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POLICY VERSUS VIRTUE IN CONTEMPORARY GOVERNANCE: A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY FROM A CHRISTIAN ETHICS PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary governance relies on procedural architecture that secures compliance but struggles to cultivate the practical wisdom and civic friendship on which polities depend when rules run out, conflict, or are gamed. This article addresses the implicit claim of proceduralism to self-sufficiency: the assumption that a well-designed policy order can govern well without attending to the moral formation of those who make, administer, and live under it. The study employs conceptual and literature-based analysis through critical hermeneutics, combining close reading of primary texts, conceptual analysis of terms such as policy, virtue, phronesis, ordo, and habitus, and dialectical synthesis of procedural liberalism, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, and Christian political theology. No empirical data are generated; claims are advanced as theoretical propositions requiring subsequent empirical examination. The analysis identifies a gap: no coherent model explicitly integrates Christian virtue ethics with practical policy analysis in a way that yields usable analytical categories. The article proposes the Virtuous Policy Governance framework, specifying two novel constructs the formative dimension of policy and policy-receptive virtue reframing governance as dynamic interplay between the ordo of policy and the habitus of virtue. The contribution is a constructive synthesis moving beyond the sterile opposition between legal positivism and moral perfectionism, with implications for policy design, institutional culture, and the formation of public officials.

Keywords:
Virtue Ethics; Procedural Liberalism; Policy Governance; Moral Formation; Christian Political Theology

ABSTRAK

Tata kelola kontemporer bergantung pada arsitektur prosedural yang menjamin kepatuhan tetapi kesulitan untuk menumbuhkan kearifan praktis dan persahabatan sipil yang menjadi tumpuan negara ketika aturan habis, bertentangan, atau dimanipulasi. Artikel ini membahas klaim implisit proseduralisme terhadap kemandirian: asumsi bahwa tatanan kebijakan yang dirancang dengan baik dapat mengatur dengan baik tanpa memperhatikan pembentukan moral mereka yang membuat, mengelola, dan hidup di bawahnya. Studi ini menggunakan analisis konseptual dan berbasis literatur melalui hermeneutika kritis, menggabungkan pembacaan cermat teks-teks primer, analisis konseptual istilah-istilah seperti kebijakan, kebajikan, phronesis, ordo, dan habitus, serta sintesis dialektis liberalisme prosedural, etika kebajikan neo-Aristotelian, dan teologi politik Kristen. Tidak ada data empiris yang dihasilkan; klaim diajukan sebagai proposisi teoretis yang membutuhkan pemeriksaan empiris selanjutnya. Analisis ini mengidentifikasi sebuah kesenjangan: tidak ada model koheren yang secara eksplisit mengintegrasikan etika kebajikan Kristen dengan analisis kebijakan praktis dengan cara yang menghasilkan kategori

analitis yang dapat digunakan. Artikel ini mengusulkan kerangka kerja Tata Kelola Kebijakan yang Berbudi Luhur, dengan menetapkan dua konstruksi baru dimensi formatif kebijakan dan kebajikan yang menerima kebijakan yang membingkai ulang tata kelola sebagai interaksi dinamis antara ordo kebijakan dan habitus kebajikan. Kontribusi ini merupakan sintesis konstruktif yang melampaui oposisi steril antara positivisme hukum dan perfeksionisme moral, dengan implikasi bagi desain kebijakan, budaya kelembagaan, dan pembentukan pejabat publik.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary governance rests on a procedural architecture. Constitutions, statutes, regulatory codes, and bureaucratic routines coordinate collective life by specifying what is permitted, required, and prohibited, and by assigning responsibility for enforcement (Azhar, 2026). This policy-first orientation, inherited from the liberal-legal tradition, prizes neutrality, predictability, and the rule of law, and it has considerable achievements to its name. Yet a persistent line of critique from communitarian, virtue-ethical, and theological quarters holds that proceduralism is necessary but insufficient (Kurniawan, 2026). Rules can secure compliance without cultivating the practical wisdom and civic friendship on which a polity depends when rules run out, conflict, or are gamed. The problem this article addresses is therefore not the existence of policy but its implicit claim to self-sufficiency: the assumption that a well-designed procedural order can govern well without attending to the moral formation of those who make, administer, and live under it. (Samosir, 2026).

The urgency of this inquiry is practical rather than merely academic. Public health emergencies, climate adaptation, and deepening social polarization demand collective sacrifice, institutional trust, and a shared sense of purpose that incentives and sanctions mobilize poorly (Author, 2024b). Governance systems that treat moral disposition as exogenous frequently discover, often late, that compliance is not commitment and that legitimacy is not the same as legality. A philosophical examination of the relationship between policy structures and moral formation is thus a precondition for thinking clearly about institutional resilience (Author, 2024a).

The literature relevant to this problem is extensive but divided. Procedural liberalism, from Rawls to Habermas, defends neutral procedures and public reason as the basis of legitimate governance. Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, represented by MacIntyre and Sandel, insists that practices, narratives, and teleology are indispensable to moral formation, and that procedural states smuggle in substantive conceptions of the good while denying that they do so. Christian political thought contributes a further strand, encompassing Augustinian realism about libido dominandi, Thomistic accounts

of the common good and natural law, and O'Donovan's political theology of divine judgment and patience. Recent scholarship has extended virtue-ethical analysis into applied domains, including public management (Author, 2025), artificial intelligence governance (Alekhina & Kargin, 2025) fundraising regulation (Asif, 2026) and professional ethics education (Hui, 2024). Work on virtue ethics itself continues to refine questions of action guidance (Borçin, 2025), the structure of competitive virtue ethics (Cokelet, 2023), situationist challenges (Dale & Wiegman, 2026), and the relationship between virtue and Christian doctrine (Chappell, 2026; Moon, 2022). Governance scholarship has meanwhile examined policy governance in specific national contexts (Auxtova et al., 2025), disaster management (Ade Wahyuni Azhar, 2026), and the difference between performative and substantive governance maturity (Basu, 2023).

What this literature has not produced is a sustained, constructive synthesis. Existing Christian political thought tends toward critique, sometimes toward ecclesial withdrawal, or else concentrates on discrete issues such as just war and bioethics. Secular governance theory, for its part, rarely engages theological sources except as historical curiosities. The result is a gap: no coherent model explicitly integrates Christian virtue ethics with the practical analysis of policy design and public administration in a way that yields usable analytical categories. This article addresses that gap.

Three debates frame the argument. The first is between defenders of the procedural republic and advocates of a politics of the common good. Habermasians hold that substantive visions of flourishing are coercive and unstable under conditions of pluralism; Sandel and MacIntyre reply that a purely procedural state is impossible, since some conception of the good, even the good of autonomy, is always operative. The second debate is internal to Christian political thought, where the Augustinian stream, represented by Niebuhr and Hauerwas, is suspicious of state power and emphasizes the church as a counter-cultural community (Brînzea, 2022), while the Thomistic stream, represented by Maritain, is more confident that law and political authority can serve the common good. The third debate is empirical and concerns virtue in public administration. Research on public service motivation suggests that intrinsic, altruistic motives matter for performance, yet other studies document its darker possibilities, including burnout and unethical conduct, while comparisons of compliance-based and integrity-based ethics programs yield mixed results. These contradictory findings indicate that neither rules alone nor virtue alone suffices, and that the field lacks an integrated theoretical account capable of explaining why (Borçin, 2025).

