

On Gifting, Receiving, and the Concept of Complementary Virtues: A Hermeneutic Key for Relational Ethics

Love seeketh not itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care,
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a heaven in hell's despair.

...

Love seeketh only self to please,
To bind another to its delight,
Joys in another's loss of ease,
And builds a hell in heaven's despite.

(WILLIAM BLAKE: *The Clod and The Pebble*)

There is perhaps no other theme in fine art, music, or literature as popular, prevalent, and multifaceted as love.¹ Considering the remarkable variety of artistic representations of this fundamental human experience, it might not be surprising that in some cases they not only differ, but even seem to conflict, as the verses by William Blake above illustrate. The first stanza talks about love that does not aim to please itself but gives and devotes itself to the other. One encounters here what would usually be called selfless love, love that is totally self-giving and even hopes to turn hell into heaven. The other stanza, in contrast to this, talks about love that does not aim to please the other, but prefers to take and receive. One encounters here what would usually be called selfish love, love that is totally self-centered and can even turn heaven into hell. In other words, whereas the first notion of love is best characterized by (a₁) a radical striving towards giving that is (b₁) exclusively directed toward the other and his/her needs, the notion presented in the second stanza can be described as (a₂) a radical tendency towards taking that is (b₂) exclusively oriented towards oneself and one's own needs.²

- 1 I would like to thank Nenad Polgar for his helpful suggestions and meaningful comments concerning the language and content of this manuscript. I also want to express my gratitude to the reviewers, whose expertise and attentive reading certainly contributed to the quality of this article.
- 2 This poem originally consists of three stanzas, of which only the first and the third are quoted in this article. The second stanza embeds the poem into a larger context from which its rather surprising title ("The Clod and The Pebble") is derived. Whereas the first and last stanza present

The differences between these two notions of love can be, hence, pinned down to (a) a certain disposition to either giving or taking that should serve (b) either the other or oneself.

We can assume that most people, when asked which notion of love they would subscribe to, would probably be more likely to opt for the idea of selfless love, since it protects the other from being exploited for purely egoistic reasons, which seems to be the main danger of the selfish notion of love. But does such a notion of selfless love actually correspond to reality? Can we really devote ourselves fully to our partner? And what protects us then from fully sacrificing and exploiting ourselves? Starting from these concerns, this article argues that the idea of selfless love can become as destructive as selfish love. In order to substantiate this claim, the article tries to clarify the problem of talking about love that is totally self-giving. At the same time, it outlines an alternative approach as a more balanced way of integrating the notion of giving into reflections on marriage and family life. The need for such an approach will become especially evident after showing how strongly this idea of total self-giving is not only found in artistic approaches but is quite central to the magisterial teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on marriage. Therefore, this contribution starts with a short exploration of the post-conciliar notion of love as it appears in magisterial teaching, followed by some current insights in virtue theory, especially regarding the concept of complementary virtues. This concept can have a foundational role in a revised approach to self-giving in intimate relationships and might be used as a heuristic tool in an analysis of two problems that are instrumental in reducing love to total self-giving: (a) totality of giving and its (b) one-sided directionality towards the other.

1. Love as Total Self-Giving?

The Second Vatican Council discontinues the tradition of a hierarchical ordering of marital ends³ and instead strengthens the personal understanding of “mutual and total love” (GS 49) between the spouses. Since marriage is rooted in an “irrevocable personal consent” (GS 48), it urges the couple “to nourish and develop

two opposing thoughts on love, the second stanza indicates that one of them is articulated by a clod, the other by a pebble. While the (malleable, adaptable) clod declares that love is about selflessness, the (robust, inflexible) pebble replies with a contrary view on love as selfishness. In relation to the title of the collection (“Songs of Innocence and Experience”), in which the poem was originally published, one might even interpret the clod as a representation of an innocent, naïve understanding of love, while the pebble might stand for a view shaped by harsh experiences.

- 3 Prior to the Second Vatican Council the sacrament of marriage was described as follows: “The primary end of marriage is the procreation and nurture of children; its secondary end is mutual help and the remedying of concupiscence” (1917 Code of Canon Law, 1013, §1).

their wedlock by pure conjugal love and undivided affection” (GS 49).⁴ Thus, according to *Gaudium et spes*, marital love “leads the spouses to a free and mutual gift of themselves, a gift providing itself by gentle affection and by deed, such love pervades the whole of their lives: indeed by its busy generosity it grows better and grows greater” (GS 49). From this description it is already clear that the “constant fulfillment of the duties of this Christian vocation demands notable virtue” (GS 49), which is, among other virtues, such as chastity⁵ or fidelity, identified as “mutual self-giving” (GS 49). Three years later, Paul VI in *Humanae vitae* (HV) also uses the image of “mutual gift” (HV 8) as a metaphor for “married love” (HV 9), and ultimately its use reaches its peak during the papacy of John Paul II.

Although self-giving had been first thematized only a few years before as a significant characteristic of marital love, John Paul II refers excessively to the notion of self-giving love in his writings and introduces two major changes. First, he explicitly relates self-giving to the sphere of sexuality and upholds it as a condition for being able to live sexuality “in a truly human way” (FC 11). According to John Paul II, sexuality must always be a physical expression of “love by which a man and a woman commit themselves totally to one another until death” (FC 11), which is ensured by the indissolubility of the marital bond. Consequently, sexual acts outside of marriage, such as in the relationships of divorced and remarried or unmarried couples, remain a “lie” (FC 11), because the gift cannot come to its full fruition as long as it is not characterized by a permanent sacramental bond. Additionally, sexuality, understood as unrestricted devotion, has to remain open to procreation, which also excludes homosexual acts as well as the use of artificial contraception. In other words, those who are not fulfilling the ideal of

4 This is also the reason why a growing number of theologians would no longer refer to this area of theological ethics as sexual morality (*Sexualmoral*) but rather as relational ethics (*Beziehungsethik*). This shift has become particularly evident in German theology. See K. HILPERT: *Ehe, Partnerschaft, Sexualität: Von der Sexualmoral zur Beziehungsethik*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2015; J. KNOP: *Beziehungsweise: Theologie der Ehe, Partnerschaft und Familie*, Regensburg: Pustet, 2019; M.M. LINTNER: *Den Eros entgiften: Plädoyer für eine tragfähige Sexualmoral und Beziehungsethik*, Brixen: Weger, 2011.

