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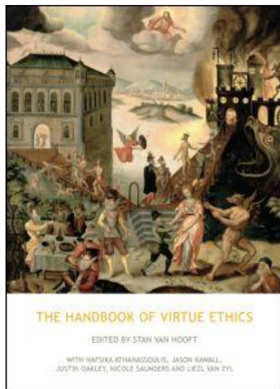

The Handbook of Virtue Ethics

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Virtue ethics, virtue theory and moral theology

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Virtue ethics, virtue theory and moral theology

Glen Pettigrove

The virtues have long played a central role in Christian moral teaching. It is not surprising, then, that over the centuries theologians have produced a number of interesting versions of an ethics of virtue. Although they hearken back to and are profoundly shaped by a shared set of canonical texts, theological commitments, and ritual observances, many of these virtue-focused accounts of ethics differ quite markedly from one another. The perfectionism of Wesley's *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* is as different from the agapism of Edwards's *The Nature of True Virtue* as it is like it. And neither of them could easily be confused with the works of Josef Pieper, who was one of the most important contributors to twentieth-century Thomistic ethics. Given the length, breadth and sophistication of this tradition, Christian moral theology offers a wealth of resources for contemporary virtue ethicists, whether they are working within a Christian theological framework or not. This chapter will highlight four strands within recent theologically informed work on virtue ethics, each of which is directly relevant to current controversies in moral philosophy: (a) Thomistic virtue ethics, (b) narrativist virtue ethics, (c) neo-Augustinian virtue ethics and (d) divine motivation theory. Along the way it will shed light on what it means to offer a virtue ethic, as opposed to a virtue theory.

THOMISTIC VIRTUE ETHICS

The second part of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* is devoted to questions relating to ethics and comprises approximately three-fifths of the total work. A considerable portion of his discussion is concerned with the virtues. But on one popular reading the virtues are not a very interesting part of his moral theory. On this reading the mind has the capacity to apprehend fundamental moral principles. The general principles of action that are grasped by means of this capacity constitute the natural law. Conscience then enables one to see how this law applies to the particular context in which one finds oneself.

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Unfortunately, however, our passions do not always line up with what reason tells us we should do. So it is the task of the virtues to help make sure our will follows our reason and acts in accordance with the principles of the natural law and the dictates of conscience rather than following the passions. On this reading, all of the serious normative, epistemic and metaphysical work has already been done prior to the introduction of the virtues. The virtues will not tell us much about what we *should do*, what we *should be*, what is *good* or *why*. Their job is simply to "make it easy for us" to do what reason and conscience tell us we ought to do (Davies 1992: 239). This makes Aquinas out to be a deontologist whose discussion of the virtues may be of interest to moral educators and empirical psychologists who want to understand why we act as we do, but they will not be of much interest to the moral philosopher.

One puzzling feature of this reading is the discrepancy between the rather uninteresting role it assigns the virtues and the remarkably illuminating observations that emerge in Aquinas's discussions of them. Philippa Foot goes so far as to assert that:

> it is best when considering the virtues and vices to go back to Aristotle and Aquinas … and it is possible to learn a great deal from Aquinas that one could not have got from Aristotle. It is my opinion that the *Summa Theologica* is one of the best sources we have for moral philosophy and moreover that St. Thomas's ethical writings are as useful to the atheist as to the Catholic or other Christian believer.
>
> (Foot 2002b: 1–2)

Of course, it is entirely possible for someone to say illuminating things about topics that are peripheral to their main interests. All the same, the richness and insight of Aquinas's discussion of the virtues raises the question of whether the virtues might play a more significant theoretical role than the one assigned to them by the popular deontological reading.

A second reason to question the common reading stems from the comparative imbalance between Aquinas's brief treatment of the natural law (which on this reading does most of the heavy lifting in his ethical theory) in the *Summa Theologiae* and his lengthy discussions of the virtues. In the prima secundae of the *Summa*, Aquinas devotes one question to the natural law, whereas he devotes forty to the general nature of virtue and vice. In the secunda secundae seven questions are devoted to matters of law, whereas 170 are devoted to discussing particular virtues and vices (Bowlin 1999: 2–3; De Young *et al.* 2009: 130).[1] The surprisingly short discussion of the natural law in the *Summa* is in keeping with Aquinas's other published treatments of ethics, some of which do not even mention the concept of natural law (Bourke 1974). At the very least, the fact that Aquinas devotes so much more of his attention to the virtues than to the natural law invites one to revisit the *Summa* to see if there is something the deontological reading has missed.

In *Contingency and Fortune in Aquinas's Ethics* (1999), John Bowlin has constructed an alternative reading of Aquinas's ethics which is instructive both for those with a particular interest in Aquinas and for those with a more general interest in virtue. On this reading the importance of the virtues is not limited to overcoming our occasional reluctance regarding doing what is right. And they are not merely instrumentally related to our flourishing. They are also partly constitutive of it and they play an essential role in helping us determine what we ought to do. Thus, on Bowlin's reading, Aquinas offers us a virtue

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ethic (as opposed to merely a virtue theory) in which virtues play a crucial role both in moral epistemology and in moral metaphysics.

The contrast between virtue ethics and virtue theory is drawn differently by different theorists, so it is worth pausing for a moment to clarify the contrast I mean to designate. Like Roger Crisp, I take *virtue theory* to refer to "the area of enquiry concerned with the virtues in general" (Crisp 1996: 5). *Virtue ethics* refers to a subset of virtue theory. What is distinctive of this subset is that virtue occupies a foundational role for each of its member theories. Virtue is not defined in a way that makes it either subordinate or reducible to rightness or goodness, as it would be if, for example, it were defined as a tendency to perform right actions or to produce good outcomes. Rather, virtue is taken to have a certain "explanatory primacy" within these theories (Watson 1990: 451). As will become clear in a moment, the ethicists I am discussing illustrate several quite distinct ways in which one might construct a theory in which virtue could be said to have primacy.

