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Preview Response

VIRTUES / LAW & SOCIAL SCIENCES

Terence C. Halliday

Research Professor, American Bar Foundation

Honorary Professor, School of Regulation and Global Governance, Australian National University

Adjunct Professor, Sociology, Northwestern University, USA

I am very grateful for Jennifer Herdt's Preview on the virtues. It brings theological insights to my work in ways I hadn't previously considered. I have two questions that reach to my research.

First, several responses to the Preview note the salience of virtues to particular settings, e.g., psychiatric care, epistemic communities, science. In like manner, Prof. Herdt's Preview raises questions for me about lawmaking and policymaking in international organizations, such as the UN Commission on International Trade Law, the International Monetary Fund or UN Security Council. I am pressed to consider whether there are distinctive virtues particularly salient to lawmakers and policymakers in these settings, whether state or non-state delegates or international civil servants within IOs, virtues that are conducive to flourishing and constructive legal order within and beyond states? Can these virtues be derived, or their understanding enriched, from biblical and theological ethics?

Second, social scientists not infrequently attribute characteristics of individuals to collective actors. A just person may be echoed or mirrored or transfigured into a just organization or a just political order. While Prof Herdt observes that virtue ethics help us think about how character is shaped by institutions and institutions may be shaped "by the character of the people within them," can we go a step further and say that an organization or institution or state or supra-state organization itself has an emergent virtue? Can virtues conventionally attributed to individuals also be descriptive or normative for organizations or collective actors, such as a corporation or non-profit organization or a political party? Can I properly speak of the UN Commission on International Trade Law as more or less just, more or less temperate? Can the International Monetary Fund be properly held accountable to the virtue ethic of humility in its institutional solutions for financial crises? Is the Financial Action Task Force modest in its formulae for suppressing money-laundering in vastly diverse countries? Can the UN Security Council be characterized as courageous if it acts against the vices of sexual violence by UN peace-keepers or the use of torture by the U.S., one of its permanent five members?

In short, do the infused and cultivated virtues, do virtue ethics, offer a repertoire for theological appraisal of international organizations or, indeed, entire transnational legal orders?

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