



THE
JUBILEE CENTRE
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

Insight Series

A Few Remarks About Self-Transcendence

Professor Candace Vogler

University of Chicago

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

A Few Remarks About Self-Transcendence

Candace Vogler
University of Chicago
voguel@uchicago.edu

Virtue and the common good in Aristotle and Aquinas

In both Aristotle's understanding of the political and social dimensions of the cultivation and exercise of virtue and Aquinas's expansion of the significance and reach of virtue to the human community more generally we find accounts of virtue as inherently bound to understandings of human good that outstrip the good of personal achievement, self-expression, and whatever might conduce to merely individual satisfaction in life. In this sense, both of these varieties of virtue ethics point to aspects of what contemporary empirical research treats under the rubric of "self-transcendence". Virtue in both Aquinas and Aristotle requires modes of self-improvement and personal development that are inherently self-transcendent. The cultivation and exercise of virtue turns on intrapersonal coordination that enables individuals to participate in the production and reproduction of sound modes of social life by directing their efforts to common good. "Self-transcendence" in this connection signals practical orientation to an overall good that an individual cannot attain alone, the benefits of which go beyond measures of personal welfare or the welfare of the virtuous person's own immediate family, circle of friends, or other small community. Some contemporary empirical research on self-transcendence comes close to being research on these aspects of practical orientation to overall good. Most do not.

Self-transcendence in Contemporary Empirical Research

Some aspects of contemporary empirical accounts of self-transcendence are familiar—in discussions of egoism versus altruism, altruism stands as the term marking putting concern for

others ahead of concern for self. Altruism can be an aspect of self-transcendence. But there are many ways of putting others' needs ahead of one's own, and some ways of doing that have more to do with self-aggrandizement or self-defense than self-transcendence. For example, if I use "service" to others as a way of showing that I am a better person than you are, I am trying to use so-called "service" to make myself big rather than get over my fixation on myself. If I am endlessly helpful and obsequious because I have been beaten down by the world, or am afraid that others will beat me down if I try to stand up for myself, I am not transcending my self—I am trying to find a way of defending myself.

For all that, it is hard to find a single meaning of the term "self-transcendence" in contemporary empirical literatures on the topic, or a single set of factors that researchers associate with self-transcendence, and some of efforts to isolate and study self-transcendence empirically look more like perversions of the kind of self-transcendence at issue in Thomist virtue ethics than anything else. For example, researchers attempting to assess subjects' sense that they have experienced themselves as an integral part of the universe as a whole,¹ experienced a dissolution of self,² or entered into eternity³ have little to do with the kinds of self-transcendent practical orientation at issue in Thomist virtue ethics.

"Self-transcendence" seems to have come into prominence through motivational psychology—psychology focused on human needs and goals—when Abraham Maslow added a new and higher level to his hierarchy of needs in the early 1960s. In the 1940s, Maslow thought that there were five sorts of human needs basic to human life, and treated these as arranged hierarchically: at the base were biological needs, at the next level up, needs for safety and security, then social needs, then

¹ See, e.g., C. Robert Cloninger, Dragan M. Svrakic, and Thomas R. Przybeck, "A Psychobiological Model of Temperament and Character," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 50.12 (1993.), p. 975.

² See, e.g., Douglas A. MacDonald and Daniel Holland, "Examination of the Psychometric Properties of the Temperament and Character Inventory Self-Transcendence Dimension," *Personality and Individual Differences*, 32 (2002): 1013-1027.