Bowlin's Aquinas draws attention to two ways in which virtues contribute to our identification of what we ought to do (i.e. to moral epistemology). The first stems from the relationship between the virtues and the passions. Virtues like courage and temperance are clearly concerned with the governance of the passions. But their importance goes well beyond merely resisting the pull of wayward passions so that one can pursue the dictates of reason. Their significance for moral epistemology can only be fully appreciated against the backdrop of Aquinas's account of the passions. The crucial dimension of this account is that the passions "are infused with judgment about the world" (Bowlin 1999: 34; see also Cates 2009). Love takes its object to be good and hatred takes its object to be evil (*Summa Theologiae* [ST] I–II 23.4). Joy takes its object to be a good that already obtains in the present, whereas hope's object is a future good that is "difficult" but "possible to obtain" (ST I–II 40.1 and 4). Sorrow takes its object to be a present evil, while fear involves "the imagination of future evil" (ST I–II 42.2). In each case, the way the passion's object is represented is partly constitutive of the passion. When I am in the grip of that passion I see its object in that light and if I cease to see it in that light I cease to experience that passion (ST I–II 42.2).

The epistemic challenge posed by the passions results from the fact that, although our passions *can be* caused by our rational assessment of a situation, sometimes our passions precede our rational assessment (ST II–II 158.1). Because the passions are infused with judgement, wayward passions that precede and diverge from reason can lead us not only to wayward actions but also to false beliefs about what is good. Our passions can distract, distort or otherwise confuse reason, leading us to see some goods as greater or more likely or less costly than they are. Virtues like courage and temperance correct the passions, fitting them more accurately to the goods, evils and difficulties of the situation an agent is facing. Thus, an agent who possesses these virtues is better positioned both to judge the situation rightly and to act in accordance with that judgement (Bowlin 1999: 40, 44). And an agent who lacks them will be a less reliable judge of which goods she should pursue and which evils avoid.

The virtues' second contribution to moral epistemology can be seen in Aquinas's discussion of happiness and prudence. According to Aquinas, "Every agent, of necessity, acts for an end" (ST I–II 1.2). The end for which embodied rational agents like us act is happiness. *Perfect happiness*, for agents with an intellect like ours, consists in contemplating the Truth, knowing "the very Essence of the First Cause" and "being united to the Uncreated Good",

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which is God (ST I–II 3.2, 3, 7, 8). However, in our current condition we are not capable of unbroken contemplation and perfect union with God. At least at present, physical and social limitations prevent us from enjoying perfect happiness (ST I–II 3.2). The most we can achieve is frequent contemplation, knowledge and union, because we must also attend to our perishable bodies and their material needs. We must avoid various dangers and work to secure our safety. "For *imperfect happiness*, such as can be had in this life, external goods are necessary, not as belonging to the essence of happiness, but by serving as instruments to happiness" (ST I–II 4.7, emphasis added). And it is at precisely this point that the virtue of prudence enters the picture. Prudence deals with life's fluctuating circumstances, enabling an agent both to anticipate and to navigate her way through opportunities and obstacles in her pursuit of imperfect happiness.

There are at least two reasons why prudence is required for a particular agent to determine the right course of action for her to pursue in her particular circumstances, both of which stem from the fact that the object of the rational appetite (i.e. the will) on Aquinas's account is "the good in universal" (ST I II 1.2). First, there are a vast number of particular goods that could be pursued as instances of (or as instrumental to) "the good in universal". The will is not determined by its commitment to the good in universal to prefer one of these particular instances over the others (ST I II 55.1). Prudence is needed to help it select a determinate course among the possible alternatives (Bowlin 1999: 58–9, 125). Second, on Aquinas's account the good in universal is necessary and, as such, unchanging. However, the circumstances of our lives that have a bearing on our pursuit of happiness are continually in flux and not entirely predictable. Prudence is needed to help an agent address these changing circumstances (ST II II 47.2). By enabling us to address the challenges posed by particularity and contingency and to identify the actions that are likely to further our pursuit of happiness in this life, the virtue of prudence makes it possible for embodied rational agents like us to determine what to do.[2]

In addition to their epistemic role in helping us figure out what to do and their instrumental role in motivating us to do it, the virtues are also partly constitutive of our good. Aquinas follows Aristotle in claiming that "virtue is about the difficult and the good" (ST II–II 137.1),[3] and Bowlin's reading of Aquinas draws attention to a significant internal connection between these two conditions.

> The virtuous agent acts with ease and this causes her to take pleasure in her actions and habits, which in turn enables her to consider them good in themselves. And yet, surely much of the pleasure comes from the fact that she has done something difficult and good well. The delight does not come from the ease of agency *per se*, for in that case she would find pleasure and intrinsic worth in all sorts of tasks she finds simple and mundane … Rather, it comes from doing without effort those difficult tasks that are ordered to the good. *This* is what makes virtuous actions and the habits that cause them instrinsically good, satisfying in themselves. Not ease, at least not principally, but rather the fact that difficulty is transcended as the good is pursued. (Bowlin 1999: 154)

Many of the goods we value most highly are those whose acquisition was challenging. Likewise, the activities we value the most are often activities that did not come easily at first. We value these goods and activities in part *because of* the difficulties they posed.

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The virtues enable us to engage in the pursuit of difficult goods and the acquisition of the relevant virtues is part of what makes the pursuit of difficult goods so rewarding. In this way, the virtues are partly constitutive of our happiness.

