

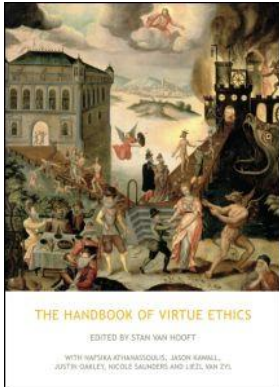
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Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

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The Handbook of Virtue Ethics

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Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315729053.ch41>

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Published online on: 27 Nov 2013

How to cite :- Pedro Alexis Tabensky. 27 Nov 2013, *Virtue ethics for skin-bags: an ethics of love for vulnerable creatures from: The Handbook of Virtue Ethics* Routledge

Accessed on: 01 Apr 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315729053.ch41>

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Virtue ethics for skin-bags: an ethics of love for vulnerable creatures

Pedro Alexis Tabensky

'Tis an absolute and, as it were, a divine perfection, for a man to know how loyally to enjoy his being. We seek other conditions, by reason we do not understand the use of our own; and go out of ourselves, because we know not how there to reside. 'Tis to much purpose to go upon stilts, for, when upon stilts, we must yet walk with our legs; and when seated upon the most elevated throne in the world, we are but seated upon our breech. The fairest lives, in my opinion, are those which regularly accommodate themselves to the common and human model; without miracle, without extravagance.
Michel de Montaigne (1603)

Where there is no need there is no love.

Philip Hallie (1997)

PREAMBLE

Virtue is a precarious victory. Our characters are shaped by the moving sands of time, making it so that ethical integrity can never be guaranteed. We have little idea of what tomorrow has in store, and this has as much to do with ignorance about the future as it does with the rickety nature of human existence. We simply do not know what will come of us, how our characters will be transformed. Whatever ideas we may have of our future personas are an amalgam of wish and highly inconclusive evidence. At some level we know these anxiety-inducing things, and we needily stretch out to others and embed our lives in a protective field so as to help assuage our fears. If we properly understand our precarious condition, we stretch out for connectedness in virtue, moved by the need for a protective cocoon that can only be constituted properly if it flows from virtue. For it is only in this manner that we can genuinely come close to others or genuinely engage with distant others in ways that will, relatively speaking, best protect us from the gales. Philip Hallie aptly describes us: "When I look at my hairy self in a bathroom mirror I see a poor, bare, forked animal, a bag of bones and organs, standing alone. And when I look at strangers in shower rooms I see the same sort of skin-bags" (Hallie 1997: 4).

Alone we stand, “forked”, naked and vulnerable, often shielded by pride and the innumerable fantasies that blind us from exposure to too much reality, and yet there would be no need for such things were we invulnerable. And it is precisely because we are “skin-bags” rather than gods that we reach out to others. Our deep vulnerability is the birthplace of love and, as I would like to suggest, the birthplace of ethics as well. Ethics is ultimately an ethics of love: that which allows us genuinely to relate to others lovingly or merely respectfully – the more impersonal variety of love. To respect others is genuinely to recognize them as human, as belonging to the *we* of humanity, and it is through our loving engagements with specific others that we can come to recognize those who do not form part of our intimate circles. It is through intimate love that we come to recognize humanity, and to recognize this presupposes the ethical. The ethical is in the first instance that which binds us to the human, the glue that constitutes the *we* of humanity, the protective *we* of frail animals creatively adapting to a largely hostile world.

We do not know what will become of us, how the future will bend us in or out of shape. We may venture guesses, even informed ones, but knowledge of whether we will succeed in weathering the storms always eludes us. Virtues shield us from the gales of adversity, allowing us, within limits, to remain whole. For virtues to have value to us – to have bite – the gales must actually threaten integrity. This is virtue’s purpose: to help us stand firmly against very real foes from within and without. There is little place for them in utopian fantasies.¹

I will challenge current mainstream conceptions of virtue, which are informed by the Stoic fantasy of invulnerability, the fantasy of a final victory against our deeply vulnerable “skin-bag” natures. I will show that a robustly ethical life is necessarily a vulnerable one in the sense that the fabric of ethical dispositions is always at risk of becoming corrupted. And I shall do so by paying particular attention to the virtue of love, and show how this fundamental virtue, which is really the fabric of virtues, is permanently at risk of corruption. This is one of its constitutive features. Even the best among us – and this is an insight drawn from Mary Midgley’s *Wickedness* (1984) – are responsible for the ongoing trajectory of their lives, must with dedication and commitment keep at it for the sake of wholeness. And we must keep at it because there are always countervailing pressures.

