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# Transcendent and cardinal virtues in university students. An exploratory study

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## ABSTRACT

Our research presents a theoretical and empirical exploratory study on humility, magnanimity and mercy as transcendent virtues from a theoretical basis that integrates elements of Christian theology and psychology. Self-transcendence is understood as an inner movement of the human being that can be oriented toward the sacred and toward other people. This movement may involve collaboration with divine action. From this theoretical framework, we developed a 15-item Likert-type self-perception questionnaire of transcendent virtues (MHM), which was administered to a sample of 870 university students in three countries, a two-factor structure (active patience and mercy) with high reliability scores ( $\alpha > .85$  for both cases). A convergent/divergent validity analysis was also conducted in relation to a questionnaire measuring cardinal virtues (QCV). The study included criterion items, and correlations to examine the relationships between variables within a hypothesized model. MHM and QCV measure two distinct yet convergent constructs. This distinction is important for character education, if we consider that whole person education (i.e. integral formation) must include both the relationship with God (vertical dimension) and with others (horizontal dimension). Together, these measures provide a comprehensive assessment of students' virtue profiles. Both scales are good tools for the assessment of students' moral development in Higher Education.

## KEYWORDS

Transcendent virtues; cardinal virtues; virtue measurement; moral development; higher education

## Introduction

Our research presents a theoretical and empirical exploratory study on humility, magnanimity, and mercy as transcendent virtues from a theoretical basis that integrates elements of Christian theology and psychology.

Transcendent virtues are a current topic addressed in several academic textbooks from prominent publishers (Frey & Vogler, 2018). The concept of transcendence was explored by psychologists, such as Maslow, though it has not always been fully understood (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). Additionally, the psychological school of logotherapy asserts that the meaning of life arises from self-transcendence—going beyond oneself and acting for the greater

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good of others. Subsequently, positive psychology has studied the theme of transcendence in connection with virtues and character strengths.

The VIA (Values in Action) framework proposed by Peterson and Seligman (2004) suggests that transcendence is a virtue that encompasses a number of character strengths, including spirituality, as well as appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, and humor. According to these authors, in the category of transcendence strengths:

[T]he reaching goes beyond other people per se to embrace part or all of the larger universe. The prototype of this strength category is spirituality, variously defined but always referring to a belief in and commitment to the transcendent (nonmaterial) aspects of life—whether they be called universal, ideal, sacred, or divine. (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 519)

The term “transcendent” is a tricky word, defined in various ways by numerous disciplines (Frey & Vogler, 2018). “In the context of positive psychology, as well as in theories of virtues and character strengths, transcendence refers to the ability to connect with something higher than oneself, providing meaning, purpose, and a broader perspective of life” (Voukouti et al., 2025, p. 224). The concept of self-transcendence can be understood as a movement of the individual toward a good that exists beyond themselves, but not necessarily toward God. Self-transcendence according to the Dictionary of American Psychological Association is: “the state in which an individual is able to look beyond himself or herself and adopt a larger perspective that includes concern for others” (American Psychological Association, 2020). Therefore, it is important to clarify the concept of transcendent virtues with the sacred and the divine, as suggested in Peterson & Seligman’s (2004) VIA proposal. Self-transcendence is related to prosocial behavior, enhancing subjective well-being, and fostering human flourishing (Cottingham, 2012; Kristjánsson, 2016; Lavy & Benish-Weisman, 2021; Nelson et al., 2023; Snow, 2018; P. T. Wong, 2016).

Although psychology has helped to understand the concept of transcendence, theology also offers important insights, as has been the case in other areas of the social sciences (Case & VanderWeele, 2024). In traditional Christian theology, building upon the legacy of Greek *paideia*, moral virtues—particularly the cardinal virtues—are considered essential for achieving a full life. The dynamism of human action is inherently self-transcendent, seeking a good that surpasses the self. The ultimate good toward which this action is directed, in accordance with human nature, is communion with God and others (López González, 2023, 2024). Self-transcendence has a horizontal dimension (transcendence toward others) and a vertical dimension (transcendence toward God) both of which are linked to the inner movement of the person toward truth and goodness (López González et al. 2025). This dynamism involves both God and human freedom, working in synergy, and reaches its culmination in the practice of the theological virtues, especially charity. In his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas teaches that the theological virtues (which are both vertical and horizontal transcendent virtues, in the aforementioned sense) are free gifts from God. These virtues require free human cooperation and enable the individual to live a full life, in accordance with their divine vocation. Therefore, self-transcendence can be directed toward God and toward others. But, according to the Christian theology of the theological virtues, God is not only the object of human self-transcendence but also the co-agent of self-transcending human action.

The cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance) are self-transcending moral virtues that do not have in themselves a link with the sacred, unlike the theological

virtues (faith, hope and charity). The theological virtues, as we have said, are a gift of God and cannot be measured. However, there are moral virtues (for instance mercy, humility and magnanimity) that have a special link with the sacred, preparing or facilitating a relationship with God, while also relating to others. These so-called transcendent virtues in their double vertical and horizontal dimension, with their limitations, can be assessed. It is convenient to distinguish between the two constructs (cardinal virtues and transcendent virtues) which, although related, are different. This distinction is important for virtue education, if we consider that whole person education must include both the relationship with God (vertical dimension) and with others (horizontal dimension). In character education, intellectual, moral and transcendent virtues can be distinguished but not separated, since all of them are required for the integral formation of the person.

Our research question is: Is the MHM questionnaire a valid instrument to measure mercy, humility and magnanimity? What is the relationship between the transcendent virtues measured by MHM and the cardinal virtues measured by QCV? In this research we offer a theoretical and empirical justification of the MHM questionnaire that measures three transcendent virtues: mercy, humility and magnanimity. The aim of this validation is to contribute to virtue education through the study of transcendent virtues. It is hoped to contribute to closing the gap on this topic in the current literature on character education. A questionnaire to measure these transcendent virtues can be a diagnostic tool for the education of the university student and for the evaluation of the virtue profile that the university proposes in its mission statement.