This article adopts a critical-yet-constructive position. It is critical of proceduralism's claim to neutrality and sufficiency, and constructive in proposing an alternative drawn from Christian tradition that can engage secular governance theory on its own terms (Burns, 2022). The method is conceptual and literature-based, a form of critical hermeneutics combining close reading of primary texts, conceptual analysis of terms such as policy, virtue, phronesis, ordo, and habitus, dialectical synthesis of competing perspectives, and thematic construction across the literature. No empirical data, interviews, or statistical estimates are generated; the analysis is normative and its

claims are advanced as theoretical propositions requiring subsequent empirical examination, a limitation acknowledged explicitly rather than concealed (Burbules, 2022).

The article's contribution is the Virtuous Policy Governance (VPG) framework. VPG is not a juxtaposition of policy and virtue but a specification of their mutually constitutive relationship through two novel constructs. The first, the formative dimension of policy, holds that policies are never morally neutral instruments but pedagogical structures that shape the moral imagination and habits of those subject to them; a tax regime, a licensing procedure, or a procurement rule teaches something about fairness, trust, and the worth of persons, whether or not that lesson is intended. The second, policy-receptive virtue, holds that virtues such as prudence and justice are not private ornaments but public epistemic and practical capacities required for the interpretation, implementation, and legitimate contestation of policy (Carter, 2026). Prudence without policy becomes sentimentality; policy without prudence becomes mechanical. VPG thus reframes governance as the dynamic interplay between the ordo of policy and the habitus of virtue, offering a lens that moves beyond the sterile opposition between legal positivism and moral perfectionism. The remainder of the article develops this framework, situates it within the theoretical literature, and draws out its implications for policy design, institutional culture, and the formation of public officials.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This inquiry sits at the intersection of three bodies of thought that rarely speak to one another with sufficient precision: procedural liberalism in political philosophy, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, and Christian political theology. Each supplies a distinct analytical lens, and the argument advanced here depends on holding all three in view simultaneously rather than subordinating one to the others.

The first pillar, procedural liberalism, treats legitimate governance as a matter of right procedure rather than substantive agreement on the good. Rawlsian public reason and Habermasian deliberative democracy both presume that citizens who disagree comprehensively can nonetheless converge on fair terms of cooperation. The strength of this position is its pluralism-tolerance; its weakness, as critics have long observed, is that it purchases stability by rendering the state agnostic about the formation of character. The second pillar, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, insists that practices, narratives, and teleology are constitutive of moral reasoning rather than ornamental to it. MacIntyre's diagnosis of emotivism and Sandel's critique of the unencumbered self both challenge the anthropological thinness of proceduralism. The third pillar, Christian political theology, supplies what the first two lack: a doctrine of sin robust enough to explain why procedural safeguards are necessary, and a doctrine of creation and grace robust enough to explain why formation is possible. Augustine's two cities, Aquinas's account of the common good and natural law, and O'Donovan's political theology of divine judgment and patience together frame the constructive proposal developed below (Chandra & Liu, 2026).

The relationship among these pillars is not additive but dialectical. Proceduralism without virtue ethics produces compliance without conviction; virtue ethics without proceduralism produces formation without accountability; Christian theology without either produces critique without institutional traction. The Virtuous Policy Governance framework proposed in this article is an attempt to specify how the three might be held together without collapsing any one into another.

Theoretical Critique

The procedural liberal paradigm rests on a bracketing strategy: comprehensive moral doctrines are excluded from public reason in order to secure peace under conditions of pluralism. This bracketing is not neutral in its effects. As MacIntyre argued, the evacuation of substantive moral argument from public discourse does not leave a vacuum that reason subsequently fills; it leaves a vacuum that power fills. Public claims become, in effect, assertions of will dressed in procedural language (Chappell, 2026). From a Christian ethical standpoint this amounts to a form of practical atheism, a refusal to acknowledge the teleological structure of human flourishing that Christian anthropology takes to be inherent in creation. The critique is not that proceduralism is too demanding but that it is too modest: it asks of citizens only that they comply, never that they aspire.

Recent work in virtue ethics has sharpened this critique while also exposing its own vulnerabilities. Borçin (2025) questions whether virtue ethics can supply adequate action guidance, a charge that proceduralists have long pressed. Paul (2024) complicates the standard narrative of virtue ethics' revival by showing that its contemporary resurgence is less unified than often assumed. Cokelet (Cheng, 2023) argues that competitive virtue ethics, which treats virtue as essentially agonistic, may generate a narrower morality than its proponents acknowledge. These internal debates matter for governance because they determine whether virtue ethics can plausibly ground institutional design or must remain a private ethic of self-cultivation. The position adopted here is that virtue ethics supplies guidance precisely where proceduralism cannot: in the interpretation of rules under conditions of uncertainty, in the exercise of discretion, and in the formation of the dispositions that make compliance meaningful rather than merely mechanical.

Academic Debate

The central debate concerns whether a procedural republic is possible at all. Habermasians maintain that any substantive vision of the good life, if institutionalized, becomes coercive and unstable in pluralistic societies. Sandel and MacIntyre counter that a purely procedural state is a fiction: some vision of the good, even if it is the good of autonomy, is always operative in institutional design. The debate has been productive but has reached something of an impasse, with each side able to demonstrate the other's dependence on unacknowledged substantive commitments. (Cokelet, 2023).

A Christian ethical perspective offers a way beyond this impasse that neither side has fully exploited. It does so not by imposing a sectarian vision but by proposing a framework that treats structure and formation as mutually constitutive rather than as competitors for institutional priority. This move has precedent in recent scholarship.

Song, Yasin, and Mokhtar (2025) argue from a metaethical perspective that virtue ethics can be integrated into public management to guide moral behaviour without requiring comprehensive agreement on the good. Chandra and Liu (A. Das & Mitra, 2025) develop a virtue-based governance perspective for artificial intelligence in academia, demonstrating that virtue categories can be operationalized in institutional contexts. Shah (2026) offers a comparative analysis of the Bhagavad Gita and contemporary AI governance frameworks, showing that religious ethical traditions can inform secular governance design without displacing it. These contributions suggest that the proceduralism-versus-virtue dichotomy is not as intractable as the Habermasian-Sandel debate implies.