5 In the recent years, several moral theologians have pointed out that in the Christian tradition the central virtue in the area of intimate marital relationships seems to be chastity. See J.F. KEENAN: “Virtue Ethics and Sexual Ethics”, in: *Louvain Studies* 30/3 (2005), 180-197; T.A. SALZMAN/M.G. LAWLER: “Method and Catholic Theological Ethics in the Twenty-First Century”, in: *Theological Studies* 74 (2013), 924-933. Yet chastity is by no means the only virtue associated with the marital relationship. This is also evident when looking at the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that defines chastity as “successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being. Sexuality... becomes personal and truly human when it is integrated into the relationship of one person to another, in the complete and lifelong mutual gift of a man and a woman.” (CCC 2337). Chastity is here presented as a virtue that is closely linked to the virtue of self-giving. However, while chastity is mainly discussed in the area of sexuality, the virtue of self-giving, even in the quotation above, seems to be more associated with the relationship itself, of which sexuality is an integral part. Taking the personalist shift during the Second Vatican Council seriously, it might be worthwhile, therefore, to reflect theologically also on this virtue of self-giving, including its implications for interpersonal love and sexuality in the perspective of the Magisterium.

matrimony and of openness to procreation are confronted with the rather fatal moral judgment that they simply do not or even cannot love their partner (fully). Although John Paul II seems to offer a new approach that distances itself from a neo-scholastic notion of natural law, he actually describes, in the guise of a personalist argument, the “nature” of sexuality as total self-giving, while his idea of “person” remains rather blurry. This allows him to re-confirm the same judgments upheld by the pre-conciliar manualist tradition.⁶ Thus, the reasoning has changed, but the conclusions remain the same.

Apart from exclusively relating self-giving to marital-procreative sexuality, John Paul II introduces a second change: In contrast to the council and Paul VI, he talks about a “self-giving love without limitations of time or of any other circumstance” (FC 80), a “total mutual self-giving” (FC 19). According to him, nothing should diminish this marital gift of love in its totality, especially forms of “subjectivism or relativism” (FC 11). Pointing out this danger of selfish love is, of course, not a new concern in magisterial teaching. Nevertheless, John Paul II pushes this concern to its breaking point where it starts to mask the full reality of marital life, including its limitations and incompleteness, and portrays these as just another form of subjectivism or relativism. If one wanted to draw an analogy with Blake’s poem quoted at the beginning of this article, then John Paul II would surely have to be counted among those who subscribe to the notion of total selfless love of the first stanza, in order to avoid anything that might hint at the possibility of selfish love of the second stanza. In his eyes, this gift of love has to be total; it knows no exceptions and, therefore, can only be realized within the indissolubility of the marital bond between a man and woman. This understanding, however, has provoked a lot of criticism from theologians, who argue that total self-giving promotes what might be called an “ideology of fusion” (*Verschmelzungsideologie*).⁷ The criticism does not aim at deprecating the importance

- 6 Gunter Prüller-Jagenteufel comes to a similar conclusion concerning John Paul II’s personalist approach. See G. PRÜLLER-JAGENTEUFEL: “Intrinsic Evil in Catholic Sexual Ethics: New Insights, New Approaches, New Logic”, in: N. POLGAR/J.A. SELLING (eds.): *The Concept of Intrinsic Evil Acts and Catholic Theological Ethics*, Lanham, MD: Lexington/Fortress, 2019, 41-51, 46: “Although John Paul II may appear to present a different point of view, his logic is essentially the same as that of natural law, especially because the ideal [of total self-giving] is not seen as an aim to strive for but a norm to be fulfilled.” Nevertheless, one wonders if a disposition that is claimed to be absolute, as presented by John Paul II, is actually an ideal or already an ideology, since in its totality it does not recognize the dynamics of relationship and, hence, instead of leading to a fulfilling life, it sets the couple on the road of constant frustration and becomes a massive burden. This thought will be further explored towards the end of this article.
- 7 See R. AMMICHT QUINN: “Vom Leben für andere: Frauenfragen als Beziehungsfragen? Überlegungen aus der Perspektive theologischer Ethik”, in: M. HEIMBACH-STEINS/G. CYPRIAN (eds.): *Familienbilder: Interdisziplinäre Sondierungen*, Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 2003, 59-68; M. HEIMBACH-STEINS: “Die Idealisierung von Ehe und Familie in der kirchlichen Moralverkündigung”, in: K. HILPERT (ed.): *Zukunftshorizonte katholischer Sexualethik*, Freiburg: Herder, 2011 (Quaestiones Disputatae; 241), 300-309; G. PRÜLLER-JAGENTEUFEL: “Ehe als eschatologische Existenz: Spiritualität der Ehe in der Spannung von Immanenz und Transzendenz”, in: *Geist und Leben* 77 (2001), 261-274.

of expressing care and love for each other, but it is skeptical about the demanded totality as presented in John Paul II's notion of self-giving, since its sole focus on selflessness as the foundation for fusion, unity, and harmony in marital life falls short of integrating the complexity of interpersonal reality, as well as personal needs.

Against the backdrop of this criticism, the following questions can be raised: What can be done about that totality of self-giving love without tilting into what was in the beginning of this article defined as selfish love? How can one balance between two unsuitable, even dangerous, notions of love that are expressed either in a disposition that tends towards exploiting oneself or a disposition that tends towards exploiting the other? And might there even be a reasonable claim not only to give, but also to receive? In order to explore these questions further and sketch an alternative approach, some key notions of virtue ethics and the concept of complementary virtues first need to be presented. Beginning with the classic Aristotelian definition of moral virtues, I will expand this concept through the theory of complementary virtues⁸ introduced by Radulfus Ardens, Peter Knauer, and Joseph A. Selling.

2. *Virtue as the Mean between Two Extremes*

Aristotle defines moral virtues (*aretē ēthikē*) in two steps: First, virtues are dispositions (*hexis*) and, as such, they can be distinguished from emotions (*pathos*) as well as from faculties (*dynamis*). In contrast to emotions and faculties, they are based on a deliberate decision (*prohairesis*) for or against a certain disposition. This moment of decision is a condition for being able to consciously develop dispositions. Dispositions are, therefore, the “result of habituation (*ethos*)”⁹ that we can praise or blame a person for, whereas having specific emotions or faculties is not an object of moral judgement. Hence, in his ethical theory, Aristotle focuses primarily on dispositions which can be either morally appropriate or inappropriate, either virtuous or vicious. To use an example: One would define bravery as a laudable disposition when experiencing danger. At the same time, one can think of dispositions that would be regarded as inappropriate in such a situation: If someone tends to take too much risk and endangers him-/herself and others with his/her foolhardiness, this disposition would be regarded as disconcerting rather than admirable. Conversely, one would come to a similar conclusion if someone tends to react too cautiously and remains incapacitated because of cowardice. On the basis of this and further considerations, Aristotle

8 This aspect of the article is based on reflections that have been already published in my doctoral dissertation. See S. HÖLLINGER: *Ansprüche an Ehe und Partnerschaft: Ein theologischer Beitrag zu einer beziehungsethischen Herausforderung*, Münster: Aschendorff, 2019 (Studien der Moraltheologie: Neue Folge; II).

