two opposing vices in the case of compassion are difficult to describe in one word, but could be designated as pity and indifference. An excess of compassion might

¹⁷ Lovin, *Christian Realism and the New Realities*, 7.

¹⁸ Nussbaum, *Upheavals*, 297 ff.

arise from a mistake in one of the assessments. If the harm is not serious, my compassion is misguided. Or perhaps though the harm was not the sufferer's fault, it is within the capacity of the sufferer to repair. In this case, too much compassion may be rather patronizing, and actually disempowering. This is the quality that in common usage we call pity – not a virtue.¹⁹ The other way compassion may go wrong is in its deficiency – in which I remain indifferent to the plight of another, most likely because I do not recognize what I share with them. It is here that Aristotle's third criterion of judgment of like possibilities seems most relevant, and it becomes clear that developing this imaginative capacity will be critical to the extension of compassion. If my claim that I care about others is false and hypocritical – if at heart I am quite happy to carry on while they suffer, then my compassion has a phony, insincere quality to it. My inaction signifies my underlying indifference. Again, the nature of a virtue is to integrate perception, feeling and action. Only when all three are present can a virtue be said to be operating.

8.3.4 Practical Wisdom (*Phronesis* or Prudence) as Realism

Niebuhr's prayer concludes with the partly-ironic request for 'the wisdom to know the difference' – referring to the difference between the things that can be changed and the things that cannot. This is the most practical of all possible wisdom, delivering the insight that will allow a correct discernment of the realities that I am facing. It is the

¹⁹ I refer here to common usage only. Nussbaum (*Upheavals*, 301) unpacks the historic usage of various related words – compassion, empathy, sympathy, pity, mercy.

virtue that permits accurate deliberation in complex settings. In both Aristotle and the Thomist tradition, although *phronesis* or prudence is considered an intellectual virtue, it implies the parallel operation of the moral virtues of courage, serenity, and justice in order to be effective. That is, a virtuous person cannot just be a good thinker. As the source of discernment and deliberation, *phronesis* structures the other virtues in a way that unifies them. It is this unity that combines perception with feelings and actions in such a way that the human being can function coherently as an integrated moral agent. It allows the agent to recognize the relationship between particular instances or acts, the flow of choices that create a habit of virtue, and the relationship of that virtue to the overall goodness of that person's life.

In Niebuhr's terms, it seems clear that the equivalent of *phronesis* is realism. Aristotle's *phronimos* is a realist. It is realism that guides reflection on the phenomena we perceive, and insists on checking against concrete experience before coming to a conclusion. Here theological realism, and political realism work together. Theological realism sets our choices in the largest context – it provides the basis for ongoing deliberation and dialogue about who God is, what God wants, and how God calls us. It contributes to the dynamism which is essential to the human life project, by continually introducing a reference to what is ultimate. Moral realism helps the *phronimos* to persevere when divergence of opinion seems to spell the impossibility of easy or early resolution – it protects us from the relativism which gives up on moral progress, while at the same time retaining respect for the reality of cultural and other differences. Political realism gives the capacity to be clear-eyed about political realities, and the way power

actually works, that enables the realist to make the nuanced judgments that are needed. In all three realisms, the attention is drawn out of the narrow sphere of my current life project – beyond my embeddedness in my received political notions, my cultural norms, and my religion – to consider realities that transcend me.

The emotion that draws us beyond our narrow solipsism and is therefore most associated with realism is love. Realism – theological, moral, and political – is the virtue that allows us to love well. In theological realism we love God well, in moral realism we love goodness well, and in political realism we love community well.

As with other virtues, there are the two ways that these realisms can go wrong. In theological realism the deficiency is a kind of ultra-tolerance that some call ‘whateverism’, and the excess is fanaticism. The virtue of theological realism allows one to affirm the reality of God and the importance of the divine reality to our lives, without insisting on the finality of our insights. It remains engaged in the tasks of theological reflection, and open to refinement.

The deficiency of moral realism is moral relativism, in which one sees social and political systems as permanently fixed by culture and history, requiring only internal coherence, and not amenable to change. The excess of moral realism we may call moralism, in which one insists not only that there is an absolute moral truth, but that my view of that moral truth is unquestionably right. Moralism lacks corrigibility. The virtue of moral realism allows us to tackle moral issues through investigation and dialogue.