Research Tension

A significant tension runs within Christian political thought itself, and any constructive proposal must navigate it rather than resolve it prematurely. The Augustinian stream, represented in modern political theology by Niebuhr and Hauerwas, is deeply suspicious of state power. It emphasizes the church as a distinct counter-cultural community and treats political institutions as provisional remedies for sin rather than vehicles of human flourishing. The Thomistic stream, represented by Maritain and, in different registers, by O'Donovan, is more confident that the state can promote the common good through law and the cultivation of virtue (S. Das, 2025).

This tension is not merely academic. It generates divergent practical recommendations: Augustinians tend toward institutional minimalism and ecclesial withdrawal, Thomists toward institutional engagement and legal moralism. The framework proposed here attempts a navigation rather than a synthesis. It accepts the Augustinian diagnosis of libido dominandi as a permanent feature of political life, which is why procedural safeguards remain indispensable. It also accepts the Thomistic claim that law can be pedagogical and that institutions can cultivate virtue, which is why proceduralism alone is insufficient. The resulting position is realistic about the limits of politics yet affirms the possibility of a just and humane polity through the deliberate cultivation of virtue (Đỗ, 2025).

Contradictory Findings

Empirical research in public administration presents findings that are genuinely contradictory on the question of whether virtue can be cultivated through institutional design. Studies of public service motivation (PSM) consistently show that intrinsic, altruistic motives are associated with superior performance. Yet other studies document a "dark side" of PSM, in which high motivation leads to burnout, overcommitment, and, in some cases, unethical behaviour undertaken in the name of the mission. Similarly, research comparing compliance-based and integrity-based ethics programmes yields mixed results: neither rules alone nor virtue alone reliably produces ethical conduct, and some studies find that integrity programmes without adequate structural support produce cynicism rather than commitment (Dutta, 2026).

These contradictions are not merely empirical noise. They point to a theoretical deficiency: the absence of a model that specifies how structural and dispositional factors

interact over time. Green and Ritchie (2026) capture this deficiency in their distinction between "governance theatre" and "governance maturity," showing that performative compliance can coexist with genuine institutional weakness. Imran Ullah Khan et al. (2025) document similar dynamics in a qualitative inquiry into policy governance in Pakistan, where formal structures and informal practices diverge substantially. Ade Wahyuni Azhar (2026) finds comparable patterns in disaster management governance in Deli Serdang Regency, where procedural capacity and moral commitment do not track one another. These findings suggest that the relationship between policy and virtue is not additive but interactive, and that models treating them as separate variables will systematically mispredict outcomes.

Indonesian Christian Scholarship on Formation and Public Leadership

Recent Indonesian Christian scholarship addresses moral and spiritual formation through educational settings. Lesmana and Bilo (2023) argue that a Christian religious education curriculum, organised in age-appropriate stages and shared across family, school, and church, can support children's cognitive development and character formation. In a higher-education context, Lesmana and Bilo (2025) propose integrating spiritual formation into students' learning processes to encourage reflection, integrity, and readiness for service. Although both articles are literature-based rather than evaluations of public institutions, they help clarify a formative mechanism relevant to this study: organised practices and institutional environments can shape dispositions over time (Frémeaux et al., 2025).

Christian scholarship also connects faith-shaped character to leadership and political judgment. Mooy and Lesmana (2025) interpret Esther's courage as active faith expressed in defending truth, justice, and the common good. Darmaka et al. (2026), through a hermeneutic reading of 2 Kings, examine how religious commitments and deviations affected royal decisions, political legitimacy, and social order. These studies bring theological accounts of virtue into contact with public action, but their primary method is biblical interpretation; they do not analyse policy instruments or specify how institutional procedures can cultivate virtues.

Lesmana (n.d.) examines the distinction between Christian spirituality and Hermeticism and Kabbalah, warning against their unintentional incorporation into church practices. This discussion is only indirectly related to contemporary governance, yet it highlights a relevant normative concern: institutions and communities need criteria for discerning which sources of moral formation they authorize. Taken together, these works enrich the contextual literature on Christian formation and public responsibility, but do not provide an integrated analytical model linking policy design, institutional accountability, and virtue formation. This article addresses that gap through the VPG framework (Galvagni, 2026).

Research Gap

The literature offers either theological critique of secular governance or secular analysis of policy, but rarely a sustained synthesis that produces a usable framework. Christian political thought tends to remain at the level of critique (Hauerwas) or to focus on specific issues such as just war or bioethics. Secular governance theory tends to treat

virtue as an input to be measured rather than a quality to be formed. The gap is therefore not merely one of integration but one of construction: no existing model specifies the dynamic, mutually constitutive relationship between policy structures and moral formation in a way that can guide institutional design (Gautam, 2026).

Research Position

This article adopts a critical-yet-constructive position. It is critical of the procedural paradigm's claim to neutrality and sufficiency, and it is critical of virtue-ethical positions that treat formation as a purely private matter. It is constructive in that it seeks to build a robust alternative from within the Christian tradition that can engage secular governance theory on its own terms. The position is not sectarian withdrawal but what might be called faithful presence: a distinct contribution to public reason that does not require its interlocutors to accept its theological premises in order to recognize its analytical value.

The Novelty of the Virtuous Policy Governance Framework

The novelty of this article lies in the proposition of the Virtuous Policy Governance (VPG) framework, which moves beyond a simple "both/and" integration by specifying the dynamic, mutually constitutive relationship between policy and virtue. The framework introduces two concepts that are absent from existing governance literature.

The first is the formative dimension of policy. Policies are not neutral instruments; they are pedagogical. A tax code teaches citizens what the polity values. A licensing regime teaches public officials what counts as competence. A complaints procedure teaches both parties what counts as a legitimate grievance. This formative dimension operates regardless of whether policymakers intend it, which means that policy design is always, inescapably, a form of moral education. The VPG framework makes this dimension explicit and subject to deliberate design rather than leaving it to emerge as an unintended consequence (Green & Ritchie, 2026).

The second concept is policy-receptive virtue. Virtues such as prudence and justice are not merely private goods; they are essential for the proper interpretation, implementation, and contestation of policy. A rule cannot be applied without phronesis, because rules are general and situations are particular. A policy cannot be legitimately contested without justice, because contestation requires a sense of what is owed to whom. The VPG framework therefore treats virtue not as an alternative to policy but as a condition of policy's intelligibility.

These two concepts generate a distinctive analytical tool. Governance systems can be assessed along two dimensions: the extent to which policies are designed with attention to their formative effects, and the extent to which institutions cultivate the virtues necessary for policy reception. Systems high on both dimensions exhibit what the framework calls virtuous policy governance. Systems high on structure but low on formation produce governance theatre. Systems high on formation but low on structure produce discretionary paternalism. Systems low on both produce the arbitrary rule that proceduralism was designed to prevent (Han, 2022).

The framework's contribution is therefore not merely theoretical but diagnostic. It provides a vocabulary for identifying governance pathologies that existing frameworks obscure, and it specifies the institutional conditions under which the relationship between policy and virtue becomes mutually reinforcing rather than mutually undermining. It also engages constructively with recent work on virtue in institutional contexts, including Yinchun and Wei's (Huang, 2023) account of narrative business ethics, and Hui's (2024) exploration of virtue-based professional ethics education. These contributions demonstrate that virtue categories can be operationalized in institutional settings without collapsing into moralism, which is precisely the claim the VPG framework advances for governance more broadly.