The final feature of Aquinas's account of virtue and its relation to the good that I shall mention is something to which Paul Waddell (1996) has drawn attention. It is perhaps the most important way in which Aquinas suggests the virtues are both epistemically significant and partly constitutive of our good. As was mentioned above, Aquinas conceives of perfect happiness in terms of knowing, contemplating and being united with God. Wisdom, Aquinas suggests, is the virtue that is engaged in successfully contemplating God and, thus, the exercise of wisdom is partly constitutive of our happiness (ST II–II 45.1). However, Aquinas's discussion of wisdom also points to another way in which not only wisdom but also other virtues might be partly constitutive of our good. "Wisdom denotes a certain rectitude of judgment". And right judgement, he contends, "is twofold". One can judge rightly through the "perfect use of reason". Or one can judge rightly through "a certain connaturality with the matter about which one has to judge". The former route to judgement is made possible by an *intellect* that is well ordered. The latter route, which Aquinas calls "wisdom as a gift", is made possible by the habits and sympathies of an agent whose *will* is well ordered (ST II–II 45.2–3). Where the matter about which one is judging is God, judging rightly through connaturality – that is, through sharing God's nature – will involve possessing virtues like love, which are central to God's nature (ST II–II 45.2). And while the former route (wisdom as an intellectual virtue) is good, Aquinas argues that the latter route (wisdom as a gift) is even "more excellent … since it attains to God more intimately by a kind of union of the soul with Him". Furthermore, "it is able to direct us not only in contemplation but also in action" (ST II–II 45.3).

In the end, an adequate reading of Aquinas's ethics will need to reconcile the emphasis he places on virtue with the remarks about natural law that gave rise to the common reading mentioned above. And Bowlin himself spends the better part of a chapter attempting to broker such a rapprochement. He contends that what Aquinas picks out when he is discussing the natural law are the conditions for the possibility of rational agency, rather than rules of the sort championed by twentieth-century deontologists. However, the details of his case need not concern us. For our purposes, what matters is the contribution that this work in moral theology makes to our thinking about the role of virtue in ethical theory. It sketches out a number of quite promising ways in which virtue might play an essential role both in moral epistemology and in moral metaphysics.

NARRATIVIST VIRTUE ETHICS

In the 1970s and 1980s a number of theologians, including Hans Frei, Johann Baptist Metz and Paul Ricoeur among others, began to develop and defend what came to be known as narrative theology. Among its early advocates was a young moral theologian named Stanley Hauerwas. While his colleague, Alasdair MacIntyre, was working on *After Virtue*, Hauerwas published a series of books ([1974] 1981, 1975a, 1977, 1981) whose cumulative effect on contemporary Protestant ethics would be hard to exaggerate. In them he advances an ethic of virtue that is rooted in a narrative conception of human agency. This section will explain Hauerwas's narrativist account of Christian ethics and note the resources it

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makes available for virtue ethicists both within and outside the church. As was the case with the Thomistic account we have just been considering, virtue plays a crucial role both in Hauerwas's moral epistemology and in his account of the metaphysics of morals.

In an early paper Hauerwas suggests, "The moral life does not consist just in making one right decision after another; it is the progressive attempt to widen and clarify our vision of reality" ([1974] 1981: 44). The reality of which Hauerwas speaks is not the stripped down, view-from-nowhere reality that is often taken to be the object of "scientific" enquiry. Rather, it is the reality of the active and engaged subject who lives in community with other subjects, a reality that is thick with meanings and vibrant with value. The job of the ethicist, he suggests, is to "analyze its infinite richness and multiplicity and perhaps suggest metaphors through which individual moral vision can be enriched and deepened" (*ibid.*).

Already it should be clear that we are no longer dealing with a thirteenth-century theologian working with a more or less Aristotelian metaphysics. We are dealing with a thinker who has been profoundly influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein, Iris Murdoch, Alasdair MacIntyre and James McClendon. Hauerwas does not conceive of reality as something we have to break through the barriers of language, culture and consciousness to get to. Rather, it is something that we access with the assistance of these things, in part, because they help constitute that reality. Concepts, metaphors and stories are what enable us to grasp, build and make sense of our world (Hauerwas [1974] 1981, 1981, 1985, [1984] 1989; Hauerwas & Burrell [1977] 1989).

One reason stories in particular are so important, Hauerwas argues, is because they make human agency possible. In order to act, we must be capable of making sense of what we are doing: "Man's capacity for self-determination is dependent on his ability to envision and fix his attention on certain descriptions and to form his actions (and thus his self) in accordance with them" ([1974] 1981: 58). In so far as what we are doing is extended in time, we must be able to connect up its various moments. And we must do so in a way that makes proper reference to the context in which we act. The fundamental tool we use to do all of this is story. Narratives not only help us organize and remember our experiences; they are what enable us to *do* in the first place. They connect us both to our past and our future. Because they are an essential building block of intentions, actions, reasons, memories and our sense of personal identity, one might even go so far as to claim that stories are the stuff of which consciousness is made: "consciousness is not so much an awareness as it is a skill, that is, the ability to place our action within an intelligible narrative" ([1985] 2001: 81).

The significance of story for consciousness and action is reinforced by our social environment. We are routinely asked to explain what we are doing, to make sense of ourselves to others. And we are taught from an early age that an acceptable response to the question "What are you doing?" will place our behaviour into a narrative framework. "I am trying to surprise my sister"; "I am putting my homework into my backpack so that I don't forget to take it to school tomorrow". The narrative forms that we use to make sense of ourselves and our actions will be drawn from the stock of stories that have been handed down to us by our community. If they were not, then our behaviours would fail to be intelligible – either to ourselves or to others – and as a result they would be hard to see as actions. Indeed, they would be hard to see as ours (1975b; 1981: 115; [1985] 2001; 2007: 37; Hauerwas & Burrell [1977] 1989: 166–8).