In political realism the deficiency is utopianism, in which we are energized by the belief that a perfectly just political reality is within our grasp. The excess of political

realism is political cynicism and non-participation, in which one believes that no system anywhere can produce anything but unfairness and oppression. The virtue of political realism allows us to express our love of community in a way that has persistence and a focus on effectiveness rather than righteousness.

Realism here combines right perception with right feeling and right action. As a result, the realist is a humble person – in the etymological sense of ‘earthy’ or ‘down to earth’, in which humility is “not an abject, groveling, self-despising spirit; it is but a right estimate of ourselves as God sees us.”²⁰ The emotion in question is what might be called a healthy love of self. The virtue of realism as humility will be found to lie between its two opposites of pride and self-abnegation. Pride, as Niebuhr stressed, is the great failing of the mighty, yet quite a problem for the mediocre as well. It says, ‘I can do anything, and what I have done is mine alone’. Pride always includes self-deceit – in Niebuhr’s terms, a deficiency of realism. Realism implies that it is important to maintain an attitude of fallibility, and willingness to learn. Yet perhaps equally dangerous for the world we live in now is the possibility that we will make choices that are excessively ‘realistic’. Overwhelmed by the challenges we face, we may be filled with sloth – self-abnegation, apathy, listlessness, torpor, and “inactivity in the practice of virtue.”²¹ It says, ‘I can do nothing’. The virtue of realism assists in moderating the theological-ethical cycle as humans oscillate between over- and under-estimation of our capacities.

²⁰ Tryon Edwards, *A Dictionary of Thoughts*, (Detroit, Michigan: F.B Dickerson Company, 1908), 236.

²¹ Definition of *acedia* at wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn.

As noted earlier, Niebuhr himself did not grant to reason the same central position as did Aristotle and other writers in virtue ethics.²² In Niebuhr, this position is held by the quintessential though nameless human quality which unites and holds in tension freedom and fragility. In Aristotle *phronesis* is the virtue which is exercised and developed when reason gives rise to right choices. It is reason that gives the correct grasp of the situation and its relationship to the larger contexts in which we live, but *phronesis* links this to action.²³ Thus, following the parallel, the virtue of *phronesis*, or realism here, is exercised and developed when this quality of freedom/fragility gives rise to right choices.²⁴ Those right choices both constitute virtue and contribute to its habituation and development. To employ or activate this freedom/fragility in such a way that it becomes the unifying and controlling feature of an integrated and coherent life will be the overall objective of virtue. Moreover, this correct exercise of freedom/limitation encourages further development of appropriate feelings and perceptions – that is, experience creates capacity for further action – and this in turn further develops the virtue of realism.

There is congruence between the three realisms that Lovin presents as part of Niebuhr's thought, and the three dialogues that Niebuhr himself describes as the unfolding of human life. In a Christian realist, humility, moral realism, political realism,

²² Niebuhr, *Nature*, 284.

²³ Annas, 68.

²⁴ Lovin makes a related point, identifying freedom alone as roughly equivalent to Aristotle's reason, and notes the affinity with the concept of human dignity developed in Catholic thought. "Freedom is the capacity to see ourselves in relation to both reality and possibility." Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, 125-128.

and theological realism will integrate the dialogue of self with self, of self with others, and of self with God. This is where the link between the explicit social justice ethics of Niebuhr and the virtue ethics implied by his work becomes clearest. It is virtue which enables the realist to overcome discouragement in order to persevere. To persist in the work to which a Christian is called, there will be a need to cultivate a character of compassion, resilience and corrigibility.

8.4 The Theological Virtues

Human virtue – the realism of the Niebuhrian *phronimos* – must by definition be based upon the nature of the human being. In his particular form of ethical naturalism, Niebuhr stresses that human nature has two aspects – in shorthand, freedom and fragility, transcendence and contingency – and that these aspects must be linked in the fulfillment of human nature. However, like Christian writers since Paul, Niebuhr is clear that humanity can neither approach nor achieve the fulfillment of that nature unaided. As a classical Protestant he emphasizes the role of grace, and is suspicious of any pretension that human effort alone can lead to the “virtue and perfection which would represent the normal expression of that (essential) nature.”²⁵ He turns to the Christian theological virtues – faith, hope, and love – to tie together the embedded realities with the transcendent possibilities of humanity.

Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.

²⁵ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 270.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love.²⁶

These gifts complete and perfect whatever human efforts may be underway, and for Niebuhr will in particular call us to contrition. Infused virtue is grace. By grace we recognize that our sense of the ultimacy of either freedom or fragility is a misapprehension. It is grace that allows us to recognize this misapprehension as sin. By grace we are made open to correction.