9 ARISTOTLE: *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. R. Crisp, Cambridge: University Press, 2004, 1103a. Hereafter, references to the *Nicomachean Ethics* are abbreviated with “NE”.

distinguishes between three dispositions, “two are vices – one of excess, the other of deficiency – and the third, the mean, is virtue” (NE 1108 b). These three dispositions are not independent from but related to each other.

At this point, one encounters the second step of Aristotle’s definition of virtues as a mean between two extremes, which indicates that virtues are determined by their relation to vices. While vices (e.g. foolhardiness – cowardice; profligacy – insensibility) are extremes, virtue (e.g. bravery, temperance) is located somewhere in between. However, a virtue does not have the same distance to both corresponding vices. “In some cases, the deficiency is more opposed to the mean than is the excess, in others the excess is more opposed than the deficiency; for example, it is not rashness [foolhardiness], the excess, which is more opposed to courage, but cowardice, the deficiency; while it is not insensibility, the deficiency, but intemperance [profligacy], the excess, which is more opposed to temperance” (NE 1109 a). It is, thus, not surprising that “some of the extremes seem rather like the mean” (NE 1108 b), which can easily lead to confusing, for example, foolhardiness with courage or insensibility with temperance. As a result, we are more likely to recommend bravery to a cowardly rather than to a foolhardy person, temperance to a profligate rather than to an insensible person. In effect, one might wonder what advice can be offered to a foolhardy or insensible person, since he/she is convinced that he/she is already (or even “more than”) brave or temperate?¹⁰ One can answer the question by simply referring to common sense that would urge a foolhardy person to be more prudent and to exercise caution and an insensible person to be more receptive and allow him-/herself some level of indulgence.

Aristotle and his definition of virtues as a mean between two extremes has received far-reaching recognition. Nevertheless, only a small number of scholars have pursued further the question of the relation between these (supposedly) three dispositions. Within the theological context, Ardens, Knauer, and Selling deserve to be singled out. Although these theologians belong to different epochs and may not have made use of each other’s work,¹¹ they formulated similar conclusions. The next section will describe these conclusions and show how they lead to an alternative concept of complementary virtues.

¹⁰ This question is also raised by A.W. MÜLLER: *Was taugt die Tugend? Elemente einer Ethik des guten Lebens*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1998 (Ethik Aktuell; 4), 158.

¹¹ Apart from a single footnote in Peter Knauer’s later publication from 2002, neither he nor Selling refer to Ardens’s work. Furthermore, Selling finds inspiration for his account of complementary virtues in a few sporadic references that Knauer makes to these in his early publications, but does not seem to be familiar with this later book, where Knauer returns to this topic.

3. Concept of Complementary Virtues

3.1. Radulfus Ardens

Radulfus Ardens, a twelfth century theologian and early scholastic philosopher,¹² is probably the first to propose the concept of complementary virtues. He developed this concept in his work *Speculum Universale*,¹³ regarded as “the most significant representation of the Christian doctrine of faith and virtue”¹⁴ of his period. There Ardens defines virtues in a threefold way. He begins with a philosophical definition that specifies virtues as dispositions that can only be cultivated by continuous practice, but he expands this notion further by highlighting a theological perspective that regards virtues as a gift from God. Consequently, virtues have a double origin for him: Although we as human beings depend on divine grace and cannot freely regulate our dispositions, we also have the task to work constantly on them within our powers. Besides this entanglement of philosophical and theological definitions, Ardens additionally introduces a third characteristic: virtue as a “mean between vices”, a mean “between too much and too little” (SpU 1.21). This definition may be surprising, given the fact that the rediscovery of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* had not taken place before the thirteenth century. The description of virtues as a middle point between extremes, however, appears already in the poetic writings of Horace, which Ardens knew and cited in his oeuvre (although without explicitly mentioning his name).¹⁵

- 12 Little is known about Ardens’s life. Biographical data about him are sparse and not fully reliable. Following Johannes Gründel, it can only be assumed that Ardens was born before 1150 in Beaulieu-sur-Bressuire, Poitou, and died around 1200. His surname “Ardens” cannot be verified before the 14th or 15th century and probably refers to his ardent style as preacher. His writings suggest that he was well educated in the arts and theology and was presumably a follower of Gilbert de la Porrée († around 1154). After his studies, he worked as teacher, preacher, and pastoral worker, mostly in the southwestern part of today’s France. Besides his (unfinished) main work *Speculum Universale*, his bibliography includes about 200 homilies and letters, although the latter have not survived. See also J. GRÜNDEL: *Die Lehre des Radulfus Ardens von den Verstandestugenden auf dem Hintergrund seiner Seelenlehre*, München: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1976 (Veröffentlichungen des Grabmann-Institutes; 27), 9-10.
- 13 In researching this article, I could find no English translation of this work. References to the *Speculum Universale*, therefore, refer to the Latin original and are my translation. For a critical Latin edition of the first five books see RADULFUS ARDENS: *Speculum Universale: Libri I-V*, ed. C. Heimann/S. Ernst, Turnhout: Brepols, 2011 (Corpus Christianorum; 241). Hereafter, references to this work are abbreviated with “SpU”. For a German translation of the most relevant passages of the first five books see RADULFUS ARDENS: *Speculum Universale: Auswahl aus den Büchern I und V; Wie entstehen Tugenden und Laster?*, Latin and German text, ed. S. Ernst, Freiburg: Herder, 2017 (Herders Bibliothek der Philosophie des Mittelalters; 14).
- 14 M. DREYER: “Radulfus Ardens”, in: *LThK* 8 (2001), 789 [my translation]; see M. GRABMANN: *Die Geschichte der scholastischen Methode*. Band 1: *Die Scholastische Methode von ihren ersten Anfängen in der Väterliteratur bis zum Beginn des 12. Jahrhunderts*, Freiburg: Herder, 1909, 248.
- 15 See J. GRÜNDEL: *Die Lehre des Radulfus Ardens*, 235; G. WIELAND: *Ethica – Scientia practica: Die Anfänge der philosophischen Ethik im 13. Jahrhundert*, Münster: Aschendorff, 1981 (Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters: Neue Folge; 21), 232.