There are three features of the ethical position Hauerwas builds around the relationships between narrative, action and consciousness to which I wish to draw attention.

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First, our tendency to prioritize some stories over others both reveals and moulds our character. For example, in a contemporary Western context we encounter the following familiar storylines (among others):

(a) the rags-to-riches, self-made millionaire;
(b) the professional;
(c) the converted sinner.

In an earlier era the rags-to-riches, self-made millionaire would have been exemplified in the biographies of industrial tycoons like John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie. The person shaped by this narrative would have thought in terms of working his way up from an unskilled job on the floor of the factory or a semi-skilled job in a company's accounting office to eventually owning his own highly profitable company.[4] The narrative would have emphasized the importance of hard work, self-discipline and frugality. Today, by contrast, the narrative of the self-made millionaire is more likely to be built around the biographies of popular culture celebrities, Silicon Valley entrepeneurs or Wall Street bankers. Since the normative contours of these narratives will be decidedly different both from one another and from Rockefeller and Carnegie – think, for example, about the comparative (un)importance of frugality within each of these narratives – we can expect related differences in the way the persons whose consciousness is shaped by these narratives tend to live their lives.

The storyline of the professional will take different shapes depending on the nature of the profession.[5] There may be some general similarities between the storyline of an architect and that of a lawyer, nurse, physician, teacher or member of the clergy. Each may have identifiable ends around which the profession is built. Each of them may involve a form of public service that requires specialized training and a "public profession" of one's allegiance to the ends of the profession or to a code of conduct governing the profession. Nevertheless, we would also expect there to be significant differences between the storyline of the architect and that of the teacher which will be shaped by and reflected in their standards of success, their aspirations, the place of each profession within the wider community, the structure of their guilds and the kinds of materials with which they are working. Even within a single profession, we typically find a number of well-recognized variants. The storyline of the family doctor, for example, will differ from that of the specialist at the university research hospital.

A third storyline is that of the converted sinner.[6] Among its many iconic expressions are the stories of Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, of Augustine of Hippo recounted in the *Confessions* and of John Henry Newton conveyed in the words of the hymn "Amazing Grace" and in his autobiography. These narratives are built around notions of moral failing and forgiveness, repentance and renewal. Persons whose consciousness is shaped by the story of the converted sinner will be alert to the possibility of temptation and the reality of vice. Gratitude at being offered a second chance will also play an important role in this narrative, as will a commitment to future improvement.

Even in the brief description just offered, one can begin to glimpse the normative significance of such narratives. They construe some traits as admirable, some ends as worth pursuing, some actions as "to be done" or "to be avoided", and so on. And the three narratives just mentioned each carve up normative and conceptual space differently.

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Sometimes two narratives – or two competing versions of the same general narrative – will be mutually incompatible. At other times, they may cohere with one another. Rockefeller and Carnegie, for example, seem to have drawn on both the rags-to-riches and converted sinner narratives to make sense out of their lives and actions. Even so, the way these narratives spotlight some features and leave others in shadow may mean that an agent who draws upon both will find it challenging to coordinate them in her thoughts, emotions and actions.

Moreover, we do not use all of the stories available to us with equal frequency. We tend to return to some over and over again, while others seldom play a significant role in our thinking, caring or acting. These tendencies, Hauerwas contends, are constitutive of our character: "Our character is our deliberate disposition to use a certain range of reasons for our actions rather than others (such a range is usually what is meant by moral vision), for it is by having reasons and forming our actions accordingly that our character is at once revealed and molded" ([1974] 1981: 59).

Making the same point in another context, he and David Burrell argue, "the kind of decisions we confront, indeed the very way we describe a situation, is a function of the kind of character we have" ([1977] 1989: 166). The character we have formed makes some interpretations of a situation plausible, some implausible, some compelling. Similarly it renders some actions inconceivable, some perhaps conceivable but still well outside the range of live options (such as torturing cats for fun), some attractive (such as teaching a graduate seminar on your favourite topic) and still others necessary (such as providing for your children).

Character plays a particularly important role in Hauerwas's thinking about ethics, forming the basis for Hauerwas's second key contribution to the development of an ethics of virtue. This contribution can be seen most clearly by contrasting Hauerwas's own ethic of virtue with something like Peter Geach's ethic of virtues.[7] Geach argues that, once people with "crazy moral views" are excluded: "there is a sufficiency of theoretical and practical consensus between men … for people of diverse opinions to cooperate in building houses and roads and railways and hospitals, running universities and so on. And on the basis of this consensus we can see the need of the four cardinal virtues to men" (1977: 16). Geach goes on to explore the nature of the cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, temperance and courage) as well as the theological virtues (faith, hope and love) and to argue that an approach to ethics rooted in these virtues is preferable to one that takes the good or duty to be the fundamental notion in ethics.

In contrast to Geach, Hauerwas argues that instead of starting with a list of praiseworthy traits like courage, love and the like (i.e. with virtues) and then moving on to ask, "What is the courageous act?" or "What would the loving person do?", we should build our account around "a person of virtue or character" (1981: 112; [1985] 2001). He contends, "virtues finally depend on our character for direction, not vice versa" (1981: 143). Such an account would be, in Michael Slote's terms, an agent-based account of ethics (Slote 2001). But unlike Slote, Hauerwas refuses to focus on motives as the root of our moral evaluation for the same reason that he resists the demand to focus on actions as the thing to be evaluated. Having virtue or character is bigger than being disposed to act in certain ways or feel certain things or care about certain sorts of objects or produce certain sorts of outcomes or manifest a certain virtue or set of virtues. "An ethic of virtue centers on the claim that an agent's being is prior to doing" (1981: 113). Having virtue,

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Hauerwas insists, involves the world we are disposed to see and our responsiveness to the reasons such perceptions give us, as well as our characteristic ways of going on in the world and the thoughts, emotions, skills and actions involved in those ways of being. Virtues, motives, reasons and actions will be involved in having virtue, but they are parts of a much larger whole and they derive their meaning – and normative weight – from that whole.