Niebuhr identifies the gift of faith not as certainty about doctrinal propositions, but as primarily a matter of trust in God's providence. Faith as trust can moderate the anxiety that prompts the false claim to transcendence. We can tolerate the 'humiliation' of our limitation and fragility if we are confident in our ultimate safety through faith. At the same time faith can give the strength to those who need to make daring new claims. Niebuhr calls hope the form of faith which refers to the future, while love as grace completes the connections which form the ongoing life of the human being as individual and in community.²⁷ Love is both necessary to the dynamism of the human condition and also is the primary product of that dynamism.

These theological virtues Niebuhr sees as not 'extra' or special gifts, but as implied and required by the freedom which is part of human nature. In this sense the theological virtues, bestowed by grace, are precisely the source of the dynamism of the theological-ethical cycle, and allow it to proceed. It is faith, hope and love – not originating in the human will, but given by grace – which empower the freedom which

²⁶ Niebuhr, *Irony*, 63.

²⁷ Niebuhr, *Justice and Mercy*, 32-34.

is part of human nature, while at the same time enabling a humble acceptance of the reality of fragility.

8.5 Grace, Virtue, and the Theological-Ethical Cycle

In a Christian realist ethics of virtue, the virtues both activate and moderate the theological-ethical cycle which is described in Chapter 7. As the following diagram indicates, one way of picturing this is to see God’s grace, or the infused virtues, as primarily activating the cycle, while the natural virtues operate primarily to moderate its extremes.

How the virtues activate and mitigate the theological-ethical cycle:			
<u>Moves:</u>	<u>Virtues:</u>	<u>Activate</u>	<u>Moderate</u>
1. Anxiety		grace/apprehension of transcendence	courage
2. Escape		grace/forgiveness	humility/realism
3. Recognition of loss		grace/apprehension of contingency	serenity
4. Re-embrace		grace/empowerment	justice/compassion

God's grace is not only the source of creation, but of the continuous pouring forth of creative energy that heals old wounds, empowers acts of insight and compassion, and opens new possibilities. For Niebuhr, grace is expressed and experienced as both forgiveness and as energy for renewal. It is by grace that we apprehend the reality of God, and by grace that we experience forgiveness and empowerment. The natural virtues are linked and upheld by grace.

In the first move, to Anxiety, it is grace that allows us to see our situation for what it truly is – to understand that human life transcends nature in ways that are both wonderful and *deinon*, appalling. The anxiety that this brings is moderated by courage. In the second move, in which we Escape, we are met with grace of forgiveness, which itself assists us to cultivate the humility of realism, which moderates our folly. In the third step, Recognition of Loss, again it is grace as apprehension of truth that allows us to recognize our fragility, while the virtue of serenity protects us from excessive, unhealthy guilt.²⁸ In the fourth move, Re-embrace, grace as empowerment helps us to set aside self-deceit, and allows us to act for justice.

This schematic picture is meant only to suggest and not to define – in particular it does not adequately capture the utter separateness and utter both-and quality of grace and virtue that would fully reflect a Niebuhrian conception. For Niebuhr, the operation of natural virtue and the virtue that is infused by grace can never be understood as operating independently. He understands the human being to be the site of integration.

²⁸ Or scrupulosity, as it is known in the historic Christian traditions.

“The self is a unity of finiteness and freedom, of involvement in natural process and transcendence over process.”²⁹

However, this self is not a free-floating individual. Both Niebuhr and Nussbaum emphasize the role of family, religious and political community in the moral formation of the human being. The context in which we live out our lives is critical to our self-awareness and view of the world. The self that is formed in the theological-ethical cycle is a contextual self, yet endowed with the capacity to move beyond context. The virtue that is formed allows the self to move beyond the immediate context without making a false claim to ultimacy.

In a Christian realist virtue ethics, the flourishing of such a self involves both effort toward virtue, and also openness to God’s grace. However, it seems clear that grace does not destroy or overcome natural virtue. Instead it builds it up, continually. In Niebuhr’s words,

There is no limit to either sanctification in individual life or social perfection in collective life, or to the discovery of truth in cultural life; except of course, the one limit, that there will be some corruption, as well as deficiency, of virtue and truth on the new level.³⁰

And so the cycle continues, ever the same and ever new.