## **Humility, mercy, and magnanimity as transcendent virtues**

In our understanding, there are three moral virtues that can be considered self-transcendent and closely related to the theological virtues; related in the sense that they prepare the soul for divine action and reach their full development with the help of grace.

[C]ertain moral virtues prepare the development of theological virtues: humility, which prepares faith; magnanimity, which prepares hope; mercy, which prepares charity or agape. Humility opens our eyes, our intelligence, to the truth. Magnanimity makes us fearless in the search for the good. Mercy leads us to seek that good for others. These three moral virtues (which we can call transcendent) facilitate the action of the Spirit who in fact impels us to openness to others (López González, 2024, p. 6).

The following is a theoretical study to justify that these three virtues are self-transcendent and serve as preparation for the reception of the theological virtues. The subsequent empirical study allows us to relate these transcendent virtues to the cardinal virtues.

### **Humility**

Humility has traditionally been studied as a moral virtue associated with the recognition of our limitations. Although it is not explicitly addressed in Aristotelian ethics, for Aquinas, humility is a fundamental virtue that moderates self-esteem, keeping us within the bounds of truth and helping us recognize what we truly are. It is a virtue that prepares and sustains faith (Aquinas, 1990, STh II-II q161). Humility has an epistemic component, which forms the foundation for its relational or moral aspects. As

a transcendent virtue, humility views all of reality in relation to God. It begins with an awareness of the transcendence of the reality in which we live and, following Simone Weil, is a supernatural virtue because it enables us to perceive others as equals, beyond what we naturally observe (Morgan, 2001). Humility prepares faith by purifying reason from an excessively self-centered gaze. Humility favors collaboration with divine action: it recognizes that God respects and requires human freedom. To be humble is to live in truth (Cessario, 1996).

In positive psychology, the VIA character strength model (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) equates humility with modesty. However, other scholars argue that humility is more of an epistemic virtue than a moral one (Wright et al., 2017). Several studies in psychology highlight humility as a key interpersonal virtue: it can help repair and form relationships with strong social bonds (Davis et al., 2013). Humility is a powerfully pro-social virtue with psychological, moral, and social benefits; “humility should be regarded as a ‘foundational’ virtue, essential (though not sufficient) for the full development of other virtues, and of virtuous character more broadly” (Wright et al., 2017, p. 8). It is generally viewed as a positive trait linked to psychological well-being and adjustment (Exline & Geyer, 2004).

In the field of psychology, there are various scales that measure humility, either as a dimension of personality (Ashton et al., 2014) or as a distinct psychological construct. In this regard, the Relational Humility Scale (Davis et al., 2011) measures three dimensions of humility within the context of interpersonal relationships: the tendency to have a modest self-perception, the willingness to accept one’s own limitations, and the fair and unbiased valuation of others. The Expressed Humility Scale (Owens et al., 2013) measures humility as it is manifested in the ability to admit one’s mistakes, openness to new ideas, and recognition of others’ strengths

### **Magnanimity**

Aquinas defines magnanimity as the virtue that inclines a person to aspire to great and difficult things, in proportion to their abilities and oriented toward the good. It is the disposition to pursue excellence and honor in a manner that is both appropriate and just (Aquinas, 1990, STh II-II q129–131). Magnanimity empowers individuals to step beyond comfort and confront their fears in the pursuit of difficult goals, making it inherently self-transcendent. While, if excessive, it can lead to arrogance and disproportion (*hubris*, in Greek), when properly cultivated, it becomes an indispensable virtue for anyone striving to achieve a difficult good for others, especially in the practice of leadership (López González et al., 2023).

As a transcendent virtue, magnanimity also prepares the ground for theological hope, enabling one to trust in God and persevere with His grace amidst trials or uncertainties. Theological hope is not simply an optimistic desire for improvement, but rather a firm confidence in God’s action, His goodness, and His power, which come to our aid in times of weakness. Moreover, magnanimity is closely linked to fortitude, particularly resilience and the initiative to undertake challenging endeavors (Titus, 2006). Today, the virtue of magnanimity is increasingly relevant due to its connection with positive emotions and the achievement of life goals. Magnanimity can illuminate moral psychology and moral education by mediating between realist and anti-realist conceptions of selfhood, between

objective and subjective well-being, between contemplation as self-transcendence and well-being (Kristjánsson, 2019).

Although magnanimity is receiving more attention in the field of psychology, appropriate measurement scales have yet to be developed. A similar construct is that of generosity, which has been operationalized and measured through the Interpersonal Generosity Scale (Mróz et al., 2025; Smith & Hill, 2009).

## **Mercy**

Thomas Aquinas defines mercy as a virtue closely tied to compassion for the suffering of others. Specifically, and in line with its Latin etymology, mercy is the act of having one's heart moved by another's misery, which leads to a desire to alleviate that suffering (Aquinas, 1990, STh II-II q30 a1). Mercy is an annexed virtue that prepares the soul/person for theological charity. It helps the person to discover, be moved by and act upon the needs of others in a divine way. Mercy refers to the virtue of indulgence in the needs of others, often in response to their suffering. Compassion refers to the capacity for sympathy (even suffering) in the face of the suffering of others. *Agape* is a term linked to Christian theology that considers love as a response of unconditional giving, in the divine way.

Aquinas emphasizes that mercy is not in opposition to justice but rather complements it. While justice concerns giving each person what they are due according to their dignity, mercy extends a good that goes beyond what is owed, without contradicting justice, particularly in the forms of forgiveness and assistance. According to Aquinas, mercy is the highest of all relational virtues, a direct expression of God's theological charity, who is merciful to all His creatures. Mercy is thus viewed as a transcendent virtue, a fruit of God's love that works within the person who receives it.

