

Imagining the Virtues: Medieval and Early Modern Histories

David Aers and Sarah Beckwith

Duke University

Durham, North Carolina

It belongs to the natural history of man that he has a moral environment.

—Gillian Anscombe

The tradition of the virtues was the model for moral practice from Aristotle to Luther. Indeed, to refer to the phenomenon of moral practice at all may be misleading, for precepts of morality were not separable from facts of human nature.¹ Ethics was not a separate domain: there is no Latin or Greek word that corresponds to *moral*.² *Ethikos* pertained to character: it framed a picture of reason, the ends of action, and of human agency all at once. The tradition of the virtues encompassed practices of living well in relation to visions of the good, and in its later Christian version, of God. One became good through practice, just as a harpist might play well through disciplined habits of exercise. At the heart of this picture is an understanding of action that is intrinsically tied to a responsible agent rather than determined by extrinsic causes.³

In the aftermath of the Second World War, a group of philosophers felt the impoverishment of modern moral philosophy in the face of radical evil. Though most of them would cavil with the rubric “virtue ethics,” all felt the strong desire to find alternatives to the dominant moral philosophy of emotivism. Iris Murdoch, Gillian Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Charles Taylor, and Alasdair MacIntyre all developed powerful critiques of emotivism and returned to the virtue tradition, variously inflected, to find ways out of the moral impoverishment of mid-twentieth-century ethics.⁴

In Alasdair MacIntyre’s extraordinary excavations of philosophy and intellectual history, the Reformation is by and large neglected as he traces a path from Aristotle to Hume and beyond. This special issue seeks to put the Reformation(s) back into the picture and to see what avenues might be opened as a result. This is the fourth special issue of *JMEMS* devoted

to exploring relations between medieval forms of Christianity and those known as the Reformations. All of them participate in the commitment of *JMEMS* to historical inquiry that engages with the specificities of the past, whether the subjects studied are people, texts, events, or communities. All four encourage, as do all *JMEMS* issues, reflection on historiography and its ideological assumptions; and all of them contribute to our understanding of thoroughly complex cultural changes with long-term consequences for Western societies. Like *JMEMS* itself, these special issues have had to work against the grain of our training and hiring as medievalists and early modernists, as well as against disciplinary boundaries themselves bound up with the generation of specialized coteries and journals, often focused on a strand of an institutionalized period or around a single author.⁵

The earliest of these three issues (1997) responded to perspectives on the transition from late medieval Catholicism developed by “revisionist” historians, outstanding among them Eamon Duffy and John Bossy.⁶ It included, for example, a microhistorical study of a Somersetshire parish by Katherine French questioning Duffy’s accounts of “traditional religion” and the revolutionary break that was the Reformation.⁷ Her method was to highlight a cluster of conflicts within the parish of Dunster and argue for continuities between the cultural politics of the later Middle Ages and the Reformation instantiated in this community. This issue also included a very different kind of essay by a great historian, David Steinmetz, who had a serious, well-informed interest in medieval theology and exegesis: “Divided by a Common Past: The Reshaping of the Christian Exegetical Tradition in the Sixteenth Century.” This is an exceptionally rich account of continuities between late medieval and Reformation exegesis. Steinmetz writes that “the Reformation, insofar as it was a religious and theological event, had the character of a civil war[,] . . . an internal controversy within Latin Christendom between Catholic insiders.”⁸ In the essay, the version of Luther’s hermeneutics and its relation to medieval precursors strikingly contrasts with James Simpson’s *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and Its Reformation Opponents*.⁹ For Simpson, distinctively Reformation hermeneutics involved an innovative and violent fusion of double predestination and a thoroughly literalistic reading of scripture. Unlike Steinmetz, Simpson argues that modern liberal ideology had misrecognized its genealogy as being in the Protestant revolution, whereas the latter actually brought forth “fundamentalism.”

The third special issue (2010) on the transition from medieval to early modern was edited by David Aers and Nigel Smith, a prolific scholar specializing in the writings of the seventeenth-century revolution. This issue

emerged from the editors' conversations about current historiography of the English Reformation and divisions over its causes and consequences. They were especially interested in attempts to understand processes which composed the Reformation and their relations to medieval cultures of discourse and the polity to which these belonged. The editors continued to discuss the revisionist historiography so central to the earlier 1997 issue but were now pondering the diachronic narrative produced by James Simpson in an extraordinary work, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*.¹⁰ This massive work is written by a literary historian with a profound knowledge of medieval writing that had become integral to his account of the Reformation.¹¹ Across 661 pages, Simpson shows in considerable detail just how the English Reformation entailed unprecedented centralization of power and authority, how it destroyed mediating institutions (ecclesial, jurisdictional, social) and major festivals of medieval Christianity (such as Corpus Christi) and their liturgies. Despite Simpson's attention to very different materials and despite very different ideological inclinations, this great work converges with Duffy's equally great work in its grand narrative of the revolutionary and violent transformation of medieval Christian culture into that of Protestantism. Despite the cornucopia of detailed, eloquent instantiation in Duffy's and Simpson's monographs, Smith and Aers had a number of questions about these narratives concerning their accounts of the late Middle Ages and the Reformation. The contributors to the 2010 special issue of *JMEMS* explored such questions across a wide range of sources: from Tyndale and More to the politics of Puritanism and its adversaries in Elizabeth's reign; from versions of "work" in Catholicism, Protestantism, and the *Piers Plowman* tradition to the theology of "service" in Luther and Langland; and mortalism from Luther to Milton.