Situationist worries, at least *prima facie*, are a concern, but I do not think these ultimately pose a threat to virtue ethics as such. Rather, if they are a threat at all (I don’t think they ultimately are), they threaten the mainstream, which conceives of virtues ideally as robustly stable dispositions that are relatively invulnerable to pressures from within and without. The picture of the virtuous individual that I here advance is that of a person struggling on an ongoing basis – typically with limited success – to remain whole.²

THE TRADITION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

I take many of the merits of mainstream virtue ethics for granted here but critique the extent to which the tradition entertains the fantasy of invulnerability in virtue. Agreeing with the mainstream, I hold that ethical theory should in the first instance be understood as a kind of picture of the ideal life and so must be intimately tied up with ideas of irreducible individuality and flourishing.³ Relatedly, I agree with mainstream concerns with psychological limits and with its suspicion regarding excessive prescription, with what

could be characterized as the algorithmic and relatively impersonal approaches to ethics that are characteristic of virtue ethics' rivals (see Tabensky 2003a, 2004).

The picture of the virtuous individual that I will paint here is one that is tailored to the human measure, understood in broadly naturalistic terms.⁴ It is not entirely new. At one level Aristotle thought of himself as doing just this, but I don't think he took this idea seriously enough as evidenced by book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where he defends the idea that we must live in accordance with what is most divine in us, the contemplative life.

On the one hand, Aristotle's ethical system is an attempt to show how the ethical life flows from the actual structures of human living (although his conception of human living at its best is far too idealistic for my taste). And, on the other, his system measures the quality of life in terms of divine ideals, which is why in the end he privileges the contemplative life over the ethical one.⁵ For the Aristotle of book X, contemplation is good not for reasons that flow from a study of the actual structure of human living, but because, of all faculties, it matches up closest to his conception of divinity. According to Aristotle the ethical life as such is inferior to the contemplative life because there is no place for ethics, or at least the ethics that is relevant to our kind, on Mount Olympus. I agree with Aristotle that gods cannot be ethical in the relevant way. But, contrary to him, and to Plato as well, I think this means that we should not measure our lives with the measuring stick of the divine. It is the wrong stick. If I am right here, then basic features of virtue ethics will need to be revised, including contemporary conceptions of virtue ethics, which in my view are largely infected with ancient perfectionisms.

Virtue ethicists standardly defend the view that ethics is best understood by appealing to stable character traits that are constitutive of people functioning at their best from the ethical point of view. Much hangs on what we mean by "stable". I do not dispute the idea that good people are trustworthy, and in this sense their characters must be relatively stable, but not unqualifiedly so. Stability must be a kind of victory. And, as such, the possibility of corruption is always present, unless one conceives of the possibility of a final victory. This is something I reject and which Aristotle and, more extremely, Plato endorse to a large extent. At Western philosophy's point of origination is a deep yearning for the end of flux or, in the specific case of Aristotle, an invulnerability to flux. This should not surprise us too much, given the profound effects, positive and negative, that this primeval anxiety has on human life in general. As we shall see below, this deeply entrenched sense of our vulnerability and the anxiety that such fear produces is a necessary condition for love and virtue.

But we are an odd species, even slightly ludicrous. It is no exaggeration to assert that we are a malcontent species. For we do not like too much stability either: stability brings boredom, and we dread boredom. This explains why even those infatuated with robotic lifestyles, and who happen to be protected more than most from the gales of adversity, must press on. So, if circumstances largely out of our control did not perform their creative and destructive roles, then we would willingly, even enthusiastically, do the job for them. Friedrich Nietzsche perhaps understood our malcontent nature better than most, and understood to what extent the yearning for stability, and the dread brought about by too much of it, moves our species forward, in its creative battle – or shall I say "tango"? – with the world.