This detailed exploration of virtues and their characteristics does not come to an end at this point in his work. Instead, he elaborates these thoughts further by proposing the principle of what he calls “collateral virtues” (*virtutes collaterales*). More specifically, Ardens uses the example of the two virtues of prudence and simplicity (understood as guilelessness) to illustrate his concept of complementary virtues: Prudence (*prudentia*) needs to be balanced by simplicity, otherwise it slides into guile or skulduggery (*versutia*). Simplicity (*simplicitas*), on the other hand, needs to be balanced by prudence, otherwise it becomes naivety or foolishness (*stultitia*). To put it differently: One must be prudent not to be deceived and one must be guileless not to deceive others. Hence, both of these virtues can only become outright virtues, for Ardens, when they complement each other and maintain a certain kind of balance. Without its complement, a disposition can easily become an extreme, i.e., a vice. Now, this principle is not restricted to the example of prudence and simplicity, but can be found throughout his entire work, and in fact gives it its basic structure. Consequently, Stephan Ernst declares “collateral virtues” to be the “key concept”¹⁶ of Ardens’s virtue approach: “The idea that two virtues belong together as *virtutes collaterales* and prevent each other from becoming a vice can be found in the specific virtue theory of Radulfus Ardens not only randomly and sporadically...but consistently, shaping the entire system of virtue theory. For virtually every main virtue...he identifies a respective complementary virtue.”¹⁷

16 Exceptions to this principle are only those few virtues that are, according to Ardens, threatened by deficiency but not by excess, since there can never be “too much” of them. In that regard, in SpU 1.21 he mentions the virtues of faith, love, and chastity, in SpU 14.41 the virtues of temperance, chastity, and love of God. However, it is precisely this assumption that Stephan Ernst questions: In his opinion, the virtue of chastity (here understood as sexual modesty), for instance, has to be supplemented by a virtue that he describes as general affirmation of or positive approach to sexuality. If this complement is missing, chastity is likely to lead to prudishness. Without chastity, on the other hand, this positive approach towards sexuality can lead to promiscuity. Similarly, the virtue of faith has to be complemented by an affirmation of the world (*Weltbejahung*); otherwise, mere faith leads to ignorance of earthly realities, while the sole focus on the world leads to idolatry. In this way, Stephan Ernst demonstrates that even these alleged exceptions can be ultimately integrated into Ardens’s structural principle of complementary virtues. See S. ERNST: “Klug wie die Schlangen und ehrlich wie die Tauben: Die Lehre von den Komplementärtugenden als Strukturprinzip der Tugendlehre des Radulfus Ardens”, in: *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift* 61 (2010), 43-60, 50; S. ERNST: “‘Estote prudentes sicut serpentes et simplices sicut columbae’ (Mt 10,16): Der Gedanke der Komplementärtugenden im *Speculum universale* des Radulfus Ardens”, in: G. FÖRSTER/A. GROTE/C. MÜLLER (eds.): *Spiritus et Littera: Beiträge zur Augustinus-Forschung* (FS C. Mayer OSA), Würzburg: Echter, 2009 (Res et Signa: Augustinus-Studien; 6), 561-562.

17 S. ERNST: “Klug wie die Schlangen und ehrlich wie die Tauben”, 50; S. ERNST: “‘Estote prudentes sicut serpentes’”, 551-575, my translation.

3.2. Peter Knauer

Contrary to Aristotle's reduction of the mean to a single virtue, Ardens offered a new direction for virtue theory that, rather surprisingly, received almost no attention in theology and was more or less forgotten in subsequent centuries. As a result, the idea needed another eight centuries before it was picked up again in philosophical¹⁸ and theological reflection. It seems that the first theologian who articulated a similar insight was Peter Knauer during the 1960s in his widely known work on the principle of double effect. In this work, he refers to Aristotelian virtue theory in order to clarify his concept of proportion and his understanding of "commensurate reason" (*raison proportionnée*).¹⁹ For this reason, Knauer uses the example of bravery as a mean between cowardice and foolhardiness and, subsequently, comes to the following insight: "Aristotle declared that bravery appears more closely related to one of the two extremes, foolhardiness. This observation, which is made by Aristotle himself with some surprise, provides an opportunity for asking whether there is not also a name for right behavior which appears to lie closer to cowardice, the other false extreme. There is, in fact, prudence. It belongs inseparably with bravery."²⁰ Knauer states clearly that the virtue of bravery has a complement. If this complement is not taken into consideration, bravery is in danger of sliding into an extreme, since it is not moderated by caution.

This makes Knauer not only the first to introduce the term "complementary virtue", but he also illustrates this thought further by offering five additional examples, e.g. "liberality – economy" and their extremes "extravagance – avarice".²¹ In doing so, he demonstrates that his initial observation can be applied to other virtues as well. More than thirty years later, he even expands his list of virtue pairs in his work *Handlungsnetze*.²² In this update, he also points out two specific challenges that one has to be aware of. Knauer first draws attention to the fact

18 Besides the recovery of the idea of complementary virtues in theology, one can find a similar development in the area of philosophy. In 1925, the German philosopher Nicolai Hartmann proposed a theory of complementary values that expands the Aristotelian virtue theory through interpreting virtues as an expression for mutually complementary values. See N. HARTMANN: *Ethik*, Berlin: DeGruyter, 1962, 439-443, 562-584. His theory has also been adapted outside of philosophy. Paul Helwig and Friedemann Schulz von Thun, for instance, integrated Nicolai Hartmann's idea into their works in psychology. See P. HELWIG: *Charakterologie*, Leipzig-Berlin: Teubner, 1936, 60-63; F. SCHULZ VON THUN: *Miteinander reden. 2: Stille, Werte und Persönlichkeitsentwicklung*, Reinbek b. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1990, 38-55.

19 See P. KNAUER: "La détermination du bien et du mal moral par le principe du double effect", in: *Nouvelle revue théologique* 87 (1965), 356-376, esp. 370-373. This article was revised and published in English and German: P. KNAUER: "The Hermeneutic Function of the Principle of Double Effect", in: *Natural Law Forum* 12 (1967), 132-162, esp. 146-147; P. KNAUER: "Das rechtverstandene Prinzip von der Doppelwirkung als Grundnorm jeder Gewissensentscheidung", in: *Theologie und Glaube* 57 (1967), 107-133, esp. 119-122.