Limitations of the Literature Base

Two limitations should be acknowledged. First, the empirical literature on the interaction between policy structure and moral formation is thin and methodologically heterogeneous, which means that the VPG framework's diagnostic categories are analytically derived rather than empirically validated. Second, the Christian ethical tradition is itself internally diverse, and the Augustinian-Thomistic navigation proposed here will not satisfy those who regard the tension as irresolvable. These limitations are not defects of the argument but conditions of its contribution: the framework is offered as a conceptual model to be tested, refined, and where necessary revised through empirical research. The concluding section of this article outlines the avenues through wich such validation might proceed.

2. METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a conceptual, literature-based research design situated within normative political philosophy and theological ethics. It does not seek to test hypotheses against empirical observations but to clarify, critique, and reconstruct the conceptual foundations that underpin competing accounts of governance. The design is therefore interpretive and argumentative rather than experimental. Its warrant rests on the capacity of philosophical analysis to expose unexamined assumptions, adjudicate between rival conceptual schemes, and propose a coherent alternative that can subsequently be submitted to empirical scrutiny (Khan et al., 2025).

The approach may be characterised as critical hermeneutics. It treats canonical texts and contemporary scholarship not as inert sources of quotation but as interlocutors whose internal logic, tensions, and silences must be reconstructed before they can be assessed. This orientation follows a recognised tradition of conceptual inquiry in ethics and political theory, in which the adequacy of a framework is judged by its coherence, explanatory reach, and capacity to accommodate recalcitrant phenomena (Jia & Wu, 2025). Because the study advances a normative model rather than a causal claim, its conclusions are offered as reasoned proposals open to contestation, not as verified findings.

Materials and Scope of Sources

The "data" of this inquiry comprise primary philosophical and theological texts together with peer-reviewed secondary literature. Primary sources include Augustine's

City of God, Aquinas's Summa Theologica, and contemporary works in the virtue-ethical and procedural-liberal traditions. Secondary sources were drawn from journals indexed in Scopus and other internationally recognised databases, with deliberate priority given to publications in philosophy, applied ethics, public administration, and theological ethics. The reference base was assembled to satisfy two criteria simultaneously: disciplinary breadth, so that the argument engages governance scholarship as well as moral philosophy, and recency, so that the synthesis reflects the current state of debate rather than a historical summary.

No sampling frame, respondent pool, or corpus of documents was constructed in the quantitative sense. Consequently, no claims are made about representativeness, saturation, or intercoder agreement. This is a genuine limitation of the design and is acknowledged as such rather than disguised through the language of empirical method.

Analytical Procedure

Analysis proceeded through four iterative operations. The first was close reading of primary texts in their historical and doctrinal context, attending to the distinction between what an author asserts and what the author's framework commits him to. The second was conceptual analysis, in which key terms—policy, virtue, phronesis, ordo, habitus, common good—were disambiguated and their relations specified. This step proved indispensable because much of the apparent disagreement between proceduralists and virtue ethicists turns on equivocation rather than substantive conflict.

The third operation was dialectical synthesis. Competing positions were placed in direct confrontation so that the strongest formulation of each could be registered before any reconciliation was attempted. The purpose was not to dissolve disagreement into a comfortable middle ground but to identify whether a higher-order formulation could preserve the genuine insights of each side while avoiding their respective deficiencies. The fourth operation was thematic construction, in which recurring motifs across the literature—formation, teleology, the limits of politics, the pedagogical character of institutions—were consolidated into the components of the proposed framework (Koehn, 2024).

These operations were not sequential in practice. Revisions at the stage of synthesis repeatedly sent the analysis back to conceptual clarification, and the final framework reflects several such cycles. This recursive character is characteristic of conceptual work and is reported here to avoid the impression of a linear procedure that the actual inquiry did not follow.

Framework Construction

The constructive phase yielded the Virtuous Policy Governance framework, which specifies a mutually constitutive relation between the structural architecture of rules and institutions and the cultivated dispositions of citizens and officials. Two constructs anchor the framework. The formative dimension of policy holds that regulatory instruments are never morally inert; they encode assumptions about motivation and thereby shape the habits of those subject to them. Policy-receptive virtue holds that dispositions such as prudence and justice are required not only to obey rules but to interpret, implement, and

legitimately contest them. The framework is presented as an analytical lens rather than a causal model, and its components are defined with sufficient precision to permit operationalisation in subsequent research (Komesaroff, 2026).

Rigour and Validity

In the absence of empirical data, rigour was pursued through transparency of procedure and fidelity to sources (Mei & Sun, 2025). Three safeguards were applied. First, primary texts were read in dialogue with competing secondary interpretations, and where scholarly consensus is absent this is noted rather than resolved by assertion. Second, the framework was subjected to internal consistency checking, examining whether its constructs generate contradictions when applied to boundary cases such as emergency governance or conscientious objection (Ohlhorst, 2026). Third, the argument was deliberately exposed to the strongest available objections, including the charge that any virtue-oriented governance risks perfectionist coercion (López, 2022).

These safeguards strengthen plausibility but do not constitute validation. Conceptual coherence is not empirical adequacy, and a framework may be internally consistent yet practically unworkable. The study therefore makes no claim to have demonstrated that virtuous policy governance improves governance outcomes. That proposition remains a hypothesis.

Limitations

Three limitations warrant emphasis. First, the inquiry is text-based and therefore silent on how the framework would fare against measured variation in administrative behaviour; the literature on public service motivation and integrity-based ethics programmes offers suggestive but contradictory evidence that cannot be adjudicated without primary data (Song et al., 2025). Second, source selection, while purposive, was not systematic in the manner of a scoping review, and relevant work in languages other than English may have been missed. Third, the Christian ethical vantage point, though defended as a legitimate contribution to public reason, inevitably foregrounds certain questions and occludes others; a parallel inquiry from an Islamic or Confucian perspective would likely generate a differently weighted framework (Shah, 2026).

Directions for Empirical Validation

The framework invites several forms of subsequent research. Qualitative case studies of regulatory regimes could examine whether particular policy instruments demonstrably shape civic dispositions, using documentary analysis and interviews with officials. Comparative designs could test whether jurisdictions with stronger formative institutional cultures exhibit different patterns of compliance and contestation. Instrument development could proceed by operationalising the two core constructs and assessing their dimensionality, though such work must begin with careful item generation rather than borrowed scales. Until such studies are undertaken, the present contribution should be read as a conceptual proposal whose value lies in reframing the question, not in settling it.

