Learning How to Love: 
Saint Maximus on Virtue

Aristotle Papanikolaou

After centuries of domination by deontological and utilitarian ethics, what is being called virtue ethics in Europe and North America has experienced a revival over the last two decades. This revival is often traced to Elizabeth Anscombe’s 1958 article, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” in which she launches a scathing critique on both deontological and utilitarian ethics. Anscombe’s efforts to revive a virtue form of ethics within both philosophical and theological ethics would not bear fruit until the publication of Alisdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* in 1981. Since then, there has been increasing attention to what has been called virtue ethics as an alternative to deontological and utilitarian ethics.

In the limited amount of literature I have read on virtue ethics, it seems to me that although virtue ethics has emphasized the contextuality of both moral decision-making and moral action, it tends to slide toward deontology in that the emphasis is still on discerning the rule in a given context. Where virtue ethicists are hesitant is in offering a thick understanding of what it means to be human, which could then ground their understanding of the relation between virtues and the good inherent to being human.

In *After Virtue*, Alisdair MacIntyre famously argued that what divided modern from pre-modern ethics is that pre-modern ethics was based on a three-fold structure “of untutored human-nature-as-it-happens-to-be, human-nature-as-it could-be-if-it-realized-its-*telos*, and the precepts of rational ethics as the means for the transition from one to

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the other.” Modern ethics, he argues, eliminated the second element of this structure, which is “human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-telos,” and, as a result, is both incoherent and destined to fail insofar as it attempts to retain the precepts of pre-modern ethics while eliminating the teleological framework within which those precepts developed. While there has been discussion within virtue ethics about the goods inherent to being human, philosophical virtue ethicists, including MacIntyre himself, have been less successful, and almost hesitant, about providing a thick and well-grounded notion of “human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-telos.”

Providing a conception of “human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-telos” is not a problem for Christian theological virtue ethics. Virtue ethics within Christian thought has almost entirely focused on the thought of Thomas Aquinas. An important discussion over the past two decades has been the relation between the cardinal and the theological virtues in Aquinas. The cardinal virtues are those acquired in which the human realizes her natural end; the theological virtues are those infused by God as gift, in which the human realizes his supernatural end, which is knowledge of God in charity. In virtue ethics in Aquinas, there is no question that virtue is linked to a thick understanding of the human telos; what is complicated to understand in Aquinas is the relation between two distinct-though-not-separated teloi for the human.3

Before I discuss the thought of St Maximus, let me admit that I have been convinced by recent literature that has affirmed that both Aquinas and his predecessor by many centuries, Augustine, believed that the human was created for theosis. Put another way, I reject the idea that what separates Aquinas from the Greek Fathers is that Aquinas rejected the idea of deification. Rather than seeing a diametrical opposition between the East and the West, I would rather frame the difference as one of conceptualities within the common framework or belief that the human was created for union with God. With that said, I do think there is a point of difference between Thomistic virtue ethics as

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transmitted through the Catholic tradition and the virtue ethics of the ascetical tradition as developed in the thought of St Maximus the Confessor. It should be noticed that the revival of virtue ethics within philosophical and theological ethics has almost entirely focused on the thought of Aristotle and Aquinas. It is often argued that the best insights of the ascetical tradition were folded into Aquinas’ synthesis. This assessment is inaccurate, and the time is now ripe to interrupt the current discussions of philosophical and theological virtue ethics with the tradition of thinking on virtue in the ascetical tradition, most especially the thought of St Maximus the Confessor.

St Maximus and Aquinas agree that the telos of the human is to be more loving, to learn how to love, which is embodied deification. Thomistic virtue ethics, however, over the centuries increasingly divided the natural from the supernatural end so as to render the impression that the virtue of love is an infused gift from God that is absolutely unrelated to any kind of human action or practice, or to a human’s so-called “natural” end. This separation has affected the Christian approach to social ethics. What is unclear and endlessly debated in the tradition of Thomistic virtue ethics is the relations between practices, the cardinal virtues, and the virtue of love. It is in the interrelation between practices, virtues (St Maximus doesn’t restrict himself to the cardinal virtues), and the manifestation of the virtue of love as the telos of the human that St Maximus can offer a substantive contribution to current discussions in virtue ethics.