20 P. KNAUER: "The Hermeneutic Function of the Principle of Double Effect", 146.

21 Ibid. 146-147.

22 See P. KNAUER: *Handlungsnetze: Über das Grundprinzip der Ethik*, Frankfurt a. M.: Books on Demand, 2002, 24-27.

that the German language does not always offer terms that are precise enough to express the disposition one has in mind. Other languages,²³ though, seem to suffer from a similar problem: The term “diligence” (as well as, e.g., “pride” or “permissiveness”), for example, can be understood as indicating a virtue, but it can also be used as a synonym for a vice that is associated with an exaggerated ambition, eagerness, or workaholicism. The identification of its complementary virtue, however, seems to be an even greater difficulty. We can easily come up with a name for the extreme (“indolence”), but we have trouble finding an unambiguous term for the virtue that complements diligence, without offering a detailed description.²⁴ Second, according to Knauer, it is an even greater challenge to find an umbrella term that covers these different groups of inter-related virtues and vices. Such a name could provide clarity and lead to a broader awareness of the four related dispositions. For the virtues of courage and caution and the extremes of foolhardiness and cowardice, for example, he suggests the term “dispositions of courage” (*Mut-Haltungen*); for the virtues of liberality and economy and the extremes of extravagance and avarice he proposes “dispositions of giving” (*Gebe-Haltungen*).²⁵

3.3. Joseph A. Selling

More recently, Joseph A. Selling has pursued the idea of complementary virtues. In his monograph *Reframing Catholic Theological Ethics*, published in 2016, he refers to Knauer’s concept and develops it further.²⁶ The novelty that he introduces can be traced through his description of the relation between dispositions, between virtues and vices. Although Selling shares the assumption that the mean between extremes consists of two corresponding virtues, he proposes an adjustment concerning the way in which Knauer presented the relation between those four dispositions. Knauer, in his English article from 1967, used the image of a “square...of universal applicability”²⁷ to illustrate the connections between the corresponding dispositions.²⁸ Selling takes this exemplification and modifies it into a trapezoid. The virtues are, thereby, located on the short and the vices on

23 Both Aristotle and Ardens struggle with the same problem. Hence, they often describe dispositions (virtues as well as extremes) that they have in mind or refer to by relating them to their corresponding virtues or extremes. Aristotle talks, for instance, in NE 1125 b, about the extremes of ambitiousness (*philotimia*) and unambitiousness (*aphilotimia*) without coming up with a name for the virtue that lies in between those two vices.

24 See P. KNAUER: *Handlungsnetze*, 25-26.

25 Ibid. 27.

26 See J.A. SELLING: *Reframing Catholic Theological Ethics*, Oxford: University Press, 2016, esp. 145-168.

27 P. KNAUER: “The Hermeneutic Function of the Principle of Double Effect”, 147.

28 What might be interesting to add here is the fact that this comparison cannot be found in either his French or German texts. Although the English article seems almost to be a literal translation of the German version, the text differs at this point. In German, the text simply says: “Es gibt beliebig viele Beispiele mehr”, which means: “There are many more examples”. P. KNAUER: “Das rechtverstandene Prinzip von der Doppelwirkung”, 121.

the long sides. In doing this, he demonstrates that the two virtues lie between the extremes and are, consequently, less far apart from each other than the corresponding extremes. His deliberations, though, do not end with the refinement of this model. Almost casually, he adds that a virtue can be better understood as the “moderated version of one of the extremes – without losing sight of the moderated version of the other extreme”.²⁹ Bravery, then, is not simply by accident more related to foolhardiness than to cowardice, but is (because of its orientation to the virtue of caution) an attenuated version of it. It is for this reason that Selling talks about the mean as a continuum between being “cautiously brave” and “bravely cautious”, since a virtue cannot exist without its corresponding complement. If it is envisioned in that way, it will always be in danger of deteriorating into an associated extreme or vice.³⁰

This notion of complementary virtues can also help to explain why virtues do not always follow an exactly predefined scheme. Since virtues cannot be reduced to a single mean but, in fact, lie on a continuum, a wide range of different behaviors expressing the same virtue seem to be possible and also depend, for example, on a person’s abilities as well as on the respective setting.³¹ This concept of complementary virtues thus demands a more nuanced awareness of the diversity and complexity of the individual’s moral life and integrates this awareness into the (theological)-ethical discourse. Conversely, this “does not mean that ‘virtuous behavior’ is relativistic or completely subjective. It merely points to the fact that real human persons function in an ever-changing world in which the circumstances of their lives and the demands on the decision-making process for achieving what are clearly virtuous ends or goals needs to be taken into account before concrete choices are made.”³² To put it differently: This approach allows a certain flexibility, but this should not be confused with arbitrariness or relativism. If a disposition becomes an extreme and, therefore, rigid, because it completely neglects what lies on the other side of the continuum, one would be justified in calling this disposition “inappropriate” or even “bad”. In other words, the adaptability and moral appropriateness of exercising virtues in specific situations turn into their opposites when their complements are rejected or ignored.

29 J.A. SELLING: *Reframing Catholic Theological Ethics*, 156.

30 See *ibid.*

31 Selling exemplifies this insight by illustrating that a “cautiously brave” behavior of a person that is, e.g., trained in the martial arts might look quite different from a person who is not. Moreover, it also makes a difference if other people are involved in the situation as well as where and when the situation is happening, etc. The implicit insight of this illustration is that exactly the same behavior can lead, depending on the person and the concrete situation, to quite different or even contrary judgements. What one would regard as “virtuous” behavior in a certain situation involving a specific person, one might find “vicious” when circumstances are different. For instance: Whereas a person that is in a good physical condition and trained in the martial arts is acting “bravely” if he/she is trying to overwhelm an unarmed attacker, someone who is physically inferior to the attacker is acting “foolhardily” in attempting the same thing.

32 *Ibid.* 167-168.

In addition to refining the principle of complementary virtues, Selling adds another intriguing thought when talking about the trapezoid that he proposes for describing the relations between dispositions. In this thought, he reacts, perhaps unknowingly, to the challenge that Knauer addresses when he discusses the difficulty of finding an umbrella term that would somehow indicate how these dispositions correspond to each other. Selling's proposal concerns the surface between these four points of the trapezoid and raises the question of what this surface actually represents.³³ To answer this question, he draws attention to the fact that by now we only know about the dispositions and how they relate to each other, but we do not really know what this relation is all about. He argues that the surface of the trapezoid designates those situations in which the related virtues and vices become relevant. To give an example: We do not need to be (cautiously) brave or (bravely) cautious in every thinkable situation, but we definitely do need these virtues when facing danger or being threatened. This means that taking certain virtues into consideration always implies that one finds him-/herself in a setting in which they become relevant. "Complementary virtues identify areas of human living, situations that a person may (or may not) face in the course of their lives."³⁴ This is also the reason why virtues hinge on their cultural, historical, and circumstantial surroundings. In certain societies and epochs, for instance, people are more exposed to dangers and, consequently, the need to develop appropriate virtues towards these kinds of situations is more urgent than for those people who do not find themselves in similar situations on a regular basis.³⁵

4. *Between Gifting and Receiving*

What can we learn from this concept of complementary virtues if we apply it to the notion of total self-giving as found in the teaching of the Magisterium? First and foremost, this principle facilitates an understanding of the problem that arises when "virtues" are defined as something "total" or "absolute". If we understand virtue as a mean between two extremes, the attribute of "totality" does not seem to be adequate for characterizing virtues. This becomes even more evident when virtues are defined as "moderated versions" of their extremes, which ought to be constantly balanced by their corresponding complementary virtues and not pinned down to an isolated disposition. Yet, this is precisely what happens when the notion of "total" self-giving that allows no exceptions is maintained. What one encounters here, thus, is an extreme, a vice. Without being balanced by its corresponding complement, self-giving becomes an unendurable sacrifice, an overly excessive devotion that presupposes an ideological notion of love rather

³³ Ibid. 154.