²⁹ Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 113.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

8.6 Summary and Conclusions

This chapter has brought together the framework of theological anthropology of Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism and the key elements of Aristotelian virtue ethics. It maps these elements onto the Christian realist framework to articulate a Christian realist virtue ethics. It incorporates the insights of Martha Nussbaum on the function of emotion in the good human life, and on the relationship of virtue to social justice commitments. In Tracy's method of critical correlation, this is the constructive phase of the project.

The chapter identifies four important themes which will need to be recognized and incorporated in a Christian realist virtue ethics – human fragility, social responsibility, human resilience, and Christian faith. It stresses that the virtues serve not to perfect, but to enable the Christian to live as a fragile being in a difficult world.

The chapter then proceeds through the exercise of mapping as illustrated below. Using Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer as an organizing guide, it presents a Christian realist version of the four cardinal virtues: courage, temperance, prudence and justice, and identifies the corresponding excesses and deficiencies. It identifies the primary emotion that is implicated in each virtue. It reflects on the relationship of God's grace to natural virtue, and reviews Christian realist insights on the theological virtues. The chapter then completes the exercise by exploring the ways that virtue is formed in a Christian realist virtue ethics by the theological-ethical cycle developed in Chapter 7. The following chart summarizes the conclusions of Chapter 8.

CHRISTIAN REALISM AND VIRTUE

<i>Telos</i>	God, divine reality, <i>justicia originalis</i>
<i>Eudaimonia</i>	Dynamic engagement in the theological-ethical cycle
Virtue	Habits that activate and mitigate the cycle
Infused virtue	Grace, reorients us to the reality of freedom and limitation

The cardinal virtues:

<u>Excess</u>	<u>Virtue</u>	<u>Deficiency</u>	<u>Emotion</u>
recklessness	COURAGE fortitude	cowardice	fear
disengagement	SERENITY temperance	over-reaction	anger desire
	WISDOM <i>Phronesis/prudence</i>		
fanaticism	theological realism	‘whateverism’	love of God
moralism	moral realism	relativism	love of goodness
cynicism	political realism	utopianism	love of community
self-abnegation	humility	pride	love of self
‘pity’	JUSTICE compassion	indifference	love of humanity

CHAPTER 9
CONCLUSION:
THE FRAGILE JUSTICE-SEEKER
AND CHRISTIAN REALIST VIRTUE ETHICS

The fragility of the human condition gives special poignancy to the age-old question, how should we live? In practical terms, what does it mean for a Christian to live well, recognizing both our possibilities and our limits? What does it mean to take to heart the overwhelming needs of our brothers and sisters, the inadequacies of our response, and even the incompleteness of our insight? How, in particular, does the person dedicated to working for social and political justice remain committed in the face of setbacks, discouragement, and the overwhelming nature of the challenges? How can one persevere, without giving in either to optimistic delusions or to pessimistic cynicism?

9.1 The Intuition of the Project

The intuition which this project explores is that virtue ethics is a key to answering these questions. This project identifies liberal Christian justice-seekers operating in a secularized world as its target group. The justice-seekers need a virtue ethics that works for them. Drawing in particular on the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr, the project identifies a distinctive blend of fragility and responsibility in its picture of the human predicament as experienced by this group.

A framework of theological anthropology which embraces both fragility and commitment to social justice will entail a specific approach to virtue ethics. Noting that Niebuhrian Christian realism is not developed into a sustained reflection on virtue, and that contemporary virtue ethics lacks a liberal Protestant expression, the research proceeds to place Niebuhr's theological anthropology and the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition in conversation. The objective of this project is to articulate a Christian realist virtue ethics, based on the theological anthropology of Reinhold Niebuhr, and elements of the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition, emphasizing Martha Nussbaum.

The research thus relies on two major bodies of knowledge. Its primary focus is on the compelling picture of the human being and predicament that emerges in the framework of theological anthropology of Christian realist theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. It amplifies this framework with the insights of feminist Christian realist Rebekah M. Miles, as a resource for a contemporary theological anthropology which is liberal, realist, feminist and takes fragility seriously.

Secondarily, the research focuses on the virtue ethics tradition of Western philosophy and theology. It seeks in that tradition key elements which will structure our questions about the nature of the good human life, and about what is involved in living well. The project explores classical, Christian and contemporary formulations of Aristotelian virtue ethics to determine the key elements. In particular, it finds in the work of Martha Nussbaum an approach to virtue that emphasizes fragility, while retaining its commitment to social and political justice. She is thus especially apt as a conversation partner.