Over ten years after this issue, the current editors of *JMEMS* continue to explore relations between medieval and early modern cultures in England in "Imagining the Virtues: Medieval and Early Modern Histories." This time we began our reflections from explorations Sarah Beckwith pursued in two books on culture and drama across the divide. The first one centers on medieval York and its Corpus Christi play but concludes with sustained study of the forces that closed down this traditional practice, together with many of the cultural forms and theology which had sustained it, forces we call "the Reformation." The later book is a study of Shakespeare's profound treatment of forgiveness, but it is premised on reflection on the medieval sacrament of penance, a form of confession and forgiveness that was abandoned by the Reformation. Beckwith explores the human consequences of

this epochal change in religious practice and how Shakespeare addresses this in his last plays.¹² From these meditations emerged the current special issue (2022). What happens to habits, practices, and conceptualizations of virtue and the whole tradition of virtue ethics as a result of the Reformation?¹³ The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century processes of reformation were always in conflict with a Roman Catholicism that refused to disappear, and the magisterial Reformation was increasingly troubled by dissenting Protestants who rejected various aspects of their reforms.¹⁴ These magisterial reforms involved complex reorganizations of ritual, sacraments, churches, theology, and the virtues. We take virtues to designate modes of living with determinate teleologies which guide human lives in their minute particulars, individual and collective. Here we also wondered what the Reformation did to the traditional source of all virtues and their end—God.

This special issue connects to yet another *JMEMS* special issue. In 2012 Jennifer Herdt edited a collection entitled “Virtue, Identity and Agency: Ethical Formation from Medieval to Early Modern.”¹⁵ In her introduction, she argues that virtue ethics and its historians had not brought “into clear focus” the “discourse of virtue” in the fourteenth through the seventeenth century. She attributes this in part to the multiplicity of “new directions” taken in this period concerning human “identity, character, and agency.” But she also imputes this to the wide range of genres “in which reflection on virtue is at home.” Such a wide range confounds the disciplinary and departmental divisions of the modern university. Herdt meets this challenge by gathering “philosophical, theological, historical, and literary studies of virtue and the virtues” that cross genres of writing and divisions between medieval and early modern periodization.¹⁶ The essays in Herdt’s issue include studies of Aquinas’s ethics in relation to his Christology and to Aristotelian and other philosophic traditions. The volume also includes studies of the versions of the virtues displayed in canonization processes, in versions of martyrdom, and in translations of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. A number of the essays explore connections between virtue ethics and troubles in church and society in later medieval and Reformation cultures. We are shown various strands of the Reformation in which the virtue tradition is transformed or rejected. For example, we meet Luther rejecting the category of virtue as a pagan one that fosters the sins of self-love, a very different kind of rejection than is voiced by the rather eclectic John Milton. The issue concludes with a study of the ways in which the tradition survived in Puritan New England.

For our special issue “Imagining the Virtues,” we posed to our con-

tributors a cluster of questions and contexts that we have outlined above. We did not, however, either seek to determine which ones they would address or (perish the thought) in what mode and with what outcomes they would do so. Our commitments were to a range of explorations about the making of the Reformation informed by serious attention to medieval culture, explicit or implicit. Out of this, we thought, our understanding of what happened to medieval versions of ethics would be enhanced, along with some of the consequences of this in literature, politics, theology, and social relations. And so it has proved—not despite but because of the variety of contributors’ approaches and concerns. The articles are united, however, by a common commitment to close and careful reading of texts.

James Simpson’s essay explores the implacable, ideologically driven onslaught of evangelical theology on the very idea that human virtue can do anything, have any say, with God. Under this attack, the question “What can I do?” is replaced with an obsessive epistemological anxiety: “Am I chosen by God for salvation?” Virtue *tout court* is rendered useless in the abjection of sinners.

This exploration of the eradication of human agency in the virtue tradition is put under examination in a more specific context by David Aers. Aers shows the deletion of human agency in Calvin’s account of the passion and crucifixion of Christ in the *Institutes*. He contrasts this with treatments in the York plays and in *Piers Plowman*, shows the implications of Calvin’s atonement theory as it is taken up in the second generation of Calvinism, and reveals some of its disastrous consequences under Cromwell in mid-seventeenth-century England.