³⁴ Ibid. 157.

³⁵ Ibid. 157-160.

than a specific cultural, historical, and circumstantial reality. This kind of ideology and the aforementioned qualifications of the virtue of self-giving ignore the unavoidable experience of complexity, tension, or even crisis within relationships.

Overall, it seems that John Paul II was not as interested in the virtue of total self-giving itself but rather in finding a novel way of validating the more traditional understanding of marital sexuality. As mentioned already at the beginning of this article, his reference to “total self-giving” (*tota donatio*) seems mainly motivated by the need to defend those norms in the area of sexuality that were already established by natural law and thought of as inviolable. In line with John XXIII’s dictum that “the substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another”,³⁶ John Paul II wraps those norms in the personalist clothing of a discourse on “total self-giving” in order to change the way they are presented and at the same time affirm their continual validity. Because of this, the link between self-giving and the regulation of sexuality is immediately established, and the result is not only a new justification of “traditional norms”, but also a specific view of what this “virtue” entails. That particular view of self-giving might seem intuitively right within the Christian context, insofar as it distances itself from any trace of egoism and urges unbounded Christ-like altruism. In the case of human sexuality in particular and human relationships in general, the intuition, however, proves wrong or at least incomplete, since it draws a simplistic notion of self-giving that confuses norm with “ideal” and ethics with eschatology. As will be shown in the following sections, two problems can be identified. First, this notion of *total* self-giving ignores its corresponding virtue and, with it, complex and finite human reality. Second, the notion of total *self-giving* is one-directional, insofar as it seems to be purely oriented towards the other. Therefore, what one is offered through John Paul II’s notion of total self-giving is an instrumentalization of this particular virtue, whose role in relational ethics is revealed only when considered within the thicker account of complementary virtues. By addressing these two specific problems in the next sections, a more comprehensive view of self-giving will be sketched.

5. *The Problem of “Totality”*

In order to tackle the problem of totality related to the notion of self-giving, it helps to recall the model of the virtuous trapezoid suggested by Selling, so that the virtuous as well as vicious dispositions might be identified more clearly. Against the backdrop of this concept of complementary virtues and, hence, contrary to John Paul II’s understanding of “total self-giving” as a “virtue”, I propose a

³⁶ JOHN XXIII: *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, 15. The Latin text can be found at: http://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/la/speeches/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_spe_19621011_opening-council.html (accessed 31.01.21). An English translation can be found at: <https://jakomonchak.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/john-xxiii-opening-speech.pdf> (accessed 31.01.21).

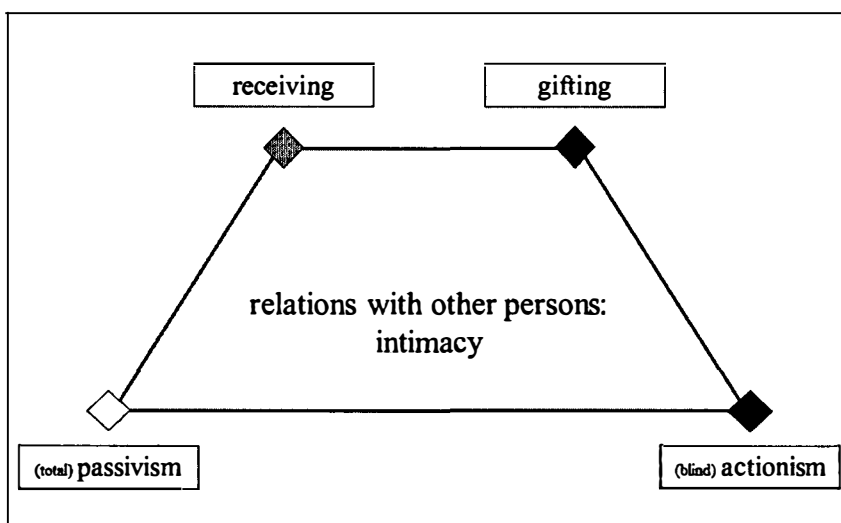
distinction between the extreme of “total self-giving” and the associated virtue of “self-giving”. To distinguish the vice of total self-giving from the virtue of self-giving even more and indicate clearly why total self-giving is indeed an extreme, it might be pertinent to introduce a different term for the former, such as “blind actionism that aims for fusion”, and a different term for the latter, such as “gifting”. Referring to different terms here supports, first, the distinction between the vice and the virtue, even if one is confronted with the difficulty of not having established terms to refer to these two, which was already identified by Knauer as a general challenge of naming dispositions. Consequently, he advises describing what one associates with specific names that can only indicate but never fully explain the related content. Second, finding adequate substitutes and giving fuller descriptions can also help one to distance oneself from already existing associations one has in mind when talking about “self-giving”, in order to be more open to reflecting on the meaning and consequences of the respective dispositions.

Bearing this in mind, the term “blind actionism” aims at capturing an exclusive emphasis on total self-giving that obscures one’s own as well as the partner’s limitations of who one can be and what one can do. It might be tempting to conceptualize an intimate relationship as a place of perfect harmony, brought about by one’s own frenetic and relentless actions, but such a conceptualization ignores the complexity of human experience and relationship and reflects an “ideal” that is too burdensome for any couple. The virtue of “gifting” understood as a “mediated form” of this extreme indicates that it has a certain resemblance to the described blind actionism. Consequently, one can define it as a disposition that promotes togetherness and commitment and is aware of the necessity to be engaged with and to work actively on a relationship. Nevertheless, according to the theory of complementary virtues, this virtuous disposition ought to be moderated by its complement. Thus, one might wonder: What can be found on the other side of the virtuous continuum? Which virtue complements self-giving?