The fantasy of a final victory is founded on fear of our vulnerability, of the fragility that is the mark of human existence, and which finds final confirmation in death. But

vulnerability is a constitutive feature of the ethical life, so we must be honest about our vulnerable natures. Were we invulnerable – godlike – we would not be ethical (at least not in the sense that ultimately matters to us).⁶ We need to find moral strength, indeed fight for it on an ongoing basis. No one survives torture or tragic loss unblemished, and, less dramatically, our characters are always on the move, shifting and moving in accordance with changes in our surroundings and in the landscape of the mind. And it is precisely the mark of the strong that they are able to overcome loss, even if only imperfectly. But to overcome is what they must, which means that they must struggle against temptation or, more generally, corrupting pressure and ongoing self-doubt. Nobody, not even the best and most self-aware among us, knows for sure how they will act in extreme (and even not-so-extreme) circumstances, and this is further evidence that the fabric of our characters is delicate – unstable – even in the case of those whom we deem to be morally exemplary. Think of the case of a veteran of heroic struggle captivated by the trappings of power, or the forgotten hero drowning his sorrows and numbing his hunger with alcohol, hollowed out by the unremitting work of the termites of the mind.

The famous Milgram, Stanford Prison and Good Samaritan experiments (among others), assuming they were well conducted, partially support the case for instability, but they do not, as briefly discussed above, give us reasons, as situationists would have it, for abandoning virtue ethics *tout court*. What we can conclude from these experiments is that normal human beings, even those who in normal circumstances are relatively trustworthy and basically decent, are not invulnerable to external pressures.⁷ Aristotle probably would, at least in his better moments (or, one could be tempted to claim, in his less Stoic moments), agree with this claim, and he could add that even those who have complete virtue may become morally polluted if circumstances are sufficiently adverse. His *Politics* is largely about developing an account of the external circumstances necessary for the virtuous person to flourish. But what Aristotle does not sufficiently acknowledge is what is implied by this, namely that (and here I follow the lead of psychoanalysis) psychological structures are inherently unstable.⁸ To acknowledge, as Aristotle does in his *Politics*, and as Plato does to some extent in his *Republic*, that the virtues can only come about in their highest manifestation in ideal external conditions, entails – *contra* the Aristotle of book X and Plato – that the mind is necessarily a precarious construct, prone to breakdown.

And if one acknowledges what seems to be the in-principle impossibility of social utopias, then the Aristotelian picture of perfect or almost perfect enduring harmony of the soul seems untenable. One of the principal reasons a social utopia is untenable is that one of the basic conditions for much of what is best in us – the virtuous life, for instance – requires that it be permanently at risk.⁹ Although I do not engage in detail with the idea of a social utopia in this piece, I have and will be providing some reasons for doubting that it is possible that such a thing could exist, if one conceives of a utopian society as constituted almost exclusively by highly virtuous and flourishing subjects.

FEAR OF FRAGILITY

I am not sure what it would mean to be unqualifiedly trustworthy. Much virtue ethics, particularly of the classical variety, seems to aim at some kind of ideal of invulnerability. Plato's *Republic* is largely about exploring the conditions for invulnerability. And the Stoics

were particularly concerned with the conditions for achieving immunity from misfortune, something also present to some extent in the Catholic tradition of thinking about hope as a virtue (see Marcel 1951: 29–67). Aristotle's idea of complete virtue, although somewhat more grounded in the actual lives of people than Platonic or Stoic counterparts, is still informed by an ideal of invulnerability to corrupting pressures, such as deep suffering and loss. And of course the divine ideal defended in book X further corroborates this interpretation.

One can certainly understand this impulse to think about the best life as ideally invulnerable. We are pain and suffering avoiders. Indeed, a defining feature of pain and suffering is that they are things to be avoided wherever possible. And it is tempting to make the maximizing move at this point: if pain and suffering are to be avoided wherever possible, then ideally – even if unobtainably – we should live in conditions where suffering is no more. But is this truly desirable? Such a view seems to follow from the idea that we are pain and suffering avoiders. But are we avoiders of this sort in an unqualified sense? I think not. If we were, we would either cease to care about most of what is of value to us, meaning that we would cease to value these things, or we would avoid all sorts of activities and engagements with others where the risk of suffering would be present. We would, for instance, avoid having intimate relationships for fear of the pain of loss. I think we can fairly be described as risk takers, some more than others. And to be a risk taker involves leaving oneself open to the possibility to suffering. A creature that could not suffer could not take risks.