In what follows, I wish to briefly outline some elements of St Maximus’ understanding of the virtues as related to the virtue of virtues, which is love. I want to end with some suggestions for how and why St Maximus’ account of the virtue makes a difference, especially in the human experience of violence.

Virtue and Love

In the writings of St Maximus the Confessor, communion with God, which is an embodied presencing of the divine, is simultaneous with the acquisition of virtue: Virtue is embodied deification. Within the Greek patristic texts, and I would also argue in Augustine, if deification means that if God is love, then the human was created to love. And this love is simultaneously a uniting oneself with God, since God
is love. As St Maximus himself says in his second letter, which is addressed to John: “And the divine and blessed love, which is fashioned from these and through which these come to be [by “these” he means the virtues], will embrace God and manifest the one who loves God to be God himself.” In his ascetical writings in particular, St Maximus discusses a trajectory of the manifestation of virtues through ascetical practices toward the manifestation of the virtue of virtues—Love. For St Maximus, the human is created to learn how to love and is in constant battle against that which weakens the capacity to love.

Virtue, for St Maximus, is not a building of character for character’s sake; it is not a state of being where one displays one’s virtues like badges of honor; it is not simply the basis for proper moral decision making within a particular context. The acquisition of virtue is the precondition for enabling the human capacity to love. As St Maximus says in his *Four-Hundred Chapters on Love*, “All the virtues assist the mind in the pursuit of divine love.” St Maximus does not restrict himself to only the four cardinal virtues but, consistent with the Eastern Christian patristic tradition, gives a wider catalogue of virtues and vices that correspond to the three parts of the soul: sensible, irascible, and the rational. The hermeneutical key to St Maximus’ complicated detailing of the relation of virtues and vices to the inner life of the human person and to human agency is “progress in the love of God,” which is measured ultimately by how one relates to others, especially those to whom one feels hatred or anger. As St Maximus explains, “The one who sees a trace of hatred in his own heart through any fault at all toward any man whoever he may be makes himself completely foreign to the love for God, because love for God in no way admits of hatred for man.”

If virtues are embodied deification, the precondition for the learning of the virtue of virtues, which is love, then vice impairs the capacity for love. St Maximus explains that “[t]he purpose of divine Providence is to unify by an upright faith and spiritual love those who have been

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6 Ibid., 48.
7 Ibid., 42.
8 Ibid., 37.
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separated in diverse ways by vice” (4.17). He elaborates that the “vice that separates you from your brother” includes “envying and being envied, hurting or being hurt, insulting or being insulted, and suspicious thoughts” (4.18-19). St Maximus is also astute to know that vice breeds vice; i.e., that it is not simply the doing of vice that harms the capacity for love, it is being “viced upon”: “The things which destroy love are these: dishonor, damage, slander (either against faith or against conduct), beatings, blows, and so forth, whether these happen to oneself or to one’s relatives or friends” (4.81). Vices produce and are such affective emotions as anger, hatred, and fear. Throughout his writings, St Maximus is attempting both to advise and exhort a form of training that can overcome what are ultimately corrosive emotions, no matter how justified.

Also relevant is St Maximus’ discussion of the relation of images to the cultivation of vices and virtues. According to St Maximus, what often incites and reifies a vice are images or thoughts that present themselves to the human person. St Maximus explains that “Love and self-mastery keep the mind detached from things and from their representations … The whole war of the monk against demons is to separate the passions from the representations.”9 St Maximus also warns that when “insulted by someone or offended in any matter, then beware of angry thoughts, lest by distress they sever you from charity and place you in the region of hatred.”10 In terms of images that incite vice, this resistance is not a removal of the image, but a disabling of its power to evoke such feelings of anger or hatred. To be virtuous is to experience in the face of images the emotions and desires that cultivate authentic relationships.

Insofar as virtue is related to love, then virtues build relationships of intimacy, trust, compassion, empathy, friendship, sharing, caring, humility, and honesty: all that is apparently threatened by the experience of vice, which destroy relationships. According to St Maximus, the acquisition of virtue is a training, realized in and through certain practices, that forms both the body and the inner life (the soul) of the human person; virtue is a wiring of the self as openness to love.