A third important feature of Hauerwas's account is his insistence on the normative significance of community. One reason community matters is that our use of stories is a communal activity.

> [T]he intelligibility of an action depends on the narrative continuities in an agent's life. Yet the ability to narrate my life depends on having narratives available that make my peculiar life fit within narratives of a community that direct me toward an end that is not of my own making. The intelligibility of my life, therefore, depends on the stock of descriptions at a particular time, place and culture. I am, at best, no more than a co-author of my life. (2007: 37)[8]

If the stories we inherit from our community are not "faithful to the character of reality", if they are impoverished, incoherent or self-deceiving, then we will be unable to develop into people of character (1981: 116). Another reason community matters for ethics is because we require training if we are to become virtuous. "[W]e learn what the moral life entails by imitating another … The problem lies not in knowing *what* we must do, but *how* we are to do it. And the how is learned only by watching and following" (*ibid.*: 131).[9] Thus we are dependent on our community both for the conceptual tools that enable us to see reasons and values in the first place and for the guidance offered by particular members of that community regarding how to live well. But there is a third way in which our virtue depends upon our community: the community provides the relational conditions required for us to live virtuously. To develop the virtue of trust, we must live in a community "that gives us the means to live without fear of one another" (*ibid.*: 37). To develop the virtue of justice, we must live in a community that does not blind us to systemic injustices. To develop the virtues of friendship, we must live in community with others who are prepared to grow in friendship and virtue alongside us. Our virtue is so dependent upon the virtues of our community that we might reasonably say, "our living well is my living well" (Hauerwas & Pinches 1997: 51).

Up to this point, I have discussed Hauerwas's work with an eye towards making it accessible to an audience that may not share his theological commitments. However, were I to leave it here Hauerwas could rightly accuse me of misdescribing his position. One of the central themes of his work over the years has been that the "Christian" in "Christian ethics" cannot be removed without losing something important (see e.g. Hauerwas 1983). Indeed, over time he has even come to object to the label "Christian ethics", preferring "Christian theology" instead (2003; Hauerwas & Wells 2004). He is willing to grant that Christian ethics may share commitments in common with secular ethics. But, he argues, the way in which these commitments are linked to the stories, practices and institutions of the faith community influences their meaning, so that what they mean to the Christian will differ from what they mean to the non-Christian. If we are to get to the heart of a Christian ethical commitment and really understand it, he insists, we should not separate

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it "from the story that forms its context of interpretation" (Hauerwas & Burrell [1977] 1989: 159).

At times, Hauerwas overstates the contrast between Christian and secular ethics. For example, in "Virtue Christianly Considered", Hauerwas and Pinches (following John Milbank) draw a contrast between Christian understandings of virtue and contemporary philosophical accounts of virtue that hearken back to Plato, Aristotle and their contemporaries. Greek *aretē*, they argue, is agonistic (1998: 297). The aim of the person striving for *aretē* is superiority. Christian virtue, on the other hand, is agapistic. Virtue "is a relational, rather than a self-contained, internal matter" (Milbank [1990] 2006: 363). The aim of Christian virtue is not victory but communion and self-giving. From these premises they conclude that "a full scale return to Greek virtue", of the sort they claim MacIntyre advocates in *After Virtue*, "cannot but involve a return to a pre-Enlightenment/pre-Christian world of war" (Hauerwas & Pinches 1998: 301–2).

One problem with this argument is that the "Greeks" are treated as if they represent a single position, which ignores the way that Aristotle, for example, contests some of the virtues of his forebears and modifies the positions of many of his contemporaries. Another problem is that early Christian conceptions of the virtues both reflect and endorse features of the agonistic metaphor. Admittedly, the aim of the contest is not to outshine other people; nevertheless, the virtuous struggle with sin, self and *sarx* (flesh) is a common theme that is routinely expressed in agonistic metaphors (contests, races, wrestling matches and battles).[10] Furthermore, the argument oversimplifies the relationship between Greek conceptions of virtue and the contemporary revival of virtue ethics. That the latter is not simply a "return to Greek virtue" can be seen in the fact that benevolence and love are among the virtues that contemporary virtue ethicists are most eager to defend (Oakley 1992: 38–85; Baier 1994; Hursthouse 1999: 91–107; MacIntyre 1999: 119–28; Wallace 1999; Slote 2001: 63–137; Foot 2002a: 59–77; 2002b: 1–18; Swanton 2003: 99–127; van Hooft 2006b: 83–108, 127–35; Annas 2011: 83–99).

