What does the spirituality of Jean Vanier have to say about virtue ethics? How does Vanier interpret Jesus and Aristotle in light of his life with the poor?

Over the past ten years, Christian ethicists have published a number of significant works exploring the relationship between Jesus and virtue ethics (Spohn, Verhey, Harrington and Keenan). Some of these have addressed the biblical as well as the historical Jesus, while others have addressed the New Testament witness to Jesus but not the results of Jesus research. Some have examined the connection between virtue ethics and spirituality, while others have explored the virtues apart from the spiritual practices that are necessary for forming them. The consensus among Christian ethicists today seems to be that, first, while knowledge of the historical Jesus and is both possible and necessary for Christian ethics, the New Testament witness to Jesus is even more normative; second, among the various ethical theories, virtue ethics is the one most compatible with the New Testament witness; and third, spiritual practices are important for actually forming the disciples of Jesus in Christian virtues, whether these be understood as simply the virtues of Jesus or as the virtues his disciples need in order to live the spirit of their founder in new situations.

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In this article, I would like to examine further this question of the relationship between Jesus and virtue ethics, although now with a focus on Christian spirituality rather than Christian ethics. To do this, I propose to analyze the interaction between spirituality, Jesus, and virtue ethics in some of the more recent writings of the contemporary Roman Catholic spiritual writer, Jean Vanier, founder of the International Federation of L’Arche communities for persons who are developmentally disabled. I will argue that Vanier’s spirituality of living with the poor leads him to interpret Jesus and the ethics of Aristotle in a way that yields a Christian ethic of compassionate love, wisdom, and justice. My comments will be in three sections: (1) the spirituality of Jean Vanier; (2) Jesus, the compassionate one; and (3) the Aristotelian virtues of love, wisdom, and justice.

The Spirituality of Jean Vanier

Although the term “spirituality” is variously used, for the purposes of this article, I will define it as inspired practical activity. Spirituality, as I understand it, is the way persons actually live their lives in response to the Spirit of God and in relationship to themselves, others, and the world (Haight, 239–41; Gutiérrez, 204).

Various past and present details of the life of Jean Vanier can be recalled, then, as together constituting his spirituality (Downey, 20–29). Born in 1928 in Switzerland to Georges Vanier, who would later become Governor-General of Canada, and his wife, Pauline, Vanier in 1942 enrolled in the Royal Navy College in Dartmouth, England, with a desire to defend his country against the Nazis. Eight years later, in 1950, at the age of twenty-two, he chose to leave the Navy in response “to a gentle call of Jesus to leave all and follow him” (Vanier 1994, 9). Vanier knew it was time for a change when he noticed he was spending more of his evenings walking the ship’s flight deck and praying his breviary than going into town with his fellow officers.

Later that same year, Vanier joined a small Christian community in Paris directed by Père Thomas Philippe, a French Dominican priest. Called l’Eau Vive (Water of Life), the community was made up largely of lay students from around the world who were interested in a life of prayer and the study of philosophy and theology (Mellis, 79; Spink, 36). It was also located in a poor area of the city, close to the Dominican community of Le Saulchoir. During these years, Vanier studied philosophy at l’Institute Catholique de Paris, specializing in the ethics of Aristotle. In June 1962, he successfully defended his doctoral thesis entitled Le Bonheur: Principe et fin de la morale aristotélicienne (Happiness: The Principle and End of Aristotelian Ethics).

A year and a half later, around Christmas 1963, Vanier visited Père Thomas Philippe in Trosly-Breuil, a small village about an hour outside Paris by train. Père Thomas had recently begun to serve as chaplain at Le Val Fleuri (The Valley of

I was deeply impressed by the men who had become Fr. Thomas’s friends. He had sensed their spiritual openness and their place in God’s heart. Each one had so much life, had suffered so profoundly and thirsted so deeply for friendship. Within each gesture and each word was the question: “Will you come back?” “Do you love me?” Their cry of pain and their thirst for love touched me deeply. (Vanier 1995, 15)

Père Thomas, in his own gentle way, suggested that maybe Vanier could do “something” to respond to these men. Consequently, after a semester of teaching ethics at the University of St. Michael’s College in Toronto in the spring of 1964, Vanier returned to Trosly-Breuil, wanting “to follow Jesus and live in the way of the gospel” (Vanier 1995, 16). His first decision was to visit a number of psychiatric hospitals and mental asylums in the locale surrounding Paris, an experience that left him deeply disturbed, but also filled with a sense of peace:

I was quite overwhelmed by what I saw, especially in an asylum south of Paris. Huge concrete walls surrounded the buildings made of cement block; eighty men lived in dormitories with no work. All day long they just walked around in circles. From 2 to 4 p.m. there was a compulsory siesta, then time for a walk all together. There I was struck by the screams and the atmosphere of sadness, but also by a mysterious presence of God. (Vanier 1995, 16)

It was at this asylum in the Seine-et-Marne that Vanier first met Raphaël Simi and Philippe Seux, two mentally and physically disabled men who had each been placed there following the deaths of their parents. Shortly thereafter, Vanier, at the age of thirty-five, bought a small, dilapidated house in Trosly, and on August 4 he welcomed Raphaël and Philippe into his home. Vanier and his longtime friend, Jean-Louis Coic, took turns preparing meals on the wood-burning stove, and Raphaël and Philippe helped as they could with different tasks in the house and garden. “We began,” writes Vanier, “to get to know each other and do things together. We were learning how to live together, care for one another, listen to one another, have fun and pray together” (Vanier 1995, 19). That this experience of “living with” persons who are developmentally disabled was to touch Vanier profoundly is evident in the following recollection:

During those first months, I learned a great deal. I was beginning to discover the immense amount of pain hidden in the hearts of Raphaël, Philippe and so many of their brothers and sisters. I sensed how much their hearts had been broken
by rejection, abandonment and lack of respect. At the same time, I was beginning to discover some of the beauty and gentleness of their hearts, their capacity for communion and tenderness. I was beginning to sense how living with them could transform me, not through awakening and developing my qualities of leadership and intelligence, but by awakening the qualities of my heart, the child within me. (Vanier 1995, 20)

Since its relatively inauspicious beginnings in 1964, L’Arche has grown to become an international federation of more than 125 communities in 30 countries on 6 continents. In 1969, Daybreak was established in Toronto, Canada, for the first time, including both Roman Catholic and Protestants in the community. In 1970, Ashe Niketan was begun in Bangalore, India, welcoming not only Christians but also Hindus and Muslims (Vanier 1995, 55–56). More recently, new foundations have been launched in such countries as the Ivory Coast (1974), Haiti (1975), Honduras (1977), Brazil (1987), Uganda (1992), and Japan (1992). Vanier also established Faith and Light in 1971, an organization of more than 1,700 communities in 70 countries that offers nonresidential, monthly support meetings for the families and friends of developmentally disabled persons.

**Jesus, the Compassionate One**

While Jesus of Nazareth figures prominently in many of Vanier’s books, he is the sole subject of *Jesus, the Gift of Love* (Vanier 1994). A work that might be described as a popular spiritual christology, *Jesus, the Gift of Love* offers an interpretation of Jesus of Nazareth as the compassionate one that is informed by the historical Jesus, the biblical witness, and the spirituality of Jean Vanier, particularly his emphasis on living with the poor.

The portrait of Jesus that Vanier paints is certainly consistent with that of historical Jesus scholars who identify him as a first-century Palestinian Jew whose public role was that of a prophet. Vanier mentions that Jesus was born around the time of King Herod’s death; grew up in Nazareth of Galilee; was initially associated with John the Baptist; emerged as a public figure in his own right in his late twenties; summoned people to repent; used parables to announce the coming of the kingdom of God; conducted an itinerant ministry throughout the villages of Galilee; effected remarkable cures, including exorcisms, as enactments of his message; shared in table-fellowship with a socially and culturally diverse group; called a close group of disciples and gave twelve of them a special status; performed a dramatic action in the Temple; incurred the wrath of some elements in Judaism, especially among the high priestly establishment; was handed over by this powerful Jewish element to the Romans to be crucified as an insurrectionist; and was reported by his followers to have been raised from the dead (Wright, 147–48).
The biblical passages that are emphasized by Vanier in his interpretation of Jesus include the agony and passion of Jesus (Mark 14–16), the hidden life at Nazareth (Luke 1–2), and the Beatitudes (Matt 5–7) (Vanier 1994, 135–47, 39–44, 87–88). He also highlights certain parables used by Jesus in his preaching, particularly the Lukan parables of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) and the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) (Vanier 1994, 54–56, 120–21). However, the parable that Vanier stresses most is that of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) (Vanier 1994, 51–52, 128), one that has received considerable attention of late by ethicists interested in identifying the distinctive virtues of Jesus (Spohn, 89–91). Vanier recounts the parable this way:

Jesus tells a story . . . to reveal who our neighbor is, the story of a man going from Jerusalem to Jericho, beaten up by robbers and left lying half dead on the road. A priest approaches, sees the man, but passes by. So too a Levite, one of the priestly tribe. Then a stranger, a Samaritan approaches, sees the man half dead, stops, and touches him, takes him in his arms, and cares for him. Jesus asks, “Who of the three treats this man as his neighbor?” Clearly the third one, a man of compassion, moved by the pain and suffering of a fellow human being. Yet he was a Samaritan, and Samaritans were looked down upon by the Jews, regarded as heretics, people who had turned away from the true Jewish religion and thus were cut off from the living tree of the chosen people. They were pushed aside and looked down on. Jesus is sensitive to them in their pain. (Vanier 1994, 51–52)

In his retelling of the parable of the Good Samaritan, Vanier characterizes Jesus, like the Samaritan, as a man of compassion. In another passage, he offers the following description of the compassion of Jesus:

The Gospels tell us of Jesus moved by compassion; the Greek word splanchna implies a physical component. It is a deep emotion that makes one’s stomach turn over. Jesus is physically and emotionally moved by suffering; his heart obviously bleeds in the presence of poor people, rejected, abandoned, and crushed, who trust in God, but are like sheep without shepherds. He suffers with all those who are in pain, no matter what class, religious group, or nationality that may be. There is something in him that cannot stand hypocrisy and downright injustice to the lowly, to the crippled, the sick people in need, crippled too in their hearts, filled with guilt and shame, crushed by those who were seen as representing God, the priests, the high priest, closed up in all their wealth and power. Splanchna can also mean anger. Jesus is angry with the way the lowly are treated. (Vanier 1994, 47)

In short, Vanier interprets Jesus as the compassionate one whose embodied emotion has three different aspects: he was moved by suffering; he longed to
forgive sinners; and he felt anger at religious and social injustice (Vanier 1994, 47, 52, 60).

The Aristotelian Virtues of Love, Wisdom, and Justice

In his book Made for Happiness: Discovering the Meaning of Life with Aristotle (Vanier 2001), a popular revision of his dissertation, Vanier presents an interpretation of the Aristotelian virtues of love, wisdom, and justice that is colored by his nearly forty years of living with the poor and trying to embody the compassion of Jesus. As he explains, Aristotle's reflections on love, wisdom, and justice are set in the context of his discussion of the various practices of friendship, contemplation, and the quest for justice.

Friendship and Love

The first Aristotelian practice discussed by Vanier is friendship, and its corresponding virtue is love. A friend, according to Aristotle, is someone “who wishes and does what is good, or seems so, for the sake of his friend” (NE 1166a 3–4) (Vanier 2001, 66). As Vanier explains, the practice of friendship begins with an attraction toward some virtue (aretē) in another person that then leads to a feeling of benevolence or goodwill toward this person. For this feeling to become friendship, however, it must be reciprocated and recognized in some form of life together that is nourished by shared activity. “Living together” does not simply mean cohabitation, “as in the case of cattle, feeding in the same place” (NE 1170b14), writes Aristotle, but a life lived in “communion,” that is, one that is nourished by shared activity with a view to great and noble things (Vanier 2001, 72). This idea of communion, developed in a very dense and powerful text by Aristotle (NE 1170b5–14), is expressed by Vanier in the following manner:

Through friendship I communicate in the consciousness that my friend has of his own existence. For the same way we feel we are alive and exist through activity and derive pleasure from it, so, through friendship, we feel our friend live and exist. And the union is so profound that the goodness of the life of our friend extends to us and gives us pleasure. In friendship there is almost a communion, a merging of two beings and their rightful good. The friend is another self. Everything that I experience, he experiences. . . . In this friendship we continue to be two, but we are one in a great and noble activity that we accomplish together. Consciousness of the goodness of my friend fills me with just as much joy as if it were my own. My friend’s happiness becomes my happiness. (Vanier 2001, 71–72)