9 Ibid., 66.
10 Ibid., 38.
Virtue and Violence

When it comes to the question of war, the Orthodox are probably most well known for asserting that there is no just war theory in the Orthodox tradition. Beyond that negative assertion, it is very difficult to discern what the Orthodox think about war. For the just war naysayers, it would not be difficult to find among the Orthodox such statements as, “[t]here is no just war, no just violence, no just revenge or recompense, no just accumulation of wealth.” In this statement, it is a little unclear why—other than for rhetorical effect—war, violence, revenge, and accumulation of wealth are grouped together, since the whole point of the idea of just war is to differentiate morally sanctioned forms of violence from those that are clearly immoral, such as revenge. From one of the leading Orthodox voices in ethics in the past fifty years, one hears how

[t]hese two seminal writers [Ambrose and Augustine] led the Western Church not only to an acceptance of the military role by Christians, but to its enhancement into a positive virtue through the development of criteria by which a war could be distinguished from an unjust war, and be called “just.” It is my contention that the East developed a different approach to the issue. Rather than seek to morally elevate war and Christian participation in it so that it could be termed “just,” the East treated it as a necessary evil. . . . Contrary to Augustine . . . the Eastern Patristic tradition rarely praised war, and to my knowledge, almost never called it “just” or a moral good . . . . The East did not seek to deal with just war themes such as the correct conditions for entering war [jus ad bellum], and the correct conduct of war [jus in bello] on the basis of the possibility of the existence of a “just war,” precisely because it did not hold to such a view of war.

This denial of any form of just war theory in the Christian East is often extended to some form of praise for the Christian Roman Empire for embodying a primarily defensive, non-aggressive ethos in relation to war.

13 Ibid., 156-57.
One is tempted to attribute this denial of a just war theory, together with its praise of the Christian Roman attitude to war, as another example of self-identification of the Orthodox vis-à-vis the proximate other—the “West.” Even though something like this distorted apophaticism—Orthodoxy is what the West is not—may be operative in some Orthodox denials of just war theory, it is irrefutable that a “theory” of just war, consisting of distinctions between conditions for entering war and conditions for conducting war, together with their respective criteria, is nowhere to be found in what has come to be known as the Orthodox trajectory within the Christian tradition. Such an absence makes Fr. Alexander Webster’s defense of a justifiable war tradition within Orthodoxy somewhat of an anomaly. While admitting that the Orthodox tradition never developed a just war theory—on this point, there seems to be a consensus—Webster argues against the position that the Orthodox consistently saw war only as a necessary evil and never as a moral good. Webster amasses a pile of citations from biblical, patristic, canonical, liturgical, and imperial sources, which he feels collectively point to an affirmation of the moral value of war under certain conditions. As Webster argues, “[w]e hope the abundant textual and iconic evidence adduced in the present volume will restore among them [Orthodox bishops, theologians and activists] the longstanding traditional moral position that war may be engaged and conducted as a virtuous or righteous act, or at least as a ‘lesser good’ instead of a lesser or necessary evil.”

In an ironic twist, Webster actually attributes the Orthodox denial of its own justifiable war tradition to the “flurry of ecumenical contacts with Western Christians and an accelerated emigration of Orthodox Christians to Western Europe and North America.” Instead of blaming the West for poisoning the East with notions of just or justifiable war, the West gets blamed by Webster for influencing the Orthodox to forget its justifiable war tradition. One way or the other, the Orthodox always seem to find a way to blame the West.

14 For such examples of self-identification, see George Demacopoulos and Aristotle Pananikolaou eds., Orthodox Constructions of the West (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2012).
16 Ibid., 118.
17 Ibid.
The Orthodox, thus, agree that there is no just war “theory” in the Orthodox tradition in the form of distinctions between *jus in bello* and *jus ad bellum*, and their respective criteria; there is also consensus that within the tradition there is discussion about the need to go to war; the current debate, however, centers on how going to war is characterized: For Harakas, it is always a necessary evil; for Webster, under certain conditions, it is virtuous and of moral value. This difference, however, reveals another, more implicit, agreement between Harakas and Webster: although both agree there is no just war theory within the Orthodox tradition, both seem to operate within the moral categories and framework of the just war tradition. What the just war tradition attempts to discern is whether both the action to go to war and the conduct within war fall on the right/wrong moral divide. Although Harakas and Webster distance themselves from a just war theory, they are still looking for the moral categories that would establish certain actions to go to war and conduct within war on either side of the right/wrong divide. To characterize war as either a necessary evil, lesser evil, lesser good, justifiable, or as a virtuous and righteous act is to attempt to do the same thing that a just war theory tries to do—establish the moral rightness or wrongness of an act, given the specific conditions. Even such distinctions between killing as murder and killing for defense reinforce this particular moral framework that centers on the rightness or wrongness of moral acts. From a Christian perspective, the concern with the rightness or wrongness of moral acts has to do with one’s positioning in relation to God and, in the end, with one’s positioning within the eschatological consummation, or heaven.