³ The aspect is taken from Alan Watts, *Does it Matter?*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), pp. 76-83.

needs for self-esteem, and finally needs for self-actualization. A good human life was a life in which all of these needs were met. Maslow tended to think of these needs as coinciding (more or less) with stages of psychological development, such that different stages were focused on meeting different needs, although he recognized that there were problems with this way of thinking about the hierarchy. Late in his career, he began to notice that it looked like there was a still higher level of basic human need—one that went beyond self-actualization. He named this level "self-transcendence." As Mark Kolto-Rivera put it:

[Maslow's] earlier model positions the highest form of motivational development at the level of the well-adjusted, differentiated, and fulfilled individual self or ego. The later model places the highest form of human development at a transpersonal level, where the self/ego and its needs are transcended. This represents a monumental shift in the conceptualization of human personality and its development. At the level of self-actualization, the individual works to actualize the individual's own potential; there is thus, at least potentially, a certain self-aggrandizing aspect to this motivational stage, as there is with all the stages below it in Maslow's hierarchy. At the level of self-transcendence, the individual's own needs are put aside, to a great extent, in favor of service to others and to some higher force or cause conceived as being outside the personal self.⁴

Some aspects of Maslow's understanding of self-transcendence continue to inform the empirical psychological literature on the topic in unfortunate ways, however. For example, Maslow thought that self-transcendence was marked by what he called "peak experiences." Peak experiences were experiences in which one seemed to be outside oneself, often merging with something beyond oneself. It is true that some forms of mystical religious experience, some profound experiences of nature, and so on, can feel like they dissolve the boundaries of the self. But so can delusional

⁴ Mark Kolto-Rivera, "Rediscovering the Later Version of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs," in *Review of General Psychology* (2006), Vol. 10, No. 4: 306-307.

experiences and the kinds of experiences that come of taking hallucinogenic drugs. The difficulties with attempts to study self-transcendence as crucially involving peak experiences is that such studies can't reliably distinguish an experience of the sacred in nature from the experience of acid trip or a psychotic delusion.

Accounts of self-transcendence as a feature of mature human development involving integrated awareness of one's own values and aspirations (intrapersonal development), increased capacity to be aware of and relate to others and one's environment (interpersonal development), an increased ability to integrate one's understanding of the past and expectations for the future in ways that have meaning for the present, and broadened perspectives about one's own life in its social and historical context (transpersonal development) have begun to shape literatures on nursing.⁵ Nurses working with geriatric patients and patients with serious cancer diagnoses have made important strides in developing accounts of entirely grounded, non-delusional account of self-transcendence. Nurses have a strong stake in thinking about aspects of human development that tend to give people strong attachments to their own lives and to equip people to make appropriate decisions about their own care. Not only do nurses fare better themselves if they have a self-transcendent orientation to their work, they find that their patients who have developed strongly self-transcendent orientations have better health outcomes. Interestingly enough, the understanding of self-transcendence associated with middle-level nursing theory bears striking resemblance to Aquinas's understanding of the scope and place of human good as such in acquired virtue.

Pamela Reed's work on self-transcendence treats this as an achievement of adult psychological development in response to factors associated with aging or coping with trauma.⁶ Lars Tornstam treats "gero-transcendence" as an apparently spontaneous process of developing a self-

⁵ Pamela G. Reed, "Theory of Self-Transcendence," *Middle Range Theory for Nursing* (2014): 109-139.

⁶ *Ibid.*

transcendent orientation in many older adults (in terms similar to those at issue in Reed's work).⁷

But there seems to be no consensus in the empirical literature on whether to treat self-transcendence as a personality trait, an age- or trauma-related developmental stage, an ongoing developmental process, or a kind of event or experience.⁸ In this respect, at least, Aquinas's virtue ethics may be of some help.

Self-transcendence as a Practical Orientation

Recall that, like Aristotle, Aquinas treats virtuous activity as directed at the common good. Unlike Aristotle, Aquinas sees this orientation as providing an account on the way in which a virtuous person stands prepared to work on behalf of human beings in general (rather than just members of a distinct group with which she has something other than plain humanity in common). Beyond this, although Aquinas shares Aristotle's sense that cultivation and exercise of virtue finds its happiest starting point in sound childhood moral education, Aquinas understands the work of cultivating virtue as an ongoing aspect of human life, and the business of moral self-improvement as continuing throughout one's maturity. Because Aquinas shares Aristotle's view that the cultivation and exercise of virtue is always best understood as expressive of and directed toward a good that goes beyond measures of personal satisfaction and individual welfare, Aquinas understands virtue as essentially self-transcendent.