Against the background of the previous considerations, we can already see that the virtue we are looking for has to point to the fact that we are constantly encountering limitations and even has to be able to integrate this insight into the concrete reality of intimate relationships. It is, hence, not a coincidence that the Second Vatican Council talks about “spouses [that] mutually bestow and accept each other” (GS 48) when unfolding its notion of “marital love”, and it is here that one can detect a disposition that seems to balance the virtue of gifting or, as it is called here, “bestowing”. What we encounter here is the importance of accepting someone as he/she is and “receiving” him/her with his/her strengths and weaknesses³⁷ as the virtuous response to a person’s limitations, insofar as it is

37 As opposed to the notion of self-giving that is used fairly consistently, at least when it comes to the recent magisterial teaching, the terminology for its complementary virtue varies, which is in itself an indication of the virtue’s marginalization. Although one comes across a number of terms, such as “accepting” (GS 48), “loving the partner for the partner’s own sake” (HV 8), “taking (others as they are)” (AL 220), the meaning of these references is not developed further nor is their relation with the notion of self-giving explained.

part of our everyday life to be confronted with unmanageable tasks and even failures. This should not be confused with the extreme of resignation or “total passivism” that completes the trapezoid and with which, on the other hand, the virtue of “receiving” is more closely related, but not identical. The former is different from the virtue of receiving, which is already connected with its complement of gifting and, hence, does not tend towards complete passivity but is informed by the necessity of active engagement with this finite reality. The extreme of “total passivism” exclusively emphasizes weaknesses and limitations, suggesting resignation as the only viable option within a relationship. The whole trapezoid could, accordingly, be presented as shown in the following image³⁸:



Apart from casting a light on the other pole of the virtuous continuum where one finds the virtue of receiving as an expression of accepting each other, the above citation from *Gaudium et spes* also shows that the council might have had a more balanced approach to this whole issue than the subsequent magisterial documents. That balance, however, was not disturbed all at once, but was instead lost gradually as other concerns took precedence. Thus, although Paul VI already emphasizes the idea of “a love which is total” (HV 9), he defines this love in his further reflections as a “very special form of personal friendship in which husband and wife generously share everything, allowing no unreasonable exceptions and not thinking solely of their own convenience. Whoever really loves his partner loves not only for what he receives, but loves that partner for the partner’s own sake, content to be able to enrich the other with the gift of himself.” (HV 9) Without a doubt, Paul VI is quite careful when treating this topic, but he implicitly acknowledges that there might be reasonable exceptions to his notion

38 This version of the trapezium is an application of the trapezium developed by Selling. See J.A. SELLING: *Reframing Catholic Theological Ethics*, 155.

of total love. Consequently, one can assume that there are situations in which one's giving and sharing is (reasonably) limited. From there, it is, again, not a big step to what Paul VI says about the partner who is, of course, also confronted with limitations and, therefore, has to be accepted as he/she is, i.e., has to be loved for his/her own sake. Even though Paul VI is not relating this crucial insight to the virtue of "receiving" as developed in this article, but actually differentiates it from the notion of loving someone for what he/she is, one could argue that receiving ought to be understood in this broader sense. Namely, if one cannot avoid being confronted with the flaws, moods, and imperfections of the partner, then excluding these from the notion of receiving leads to the reduction of the scope of this virtue, brought about by Paul VI's hesitancy to develop his idea further in that direction. During the papacy of John Paul II, however, the necessity of accepting and integrating limitations, disappointments, and even failures into the mutual relationship seem to have vanished without a trace, leaving only the notion of total self-giving.

To summarize: There is a need to correct the tendency towards "totality" within post-conciliar magisterial documents and to re-introduce a more balanced approach to dealing with intimate relationships. To do so, the disposition towards one's partner ought to be envisioned on the continuum between gifting and receiving, between giving and taking someone as he/she is, while avoiding both extremes of total passivism and blind activism.³⁹ Ending up in these extremes is, therefore, not only a consequence of directly giving in to an extreme, but also (and this is perhaps even more likely) a result of insisting on only one of the "virtues" in a total sense while losing sight of the whole reality of the relationship.

6. *The Problem of "One-Directionality"*

Due to the fact that John Paul II discusses self-giving within the broader context of intimate relationships, it is easy to overlook the significant detail that his notion of this "virtue" is directed exclusively towards one's partner. In other words, when self-giving is discussed in magisterial teaching, it is posited that the one who gives or gifts is always different from the one who receives the gift of

39 According to Knauer's observation, finding appropriate terms for virtues and their vices also depends on the respective language. This can be demonstrated with regard to what is called in this article "gifting" and "receiving", "blind activism" and "total passivism". In German, one would translate giving as *Hingabe* and its complementary virtue as *Annahme*, which means that "giving" (*geben*) and "taking" (*nehmen*) are already integral parts of these two terms. The latter term (*Annahme*), however, cannot be fully translated, since it is an expression that means not only accepting but truly integrating something or someone into one's own life. Exchanging the prefixes "*Hin-*" and "*An-*" in those two terms (*Hinnahme*, *Angabe*) indicates which extremes are related to the virtues. Whereas *Hinnahme* stands for resignation and passivism, the reference to *Angabe* (in the sense of a ruthless requirement, pressure, or force) can be understood as "activism". This play on words is not translatable into English, which makes it more dependable on explanations of each of these dispositions.

self. This, on the other hand, does not seem to correspond with how the virtue of receiving as an expression of acceptance is usually understood, insofar as one can and ought to accept oneself, as well as the other. Thus, in this latter case, one is not only the subject who practices and directs virtuous behavior towards another person, but can at the same time be that person to whom the virtue is directed. That kind of self-referential directedness of virtue is usually missing when it comes to self-giving, and it is perhaps in this that one ought to look for the main reason why John Paul II is able to relate it so strongly to the notion of altruism. Nevertheless, according to the concept of complementary virtues, this two-directionality of accepting or receiving should at least raise the question whether self-giving or gifting really remains limited to others as persons towards which this virtue is directed. Or, alternatively, could someone be a gift to oneself without being a narcissist or egotist? Although this suggestion might sound quite odd at first, insofar as this virtue is usually regarded as a variation of love towards one's neighbor, there is no reason why it could not also incorporate and incarnate the virtue of self-love⁴⁰ as expressed in the often-overlooked commandment to love one's neighbor *as oneself*.

Put differently, directing the virtue of gifting towards oneself recognizes the need to pay attention to personal needs, i.e., caring for one's physical and psychological health, taking time for oneself as well as for close friends, pursuing one's talents and hobbies, etc. Gifting should not, therefore, be confused with self-abandonment. We can only give and devote ourselves to others, if there is a (healthy, content, etc.) self that can give (itself to the other). Without a doubt, this kind of self-acknowledgement can itself become extreme and lead to "egotism", if it is not balanced by its directedness towards the other and, hence, result in the exploitation and instrumentalization of the partner. However, one can also drift into extreme forms of "altruism" and self-denial, if personal needs are ignored or even deliberately suppressed. Monika Hoffmann summarizes well the balance between self-love and love of the other: "Totally selfless love is to be rejected as much as selfish love. Neither of these benefit the other person. While in the case of selfish love the other becomes a means to an end, in the case of selfless love the other does not find an individual, personal relatedness",⁴¹ i.e., has no "thou" to relate to. A similar observation can be made with regard to the virtue of "receiving" that should encompass taking the other as he/she is as well as taking oneself for who one is. If one accepts only one's own limitations ("I am who I am"), but expects the other person to have no flaws, the acceptance of oneself becomes an excuse for projecting any tensions or conflicts in the relationship onto the partner.