What is remarkable about the entire debate is that there is little attention to what is arguably the core and central axiom of the Orthodox tradition—the principle of divine-human communion. Webster speaks of war as “virtuous,” and yet pays absolutely no attention to the tradition of thinking on virtue in either the ascetical writings or in such thinkers as Maximus the Confessor; in both cases, the understanding of virtue is inherently linked to one’s struggle toward communion with God—*theosis*. How exactly is claiming to have fought in a virtuous war, or to have killed virtuously consistent with this tradition of thinking on virtue in light of the principle of divine-human communion? Is it really the case that being virtuous in war means moving *toward* a deep-
er communion with God? Webster does not give an answer to these questions. Although Harakas does argue for the patristic bias for peace, approaching the issue from an eschatological perspective, his emphasis is still on how to label the action to go to war or the conduct during war, and there is no attention to war from the perspective of the Orthodox understanding of creation’s destiny for communion with God.

It is very common in the United States now to hear of stories of combat soldiers from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. One hears horrible stories of combat veterans who have a difficult time simply being with their wives, their children, their friends, in bars, restaurants, social groups that give most of us some pleasure. They have a hard time keeping jobs, and many of them end up homeless on American streets. They are plagued by demonic images and memories of the war. There are many, many stories that I could give here, but I will restrict myself to the story of the combat veteran John, who was fighting with his fiancé about bus schedules. The argument escalated to the point where John became enraged and went into what is clinically called a “Berserk state.”18 He took a knife and cut his fiancé many times. After he awoke in the hospital, he could not remember what he did, and the first thing he asked was, “did I kill my daughter”?19 In John’s situation, what we see are two of the key vices that, according to St Maximus, get in the way of love: fear and anger. We don’t see self-love here as much as self-hatred and self-loathing.

Combat soldiers are trained to kill, to treat all others as threats.20 This training becomes intensified when in the combat situation, where the body is training itself to protect itself. In addition to the constant fear of violence, which can only provoke the feeling of anger, combat soldiers are put in situations where they must inflict violence, often on innocent non-combatants. What emphasis on just war theory does in the ethics of war is to fail to account for the effects of violence on the combat veteran’s capacity to love: to love self in the proper way and to love the other, even the enemy or the stranger. This effect occurs on the

18 For a definition of the “Berserk state,” see Jonathan Shay, Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and The Undoing of Character (New York: Scribner, 1994).
combat veteran even if it is clear that they are fighting on the supposedly “just” side of the war, as in World War II. The mistake that just war theory makes is not so much trying to establish criteria for thinking about justified uses of violence; but implying that simply because one is on the so-called just side of a war that his relationship with God is unaffected. Whether one is on the just or unjust side, the combat veteran’s experience of violence will affect his relationship with God insofar as it affects his capacity to love.

If one is impaired in the ability to love, one is impaired in one’s ability to be gifted with theosis. Jonathan Shay, one of the pioneers in the United States in treating combat veterans suffering from PTSD, describes the effects of the violence of war on the combat soldier in terms of the “ruin of good character.” More recently, a new clinical diagnosis has emerged called “moral injury,” which attempts to describe the particular effects of violence on the human. If we follow St Maximus, which I think we should, this “ruin of good character” and “moral injury” must be understood in terms of the diminished capacity to love.