The study of forgiveness and compassion is common in the field of psychology. More recently, charity has been studied in terms of *agape*. *Agape* love is a moral virtue in which a person willingly and unconditionally offers goodness, at a cost to the giver, to another or others in need (Enright et al., 2022). This type of love focuses on the well-being of others without expecting anything in return and is considered a high form of love that transcends personal relationships, extending even to those who have caused harm. *Agape* love is a key dimension of human moral life and agency (Carr, 2024). There is a growing interest in psychology regarding its proper conceptualization and measurement (Graham, 2011; Hendrick et al., 1998; Levin & Kaplan, 2010; McCullough et al., 2005). There is also interest in its education: "the route to the highest human love of something like *agape* lies through appropriate (moral) education or tuition" (Carr, 2024, p. 286).

## **Objectives**

Our research aims to develop a questionnaire (MHM) to measure the virtues of mercy, humility and magnanimity and to assess their convergency with cardinal virtues. The proposed model holds that the construct of transcendent virtues is distinct from yet convergent with that of cardinal virtues; both are positively correlated with students' perceptions of the overall education they receive at university. This general objective is articulated through the following specific objectives:

- (1) To evaluate the psychometric properties of the MHM questionnaire, which measures mercy, humility and magnanimity as transcendent virtues: mean and standard deviation of the items, reliability and factorial structure.
- (2) To analyze the relationship between the MHM and QCV questionnaires in order to determine the common factorial structure, convergent/divergent validity, reliability of the common model and correlations between the factors.
- (3) To provide evidence of the correlation between the MHM and QCV questionnaires and students' self-perceptions of whole person education (i.e. integral formation) as measured by two criterion items.

## Methods and materials

### Participants

A total of 870 university students took part in the study using convenience sampling. The sample consisted mainly of students from Mexico (688), with the remainder from Spain (100) and Chile (82). Data collection took place at different time intervals, from October 2023 to May 2024. In the first and second applications, the aim was to evaluate the psychometric properties of the MHM questionnaire (first through an exploratory approach and later through a confirmatory model), while the third application aimed to analyze the relationship between the MHM questionnaire, and the cardinal virtues measured by the QCV questionnaire. [Table 1](#) shows the characteristics of the samples used in each case.

### Instruments

To measure the transcendent virtues, the MHM questionnaire was designed with three Likert-type subscales corresponding to the theoretical framework presented in the previous section on magnanimity, humility and mercy. To obtain evidence of construct validity, a preliminary version of the questionnaire (MHM-1) was evaluated through two applications: first through an exploratory approach (first application) and later through a confirmatory model (second application). This first version was refined, and an improved version (MHM-2) was administered to a new sample (third application), consisting of 15 items (5 items for each virtue). Both versions of the questionnaire can be found in [Appendix 1a](#) and [Appendix 1b](#).

To measure the cardinal virtues, the QCV questionnaire was used (Rodríguez Barroso et al., 2025). This questionnaire (see [Appendix 2](#)) contains 27 self-perception items on a 6-point Likert scale. Each cardinal virtue is measured through

**Table 1.** Composition of samples collected in each application according to nationality.

Application	N	Country
1	314	Chile (82), Spain (100), Mexico (132)
2	296	México (296)
3	260	México (260)

two related personal competencies developed according to an Aristotelian-Thomistic theoretical model.

### **Procedure**

The first sample of 314 university students was collected in autumn of 2023 (from 30 October to 7 December). The second application (sample of 296 students) took place in 2024, from 19 February to 6 March. Finally, the third administration (sample of 260 students) took place in 2024, from 18 April to 14 May. MHM-1 was administered to the first two samples, while MHM-2 and QCV were administered to the last sample. In addition, two criterion items were included in this last application: 1) “The courses I have taken at the university have helped me in my overall formation” and 2) “The training I have received at the university has helped me develop my competences and virtues.”

The questionnaires were administered through the Jotform platform, which allowed students to complete the survey through an electronic device, voluntarily and by following the Research Ethics Committee guidelines of each institution concerning personal data protection.

### **Data analysis**

#### **Construct validity of MHM**

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were performed to evaluate the structure of the MHM questionnaire (in both versions). For EFA, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett’s test were calculated to assess the adequacy of the data to this type of analysis. Results were satisfactory (KMO = .890;  $\chi^2 = 2273$ ;  $df = 153$ ;  $p < .001$ ). For CFA, multivariate normality of the data was tested using Mardia’s test (Mardia, 1970). As the data did not meet this assumption, the unweighted least squares (ULS) method was used to estimate the model parameters, as it is robust under these conditions. The following goodness of fit indices were used to assess the model fit: RMSEA, SRMR, GFI, CFI, and TLI. A model is considered to have adequate fit indices when RMSEA < .06; SRMR < .08; GFI > .95; CFI > .95 and TLI > .95 (Schreiber et al., 2006).

#### **Convergent/Divergent validity of MHM**

Evidence of convergent validity was analyzed by calculating the average variance extracted (AVE) following the recommendations of Fornell and Larcker (1981). This measure provides information about the amount of variance that is captured by the construct in relation to the amount of variance due to measurement error. Values of AVE greater than .50 indicate satisfactory convergent validity.

Evidence of divergent validity was analyzed following Fornell and Larcker criterion (1981). This criterion is met if the square root of each construct’s AVE is greater than its highest correlation with any other construct.