Nevertheless, while Hauerwas may occasionally overstate the contrast between Christian, Greek and contemporary secular virtue ethics, his insistence on the importance of the contrast offers a useful reminder of the role culture and community have in shaping our sense of virtue. Although courage, for example, might be endorsed by people from a wide range of cultural and historical backgrounds, when we attempt to spell out what it involves we should not be surprised to discover that judgements regarding what courage is, how important it is, why it matters, when it is called for and who can possess it differ (Hauerwas & Pinches 1997: chs 6, 9). We might also expect there to be some variation in the virtues endorsed by different communities. One might expect Christian communities to value grace, gratitude, hope, hospitality, humility, forgiveness, meekness, patience and sacrificial love (Roberts 1993, 2007; Hauerwas & Pinches 1997; Pettigrove 2007, 2012). Ayn Rand and those inspired by her, on the other hand, value ambition, independence, productiveness, pride and selfishness and reject a number of traditional Christian virtues (Rand 1964; T. Smith 2006; Swanton 2011). Of course, this will already be a familiar point to contemporary virtue ethicists who are likely to have cut their teeth on Aristotle, Hume and Nietzsche. But in so far as Hauerwas invites us to see these positions not merely as disagreements between individuals but rather as differences between larger traditions and their associated ways of life, he offers us a useful reminder that competing ethical judgements frequently depend upon complex networks of background assumptions that often go unanalysed.

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Like most contemporary virtue ethicists, then, Hauerwas calls into question the twentieth-century moral philosopher's preoccupation with act assessment and encourages us to pay attention to the virtues. But, he urges, we should not stop there. Rather, we should go on to evaluate stories, character and communities, all of which will feed into our assessment of actions and virtues. Hauerwas's *oeuvre* invites us to think about evaluative issues within this much broader framework and provides us with useful theoretical resources for examining the vast, richly painted canvas it encloses.

NEO-AUGUSTINIAN VIRTUE ETHICS

One the more interesting developments in moral and political theology during the 1990s and early 2000s was a re-engagement with Augustine. John Milbank ([1990] 2006), Oliver O'Donovan (1999), Gilbert Meilaender (2006) and Charles Mathewes (2008) have been four important contributors to this revival. But *vis-à-vis* virtue ethics, the most sophisticated theoretical contribution to the neo-Augustinian/neo-Platonic strand of moral theology has come from Robert Merrihew Adams. For more than forty years Adams has been the pre-eminent defender of divine command ethics. But throughout that same period he has also been one of the Christian ethicists to have done the most to invite readers to consider the role of character, virtue and motivation in everyday moral thinking. So at the very least one must say that Adams has been one of the major, theologically engaged contributors to contemporary virtue theory. And this contribution is both underscored and advanced in his recent book, *A Theory of Virtue* (2006). However, it is his earlier book, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (1999), that has the most to offer virtue ethicists and virtue metaethicists.

Much of the work that has been done on virtue ethics in recent years, taking its cue from Aristotle, has been attempting to offer a "naturalistic" account of ethics (Nussbaum 1988, 1990b; Hursthouse 1999; Foot 2001). Adams's work, arguing as it does that "The realm of value is organized around a transcendent Good" (1999: 50), stands in marked contrast to this trend. Adams uses two examples to gain a hearing for his view. One is the example of the saint. We admire saints in spite of the fact – perhaps even because of the fact – that they are decidedly unnatural. They choose to live among the sick and devote themselves to serving the destitute. They turn the other cheek and forgive those who persecute them. They steadfastly pursue impossible aims. Saints "envisage and do and show others how to do, things that no one else had thought of doing. They don't just draw from a standard repertoire of what is natural for humans; they expand the human repertoire and in ways that may never seem entirely natural" (*ibid.*: 56).

The other example that Adams uses appeals to our experiences of goods like beauty. He asks, "In the experience of beauty – the beauty of a person or a work of art or the evening light falling on leaves or mountains – is it not true that we are apt to feel that we are dimly aware of something too wonderful to be contained or carried either by our experience or by the physical or conceptual objects we are perceiving?" (*ibid.*: 51).

These experiences point to something beyond the particular objects that are their focus. They draw our attention to an ideal whose goodness is reflected in the object before us, but which also transcends the limitations of that object (*ibid.*: 194). Neither of these examples – nor indeed the argument of the book as a whole – is intended to persuade everyone to

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abandon the naturalistic project. Rather, the book is meant to showcase the attractions of an alternative view and show how it can address common problems in ethical theory.

The sort of goodness around which Adams builds his project is what he calls "excellence". The excellent is that which "is worthy of love or admiration" (*ibid.*: 13–14). And the quality that makes excellent objects excellent, Adams suggests, is that they resemble God: "being excellent in the way that a finite thing can be consists in resembling God in a way that could serve God as a reason for loving the thing" (*ibid.*: 36). Thus God serves as the transcendent Good around which the realm of value is organized.

So where does virtue fit within this account? In his more recent book, Adams "define[s] moral virtue as excellence in being for the good" (2006: 14). This characterization makes it sound as though virtue comes into the account at a different level than other sorts of goods: other goods have primacy and virtue has a secondary or subordinate kind of goodness, which it derives from its relationship to these more fundamental goods. However, such a construal fails to do justice to the role of virtue in the metaethics Adams develops in *Finite and Infinite Goods* (on which *A Theory of Virtue* explicitly depends). There he observes,

> most of the excellences that are most important to us and of whose value we are most confident, are excellences of persons or of qualities or actions or works or lives or stories of persons. So if excellence consists in resembling or imaging a being that is the Good itself, nothing is more important to the role of the Good itself than that persons and their properties should be able to resemble or image it.
>
> (1999: 42)

Although it might be possible for a non-personal, transcendent Good to do the job (Murdoch 1992), this condition is much easier to satisfy if, as Adams contends, "God is the Good itself" and God "is a person" (1999: 42). Adams develops his account of goodness in terms of what God is *like* (or what is like God) rather than what God is *for*. And the God in question is a specifically Christian God, many of whose defining attributes are virtues like wisdom, patience, justice and grace. Thus, the goodness of moral virtues is to be explained in the same way as the goodness of other things, namely, in terms of resembling God (*ibid.*: 14).