Virtue is valuable to us against a backdrop in which we are so endlessly and necessarily vulnerable to corruption. That is where the idea of stability gets its bite. In a world of another sort – a paradisaical one – the fight for virtue would have no place. So much the worse for virtue, Saul Smilansky would say. He argues, as briefly discussed above, that ethics is only a necessary requirement in an imperfect world such as the one we happen to live in, and that its value is contingent upon imperfection (2007: 77–89). Aristotle would agree. However, because ethical integrity is always at risk of corruption, ethics needs on the whole to be taxing. Accordingly, ethical living is a necessary feature of the good human life rather than merely, as Smilansky holds, a contingent necessity.

VIRTUES OF LOVE

Think carefully about what really matters to us rather than about things that we could set aside at any given point without great loss. I am concerned here with aspects of our lives the loss of which would amount to a significant or complete breakdown of the self, to a “spiritual autophagy” as Gabriel Marcel would put it (1951: 44). I take it that love is unrenounceable in this sense: not merely this or that specific relationship of care, but the network of caring relationships within which our lives are nested. And, unsurprisingly, love is standardly taken to be one of the chief virtues, such that it is hard to see how a life lacking altogether in loving relationships could ultimately be desirable to us. Thinking carefully about the conditions for love will reveal that vulnerability to pain and suffering are necessary conditions for it. Love flows from the genuine fear of pain and suffering, from a deeply entrenched sense, as evidenced by the deep emotional commitment that is constitutive of love, a strength of commitment that can only properly be made sense of in relation not only to a sense of what is positively to be gained, but also in relation to an

understanding, even if only implicit, of what it would be like to live a loveless life, a life entirely separated from others. The irresistible thirst for love, present in germinal form in infants as expressed by the desperate cry for the fecund body of the mother that satisfies all cravings for food and protection, cannot be ignored except at an exceptionally high cost to the self. Most, if not all, psychological disorders are in one form or another disorders of love, failures of love. Corrupted self-esteem is for the most part a consequence of a lack of recognition that one is worthy of being loved.

Marcel aptly describes the experience of despair, no matter what its origins, as an all-consuming sense that one is alone or, more precisely, that one is categorically unloved, that nobody cares about me, that nobody would or could lend me a helping hand, that I am special to no one. It is for this reason that, according to Marcel, despair must be understood as “captivity or exile”, as being shut off and left alone (*ibid.*: 41).

I should stress that the sort of solitude that I am concerned with here is not the more common form of solitude, which often plays very positive functions in our lives, the form of solitude defended by Anthony Storr in his *Solitude*.¹⁰ I would not have spent time working on this chapter were it not for the joy that I derive from solitary contemplation. Following Eric Fromm (1956), I will from now on refer to the sort of solitude that Marcel describes as “separateness” (1951), and this contrasts well with the idea of love as connectedness in virtue.

One of the key sources of pain and suffering that grounds the possibility of love is separateness. Separateness is arguably one of our greatest fears. If, following Marcel, one recognizes that desperation always expresses itself as separateness, as being trapped, hollowed out and unable to receive a helping hand, then one will also recognize to what extent one grasps one’s integrity as requiring “communion” with others, another way of describing connectedness in virtue (Marcel 1951). To say that something is a fear is to say that it is a source of pain and suffering. We fear that which directly or indirectly causes us pain and suffering. But the reverse is also true: pain and suffering are caused by what we fear. Pain and suffering make it so that we cannot be indifferent to what we fear. The very idea of fearing that towards which we are indifferent is incoherent.

We fear separateness, and love is its antidote: sexual love, the love between friends, of parent to child and indeed more impersonal modalities of care as well (Fromm 1956). Love is deeply important to us in so far as it adds something of great significance to our lives. And its value is measured by the cost of its loss, a cost we all at some level recognize. Love, in this regard, could be seen as a kind of cure. But it is a dangerous kind of cure, given that love involves taking the risk of disappointment and loss. But the cost of not taking this risk is far higher than the cost of taking it.