**Table 2.** Mean and standard deviation of the items of the MHM questionnaire in the three applications.

First application (MHM-1)		
Item	Mean	SD
M1	5.29	0.93
M2	5.32	0.92
M3	4.34	1.38
M4	5.17	1.40
M5	4.92	1.08
M6*	3.96	1.73
H1	5.32	0.85
H2	4.64	1.11
H3*	3.66	1.68
H4	4.79	1.10
H5	5.33	1.01
H6	5.04	1.04
MG1	4.90	1.01
MG2	4.98	0.93
MG3	4.94	1.06
MG4	5.28	0.93
MG5	4.68	1.25
MG6	5.21	0.92
(*) Reverse items		
Second application (MHM-1)		
Item	Mean	SD
M1	5.10	1.02
M2	5.08	1.01
M3	4.34	1.33
M4	4.94	1.53
M5	4.61	1.27
M6*	3.76	1.64
H1	5.19	1.02
H2	4.60	1.18
H3*	3.69	1.57
H4	4.69	1.24
H5	5.12	1.13
H6	4.83	1.12
MG1	4.69	1.22
MG2	4.84	1.12
MG3	4.74	1.25
MG4	5.04	1.11
MG5	4.50	1.34
MG6	4.95	1.10
(*) Reverse items		
Third application (MHM-2)		
Item	Mean	SD
M1	5.07	1.15
M2	4.71	1.22
M3	4.66	1.33
M4	4.85	1.25
M5	4.71	1.18

*(Continued)*

**Table 2.** (Continued).

H1	5.23	0.97
H2	4.81	1.07
H3	4.84	1.13
H4	5.25	1.08
H5	5.10	1.02
MG1	4.97	1.01
MG2	5.00	1.04
MG3	5.16	1.02
MG4	4.81	1.15
MG5	5.20	1.03

### ***Relationship between MHM and QCV***

First, descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) of both scales were calculated. Reverse items of MHM-1 were recoded prior to analysis. To analyze the relationship between MHM and QCV scores, Pearson correlations were calculated between the factor scores.

All analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics v.29 and IBM SPSS Amos v.24.

## **Results**

### ***Descriptive statistics***

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) of the items included in the MHM questionnaire in the three applications carried out. In general, the items performed well, except for M6 and H3.

### ***Reliability analysis***

Table 3 shows the internal consistency (calculated using Cronbach's Alpha) of the MHM and QCV scales used in the different applications. Excellent reliability of both questionnaires is observed in the third application.

### ***Construct validity***

Table 4 shows the factor structure of the MHM-1 questionnaire in the second application, after eliminating items M6 and H3, which were found to be deficient in the first application. It can be seen that MHM has a first factor corresponding to the items of the virtue of mercy. The humility and magnanimity items load on the same factor, which will be discussed later.

**Table 3.** Cronbach's alpha of the MHM and QCV scores in the three applications.

Scale	First Application	Second Application	Third Application
MHM-1	.847	.890	
MHM-2			.947
QCV			.945

**Table 4.** Final factor matrix of the MHM-1 questionnaire in the first application.

	Factor 1	Factor 2
M1		.790
M2		.912
M3		.469
M4		.317
M5		.386
H1	.420	
H2	.574	
H4	.746	
H5	.461	
H6	.512	
MG1	.723	
MG2	.714	
MG3	.358	
MG4	.710	
MG5	.521	
MG6	.757	

Table 5 shows the fit indices of the factor model of the MHM-1 questionnaire used in the second application. Most indices don't reach the thresholds to consider an adequate fit.

Figure 1 also shows the path diagram of the MHM-1 questionnaire used in the second application, in which the relationship between the factors can be observed, as well as the relationship between each factor and its corresponding items.

Table 6 shows the factor structure of the MHM-2 questionnaire, refined according to the results of the third application, after eliminating items M1 to M6, as well as H3 and MG3. Items M6 and H3 showed negative covariances with the rest of the items, even after its recoding. On the other hand, item MG3 showed similar factor loadings in both factors. In addition, 5 new items (M1 to M5) based on a compassionate foundation were included, these items were proposed by the research team and based on existing literature to improve the internal consistency of MHM questionnaire. Again, the two-factor structure of the MHM questionnaire is evident. In the discussion we will comment on this finding and why we have labeled factor 1 as "active patience," while retaining the label of "mercy" for factor 2. The justification for this label is provided in the discussion (cf. 5.1).

**Table 5.** Fit indices of the factor model of the MHM-1 questionnaire in the second application.

Indices	Estimation	Confidence Interval 95%	
		Minimum	Maximum
RMSEA	.082	.071	.092
SRMR	.054		
GFI	.876		
CFI	.916		
TLI	.900		

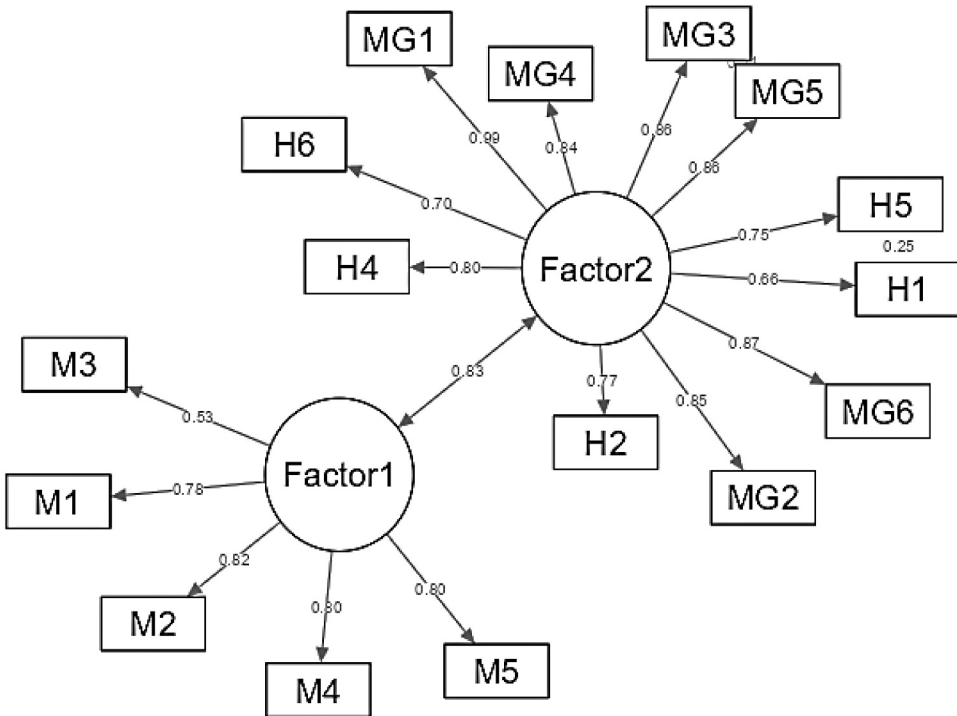


Figure 1. Path diagram of the MHM-1 questionnaire of the second application. (see Figure 1 in a separate document)

The fit indices for the factor model of the MHM-2 questionnaire are presented in Table 7. These indices indicate a good model fit, which is even superior to the fit indices obtained for MHM-1. Figure 2 also shows the path diagram of the MHM-2 questionnaire indicating the relationship between the factors and their corresponding items.