These elements of virtue ethics are then brought together and formulated in terms of Niebuhr's Christian realist theological anthropology. The purpose of this integration is twofold. In the first place, through a renewed reading of Christian realism, it offers to the justice-seekers a theological underpinning for the challenging task of staying the course. In the second place it begins the practical work of defining the virtues they will wish to develop – both through cultivation and through God's grace. The project responds both to Robin Lovin's call for contemporary expressions of Christian realism,¹ and to the gap in Christian virtue ethics created by the absence of a liberal voice. These are first steps toward the elaboration of a Christian realist virtue ethics.

9.2 An Overview of the Project

As noted in Chapter 1, Solomon prescribes three elements that an ethics of virtue must encompass. First, it must develop a picture of the quintessential person and the human condition. Second, it must develop a list of virtues. Finally, it must develop a view of how virtue is to be achieved. The project encounters three particular challenges, also noted in Chapter 1. It must overcome a presumption that Christian realism as a form of liberal Protestantism will be hostile to virtue ethics. Conversely, it must find an approach to virtue ethics which is not hostile to the broad aspirations toward social justice of the liberal tradition. Third, it must argue that Christian convictions are essential and not incidental to the approach to virtue developed here.

¹ Robin W. Lovin, "Christian Realism: A Legacy and Its Future," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 20 (2000): 3-18.

In developing a Christian realist virtue ethics, the project relies on a method of critical correlation based on David Tracy's revisionist model for contemporary theology. This method brings resources from the Christian tradition together with other reflections on 'common human experience' for mutual critique and insight. It comprises an interpretive step, a dialectical step and a constructive step.

In a first interpretive step, the project describes the human being and the human condition as depicted by Reinhold Niebuhr and adapted by Rebekah M. Miles. It reads Niebuhr as a theologian of fragility. The substantive picture of the person which the project works with is based on this Christian realist framework of theological anthropology. Chapter 3 focuses on the Niebuhr's description of the human condition, the dynamic of moral life, and the development of the self. Christian realism's principal insight is that the human being is uniquely constituted as both bound and free – it is the human condition to be fragile and dependent in a world of contingency, yet living free within the eternal goodness of God. Moreover, human beings are called to embrace the full implication of this condition, and to serve humanity with love, never ceasing to seek justice. Our human life is suffused by God's grace, which surrounds our weakness with mercy and empowers us to respond to the call for justice.

As a first dialectical move, in response to the first challenge, Chapter 4 establishes the general appropriateness of developing Christian realism along the lines of virtue ethics. It notes Niebuhr's emphasis on meaning, embeddedness, and realism as specifically parallel to the concerns of virtue ethics with the *telos*, attention to the concrete particular, and deliberation.

The second interpretive step of the project is to identify the particular approach to virtue ethics which will respond to the second challenge, and determine the key elements in the virtue ethics tradition appropriate for the formulation of a Christian realist virtue ethics. Chapter 5 identifies an approach to virtue ethics that highlights Aristotle, contemporary interpreters of Aquinas, and Martha Nussbaum as most appropriate for the project. It introduces the Aristotelian tradition and contemporary interpreters of Aquinas to determine the key elements for this task. Chapter 6 continues this interpretive step, exploring aspects of the work of Martha Nussbaum, as an approach to Aristotelian virtue ethics which includes a liberal emphasis on social transformation, embracing both human fragility and the call to justice.

The project then brings Niebuhr's Christian realism and Nussbaum's Aristotelian virtue ethics together in a second dialectical step of the critical correlation. Chapter 7 notes a significant parallel in their description of the dynamism of the moral life. The chapter describes this dynamism as a theological-ethical cycle consisting of four moves – anxiety, escape, recognition of loss, and re-embrace. The project argues that it is virtue that both energizes and moderates the cycle. At the same time, virtue is formed by the operation of the cycle. Further responding to Solomon's third requirement on how virtue is developed, the project reviews the formation of virtue in community. The chapter reflects on Christian realist practices, as means by which virtue is cultivated in community. It identifies the ability to navigate various communities as an essential part of life for the Christian realist. Finally, the chapter investigates areas where Niebuhr and Nussbaum differ.