The love that we are capable of and which we find intelligible, more than purely at a schematic level, is at bottom a response to need. I agree with Hallie’s view, expressed in the second epigraph of this chapter, that need is a condition for love. This need is more than a mere want, something towards which we can be close to indifferent. It is a need that demands to be fulfilled, because the cost of failure is immense personal loss. It is not within us to take this need lightly. The need in question is to assuage separateness. So, if the risk were not there – if separateness were not an object of dread – then love would not be necessary. The virtue of love – not abstract ideas of love sometimes attributed to gods, but the mundane love we are actually capable of experiencing – is specific to creatures that fear separateness. And we fear separateness because we have some sense, at a deep

affective level, of what separateness would amount to. From the earliest infancy, before the advent of language, we fear being separated off. This is perhaps why love is so basic to us. It responds to a need that precedes socialization. But, as Fromm argues, basic awareness of our vulnerability – of our inability to cope on our own and the shame and anxiety that aloneness brings about – is responsible for giving us an unrenounceable need to share our lives with others. Separateness is deeply destructive to life. We pursue love in order to avoid the “spiritual autophagy” of separateness. Perhaps paradoxically, we protect ourselves by making ourselves vulnerable to others.

The fear of separateness has a complex structure, which includes the fear of death and more generally the radical vulnerability of the lonely broken figure in a largely hostile world. But most importantly for our purposes, this structure includes the fear of loss of integrity, of the breakdown of self, in short, of radical corruption, even madness. The fear in question is that of dissolution. That is the object of the anxiety that pushes us to seek “communion” with others. Even if our lives happen to be properly nested in a network of love from the beginning, we still experience the anxiety of being separated off. For we do not know what the future has in store for us, fuelling our ongoing sense that things may not turn out right, that conditions that hold us together may become corrupted, that the loving relationships that sustain us cannot be taken for granted.

To admit that this anxiety is a central feature of our existences is to admit to a certain susceptibility to breakdown of psychological structures, explaining the very possibility of madness and lesser psychological evils. This suggests that the stability of the virtues defended by the tradition is a myth.

Love is a triumph over fear, a response to the need to overcome fear. Triumph always presupposes effort. But the triumph in question is never absolute. It depends on the ongoing possibility of fear and on the ongoing effort to overcome it. I may for periods of time (partially) forget about the threat of separateness if my life is properly nested in a complex web of loving relationships. But love is not simply something that one achieves once and for all. It is not merely its coming into fruition that is a response to a need, but so too is its ongoing existence. And the ongoing need for intimate company is a direct response to the ongoing fear of separateness. This fear may not always be conscious, but it is a central feature of the background that motivates “skin-bags”, rather than gods, to make themselves vulnerable to others in order to protect themselves from “spiritual autophagy”. This partly explains the fear of separation typically experienced by those thinking about the possibility of moving on from a doomed romantic relationship. The fear in question is that of being left alone to our own devices, separated off, for we believe at a visceral level that alone we cannot cope. Alone we are exposed in all our shameful naked vulnerability. Alone we become the pathetic rivals of a world infinitely more powerful than us: unprotected and helpless. And even the least observant among us knows this, as expressed by our deep need for intimacy as well as more impersonal cooperative bonds involving care, trust and recognition.

We do not only seek the company of intimate others, for that would not protect us sufficiently. We seek out networks of cooperative exchange, ideally guided by trust and a sense of common purpose. We cooperatively build networks within which our circles of intimacy can be cocooned. Taken alone, our circles are far too frail, far too much at risk of dissolution, at the mercy of the physical and psychological dangers that afflict the solitary figure, cut off, indeed exiled, from the protective shield of community.

OTHER-REGARD

An objector could claim that the present account of love is that in name only, for it places too much emphasis on self-regard. She could claim that other-regard must be a central part of any account of love. And to this I respond that the account I am defending is not incompatible in the least with other-regard. It is true that need motivates me to love, that without it love could not be, but it is also true that to love properly involves caring for others for their sake as well as for ours. The basic need to assuage separateness pushes us above the plain of pure self-regard.