Table 6. Final factorial matrix of the MHM-2 questionnaire (third application).

	Factor 1	Factor 2
M7		.734
M8		.809
M9		.773
M10		.750
M11		.648
H1	.543	
H2	.734	
H4	.706	
H5	.639	
H6	.602	
MG1	.876	
MG2	.672	
MG4	.784	
MG5	.585	
MG6	.911	

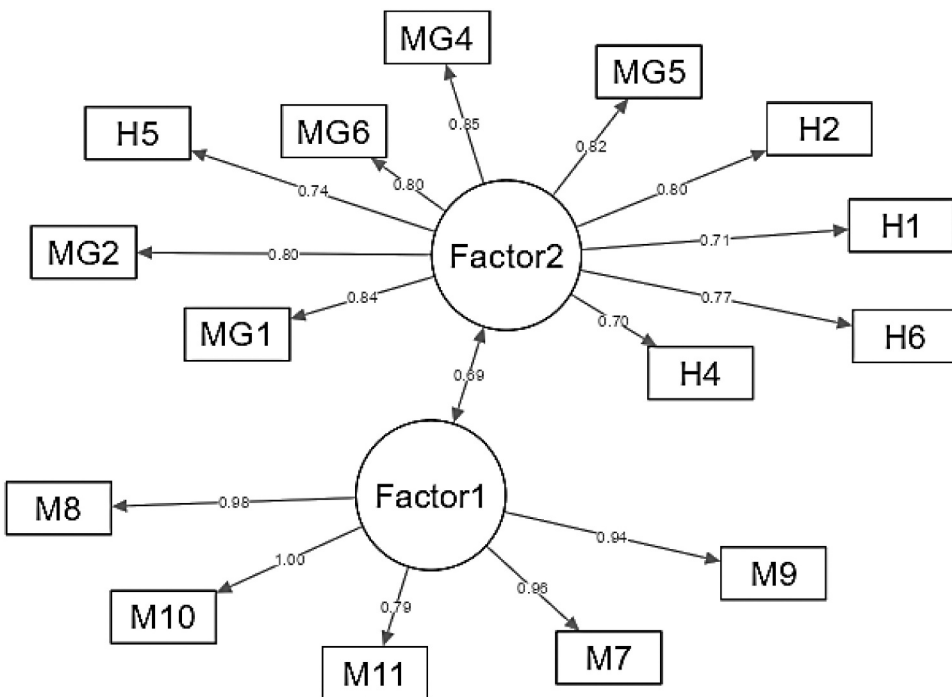
**Table 7.** Fit indices of the factorial model of the MHM-2 questionnaire (third application).

Indices	Estimation	Confidence Interval 95%	
		Minimum	Maximum
RMSEA	.072	.061	.084
SRMR	.052		
GFI	.980		
CFI	.935		
TLI	.924		

Table 8 presents the fit indices for the measurement model when both the MHM-2 and QCV questionnaires are considered together. Despite the poor fit of the model according to CFI and TLI the model shows a good fit according to RMSEA and SRMR.

**Convergent/Divergent validity and correlations between QCV and MHM**

Table 9 presents the reliability of MHM and QCV dimensions, and AVE coefficients (including their square roots). All virtues of QCV and MHM show good reliability. In addition, most virtues show AVE coefficients above .500, indicating convergent validity, except for Temperance (AVE = .446). Finally, there is evidence of divergent validity of Active Patience, as its highest correlation ( $r = .736$ , see Table 10) is lower than its AVE square root (.766). However, there is no evidence of divergent validity in the case of Mercy (highest  $r = .963 < .748$ ).



**Figure 2.** Pathway diagram of the MHM-2 questionnaire (third application).

**Table 8.** Fit indices of the factorial model of the MHM-2 + QCV model.

Indices	Estimation	Confidence Interval 95%	
		Minimum	Maximum
RMSEA	.067	.062	.071
SRMR	.069		
GFI	.909		
CFI	.878		
TLI	.869		

**Table 9.** Indices of the reliability and convergent/divergent validity of the factors of the MHM-2 + QCV model.

Factor	$\alpha$	$\omega$	AVE	AVE square root
Active Patience	.876	.876	.587	.766
Mercy	.926	.927	.559	.748
Prudence	.891	.891	.540	.735
Fortitude	.917	.917	.613	.783
Temperance	.841	.844	.442	.665
Justice	.921	.921	.660	.812

**Table 10.** Pearson correlation matrix of the virtues with the criterion variables.

	Active Patience	Mercy	Prudence	Fortitude	Temperance	Justice	Criteria 1	Criteria 2
Active Patience								
Mercy	.736**							
Prudence	.612**	.816**						
Fortitude	.573**	.867**	.849**					
Temperance	.385**	.344**	.414**	.341**				
Justice	.724**	.963**	.794**	.840**	.296**			
Criteria1	.451**	.665**	.566**	.550**	.252**	.641**		
Criteria2	.513**	.688**	.577**	.597**	.188*	.683**	.797**	

\*p < .01.  
\*\*p < .001

Table 10 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients calculated between the factors derived from the MHM-2 questionnaire, the factors from the QCV questionnaire, and the two criterion items measuring students perceived whole person education at the university.