If friendship is to endure, argues Aristotle, it must be based on the moral virtue of love. “Mutual love,” he writes, “involves choice and choice springs from a state
of character; and men wish well to those whom they love, for their sake, not as a result of feeling but as a result of a state of character” (NE 1157b31) (Vanier 2001, 68). This love that lies at the heart of friendship, explains Vanier, is an active love: it does not mean only being well disposed toward and really open to another, but also being willing to expend oneself for another’s well-being. Furthermore, such a love seeks not only the basic human goods of health and satisfying work for the other person, but also the highest human goods that most nourish the soul: the pursuit of truth culminating in contemplation and the devotion of one’s life to other citizens through the acts of justice.

While Vanier finds much of value in Aristotle’s discussion of friendship and love, he criticizes Aristotle’s belief that perfect friendship can exist only among free adult men, since they alone had equal personal status in society and thus alone could love one another equally. Men and women, parents and children, and masters and slaves can truly befriend each other, thought Aristotle, but these are always lesser forms of friendship, based at best on a “proportional equality” that respects the fundamental inequality involved, and where the lesser party rightly loves the greater party more than the greater party loves the lesser. Vanier argues that true friendship involves sharing not only great and noble activities, beautiful thoughts, and strong capacities, but also shortcomings, weaknesses, and affective needs. “Thus,” he writes, “the child can humanize the man in the same way that a person who is weak and bereft can release goodness, tenderness, and compassion in him, and help him thereby discover a new inner unity and communion” (Vanier 2001, 185).

Vanier criticizes Aristotle’s belief that perfect friendship can exist only among free adult men.

Contemplation and Wisdom

The second Aristotelian practice identified by Vanier is contemplation, and its corresponding virtue is wisdom. As Vanier explains, the activity of contemplation begins with the natural human desire to know the truth and allowing oneself to be penetrated by wonder and its attendant joy. The mind or intelligence (nous) then learns to see things in their deepest dimension. Based on the observation of movement and becoming, explains Vanier, one can grasp, in an act of intellectual intuition, “a reason for the existence of the movement, a good that gives rise to the movement, which is the final cause” (Vanier 2001, 101). One can also deduce that the ultimate final cause must of necessity be, as Aristotle puts it, “something which moves without being moved, being eternal, substance and actuality” (Metaph. 1072a21), what he calls the First Mover or God (Metaph. 1072b10–30) (Vanier 2001, 102).
The intellectual virtue that is required to contemplate this First Mover, argues Aristotle, is theoretical wisdom (sophia), the highest of the virtues. The wiser a person becomes, explains Vanier, the more the capacity to contemplate takes root in him and the more the activity of looking at God, in and through visible things and their movement, becomes a source of great joy. The wise person comes to understand that the First Mover is the source of all movement in the universe and that the whole universe is thus ordered by it, just as a general determines the order of his army. The wise man, writes Vanier, is someone with a unique perspective on life:

The wise man who has caught a glimpse of God through visible things . . . is no longer embroiled in the quarrels and conflicts of state. He stands back from them. He sees things from a standpoint of humility born of the fact that he recognizes himself to be subject to truth and the pursuit of it. By looking in the direction of God, the Eternal, he sees himself to be small and finite, even though he bears within him a treasure: the capacity to know. (Vanier 2001, 107)

This theoretical wisdom, Vanier later notes, also has a practical dimension, which Aristotle calls the intellectual virtue of prudence (phronesis). The prudent person is someone who has the intellectual ability to clearly identify and grasp in concrete terms the best means of attaining a desired end, whether this be for one’s own benefit or the benefit of others in society, as in the case of political prudence. “With the presence of the one quality, practical wisdom,” writes Aristotle, “will be given all the virtues” (NE 1145a1) (Vanier 2001, 155).

While Vanier finds much to be lauded in Aristotle’s discussion of contemplation and wisdom, he criticizes Aristotle’s emphasis on the mind as that which is most noble in human beings and contemplation and theoretical wisdom as their highest activity and virtue, seeing this as an explanation for why Aristotle sees no value in children with severe mental handicaps who seem deprived of reason. Vanier implies a preference for the Jewish mentality that not only affords a special primacy to the affective, but where the Jewish people receive their knowledge and laws from the God who loves, watches over them, and guides them, rather than simply from their own human efforts to understand the universe.