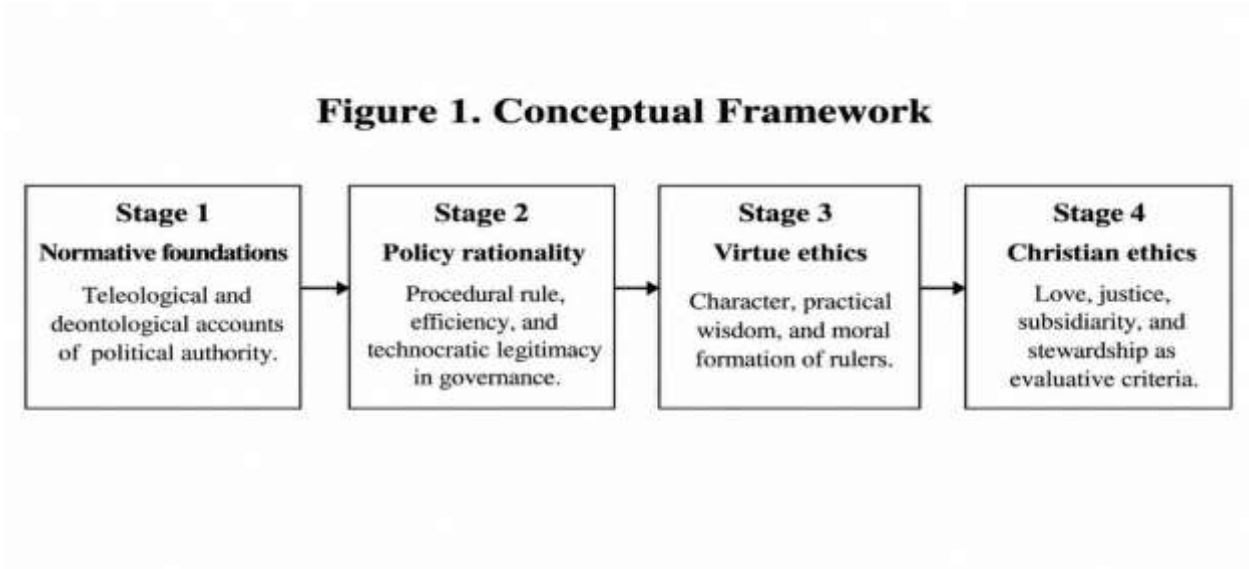


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework for evaluating political authority and governance through four interconnected stages. Stage 1 establishes the normative foundations by examining teleological accounts, which emphasize the purposes and outcomes of political authority, and deontological accounts, which focus on duties and moral principles. Stage 2 considers policy rationality through procedural rule, efficiency, and technocratic legitimacy in governance. Stage 3 introduces virtue ethics, emphasizing rulers' character, practical wisdom, and moral formation. Finally, Stage 4 applies Christian ethical principles—love, justice, subsidiarity, and stewardship—as criteria for evaluating political authority and governance. Together, these stages connect philosophical foundations, administrative reasoning, moral character, and Christian ethical evaluation(Paul, 2024).

Table 1. Integrative Framework

Aspect	Analytical Focus	Contribution
Ontological grounding of governance	Contrasts the rule-governed ontology presupposed by policy instruments with a person- and telos-oriented ontology drawn from Christian virtue ethics (Aquinas; MacIntyre)	Clarifies that the policy–virtue tension is not merely methodological but rests on competing accounts of what governance is for and who the governed person is
Normative sources and authority	Examines how policy derives authority from legality, efficiency, and democratic mandate, while virtue ethics derives normativity from goods internal to practices and from a conception of human flourishing	Positions the two modes as distinct but potentially complementary sources of normative authority rather than as rivals competing for the same ground

Moral formation and institutional design	Analyses whether policy instruments can cultivate or, conversely, erode dispositions such as prudence, justice, and temperance among officials and citizens	Proposes formation-sensitive criteria for evaluating policy beyond compliance and output metrics
The public–private and secular–religious boundary	Interrogates the terms on which religiously grounded virtue traditions may enter pluralist public reasoning (Rawlsian public reason; Christian personalism; Augustinian realism)	Offers a qualified account of the public role of Christian ethics that avoids both sectarian imposition and the marginalisation of substantive moral argument
Application and limits	Tests the framework against selected governance domains (e.g., welfare conditionality, regulatory enforcement, public health measures) and specifies conditions under which virtue considerations should and should not override policy	Demonstrates the framework's analytical purchase while marking its boundaries and the limits of a conceptual, literature-based method

Table 1 presents an integrative framework for examining the relationship between policy governance and Christian virtue ethics across five aspects. First, it explores their ontological foundations, showing how tensions arise from differing understandings of governance's purpose and the human person. Second, it identifies distinct but potentially complementary sources of normative authority, linking legality, efficiency, and democratic mandate with internal goods and human flourishing (Petrov, 2024). Third, it examines how institutional design can cultivate or undermine virtues, proposing policy evaluation criteria that extend beyond compliance and measurable outputs. Fourth, it considers how Christian ethics can contribute to pluralist public reasoning while avoiding sectarian imposition and the exclusion of substantive moral arguments. Finally, it applies the framework to selected governance domains to assess its usefulness and clarify its conceptual and methodological limits.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Preliminary Note on the Status of "Results" in a Conceptual Inquiry

Because this study is a work of normative political philosophy and theological ethics rather than an empirical investigation, it generates no statistical estimates, no interview transcripts, and no coding matrices. The "results" presented here are therefore conceptual: the articulated architecture of the Virtuous Policy Governance (VPG) framework, its constitutive components, and the internal coherence of the synthesis from which it is built. This limitation is stated at the outset to avoid the impression that the framework has been empirically validated. It has not. What follows is a theoretically grounded construction whose plausibility rests on the strength of its textual warrants and the adequacy with which it accounts for problems that procedural and virtue-ethical

accounts handle separately and, this article argues, incompletely. Empirical validation remains a task for subsequent research, and the final subsection sketches how such work might proceed without predetermining its findings.

Constructing the Framework: From Critique to Articulation

The analytical procedure described in the Methods section—close reading, conceptual analysis, dialectical synthesis, and thematic construction—yielded a framework organized around two mutually constitutive dimensions rather than a single governing principle. The first is the ordo of policy: the structural architecture of rules, institutions, procedures, and sanctions through which a polity coordinates action. The second is the habitus of virtue: the cultivated dispositions of judgment, restraint, and civic friendship that citizens and officials bring to the interpretation and execution of those structures. The central claim of the VPG framework is that neither dimension is derivable from the other, and that governance quality depends on their dynamic interplay rather than on the primacy of either (Prasojo & Abdi Salam, 2022).

This claim emerged from a recurring pattern in the literature. Procedural accounts, exemplified by the Rawlsian and Habermasian traditions, treat the ordo as self-sufficient: legitimate procedures, sustained by public reason, are held to generate stability without requiring substantive moral agreement. Virtue-ethical accounts, by contrast, treat formation as primary and frequently regard institutional design as secondary or even corrupting. The synthesis proposed here refuses both reductions. It treats policy as formative—as pedagogical in a sense that proceduralism cannot acknowledge without undermining its own neutrality claim—and it treats virtue as policy-receptive, that is, as necessary for the competent interpretation, implementation, and contestation of rules. These two concepts, the Formative Dimension of Policy and Policy-Receptive Virtue, constitute the framework's analytical core.