Nancy Bradley Warren takes her examination of virtue into questions of efficacy in Eucharistic theology. Centering on Henrician England, she examines two treatises by Thomas More on the passion of Christ and on reception of the Eucharist, and then considers the visions experienced by Elizabeth Barton at a spectacular mass held by Henry VIII for Francis I of France. Through these texts and events, Warren traces a nexus of problems raised by questions pertaining to the Eucharist: who is worthy to receive the sacrament, what is its virtue, and how is it received?

The second half of the volume features three articles on Shakespeare’s engagement with the virtue tradition.¹⁷ Lindsey Larre turns to a virtue not included in Aristotle’s account of the moral virtues, but central to Aquinas’s exposition of the theological virtues: love. Taking the excoriating assay of love in *King Lear*, she explores the language of “exchanging” and “enforcing” charity, in particular through her figuration of Poor Tom.

The legacy of Erasmus in Shakespeare's work is central to Julia Lupton's exploration of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, a play that shares its exploration of ingratitude with *King Lear*. But here Lupton works through the visions of goodness in the play, paying careful attention to the work of peace, care, and hospitality and perceptions of the good. Jason Crawford's essay takes up a tradition of writing about vice, especially in popular tales of divine retribution that draw on conventions of both tragedy and comedy. He takes a close look at the shaping of narratives of come-uppance in a range of texts from true-crime pamphlets to Thomas Beard's *Theatre of God's Judgements*. Crawford pursues these stories into the actual theater of Shakespeare, especially *Othello*, which is built from tales of vice and retribution. In this play and in light of new Calvinist idioms, Shakespeare tests the boundaries that separate justice from atrocity and comic satisfaction from tragic violence, and in doing so, Crawford argues, Shakespeare finds the mechanisms of comic justice to collapse.



Notes

- 1 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 56. The epigraph comes from G. E. M. Anscombe, "The Moral Environment of the Child," in *Faith in a Hard Ground: Essays in Religion, Philosophy, and Ethics*, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Charlottesville, Va.: Imprint Academic, 2008), 224–33, at 224.
- 2 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 38.
- 3 See Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013).
- 4 See Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 2001); G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1–19; Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); MacIntyre, *After Virtue*; Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).
- 5 See "From Medieval Christianities to the Reformations," ed. David Aers, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* (hereafter *JMEMS*) 27, no. 2 (1997); "Medieval/Renaissance: After Periodization," ed. Jennifer Summit and David Wallace, *JMEMS* 37, no. 3 (2007); and "English Reformations: Historiography, Theology, and Narrative," ed. David Aers and Nigel Smith, *JMEMS* 40, no. 3 (2010).
- 6 See Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England*,

- c. 1400–c. 1580, 2nd ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005); and John Bossy, “The Mass as a Social Institution, 1200–1700,” *Past & Present*, no. 100 (1983): 29–61; and Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).
- 7 Katherine L. French, “Competing for Space: Medieval Religious Conflict in the Monastic-Parochial Church at Dunster,” *JMEMS* 27, no. 2 (1997): 215–44.
- 8 David C. Steinmetz, “Divided by a Common Past: The Reshaping of the Christian Exegetical Tradition in the Sixteenth Century,” *JMEMS* 27, no. 2 (1997): 245–64, at 245.
- 9 James Simpson, *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and Its Reformation Opponents* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).
- 10 James Simpson, *The Oxford English Literary History, Volume 2, 1350–1547: Reform and Cultural Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- 11 See David Aers and Sarah Beckwith, eds., “Reform and Cultural Revolution: Writing English Literary History, 1350–1547,” *JMEMS* 35, no. 1 (2005): 3–12.
- 12 See Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); and Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011). Also on the human consequences of Reformation changes in theology and religious practice, see David Aers, *Versions of Election: From Langland and Aquinas to Calvin and Milton* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 109–81; especially illuminating is the account of the Calvinist teacher Mr. Peacock, who suffers a horrifying crisis of conscience on his deathbed in light of his predestinarian theology (127–34).
- 13 See the special issue “Unintended Reformations,” ed. David Aers and Russ Leo, *JMEMS* 46, no. 3 (2016), particularly James Simpson, “Brad Gregory’s Unintended Revelations,” 545–54.
- 14 See Anthony Milton, *Catholic and Reformed: The Roman and Protestant Churches in English Protestant Thought, 1600–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Michael C. Questier, *Conversion, Politics, and Religion in England, 1580–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- 15 See “Virtue, Identity, and Agency: Ethical Formation from Medieval to Early Modern,” ed. Jennifer A. Herdt, *JMEMS* 42, no. 1 (2012), and Herdt’s introductory essay for the issue (1–12). See also Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
- 16 Herdt, “Virtue, Identity, and Agency,” 2.
- 17 See Julia Reinhard Lupton and Donovan Sherman, eds., *Shakespeare and Virtue: A Handbook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), forthcoming.