A love that was purely self-regarding would of necessity be tormented, for to love in this way is largely to remain alone and hence is largely self-defeating. I can only dispel the anxiety of separateness, without subterfuge, by opening up to the other, by giving of myself for the sake of others, as Fromm would put it (1956: 24). To give of oneself must be distinguished from instrumental loving, where one gives only for the sake of certain returns, where the giving is strategic, such that, if one could receive without giving, that would be the preferred course of action by those operating in the wrong register. Instrumental giving is aimed at motivating others to give me what I need. It is not a form of sharing or communing. Properly to love, by contrast, involves sharing, which is at bottom not transactional, despite the fact that it has a self-regarding dimension. When loving in the “mercenary spirit” one remains enclosed in oneself, vulnerable to the anxiety of separateness, only able to find the temporary solace of the shopper, trapped in short cycles of comforting pleasure and disenchantment (Marcel 1951: 56). Genuinely to give involves opening up to the other, giving of oneself to the loved one without demanding return, in the serene hopeful confidence that such love will be reciprocated. To give properly in this way is not to demand return, but to hope that my giving will contribute to opening up a space of sharing. And the returns that one hopes for when one loves in the proper register cannot easily be quantified, for it is not informed by the logic of the market. The returns typically take the form of caring gestures expressive of dedication, including the willingness to make sacrifices. Most of all, one gives in this way not because of the returns that such giving would elicit, but in order to demonstrate one’s availability to sharing. This is not altruism in its purest and highly idealized manifestation.¹¹ Rather, it is a giving that opens up a space of love, a giving that radiates outwards in the hope that the gesture will resonate with those who are receptive to the calling. This sort of calling opens up a space of sharing where the recipient comes to form part of the web of love of the giver in a way that bestows meaning on the idea of sacrifice.

To love, properly speaking, is to be motivated by the fear of separateness to share with and care for others. But this aim can never be realized properly if the aim of one’s loving is exhausted by the primordial need that originally set love in motion. Love, properly speaking, is pushed forward by the need to overcome separation, but it is guided by the vision of care and reciprocity.

Mutuality is one of the central features of most kinds of love. And mutuality should not be understood as a kind of economic transaction. If it were, then the fear of separateness could not be assuaged, unless we were able to trick ourselves into believing that our economic associations were indeed grounded in care. It is only by caring that the fear of separateness can be assuaged, only by generously extending oneself outwards for the sake of others. Generosity and genuine care are central features of properly formed love. The

excessively needy subject cannot but be guided by fear rather than by an understanding that fear is the ground rather than the light that guides love.

Loving relationships of mutuality, although motivated by the need to overcome the fear of separateness, require non-instrumental other-regard for successfully overcoming fear. It involves moving beyond immediate need. If I did not care for you for your sake then I could not be said properly to love, properly to enter into a form of communion that will assuage my fears (*ibid.*: 58). To care in this way is not so much to care for you independently of how my caring may affect me, but rather to care for you to the extent that I am willing to make sacrifices for you. One thing I gain from such sacrifices, from the purely personal point of view, is the preservation of my moral integrity. If I did not make this sacrifice for you, a crucial part of me would die. On rare occasions such sacrifices may be ultimate. And we are sometimes prepared to make them to the extent that we wholeheartedly believe that not doing so would turn us into human beings we could not bear to be. A comparable case is that of Socrates' ultimate sacrifice. He could only carry on at the cost of giving up what sustains him.

So, love is a response to fear of separateness, a triumph over separateness, but I cannot justify my loving relationship by appealing exclusively or even primarily to this basic condition, although I can explain why love exists in the first place by appealing to this fear.

The fear of separateness is tied up with the fear of dissolution, of a breakdown of the self (including the fear of physical harm). Love protects us against erosion, like bulwarks facing angry seas. It shields us from adversity, as the love of father and son portrayed in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2010) shields them from their apocalyptic surroundings. It allows us to remain whole. Or, more precisely, it is a constitutive element of wholeness.

So the virtue of love is there to assuage dissolution. This amounts to admitting that fundamentally the subject is unstable, prone to breakdown, forced permanently to work at remaining whole. There is a fundamental instability at the heart of our being.

Further evidence of this instability is the central role that the virtue of hope plays in our lives. Hope, understood as a virtue, is a particular disposition towards the future. In the Catholic tradition this disposition is typically tied up with salvation, but we need not go that way. Marcel argues that hope is central to love, and I largely agree with him.¹² Love demands that we place our hopes in others, but in so far as love presupposes care, this cannot be merely self-directed. I must place my hopes in us. Love involves the intertwining of lives significantly for the sake of those we love as we head forward, largely in the dark, towards the many perils that are the mark of human living. And a key part of this uncertainty relates to what the future will make of us, whether we will manage to overcome the obstacles strewn on our way without loss of integrity. Virtues such as loyalty, respect, perseverance, attentiveness, reliability, honesty and bravery play themselves out in this context. In fact, this is the proper place of the virtues. It is in this context that they have meaning to us. And in this context the virtues are understood as victories that are never final in any absolute sense.