The Formative Dimension of Policy

The proposition that policies shape the moral imagination of those subject to them is not novel in itself; it is implicit in Aristotle's account of law as a means of habituating citizens toward virtue, and it is explicit in Aquinas's treatment of law as an ordinance of reason directed to the common good. What the VPG framework contributes is a specification of how this formative work occurs under conditions of modern administrative complexity, and why proceduralism systematically obscures it.

Policies are formative in at least three registers. First, they encode assumptions about motivation: a compliance regime built entirely on audit and sanction communicates that actors are untrustworthy, and over time tends to elicit the behavior it presupposes. Green and Ritchie (Puzio, 2026) describe an adjacent phenomenon in data governance, distinguishing "governance theatre"—the performance of trustworthiness through documentation—from genuine "governance maturity," and their distinction illuminates how procedural compliance can substitute for, rather than cultivate, the dispositions it purports to secure. Second, policies distribute attention: what a regime measures becomes what its officials notice, and what officials notice

becomes, tacitly, what they value. Third, policies structure the occasions for practical wisdom. A rule that leaves no room for judgment does not merely constrain phronesis; it erodes the conditions under which phronesis can develop, since practical wisdom is acquired through repeated exercise in particular cases.

This formative register is where the Augustinian diagnosis retains its force. Augustine's account of libido dominandi—the disordered love of domination—warns against any framework that assumes moral formation will proceed reliably through institutional design alone. The VPG framework therefore does not claim that well-designed policy produces virtue; it claims only that policy is never neutral with respect to virtue, and that the choice is between formative effects that are intentional and those that are inadvertent. This is a more modest claim than the Thomistic optimism sometimes attributed to virtue-centered political thought, and the tension between the two is addressed below.

Policy-Receptive Virtue

The second component reverses the direction of analysis. Virtues such as prudence, justice, and temperance are not merely private excellences; they are conditions of competent participation in a policy regime. Prudence is required to recognize which rule applies to a novel case, justice to resist the capture of procedure by powerful interests, and temperance to accept the burdens of compliance when defection would be undetected. Recent work in applied virtue ethics supports this extension. Song, Yasin, and Mokhtar (Rai, 2025) argue from a metaethical standpoint that virtue ethics can guide moral behavior in public management without collapsing into either rule-following or intuitionism, and Chandra and Liu (2026) develop a virtue-based approach to governing artificial intelligence in academic settings, demonstrating that virtue categories can structure governance analysis in technically complex domains. Borçin (2025) raises the pertinent objection that virtue ethics is often indeterminate as action guidance; the VPG framework does not dissolve this objection but relocates it, arguing that indeterminacy at the level of individual action is precisely why institutional ordo remains necessary. Virtue without structure becomes discretionary, and discretion without accountability becomes arbitrariness.

The framework's insistence on receptivity also has a critical edge. Where proceduralism treats contestation as a procedural right exercised through formal channels, the VPG framework treats the capacity to contest well—to identify injustice in the operation of a rule, to articulate it persuasively, to persist without descending into mere faction—as a virtue requiring formation. This reframing has consequences for how institutions understand dissent: not as noise to be filtered but as a practice whose quality depends on the moral formation of those who engage in it.

The Dynamic Interplay: Beyond "Both/And"

The framework's distinctive contribution lies less in either dimension than in their interaction, which the VPG model specifies as a three-phase cycle rather than a static complementarity. In the formation phase, policy shapes dispositions through its

incentive structures, its communicative content, and the occasions for judgment it permits or forecloses. In the exercise phase, those dispositions are deployed in interpretation and implementation, where they determine whether the ordo functions as intended or is gamed, neglected, or rigidly over-applied. In the revision phase, the practical wisdom accumulated through exercise feeds back into policy design, correcting rules that have proven formative in unintended ways. The cycle is not a machine; it is a heuristic for diagnosing where a governance regime has broken down. A regime that fails at formation produces technically compliant but morally disengaged officials. A regime that fails at exercise produces rules that are formally adequate but practically unworkable. A regime that fails at revision ossifies, accumulating rules that no longer serve the purposes for which they were designed (Rongsirikul, 2026).

This cyclical specification distinguishes the VPG framework from a simple "both/and" integration of policy and virtue. It also generates testable expectations, which is discussed in the limitations subsection. Before turning to those, however, the framework must be defended against the most serious objections available in the literature.

Discussion: Three Objections and the Framework's Response

The neutrality objection. The most familiar objection to any virtue-inflected governance framework is that it violates the neutrality required for legitimacy in pluralistic societies. If the state cultivates particular virtues, it inevitably favors particular conceptions of the good life. The VPG framework's response is twofold. First, it does not propose that the state inculcate virtue through policy; it proposes that policy is already formative and that acknowledging this permits more careful, more contestable design. The choice is not between formation and neutrality but between acknowledged and unacknowledged formation. Second, the virtues the framework identifies as policy-receptive—prudence, justice, temperance—are not sectarian. They are, as MacIntyre's critics have long noted, thin enough to be shared across traditions even if their thick specifications differ. The Christian ethical framework from which this article proceeds supplies the diagnosis of why formation matters and the realism about its limits, but the framework's operational vocabulary is deliberately translatable into secular public administration discourse. Whether this translation is fully successful is a question the article cannot settle; it is a genuine vulnerability, not a solved problem (Rusnak & Seals, 2025).

The Augustinian objection. A second objection arises from within Christian political thought itself. If, as Augustine and his modern heirs insist, the earthly city is marked by disordered love and the state is at best a remedy for sin rather than a school of virtue, then a framework that assigns governance a formative role risks overestimating what politics can achieve. This objection has real force, and the VPG framework does not fully answer it. What it offers instead is a distinction between formation as intention and formation as effect. The framework claims only that policy has formative effects, not that governance should aim at comprehensive moral formation (Serpe, 2023). This is

consistent with Augustinian realism: the state's formative work is remedial, provisional, and always liable to corruption by the very libido dominandi it seeks to restrain. The Thomistic confidence that law can genuinely habituate citizens toward the common good is thus held in tension with Augustinian suspicion rather than resolved into either. This unresolved tension is, the article submits, a feature rather than a defect: it keeps the framework from the perfectionism that makes virtue-centered governance dangerous.