The effects of violence on the human is also clearly visible in the poor neighborhoods in the big cities of the United States (and I’m sure of Europe), where the threat of violence is constant. One teenager who lived in a poor neighborhood of Chicago, which is infested with violent gangs, described his neighborhood as a daily war zone. Related to this, one of the most difficult questions confronting educators in the United States is how to educate children in poorer neighborhoods, who are consistently underperforming in comparison with children in more middle-class or affluent neighborhoods. Paul Tough has recently reported on approaches to this problem that focus on character, such as the recent work and studies of the Nobel-Prize economist from the University of Chicago, James Heckman. Tough describes how educators for decades were focusing on improving what are called “cognitive skills,” which have to do with such things as reading and mathematics. Studies have shown that the skills correlated with success in such things

21 Shay, Achilles in Vietnam, xiii.
as college graduation, or well-paying job are what are called “non-cognitive skills.” It is the development of non-cognitive skills that allow for the development of cognitive skills. Examples of non-cognitive skills are self-control, impulse control, anger management, delayed gratification, or thinking before making a bad decision. If you have not noticed already, these sound a lot like St Maximus’ virtues.

What they have also discovered is that the stress from adverse experiences in childhood, such as the experience of violence or the threat of violence, can prevent non-cognitive skills from developing properly. If a child has experienced four or more adverse effects as a child, she is thirty-two times more likely to develop learning problems. If a child is experiencing the constant threat of violence in the home, the stress that such a threat generates can prevent the development of the part of the brain responsible for non-cognitive skills. Another way it was explained is this: if one is in the forest and is confronted by a bear, then the part of the brain responsible for aggression will activate and the part of the brain responsible for reading and writing will deactivate in order for the person to prepare for an emergency response. Such an emergency response, however, is meant to be infrequent. For some children living in a family home situation in which the threat of violence is constant, the brain responds as if facing a bear every single day. If the emergency response of the brain is activated repeatedly, the brain forms pathways that get increasingly ingrained. In day-to-day situations, this means that it is difficult for such children to learn reading and mathematics in class when the brain is constantly on emergency response mode. It also explains why such children are plagued with two of the vices that St Maximus says get in the way of love—fear and anger. It is not uncommon for such children to have behavioral problems in school that often manifest themselves in rage. Being surrounded by or experiencing violence can actually form the brain in such a way as to form the vices of fear and anger (again, not necessarily self-love as much as self-loathing). These vices are impeding the ability to be in the kind of relationships that would not simply allow for love to occur, but to allow for learning to occur.

What was also interesting about these studies is that it is being shown how proper attachment to a parent or parents can help a child manage the stress of adverse situations. In other words, the development of proper relations through the virtues can counter the vices
formed through the experience or threat of violence. What’s most hopeful is that these non-cognitive skills can be learned even throughout adulthood; in other words, the human was created in such a way that these non-cognitive skills can be learned no matter the age of the person. What is really remarkable about all this, at least for me, is the connection between all that these studies are showing with all that St Maximus says about the interrelation between the manifestation of the virtues and contemplation.

What I have attempted to suggest in this paper is that St Maximus’ account of virtue can disrupt the current status quo in both philosophical and theological virtue ethics by offering a thick understanding of the human telos as one that entails learning how to love. And while Thomistic virtue ethics provides a thick understanding of the human self, the nature/grace divide that haunts Thomistic virtue ethics separates love from the natural good inherent to being human, which leads to an emphasis on social justice in terms of human rights to social goods, such as healthcare, just wages, etc. I think St Maximus’ account can and should affirm all that, and more. It can offer an account of virtue that can both illuminate the effects of violence and poverty on being human, specifically on the human capacity to love and to form relationships, and can contribute to the interdisciplinary effort of understanding how the cultivation of virtues leads to human flourishing in areas such as education, or how the cultivation of virtues mitigates the effects of violence and poverty.

St. John Chrysostom once said that even the poor need virtue. St Maximus helps us to understand this comment in the sense that what is distinctive about an Orthodox social ethics for today goes well beyond simply helping the poor during a time of need, or advocating for systemic change. By never wavering in its understanding of the human being as being created to learn how to love, a Christian social ethics offers the very wisdom of the practices needed to form the human being in the virtues that would allow the human to mitigate the effects of poverty and violence and enable the person to learn how to love, which is nothing less, according to St Maximus, than the experience of God. If poverty and violence potentially depersonalize and render the human being faceless, then the ascetical practices that manifest the virtues and that enable the capacity to love are essential for the realization of the person as a eucharistic being in the world that is free (ekstatic) and irreducibly unique (hypostatic).