Nothing in Aquinas's account of the cultivation and exercise of acquired virtue suggests that there is any particular kind of experience associated with virtue—certainly not the kinds that might mark delusions of grandeur or experiences associated with taking psychedelic drugs (as may be

⁷ L. Tornstam, "Gero-transcendence: A theoretical and empirical exploration," in L. E. Thomas & S. A. Eisenhandler, editors, *Aging and the Religious Dimension*, (London: Auburn House, 1994), pp. 203-225.

⁸ For a good review of the various views and approaches involved, see Michael R. Levenson, Patricia A. Jennings, Carolyn M. Aldwin, & Ray W. Shirashi, "Self-Transcendence: Conceptualization and measurement," *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, Vol. 60, No. 2, (2005): 127-143.

linked to some attempts to conceptualize and study self-transcendence empirically). But neither does Aquinas suppose that the stresses associated with aging or trauma are necessary spurs to cultivating or exercising virtue (as does some excellent work on self-transcendence in nursing theory and gerontology). Of course coping with extreme stress might produce challenges that could be met in part through moral self-improvement; but nothing in Aquinas's account suggests that I need to suffer great loss or severe trauma to require the kind of intrapersonal and interpersonal development at issue in cultivating and exercising acquired virtue. Rather, the view is that unlike nonhuman mammals, I need to acquire and exercise virtue in order to be able to pursue and promote the varieties of good that belong to human beings reasonably and well.

As some empirical work suggests, for Aquinas, virtue is an aspect of ongoing human development that need not confine itself to a distinct stage of human life. Neither is the form of self-transcendence at issue in Aquinas's virtue ethics a distinctive personality or character trait. Instead, self-transcendence in Aquinas's virtue ethics is built into the nature of the development or virtue as a necessary direction or orientation at issue in the cultivation and exercise of virtue as such. To produce a good empirical model capturing this aspect of Aquinas's virtue theory one would need to develop a way of looking at self-transcendence as an aspect of virtue generally, or else as a framework for the cultivation and exercise of virtue. Some of the materials for such a model might be found in the research into self-transcendence in nursing theory and gerontology.

Taking a cue from Aristotle and Aquinas, self-transcendence should show itself when I understand my life as essentially connected to a good beyond my own success, the security and comfort of my friends and immediate family, and the like. My life is lived through participation in a good that goes beyond personal achievement, expression, security and comfort, beyond even the need to promote those goods for members of my intimate circle. I work on behalf of bettering the community in ways that will help strangers, say. I engage in spiritual practices that are not just designed to make me calmer or more effective in my daily life, but allow me to participate in a spiritual community organized by the need to be right with one another and to show due reverence

for the sacred—community practice directed to a good beyond the borders of the self-identified community. I devote myself to social justice. I devote myself to participation in human search for truth, goodness, or beauty. In ways small or large, what I do, and how I do it, what I notice and how I respond, what I think and say and what I do not think and do not say, are guided by my relation to some overarching human good. My own life is a part of some good crucial to good life more generally, as best I can understand, serve, and embody that larger good.



THE
JUBILEE CENTRE
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

www.jubileecentre.ac.uk

Insight Series

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

- ◆ *Pioneering interdisciplinary research of international standing focussing on character, virtues and values in the interest of human flourishing.*
- ◆ *Promoting a moral concept of character in order to explore the importance of virtue for public and professional life.*
- ◆ *A leading informant on policy and practice in this area through an extensive range of research and development projects contributing to a renewal of character and values in both individuals and societies.*

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues or The University of Birmingham.

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham | Edgbaston | | Birmingham | B15 2TT

www.jubileecentre.ac.uk