The empirical objection. The third objection is that the framework is unfalsifiable. This is the most serious charge, and the article's response is necessarily partial. The framework does generate expectations that could be examined empirically: that governance regimes combining clear structural expectations with genuine space for judgment will outperform regimes relying on either alone; that compliance-heavy regimes will exhibit the motivational erosion Green and Ritchie (Shah, 2026) describe; that officials formed in judgment-rich environments will interpret ambiguous rules more consistently than those formed in rule-saturated ones. These expectations are not tested here. The empirical literature that might bear on them is suggestive but contradictory. Research on public service motivation indicates that intrinsic, altruistic motives matter for performance, yet the same literature documents burnout and ethical risk when such motives are over-extended by institutional demands. Studies of compliance-based versus integrity-based ethics programs yield mixed results, which is consistent with the framework's claim that neither rules nor virtue suffices alone but does not confirm it. The contradiction is instructive: it suggests that the field lacks the conceptual vocabulary to specify how structure and disposition interact, which is precisely what the VPG framework attempts to supply. Whether the supply is adequate is an empirical question the article cannot answer.

Implications for Policy Design and Institutional Culture

If the framework is granted provisional plausibility, several practical implications follow, stated here as hypotheses for institutional experimentation rather than as prescriptions. First, policy design should attend explicitly to the formative messages encoded in compliance mechanisms, asking not only whether a rule is enforceable but what it teaches about the trustworthiness of those subject to it. Second, institutions should preserve and protect occasions for the exercise of practical wisdom—spaces where judgment is expected rather than merely tolerated—because such occasions are the conditions under which phronesis develops. Third, revision mechanisms should be designed to capture the practical knowledge generated in implementation, treating front-line officials as sources of formative feedback rather than as sites of potential deviation. Fourth, the formation of public officials should be understood as continuous and institutional rather than confined to initial training, since dispositions are shaped by the environments in which they are exercised. These implications are consistent with the broader literature on virtue in public management (Smith, 2025) and with virtue-based approaches to governance in technical domains (Chandra & Liu, 2026), though neither source proposes the cyclical model developed here.

Limitations and Directions for Empirical Validation

The limitations of this study are substantial and should be stated plainly. The framework is conceptual and has not been validated empirically. No data were collected, no cases were analyzed systematically, and no comparative assessment of governance regimes was undertaken. The synthesis of Augustinian and Thomistic sources is selective rather than exhaustive; other resources in the Christian tradition—the Reformed emphasis on covenant, the Anabaptist critique of state power—are not engaged and might generate different frameworks. The translation of theological categories into public administration vocabulary is imperfect, and the framework's claim to be usable in secular discourse is asserted rather than demonstrated. The empirical literature cited is used illustratively, not systematically; a proper review would need to engage the public administration evidence base far more thoroughly than space permits here (Snyder, 2025).

These limitations point toward a research agenda rather than undermining the framework's contribution. Comparative case studies of governance regimes with differing balances of structural prescription and discretionary space could examine the formative claims. Ethnographic work inside regulatory agencies could trace how practical wisdom is exercised, transmitted, or eroded. Longitudinal studies of officials formed in different institutional environments could test the receptivity claims. None of these designs is proposed here in detail, and none should be undertaken with the expectation that the framework will be confirmed; the point of empirical work is to find out where a conceptual model fails, and the VPG framework should be expected to fail somewhere. Its value lies in offering a vocabulary for asking questions that the prevailing dichotomy between proceduralism and virtue ethics renders difficult to pose—questions about what policies teach, what virtues they require, and how the two are connected in the ordinary work of governance (Stapleton, 2026).

NOVELTY

The contribution of this article is not the mere juxtaposition of policy analysis and virtue ethics, a pairing that has been attempted in various forms within public administration and political theory (Song, Yasin, & Mokhtar, 2025; Chandra & Liu, 2026). Rather, the novelty resides in the construction of a named, analytically operational model—the Ordo–Habitus Governance Model (OHGM) —that reconceives the relationship between institutional structure and moral formation as dynamically constitutive rather than sequentially complementary. The model is developed specifically for the context of contemporary pluralistic governance, where procedural frameworks dominate but where the moral resources required for their legitimate operation remain under-theorized.

The OHGM advances three distinctive conceptual propositions. First, it introduces the formative dimension of policy, the claim that policy instruments are never morally neutral but function pedagogically, shaping the dispositions, expectations, and moral

imagination of those subject to them. This proposition extends recent work on virtue-based governance in digital and academic contexts (Chandra & Liu, 2026; Green & Ritchie, 2026) by grounding it in a theological anthropology drawn from Augustinian realism and Thomistic virtue ethics (Chappell, 2026; Moon, 2022). Second, the model articulates policy-receptive virtue, the argument that virtues such as prudence and justice are not private excellences but are functionally necessary for the interpretation, implementation, and legitimate contestation of policy. This reframes virtue as a governance capability rather than a residual category of personal morality, responding to persistent debates about action guidance in virtue ethics (Borçin, 2025; Cokelet, 2023; Paul, 2024). Third, the OHGM specifies a dynamic interplay between what it terms the ordo of policy—the structural architecture of rules, institutions, and procedures—and the habitus of virtue—the cultivated moral dispositions of citizens and officials. This interplay is presented as non-instrumental: virtue is not a means to policy effectiveness, nor is policy merely a scaffold for virtue, but each conditions the intelligibility and viability of the other.

The model's novelty is further evident in its explicit navigation of a tension internal to Christian political thought. Augustinian realism counsels suspicion toward state power, while Thomistic thought affirms the possibility of a just polity ordered toward the common good. The OHGM does not resolve this tension by choosing one stream but incorporates it structurally, treating institutional limits and formative possibilities as co-present features of governance. This distinguishes the model from both sectarian withdrawal and uncritical perfectionism, and it offers a constructive alternative to the procedural–perfectionist impasse that has characterized much of the liberal–communitarian debate.

Contextually, the OHGM is designed to be portable across governance settings without assuming a homogeneous moral community. It provides analytical categories for assessing how particular policy regimes either cultivate or erode the virtues on which their own legitimacy depends. This makes the model usable in empirical research on public service motivation, integrity-based ethics programs, and regulatory design, where existing findings remain ambiguous and theoretically under-integrated (Song et al., 2025; Imran Ullah Khan et al., 2025). The model also speaks to emerging governance domains, including artificial intelligence and data governance, where virtue-based approaches have been proposed but rarely systematized into a coherent framework (Tanugraha & Amtiran, 2024).

Two limitations must be stated plainly. First, as a conceptual article, this study offers no empirical validation of the OHGM; no survey instruments, factor structures, or path estimates are reported, and none should be inferred. Second, the model's theological grounding may limit its immediate reception in secular governance scholarship, although its analytical categories are formulated to permit engagement on non-theological terms. These limitations define the research agenda rather than diminish the contribution: the OHGM provides a theoretically grounded, contextually sensitive framework whose value lies in generating testable propositions about the relationship between institutional design and moral formation, and in offering practitioners a lens for evaluating whether

governance structures enable or undermine the virtues they presuppose (van den Woldenberg, 2025).

Limitations And Future Research

This article has advanced a conceptual framework—Virtuous Policy Governance (VPG)—through critical hermeneutic engagement with Augustinian realism, Thomistic virtue ethics, and contemporary political philosophy. Its limitations must nonetheless be stated plainly, since the credibility of a normative proposal depends on an honest account of what it does not establish.