There are three reasons for drawing attention to this feature of Adams's account of the goodness of virtue. First, although "alliance with the Good" and "being for the Good" are clearly among the ways of being excellent, there are other ways of being good as well. Attending to Adams's earlier characterization of the goodness of virtue invites us to consider a range of character traits that we might deem virtues but that are not readily characterized in terms of being *for* the good. Various forms of creativity may be traits of this sort. They may express qualities that resemble (in the requisite way) the Creator, the goodness of whose creative activities Adams argues is not (or not wholly) determined either by the qualities of the objects the Creator brings into existence or by the Creator's purposes in creating (1972; 1999: 124). Indeed, this has been a recurring theme in Adams's work. In numerous articles (e.g. 1976, 1984, 1985) he has highlighted the importance for moral evaluation not only of that *for* which we act (whether in the sense of the outcome *to which* our actions are directed or in the sense of that *in favour of* which we act) but also of that *from* which we act. He has (rightly) argued both that motives

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matter and that the goodness of motives cannot always be captured by appealing to the goodness of other things.

Second, drawing attention to the account of virtue found in *Finite and Infinite Goods* highlights the resources that his metaethics provides for developing a normative ethical theory in which virtue has a certain "explanatory primacy". To be sure, his is not a theory in which all other major normative concepts – including rightness and goodness – are derived from or defined in terms of virtue. But neither is it a theory in which virtue derives its normative status from serving to promote some other normative property – as it does in virtue consequentialism, for example. Adams offers us a model in which virtue is to be found on the ground floor of the theory. Virtue is a type of goodness – the most important type – and plays an essential role in determining what we should do, what we should be and why. Thus, he provides an example of how a virtue ethic might be developed in which virtue has a certain kind of primacy even though it may not be alone in possessing this quality.

A third reason for hearkening back to Adams's earlier characterization of virtue is closely related to the second. There is a good deal that virtue ethicists might learn from Adams's characterization of the relationship between goodness and obligation. In particular, Adams illustrates how obligation might be subordinate to – but not reducible to – goodness and virtue. Obligations, he argues, are explained in terms of relationships. They pertain to the conditions that preserve harmony within or place "a strain on one's relations with others" (1999: 239). In particular, a moral obligation is constituted by the expectations and demands that "arise in a relationship or system of relationships that is good or valuable" (*ibid.*: 244). Already it is clear that within Adams's account the good is prior to the right. However, this priority relation becomes even clearer in his discussion of the relative strength of moral obligations, which vary on the basis both of the content of the demand or expectation (how good it is) and on the basis of the character of the person who makes the demand or has the expectation (how virtuous they are): "Where what people ask is not for their own well-being … I think we normally have more reason to comply with the requests and demands of the knowledgeable, wise or saintly" (*ibid.*: 245).

It is not hard to see how, within such a framework, the strongest moral obligations would be those that arise in the context of the best kind of relationship (the one with God) as a result of demands made by the most virtuous agent (God). But this is not the point to which I wish to draw attention. Rather, what I wish to highlight is the way in which the logic of obligation might be both dependent upon and nevertheless distinct from the logic of goodness and virtue. One needs at least marginally good relationships in order to get this account of moral obligation up and running. But once relationships of the requisite sort have been introduced, they bring with them a distinct set of constraints and success conditions that, while not independent of considerations of goodness and virtue, are not reducible to virtue or some other type of goodness. Consequently, what Adams offers in *Finite and Infinite Goods* is an instructive model for constructing an ethical theory in which rightness is governed but not wholly determined by virtue. Within this model some of what we should do will be directly determined by considerations of goodness and virtue – be patient and gracious, do the kind thing, the honest thing, the wise thing, and so on – whereas other things we should do will be shaped indirectly by considerations of goodness and virtue but will be directly determined by the demands and expectations of the relationships in which we stand.

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DIVINE MOTIVATION THEORY

Perhaps the most important development in moral philosophy in recent years has been the rediscovery of emotion. This renewed interest has both influenced, and been influenced by, the rediscovery of virtue, with several of the key contributors to one revival also championing the other.[11] During the same period moral theologians have also been interested in the role of the emotions in the moral life. However, among theologians the revival has seemed a bit less dramatic. This is not because moral theologians are less interested in the emotions. Rather, it is because the emotions were never quite so thoroughly out of fashion in the theological community as they were in the philosophical one. In part this was due to the fact that both conservative and liberal Protestant theologians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had argued that emotions play a significant role in the Christian life, and those theologians and their arguments continued to carry weight with theologians throughout the twentieth century.[12] Similarly, a number of prominent twentieth-century Catholic theologians had argued that human agents depend upon the emotions for resources that we need in order to live well.[13] Furthermore, from the first century onward, faith, hope and love have been earmarked as being of central importance to the Christian life. While these three are clearly more than just emotions, they have commonly been thought to involve emotions. And a number of interesting projects in moral theology were put forward during the twentieth century that were built on one or more of the three.[14]

From the point of view of advancing our understanding of virtue ethics, the most instructive theologically informed contribution to the emotions revival is Linda Zagzebski's *Divine Motivation Theory* (2004). The first part of *Divine Motivation Theory* examines our moral concepts and how we acquire them. The second provides the metaphysical grounding for this conceptual framework. And virtues and emotions play a fundamental explanatory role in both parts.

Our moral concepts, Zagzebski suggests, emerge out of experiences of wanting to be like some people and not others (either in some particular respect or in general). "The move from 'I want to be like R and not like S' to 'R is better than S' is not only genetically primitive, but also basic to moral thinking" (*ibid.*: 53). Initially R and S are likely to be people with whom we have direct contact. But from a very early age we are also told the stories of people (real and imagined) who are recognized within our wider culture as exemplary. As we observe people and listen to their stories we come to esteem and wish to imitate not only – or even primarily – actions but also abilities, dispositions and ways of life. We admire Gandhi's nonviolent resistance, Jesus's sacrificial love, Father Zossima's insight into the thoughts and feelings of others, Socrates' courage, and the like.