CLOSING

My primary focus has been on the virtue of love and the need that sets love in motion. I have suggested that love is the wellspring of virtue. Since all virtues are dispositions

that allow us to cope as best we can with the storms of life, virtues must be understood as precarious victories which, however personal, always presuppose a *we*. And, as such, they precariously shield us from ongoing threats: ultimately the threat of separation and of losing our spiritual hold (see Marcel 1951: 37–8). But such threats turn integrity into a highly prized value, something worthy of our ongoing efforts and towards which “skin-bags” cannot be indifferent.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Sally Matthews and Thaddeus Metz, and for the anonymous reviewer of an earlier version of this piece, for their valuable feedback.

NOTES

1. Saul Smilansky would agree, although he thinks that this means that ethics is a contingent necessity. I disagree. Morality emerges in the very same context that makes human living at its best possible, and I will go some way to showing why this is the case in this piece (Smilansky 2007). Simone de Beauvoir (1948: 10) seems to agree with me: “But it is also true that the most optimistic ethics have all begun by emphasizing the element of failure involved in the condition of man; without failure, no ethics; for a being who, from the very start, would be an exact co-incident with himself, in a perfect plenitude, the notion of having to be would have not meaning. One does not offer an ethics to a God.”

Her concern here is not with contingency, but with what defines the human situation as such. Much the same can be said about Hallie, who has little time for the sort of utopias that Smilansky believes will make ethics irrelevant. For Hallie, the rare beauty that humans are capable of occurs in the midst of storms. And his two main influences, Michel de Montaigne and Albert Camus, concur. See Montaigne (1603) and Camus ([1942] 2005).

2. See Nancy Snow, this volume, Chapter 38.
3. That said, I do criticize a key feature of eudaimonism in Tabensky (2009a).
4. I largely agree with Richard Hamilton’s characterization of naturalism. See this volume, Chapter 4.
5. See, for instance, J. Lear (2000). Lear shows us how Aristotle’s ethics is ultimately an effort to escape the conditions of life, the “pressures in being alive” (*ibid.*: 52).
6. In support of these claims, see Nussbaum (1989), B. Williams (1973c) and Tabensky (2003b: 89–123).
7. For a rich discussion of the Milgram experiment and the Stanford Prison experiment by the originator of the Stanford Prisoner experiment, see Zimbardo (2007).
8. In Jonathan Lear’s words: “we have reason to think of the mind as a *self-disrupting organism*” (J. Lear 2000: 112). And, in Sigmund Freud’s words: “in addition to the drive to preserve the living substance and bring it together in ever larger units, there must be another, opposed to it, which sought to break down these units and restore them to their primordial inorganic state. Besides Eros, then, there was a death drive, and the interaction and counteraction of these two could explain the phenomena of life” (Freud [1930] 2002: 55).
9. This is one of the basic themes defended in a literary fashion in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Here is a key section of the novel, which I originally quote in Tabensky (2009b), where I discuss the novel in more depth than I have space for in this piece. Mustapha Mond argues that the new world order “has absolutely no need of nobility or heroism In a properly organized society like ours, nobody has any opportunities for being noble or heroic. Conditions have got to be thoroughly unstable before occasion can arise. Where there are wars, where there are divided allegiances, where there are temptations to be resisted, objects of love fought for or defended – there, obviously, nobility and heroism have some sense” (Huxley 2004: 209).

The Savage replies: “But the tears are necessary. Don’t you remember what Othello said? ‘If after every tempest come such calms, may the winds blow till they have awakened death’ But I don’t want comfort, I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness” (*ibid.*: 210–11).

10. Storr (2005) defends the value of solitude, but his conception of solitude does not contradict what is being defended here. First, Storr does not deny the value of loving relationships. Second, his conception of solitude is not antithetical to having a rich gamut of human relationships. His concern, rather, is to highlight the importance of an introspective life and to defend the plausible idea that not all value flows from love. In his words (*ibid.*: 202), “The happiest lives are probably those in which neither interpersonal relationships nor impersonal interests are idealized as the only way to salvation. The desire and pursuit of the whole must comprehend both aspects of human nature.”
11. The extreme conception of altruism – devoid entirely of a self-regarding dimension – is defended by Marcel (1951).
12. Although I disagree with his defence of charity, understood by him as the highest form of human love. See Marcel (1951: 29–67).

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