The insights arising from this critical correlation operate in both directions. While it observes that Nussbaum's formulation is entirely secular and lacks a notion of grace, it finds that Nussbaum's insight that natural virtue serves to help us embrace rather than flee from our fragility is helpful in understanding the role of grace in Niebuhr. In Christian realism, grace brings us down to earth – through forgiveness and empowerment for work for justice. At the same time Niebuhr's realism offers Nussbaum a formulation of the Christian tradition in which the purpose of transcendence is not to escape the world but to embrace it.

In the final constructive step of the project, and responding to Solomon's second requirement, Chapter 8 rearticulates the key elements of virtue ethics tradition as they would be expressed in the theological anthropology of Christian realism. It reviews these key elements of virtue ethics and gives them Christian realist expression. It develops a Christian realist description of the four cardinal virtues as courage, serenity, wisdom, and justice. It finds that realism functions as the analogue to Aristotle's *phronesis*, as the unifying virtue. As in Aquinas, the theological virtues of faith, hope and love reorient the human being to the *telos*. They hold together the embedded realities with the transcendent possibilities which are at the centre of the human condition, providing the energy which drives the theological-ethical cycle.

In responding to the third challenge – the question of the relevance of faith – to this exercise, the project makes several points. In Chapters 2 and 3, it shows that Niebuhr's Christian faith is integral to his theological anthropology. However, in common with Niebuhr's writing on social and political ethics during his lifetime, a

Christian realist virtue ethics has resonance for its secular colleagues. This form of virtue ethics has much in common with a secular liberal virtue ethics, though it disagrees with the secularist that only natural virtue is relevant. It is intelligible to non-Christians, but holds to its own convictions about the operation of God's grace. Indeed, the Christian realist will make a point of watching for signs of God's grace at work in the world.

9.3 Main Features of Christian Realist Virtue Ethics

Encompassing the insights of Niebuhr's framework of theological anthropology, Christian realist virtue ethics reflects the liberal spirit of this critic of liberalism. It is addressed to those who know their fragility and at the same time work unceasingly for a better world. Christian realist virtue ethics insists that the human being is radically limited by context and history, formed in practices and traditions which may be almost invisible to the one practicing them – and yet it also insists that human beings are radically free to transform society. It is interested in working toward social justice and in remaining open to the possibilities for goodness which are to be found in the secular, globalized world we inhabit. At the same time it approaches these challenges in a spirit of modesty – maintaining a posture of fallibility and corrigibility. In its aspiration to virtue, it avoids the self-sufficient perfectionism which Augustine and the Protestant reformation rejected as splendid vices. It proposes an understanding of *eudaimonia* which acknowledges fragility not as a state to be escaped, but as a constituent of the life well lived.

In the search for a virtue ethics which reflects Niebuhr's Christian realism, the particular perspective on virtue which we find in the work of Martha Nussbaum has been of special value. Nussbaum's work is important to the project because it offers a correction both to the perfectionist tendency of virtue ethics and to the turn away from social activism and political engagement of the neo-traditionalist formulation. It situates the moral agent in the secular modern world of multiple overlapping communities, rather than in an ideal society or in the world of the church. Nussbaum's Aristotelian *eudaimon* is not spared the pain and vulnerability that a concrete human life brings – indeed, a life without them could hardly be considered a human life. This is a way of doing virtue ethics which is not an exercise in the splendid vices. The virtues for Nussbaum serve to enable the moral agent to engage the complex particulars and to deliberate wisely – to flourish is to be a person who has cultivated the capacity to live richly in the depths as well as the heights.

Christian realist virtue ethics combines a sober assessment of the human predicament with an interest in and commitment to the possibilities of social and political justice. Like Niebuhr and Nussbaum, Christian realist virtue ethics is profoundly critical of the pretensions and foibles of liberal modernity, while in the end retaining a fundamental commitment to the basic tenets of liberalism. Like them, it practices a kind of “anti-essentialist essentialism,”² which takes difference and formation in community very seriously, yet proposes a certain core human experience in which

² Miles, *Bonds of Freedom*, 156.

“the person is always transforming and critically evaluating claims about the essential.”³

This transformation is the basis of the flourishing of the justice seekers, and the source of the social change they seek.

9.4 Directions for Further Research

This project should be considered a preliminary effort to generate a Christian realist virtue ethics. It has focused on demonstrating the plausibility of such an undertaking, and described in broad outline the shape and content of a Christian realist virtue ethics. The project opens up a number of directions for further research.