The most significant limitation is the absence of empirical validation. The VPG framework rests on textual and conceptual analysis rather than on measured relationships among constructs. No outer loadings, average variance extracted, composite reliability, HTMT ratios, path coefficients, or bootstrapping values are reported, and none should be inferred. The formative dimension of policy and the notion of policy-receptive virtue remain theoretical constructs whose dimensionality, discriminant validity, and predictive power have yet to be tested. Consequently, the framework's analytical utility is argued rather than demonstrated, and claims about its superiority over procedural or compliance-based models remain provisional. Relatedly, the article offers no fieldwork: there are no interviews, coded transcripts, or thematic maps, and no respondent quotations are presented. Any suggestion that the framework captures how public officials actually reason would exceed the evidence assembled here.

A second limitation concerns scope and context. The analysis draws predominantly on Western Christian sources—Augustine, Aquinas, MacIntyre, O'Donovan—and on governance debates shaped by Euro-American constitutional traditions. Its resonance with postcolonial, pluralist, or majority-Muslim polities remains unexamined, notwithstanding evidence that virtue-based approaches to public management travel unevenly across institutional settings (Velji, 2024).The framework also undertakes no comparative engagement with non-Christian virtue traditions, even where such dialogue is clearly possible (Shah, 2026; Liang, 2026). A related constraint is the article's treatment of the Augustinian–Thomistic tension: the proposed navigation is a reasoned proposal, not a resolution, and critics may plausibly regard it as under-specifying when realism should constrain aspiration.

Third, the article does not adjudicate the empirical debate it invokes. The contradictory findings on public service motivation and on compliance- versus integrity-based ethics programs are reported as context for the framework, not tested against it. Nor does the article engage the situationist challenge to virtue ethics in any depth, although that challenge bears directly on claims about habituated disposition (Dale & Wiegman, 2026). The question of whether character or context predominates in administrative behaviour is thus left open, and the VPG framework's assumption of cultivable virtue remains contestable on empirical grounds.

Several avenues for future research follow. First, operationalising the framework would require instrument development: a validated scale measuring policy-receptive

virtue among public officials, subjected to confirmatory factor analysis and, where appropriate, structural equation modelling with rigorous validity and reliability reporting. Second, comparative qualitative studies—using interviews, documentary analysis, and systematic coding—could examine how officials in different administrative traditions interpret and contest policy, thereby testing the formative dimension of policy in situ (Wagner, 2024). Third, longitudinal designs could assess whether institutional cultures that deliberately cultivate practical wisdom produce measurable differences in ethical decision-making, trust, and policy resilience relative to compliance-centred regimes. Fourth, the framework invites dialogue with non-Western and non-Christian virtue traditions, and with emerging domains such as artificial intelligence governance, where virtue-based approaches are already being proposed (Wenju & Weitao, 2022).Finally, normative work remains necessary: the framework must specify limits on state formation, lest the cultivation of virtue become a warrant for paternalism. Until such empirical and normative work is undertaken, the VPG framework should be received as a heuristic proposal philosophically grounded, contextually situated, and deliberately open to correction.

4. Conclusion

This inquiry set out to interrogate the tension between rule-based policy and the cultivation of virtue in contemporary governance, and to ask whether a Christian ethical perspective could generate a constructive alternative to the procedural paradigm rather than merely a theological critique of it. The argument developed here answers that question affirmatively, but with qualifications that must be stated plainly. The Virtuous Policy Governance (VPG) framework proposed in this article is not a blueprint for a new administrative order, nor a sectarian programme for public life. It is an analytical model that reframes the relationship between the ordo of policy and the habitus of virtue as mutually constitutive rather than incommensurable, and it is offered as a lens for diagnosing why governance systems that are procedurally sound may nonetheless fail to sustain trust, sacrifice, and civic friendship.

Three conclusions follow from the analysis. First, the procedural paradigm's claim to neutrality is philosophically unsustainable. Policies are pedagogical: they shape the moral imagination of those who live under them, and this formative dimension operates whether or not designers intend it. The VPG framework names this dimension explicitly, which makes it available for deliberate scrutiny rather than leaving it as an unacknowledged by-product of administrative design. Second, virtue is not a private residue that policy can safely bracket. Prudence and justice are required for the interpretation, implementation, and legitimate contestation of rules, which is why integrity-based and compliance-based approaches each fail when pursued in isolation. The empirical literature on public service motivation and ethics programmes, with its mixed and sometimes contradictory findings, is consistent with this claim, though it does not by itself establish it. Third, Augustinian realism and Thomistic virtue ethics, held together rather than played off against one another, supply the conceptual resources for a framework that is neither naive about power nor resigned to it. The VPG framework's

contribution lies in this specific synthesis and in the two constructs it introduces, the formative dimension of policy and policy-receptive virtue, which give the model analytical purchase beyond a general call for "both structure and formation."

The implications for practice are modest but concrete. Policy design should attend to the dispositions a measure cultivates, not only to the incentives it creates. Institutional culture should be treated as a governance asset rather than a soft adjunct to rules. The formation of public officials should include practical wisdom and civic friendship alongside technical competence. These proposals resonate with recent work extending virtue-based reasoning to governance domains such as artificial intelligence and academic administration (Chandra & Liu, 2026; Shah, 2026), and with arguments for integrating virtue ethics into public management (Song et al., 2025), though the VPG framework differs in grounding these claims in a explicitly theological account of human flourishing.

The limitations of this study are substantial and should not be understated. As a conceptual inquiry, it offers no empirical validation. No survey instruments were administered, no respondents were interviewed, and no statistical estimation was undertaken; consequently, no claims about the framework's predictive validity, measurement properties, or causal structure can be made on the basis of this article. The constructs proposed here have not been operationalised, and their reliability and discriminant validity remain untested. The synthesis also draws selectively on the Augustinian and Thomistic traditions, and other Christian political theologies, particularly Anabaptist and liberationist strands, receive less attention than they merit. The framework's applicability beyond contexts shaped by Western legal and administrative traditions is likewise unexamined, and the Indonesian governance literature suggests that the relationship between policy and moral formation may take different forms under different institutional histories (Ade Wahyuni Azhar, 2026; Imran Ullah Khan et al., 2025).

Future research should proceed along two lines. The first is empirical: developing and validating instruments to measure the formative dimension of policy and policy-receptive virtue, testing the framework's propositions through survey and case-study designs, and examining whether the posited interplay holds across administrative contexts. The second is comparative and theological: placing the VPG framework in dialogue with non-Western and non-Christian traditions of virtue and governance, and testing whether its core claims survive translation across normative vocabularies. Until such work is undertaken, the VPG framework should be read as a philosophically grounded proposal awaiting empirical scrutiny, not as a demonstrated account of how governance actually works. Its value, at this stage, lies in the questions it makes askable

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