**The Practice and Virtue of Justice**

The third Aristotelian practice discussed by Vanier is the quest for justice, and its corresponding virtue is also justice. Aristotle argues that the practice of justice provides structure for life and work in the political community. Members of society ought to conduct their relations with others in accordance with the law, since it is an expression of justice and encourages people to be virtuous because the good of others depends on its doing so (NE 1129b19–23) (Vanier 2001, 128). Moreover, legal justice ought to have its basis in natural justice. As Vanier explains, whereas
obeying a traffic signal is a matter of “legal” or particular justice, homicide, adultery, and theft are matters of “natural” or universal justice; they are always unjust no matter when and where they occur (NE 1107a11) (Vanier 2001, 129). By the term “natural,” Aristotle means the profound essence of a being, and, in the case of human beings, that which also flows from the deepest aspirations of reason (logos).

The moral virtue that is acquired through the quest for justice is itself called justice. Aristotle argues that justice is “complete virtue” because the one who possesses it exercises it “not only in himself but towards his neighbor also.” Justice alone is thought to be “another’s good,” because it “does what is advantageous to another” (NE 1129b26–1130a8) (Vanier 2001, 127). Being a just citizen is not simply a matter of obeying the law, but doing so because one wants society to be a place of peace and its members to attain true happiness. Moreover, being a just ruler, as Vanier explains, means, first of all, having a sense of equity that enables one to distribute the goods of society according to a proportional equality based on merit (NE 1130–b30) (Vanier 2001, 135); second, having a keen sense of discernment (epieikes) that enables one to act according to one’s conscience in the knowledge that the original legislator would have done the same thing were he confronted with this particular situation (Vanier 2001, 136); and third, being able to reestablish equality when someone has stolen from another or destroyed another’s property (Vanier 2001, 137).

While Vanier praises much in Aristotle’s discussion of justice as both practice and virtue, he criticizes the prejudicial attitudes that mark his account. Aristotle asserts that women are less intelligent than men; consequently, they should have the inferior social role of obeying rather than commanding (Pol. 1260a12) (Vanier 2001, 131–32). He also views slaves as less intelligent than their masters, thus, they should engage in manual work, serving as the living tools of freemen, a sort of extension of their bodies (Pol. 1254a9ff.). He also succumbs to racism and cultural elitism when he cites Euripides: “It is meet that Hellenes should rule over barbarians’; as if they thought that the barbarian and the slave were by nature one” (Pol. 117b23–32) (Vanier 2001, 184). Clearly, writes Vanier,

Aristotle does not work out a morality of compassion. In this respect, his ethics differ fundamentally from . . . the Jewish religion, which stresses the importance

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**Being a just citizen**

is doing so because one wants society to be a place of peace and its members to attain true happiness.
of looking after widows, orphans, and immigrants (see Dt. 10:17-19). In the time of Isaiah, God revealed what behavior pleased him. It was not first and foremost the sacrifice of animals in the temple or fasting, but working with the hungry, the poor, and the weak (Is. 58). And in the jubilee year, slaves were to be set free (Lev. 25). (Vanier 2001, 188)

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have argued that Jean Vanier’s spirituality of living with the poor leads him to interpret Jesus and the ethics of Aristotle in a way that yields a Christian ethic of compassionate love, wisdom, and justice. Like the Good Samaritan, Vanier’s Jesus was a person moved by suffering who longed to forgive sinners and who felt anger at religious and social injustice. Given the centrality of compassion in the life of Jesus, Vanier both extols and criticizes the virtues of love, wisdom, and justice presented by Aristotle. First, while the love that heartens friendship is willing to expend itself for the well-being of another, such love is possible not only among the able, but also between the able and the disabled, who both have their strengths and weaknesses. Second, while the wisdom that enlightens contemplation is capable of glimpsing God in the world and grasping the best means to a desired end, such wisdom is less valuable than affectivity that is open to God’s revelation of love. Finally, while the just character that enlivens just conduct is disposed to respect the law for the sake of peace and happiness in society, such justice must be seasoned by compassion if it is to liberate those oppressed by sexist, classist, racist, and culturally elitist institutions.

**References**