This table highlights strong correlations between Factors 1 (active patience) and 2 (mercy) of the MHM-2 and the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, and fortitude, particularly between justice and mercy. Temperance also shows a significant, albeit weaker, correlation with the other cardinal virtues. Notably, the high correlations of both Justice and Mercy with the criterion items stand out, indicating a strong link between these virtues and students perceived comprehensive formation.

Figure 3 also shows the path diagram of the joint model of MHM-2 and QCV. Factors 1 and 2 of the MHM have been named active patience and mercy, respectively, according to the theoretical model (see discussion).

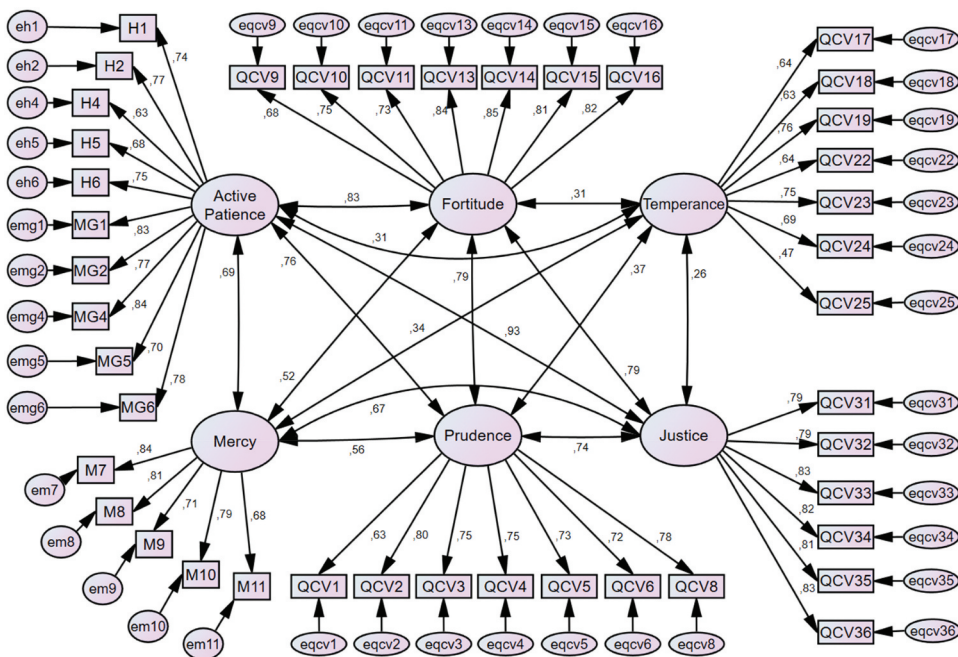


Figure 3. Path diagram of the MHM-2 + QCV model.

## Discussion

The results obtained in relation to the four specific objectives are discussed below.

### Psychometric properties and meaning of the MHM questionnaire

Tables 2-5 and Figure 1 indicate that the MHM-1 questionnaire exhibits good psychometric properties, with a bifactorial structure where the virtues of humility and magnanimity load onto the first factor, and mercy loads onto a second factor. However, it was deemed necessary to improve the questionnaire by removing poorly functioning items (M1 to M6, H3 and MG3) and replacing the items on the mercy scale with more appropriate ones. These items were removed due to conceptual concerns and reliability issues.

The MHM-2 version, used in the third application (see Tables 6-7 and Figure 2), demonstrated improved psychometric results, with excellent reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = .947), a better model fit within the standard benchmarks, and confirmed the previously identified bifactorial structure. While our theoretical model proposed three factors (corresponding to the three transcendent virtues), the results suggest that humility and magnanimity form a single factor, that has been labeled as “active patience.” The following is a justification for this denomination.

The interpretation of Factor 2 as mercy is straightforward. However, the interpretation of Factor 1, which includes the items for humility and magnanimity, requires further consideration. According to Aquinas, magnanimity and humility share a common essence (Aquinas, 1994, STh II-II q161 a4), making it reasonable to consider

them as a single virtue in which both converge. The Thomistic concept of magnanimity is so closely tied to humility and charity that it substantially corrects and transforms Aristotle's conception of the virtue (Keys, 2003). Given the content of the items and in line with the Christian theology, we propose calling this factor "active patience," a virtue connected not only with theological hope but also with faith, and which corresponds to the Greek term *hypomoné*.

Aquinas (1994), STh II-II q136 a2) in explaining patience is inspired by the Christian virtue of *hypomoné*. Patience makes us tolerant of adversity and helps us to overcome the grief, anger or even hatred that adversity can generate. Patience is part of (a secondary virtue of) fortitude, and is a transcendent virtue perfected by the Holy Spirit, who instills in the soul a special confidence that excludes fear (Aquinas, 1994; STh II-II q139 a1). Patience supports the development of other moral virtues such as fortitude, justice, love and hope (Pianalto, 2016).

The term *hypomoné* (related to active patience, perseverance, and endurance) is frequently used in the Bible, especially by St Paul, as an expression of the believer's faith and hope during trials. *Hypomoné* is mentioned twice in 2 Peter 1:6 as a virtue that produces Christian character. Zizioulas (2018), p. 166) links *hypomoné* to eschatological spirituality, the watchful expectation of the moment when the Lord will reward those who have been faithful and have borne witness (martyria) to the name of Jesus before all.

It is worth mentioning here the work of Schnitker (2012), who defines patience as the tendency to wait calmly in the face of frustration or adversity. Religiousness and spirituality are predictors of the virtue of patience, which in turn predicts the use of emotion regulation strategies, particularly cognitive reappraisal (Schnitker et al., 2017). Although this conceptual approach is not the same as active patience, there are both theoretical and empirical similarities.

In conclusion, we can affirm that the MHM questionnaire measures active patience and mercy as transcendent virtues linked to faith, hope and charity.