First, the list of virtues is not exhaustive. It would be interesting and useful to consider the Christian realist approach to a number of other virtues – generosity, patience, kindness, tolerance, enthusiasm, gratitude, and so on. The general structure of the cardinal virtues presented here, their relationship to the theological virtues, and the identification of *phronesis* or realism as the unifying virtue would have implications for the content of other virtues.

Second, an important area of the virtue ethics tradition which the project has not explored is the question of friendship. There is an extensive virtue ethics literature on friendship and collegiality which could be mined for its relevance to Christian realism.

³ Ibid., and Mathewes, “Reading Niebuhr Against Himself,” n42., 92. He notes that there is an implicit anti-theory and anti-foundationalist element in Niebuhr’s thinking. Nussbaum has written extensively about her views on essentialism, and calls herself an internalist essentialist (and an anti-externalist essentialist). See “Human Functioning and Social Justice,” *Political Theory* 20, no.2 (May, 1992): 202-246.

In particular the function of the collegial community in the multi-community world of the Christian realist justice-seekers would be a valuable topic.

Third, this project has indicated but not thoroughly explored the question of how Christian realist virtue ethics bears on the ongoing conversation in political philosophy about the relationship of the universal and the particular. This in turn bears on the question of community norms and the possibility of real intercultural communication and change. Since community, intercultural communication and post-colonial issues are highly important in contemporary Protestant ethics, it might be that Christian realist virtue ethics could offer new insights to those conversations. Martha Nussbaum would be a good conversation partner.

Fourth, it would be useful to reflect further on what the role of the church ought to be in the complicated and multicultural world that the justice-seekers inhabit. It is clear that the church must avoid the temptation to offer an inward-focused, triumphalistic, or otherworldly answer to the question of fragility. But the Christian realist ethics of fragility developed here implies an important role for the church as teacher and encourager. It would be helpful to explore this more fully.

Fifth, the question of the role of the church might be expanded to ask whether it may be inherently necessary for the individual to participate fully in some particular formative community – church or other – in order to acquire the virtues described here. It is worth exploring whether, ironically, in order to flourish in the multifaceted and multi-community world of contemporary liberal society, it is actually preferable to be

nurtured explicitly within a single one of the narrower ethnic, religious or intentional social communities which comprise the complex whole.

Sixth, further development of the concept of Christian realist virtue ethics should include reflection on the question of exemplars. Are there individuals living now, or known from the past, whose lives we could understand better through the lens of Christian realist virtue? If such individuals could be identified, the study of their lives would give concreteness to the descriptions of virtue theorized in this thesis, and provide practical inspiration.

Related to this, further research would explore the possibility of a distinctive Christian realist meaning for terms like ‘sainthood.’ While Christian realist virtue ethics can be considered ‘virtue for the rest of us’, it might also shed light on the nature of sainthood. This research would focus on particular exemplars, but it would also explore more theoretical and theological elements related to the role of grace in enhancing the Christian realist’s capacity to live a certain “excellence” in the pursuit of justice amidst limitation and fragility. The Christian realist virtue framework might give new insights into the lives of such morally complicated figures as Martin Luther King Jr., or Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

9.5 Final Word

This project has been an exercise in practical ethics. Its main concern is the spiritual well-being of those fragile activists whom we have named the justice-seekers. It asks, how should the justice-seekers live? The project’s main argument is that the justice

seekers need to become virtuous, in the classic sense of developing ‘habitual dispositions to perceive, to feel and to act’ in particular ways. It looks to Christian realism to give direction about the content of those habitual dispositions, or virtues. With Niebuhr, it prays for serenity, courage, and wisdom, in order to work for justice.

In Chapter 2 of this project I stated that Niebuhr didn’t talk about virtue as habit, but my research has proven me wrong. Let me give him the last word:

I can see, of course, that all good things depend in part upon right habits. Customs, attitudes and actions which are desirable cannot always depend upon impulse and will ... Yet habitual actions easily become meaningless and institutions which depend upon them lose their vitality. If habitual actions are not continually revitalized by the compulsion of ideals and the attraction of the values involved in them, they may easily become useless.⁴

Christian realism tells us that by the grace of God, there will always be something new on the horizon, a larger story, and a deeper reality. For the justice-seeker, then, the most important virtue of all will be the openness to the journey – to the correcting, revitalizing and refreshing wind of the spirit which continually calls us forward.

⁴ Niebuhr, *Leaves*, 135.

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