40 For an extensive typology of different notions of self-love in Christian thinkers see D. FOZARD WEAVER: *Self Love and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 (New Studies in Christian Ethics; 23), 47-77.

41 M. HOFFMANN: *Selbstliebe: Ein grundlegendes Prinzip von Ethos*, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2002 (Abhandlungen zur Philosophie, Psychologie, Soziologie der Religion und Ökumenik; 50), 331, my translation; see also H.-G. GRUBER: *Familie und christliche Ethik*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995, 107-108.

If one is taking the partner as he/she is but, on the other hand, cannot accept one's own weaknesses, this leads easily to blaming oneself for all the problems that keep appearing in a relationship.⁴²

In summary: The problem of one-directionality suggests that the "virtue" of self-giving as understood by John Paul II can only be directed towards the other. Yet, the above reflection demonstrates that in the case of the virtue of gifting as well as in the case of the virtue of receiving, we are not confronted with an either-or issue but rather have to maintain a balance between the directedness towards the partner and that towards oneself. One might even say that when this two-directionality is introduced, there is another trapezoid to discover, whose aim is to avoid additional extremes: extreme forms of egotism that leave no space for the other, as well as extreme forms of altruism that ignore the importance of paying attention to one's own well-being. In order to fully develop these virtues, both directions must be constantly kept in view.

7. Conclusion

This article in no way rejects self-giving – or what was called gifting in this article – as a virtue. On the contrary, it proposes self-giving or gifting as a virtue that offers essential insights concerning intimate relationships; it helps couples not to tilt into full resignation or total passivism and takes the task of actively shaping the relationship seriously. But – and this is what this contribution is ultimately about – gifting must not be the sole focus of the understanding of interpersonal love, especially when it is defined as total devotion to the partner, without any mediation by its complementary virtue and directional expansion towards oneself. In other words, it is simply not true that love knows no bounds. In addition to the experience of greatest joy, harmony, and support, love can also lead to moments of frustration and disappointment. This is also what the poem by William Blake at the beginning of this article can teach us. Rather than regarding the two stanzas as competing and mutually exclusive forms of love, one could interpret these two notions as two different aspects of one and the same love. Although partners might sometimes lean more towards the one or the other aspect of love, they ultimately have to integrate both realities: gifting as well as receiving, giving as well as taking, caring for the other as well as caring for oneself.

However, when it comes to the teaching of the Magisterium, one is still confronted with what seems to be a blind spot or an avoidance of dealing with conflicts or even failures within marriage and family life. John Paul's perspective does not integrate the relational experiences of difference, tension, and conflict. The article, thus, argues that both moments – gifting and receiving, giving and taking – must be taken seriously in church teaching. An initial step in that

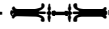
⁴² See T.A. SALZMAN/M.G. LAWLER, *Introduction to Catholic Theological Ethics: Foundations and Applications*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2019, 114.

direction has been made by Pope Francis in *Amoris laetitia* when he points out: “As love matures, it also learns to ‘negotiate’. Far from anything selfish or calculating, such negotiation is an exercise of mutual love, an interplay of give and take, for the good of the family.” (AL 220) With this rather astonishing thought, Pope Francis attempts to engage with these abovementioned challenges and provides virtuous correctives to John Paul’s narrow definition of total self-giving. Nevertheless, a more systematic reflection has to follow such sporadic corrections that are easily missed in magisterial pronouncements when they are not related to a broader and more consistent understanding of those realities they address.

SUMMARY

On Gifting, Receiving, and the Concept of Complementary Virtues: A Hermeneutic Key for Relational Ethics

This article explores the potential contribution of the concept of complementary virtues in the area of relational ethics and focuses especially on the magisterial notion of love as “(total) self-giving”. Although the notion of love had an important influence on the personalist shift during and after the Second Vatican Council, attention needs to be drawn to serious limitations of its understanding as “total self-giving” in terms of its “totality” and “one-directionality”. In order to understand these limitations and their potential risk for couples and families, the author pursues the idea of complementary virtues and applies it to the notion of self-giving. First developed as a structural principle for understanding the relation between virtues and vices by Radulfus Ardens in the 12th century, the concept reappears in the thought of Peter Knauer during the 1960s and is deepened in the current work of Joseph A. Selling. Since this approach proves to be highly sensitive in countering the risk of one-sidedness when focusing on an isolated disposition, the article tries to unfold the implications of this approach for the virtue of self-giving by highlighting the importance of its complementary virtue as well as its two-directedness. Consequently, two considerations have to be integrated when trying to develop a more constructive approach to this virtue. First, *total* self-giving emphasizes the importance of committing to and actively engaging with one’s partner. Nevertheless, this disposition becomes an extreme when it denies the reality of differences, tensions, and conflicts within an intimate relationship. Therefore, self-giving or gifting has to be balanced by a complementary virtue such as accepting or receiving, insofar as this virtue raises awareness of potential limitations and challenges and suggests how to integrate them into virtuous living. Only if these two virtues of self-giving and accepting, or gifting and receiving, complement and, thus, balance each other, extremes of blind activism and total passivism within one’s relationship can be avoided. Second, *total self-giving* is usually understood as one-directional, insofar as it seems to be always oriented towards the other. In order to correct this, the author proposes envisioning the virtues of gifting and receiving as being able to be directed towards oneself as well as the other, which would prove beneficial for avoiding extreme forms of altruism and egoism. The example of self-giving is instructive insofar as it demonstrates that the concept of complementary virtues can be an important hermeneutic key for a relational ethics that acknowledges the complexity of reality and avoids simplistic answers in the area of intimate relationships.



Stephanie Höllinger, Ph.D., currently works as university assistant (postdoc) at the Chair of Moral Theology at the Catholic-Theological Faculty of the Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz, Germany. In 2018, she received her doctorate from the Catholic-Theological Faculty of the University of Vienna, Austria. The results of her research can be found in *Ansprüche an Ehe und Partnerschaft: Ein theologischer Beitrag zu einer beziehungsethischen Herausforderung*, Münster: Aschendorff, 2019 (Studien der Moraltheologie: Neue Folge; 11).