### **Relationship between cardinal and transcendent virtues**

Table 8 indicates the fit when both instruments (MHM-2 and QCV) are combined into a single questionnaire (or model). MHM shows convergent validity in relation to the QCV. However, it is particularly noteworthy that justice and mercy exhibit a high Pearson correlation coefficient (.963), so they could be considered as a single factor. The explanation for this is that both mercy and justice are more relational virtues compared to the others, which are more closely associated with cognitive and performative aspects. Certainly, they are related but differentiated virtues, as theology affirms. According to Aquinas (1988), STh I q21 a4), in all that God does, there is mercy and justice. Moreover, justice presupposes mercy and is founded on it.

In contrast, active patience (resulting from humility and magnanimity, as measured by the MHM) emerges as a distinct factor, clearly differentiated from the other factors assessed by the QCV.

The path diagram (cf. Figure 3), on the other hand, presents the relationship between factors as part of a hypothetical joint model. Results indicate suboptimal model fit, which may be partially attributable to the sample size (Wolf et al., 2013)

being insufficient to adequately estimate a model of this complexity (six factors and forty-two items).

Despite this limitation, the inter-factor correlations are robust, with only the correlation between Temperance and Justice which falls below .30. These findings provide preliminary evidence of a significant association between the cardinal virtues and the constructs assessed by the MHM questionnaire.

In conclusion, MHM is a questionnaire close to but distinct from QCV, which when applied together to measure students' perceptions of virtues provides additional information that QCV alone does not, in particular active patience.

### ***Evidence on students' self-perception of whole person education***

Our third specific objective is to gather evidence regarding students' self-perception of integral formation (i.e. whole person education), as measured through two criterion items: 1) "The courses I have taken at university have helped my integral formation" and 2) "The education I have received at university has helped me develop my skills and virtues." To achieve this, we calculated the Pearson correlation coefficients of the virtues measured by the MHM and QCV questionnaires in relation to the two criterion items (cf. Table 9). The two criterion items have a Pearson correlation coefficient of .797, indicating that they are closely related, though not identical.

The data in Table 10 show significant high correlations with the criterion items, except for temperance. Justice and mercy (factor 2 of MHM) show the highest correlation with the criterion items (between .641 and .688), which can be attributed to the fact that, for students, these two virtues are most closely associated with integral formation and could be considered the pinnacle or culmination of their education. Prudence and fortitude have correlations between .550 and .597. Active patience (factor 1 of MHM) correlates at .451 with criterion item 1 and .513 with criterion item 2. Finally, the correlation for temperance with criterion item 1 is a modest .252, and with criterion item 2, it is even lower at .188.

These results allow us to hypothesize that students perceive the courses they have taken at university as helpful for their whole person education (i.e. integral formation) and character development. Additionally, mercy and justice appear to be the virtues most linked to students' perception of their integral formation.

The low correlation of temperance with the perceived whole person education requires further study, as its interpretation is not entirely clear. It may suggest that a review of the items measuring this virtue is necessary. Alternatively, it could imply that students feel the university is not providing adequate education for the development of temperance, in contrast to the other virtues. Additional qualitative data or student feedback may provide further insight into this finding.

### **Conclusions**

Contemporary psychology is increasingly engaging with the insights of philosophy and theology, particularly Thomistic Christian theology, to enhance its understanding of human flourishing (Brugger, 2009; Vitz et al., 2020). Philosophy and theology:

(1) can help the social sciences identify new directions and scope for their inquiry; (2) provide conceptual clarity for constructs that the social sciences elect to study; and (3) enrich and clarify the interpretation of empirical results. Moving in the opposite direction, the social sciences can help (4) furnish new data for humanistic reflection; (5) confirm (or challenge) claims from the humanities; and (6) develop and assess interventions for achieving the goods highlighted by humanistic inquiry. (Case & VanderWeele, 2024, p. 2)

Our research on transcendent virtues and their relationship with the cardinal virtues exemplifies this approach. This research offers a new instrument (MHM) for measuring virtues, specifically for the assessment of mercy, humility and magnanimity, which are considered transcendent virtues. The virtues of magnanimity and humility can be grouped into a single factor that we have called active patience (in Greek *hypomoné*). The exploratory study shows that MHM has strong psychometric properties and convergent validity with the QCV questionnaire, which measures cardinal virtues. These constructs are distinct but convergent; considering them together offers valuable insight into students' whole person education (i.e. integral formation).

However, there are notable limitations to the study: 1) the sample size is small, convenience-based, and limited to students from Christian-influenced universities. In the future, studies with larger sample sizes are recommended, especially in institutions with different organizational cultures from those of the universities included in this study.; 2) measuring a complex construct such as moral or transcendent virtues requires triangulation with qualitative data from student feedback and by using alternative statistical techniques to further validate the model; 3) while the results are promising, they remain preliminary and raise questions regarding the stability and overall factor structure of the model. Therefore, further studies on convergent and discriminant validity using other instruments, such as the VIA (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), are recommended.

It is important to conduct cross-cultural studies, not only to assess the validity of the instruments but also the validity of the theory. The Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy underlying this proposal has proven capable of guiding and explaining the development of both the constructs and their measurement tools. It is important to examine the Aristotelian-Thomistic principles across diverse cultural contexts and their potential for universal applicability. If there is a human nature, as the theory suggests, it is expected that there will be a similar ranking-order of means across all countries, as has been found in studies on character strengths (Park et al., 2006) or happiness (Veenhoven, 2012).

The results of this research can be applied in education or psychological practice: 1) to assess the effectiveness of educational interventions; 2) to provide the student with personalized reports that can help them develop a virtue education improvement plan, with the help of a mentor; 3) to evaluate whether a university is fulfilling its mission statement, thus enhancing the virtue profile of its students.

Finally, the measurement of virtues is not an end in itself, but rather a tool that can be valuable for students and educators. The assessment of transcendent virtues should be seen as helping students become more self-aware and make the decisions that promote their flourishing and allow them to transcend in their relationships with others and with the Other.

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## Appendix 1A

### Transcendent Virtues Questionnaire MHM-1

Virtue	Code	Item
Mercy	M1	I help others without expecting anything in return.
	M2	When I perceive that someone needs me, I offer them help.
	M3	When someone offends me, I don't let myself be carried away by resentment
	M4	I do not take advantage of those who are vulnerable.
Humility	M5	I actively seek reconciliation when interpersonal conflicts arise.
	H1	I recognize the qualities and achievements of others.
	H2	I value my difficulties as an opportunity.
	H3	I emphasize the faults and mistakes of others.
	H4	I recognize my achievements and qualities.
	H5	I am grateful when someone is kind to me, even more so when I do not deserve it.
Magnanimity	H6	I act guided by the pursuit of truth.
	MG1	I face my fears in order to achieve the goals I have set for myself.
	MG2	I make sacrifices in order to fulfil my commitments.
	MG3	I take the initiative in projects to help others.
	MG4	I trust that with my work and the help of others I will be able to reach my goals.
	MG5	I take initiatives linked to the meaning of existence.
	MG6	I stand firm in my goals.

## Appendix 1B

### Transcendent Virtues Questionnaire MHM-2

Virtue	Code	Item
Mercy	M1	I have compassion for the sufferings of others.
	M2	I seek to comfort the sorrows of others.
	M3	I am sensitive to the spiritual needs of others.
	M4	I am touched by seeing people who are sick or in material need.
	M5	I am benevolent in my judgments of others.
Humility	H1	I recognize the qualities and achievements of others.
	H2	I value my difficulties as an opportunity.
	H4	I recognize my achievements and qualities.
	H5	I am grateful when someone is kind to me, even more so when I do not deserve it.
	H6	I act guided by the pursuit of truth.
Magnanimity	MG1	I face my fears in order to achieve the goals I have set for myself.
	MG2	I make sacrifices in order to fulfil my commitments.
	MG4	I trust that with my work and the help of others I will be able to reach my goals.
	MG5	I take initiatives linked to the meaning of existence.
	MG6	I stand firm in my goals.

## Appendix 2

### Questionnaire of Cardinal Virtues and Competences (QCV)

Virtue	Competence	Item (English)	Item (original)
Prudence	Critical Thinking	I question ideas (my own and others').	Cuestiono las ideas (propias y ajenas).
		I confront my ideas with reality. I change my ideas if I find reasons for it. I support my ideas with solid and contrasted evidence.	Confronto mis ideas con la realidad. Cambio mis ideas si encuentro razones para ello. Fundamento mis ideas a través evidencias sólidas y contrastadas.
	Decision Making	When I have to make an important decision, I identify different alternatives.	Cuando tengo que tomar una decisión importante identifico distintas alternativas.
		Before making important decisions, I value other opinions. I make decisions after weighing pros and cons.	Antes de tomar decisiones importantes valoro otras opiniones. Tomo decisiones tras sopesar pros y contras.
Fortitude	Resilience	I face adversity with a positive attitude.	Afronto la adversidad con una actitud positiva.
		I easily overcome problems or adverse situations. After an adverse or unfavorable situation, I emerge stronger.	Supero con facilidad problemas o situaciones adversas. Tras una situación adversa o desfavorable salgo fortalecido.
	Proactivity	I take the initiative to achieve what I set out to do. I take action to achieve my goals. I plan actions to achieve my objectives.	Tomo la iniciativa para alcanzar lo que me propongo. Llevo a cabo acciones para alcanzar mis metas. Planifico acciones para llevar a cabo mis objetivos.
		I use the strategies that seem most efficient to achieve my goals.	Uso las estrategias que parecen más eficientes para alcanzar mis propósitos
Temperance	Self-Control	I find it hard to sacrifice leisure time when I have more important tasks to do. When I try to give up distractions (social networks, series, games, etc.) I find it difficult to do so.	Me cuesta sacrificar tiempo de ocio cuando tengo tareas más importantes que realizar. Cuando me propongo dejar de lado distracciones (redes sociales, series, juegos . . .) encuentro dificultades para hacerlo
		I find it difficult to “know how to wait” when I don’t get immediate answers.	Me cuesta “saber esperar” cuando no obtengo respuestas inmediatas.
		I am able to moderate my “temptations” when I have another activity to do.	Soy capaz de moderar mis “tentaciones” cuando tengo que realizar otra actividad.
		I am consistent in carrying out my activities.	Soy constante en la realización de mis actividades.
		I say things impulsively I get impatient easily in class. I am easily distracted.	Digo las cosas de manera impulsiva. Me impaciento fácilmente en las clases. Me distraigo con facilidad.
	Emotional Management	I do what I feel like doing at any given moment.	Hago lo que me apetece en cada momento.
		I am able to control my own emotions.	Soy capaz de controlar mis propias emociones.
		I can calm down easily when I feel angry.	Me puedo calmar fácilmente cuando me siento enfadado.
		I manage my emotions, adapting them to the situation at the time.	Gestiono mis emociones, adecuándolas a la situación del momento.

(Continued)

Virtue	Competence	Item (English)	Item (original)
Justice	Leadership	I get involved with my classmates so that everyone contributes the best of themselves.	Me implico con mis compañeros para que todos aporten lo mejor de sí mismos.
		I help others when they need it, regardless of my affinity with them.	Ayudo a los demás cuando lo necesitan, independientemente de mi afinidad con ellos.
		I guide others wisely to achieve their goals.	Oriento a los demás cuando lo necesitan, independientemente de mi afinidad con ellos.
Justice	Teamwork	When working as part of a team, I encourage a climate of listening among all members.	Cuando trabajo en equipo, favorezco un clima de escucha entre todos los integrantes.
		I comply with the tasks established in the work team.	Cumplo con las tareas establecidas en el equipo de trabajo.
		When I work in a team, I collaborate with my teammates, trying to improve the work done.	Cuando trabajo en equipo, colaboro con mis compañeros tratando de mejorar el trabajo realizado.