Already it is clear that there is room both for emotions and for virtues to play a significant role in Zagzebski's account of the acquisition of moral concepts, since our emotional responses to R and S may contribute to our wanting to be like one rather than the other and traits of character are among the qualities we approve or disapprove. However, Zagzebski has an even more crucial role for each of them to play. When the exemplars in question are moral exemplars (as opposed to, say, athletic ones), she argues, "the psychologically most basic difference between exemplars and ordinary persons is the kind of perception they have in emotion. My thesis, in brief, is this: The emotions of exemplars are trustworthy and what makes them trustworthy is that they fit their intentional objects" (*ibid.*:

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58). Exemplars find rude behaviour offensive, feel pity towards the pitiful, are grateful to the generous, admire the admirable, and so on. Furthermore, "Emotions easily become dispositions. Human beings develop patterns of emotional response in similar situations" (*ibid.*: 71). What is distinctive about exemplars' dispositions is that they are dependable.

The dispositions in question are dispositions to "notice" certain features of the world. But they are not only that. They are also dispositions to care about those features and to act in characteristic ways towards objects that possess them. In addition to being perceptual, then, they are also motivational. They are "motive-dispositions" which are "constituents of traits of character" (*ibid.*: 73). Some of these characteristic patterns of emotional response – those manifested by exemplars of goodness – will be important components of one or more virtues, whereas others will contribute to the make-up of vices.

Thus, the ethical framework that Zagzebski provides begins with our judgements about exemplars and quickly moves from that starting point into a discussion of virtue. Virtues and their associated motives enjoy a pride of place within her exemplarist theory. Motives are important constituents of virtues which are important constituents of exemplary (good) persons. And other major ethical concepts – like obligation, right action and good outcome – are defined in terms of motives, virtues and virtuous agents. So, for example, she defines a virtue as "a deep and enduring acquired excellence of the human person that has two components: (1) a motive disposition and (2) reliable success in bringing about the end (if any) of the motive" (*ibid.*: 121–2). One might think the second condition brings a criterion other than virtue, such as that of a good state of affairs or a good outcome, into the definition of virtue and makes the goodness of virtue dependent upon it. But Zagzebski argues that the dependence relation runs in the opposite direction. "I propose that the value of an end comes from the value of that which explains it. To be good as an end – worthy of choice or desire – is to be the end of an intrinsically good motive" (*ibid.*: 99). And she proceeds from there to develop a virtue-ethical account of an obligation, a right act, a wrong act, and so forth: "An obligation (duty) is a requirement of virtue … A right (permissible) act is an act that is not contrary to virtue … A wrong act is an act that is contrary to virtue" (*ibid.*: 159–60).

Our attention in the last few paragraphs has been focused on conceptual and epistemic questions: What do we take virtues, right actions and good outcomes to be? How do we arrive at our judgements about these matters? But Zagzebski thinks there are further questions we need to address, which are metaphysical questions: Does the world really contain the properties the exemplar's emotions perceive in it? How are these properties constituted? It is with the aim of answering these questions that Zagzebski turns to theology.

When we observe, think about, evaluate and respond to other agents we routinely make use of concepts that are tied to emotions. We see them with admiration or pity, for example, and ascribe to them the properties of being admirable or pitiful. Likewise, she suggests, "God can construe the intentional object of His emotion as falling under the thick concepts constitutive of each of His emotions in the same way that He can construe any object as falling under ordinary descriptive concepts" (*ibid.*: 208). There may be many differences between God's emotions or emotion-related construals and ours. But the difference that is most salient for our purposes is that God's construing an object in this way *makes it so*. God's emotions fix the properties that our emotions aim to fit. In the end, what determines the trustworthiness of the moral exemplar's emotions is that she sees the world in something like the way God sees it.

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Similarly, God's motives determine which ends are worth pursuing and which dispositions worth cultivating. "Human motives are good insofar as they imitate the motives of God as those motives would be expressed in finite and embodied human persons" (*ibid.*: 213). In other words, God is the ultimate exemplar. But unlike human exemplars, whose motives can help fix our moral concepts but cannot endow the world with the corresponding properties, God's motives create value in the world. "God's motive dispositions, like ours, are components of his virtues and all moral value derives from God's motives … The ultimate paradigm of goodness and the source of all value is God" (*ibid.*: 185).

CONCLUSION

This survey of recent theologically informed contributions to virtue ethics is by no means exhaustive. There are numerous others who might just as easily have been included, such as Jennifer Herdt (2008) and Robert Roberts (2007). However incomplete it might be, I hope that it has showcased some of the resources that contemporary moral theology has to offer virtue ethics. By way of conclusion, let me highlight two things in particular that emerge from the preceding discussion.

First, there are more ways to go about constructing an ethics of virtue than are commonly acknowledged. One might, as Zagzebski does, begin with motives which are constituents of the virtues of exemplary (good) people. And one might build up from there, defining right actions and good outcomes in terms of the virtues of such people, so that what one should do and how one should be will be determined by their relationship to virtuous motives. Or one might begin, as Aquinas does, with a conception of human well-being that includes the virtues as necessary constituents. Here, too, the account of what one should do and how one should be will be grounded in the virtues. And the agent who seeks to determine what she should do and how she should be in any particular situation will need to possess at least some of the virtues to some degree. On the other hand one might begin, as Hauerwas does, with the much broader foundation of virtue (rather than the virtues). One might take the most basic evaluative unit to be a whole life lived in the context of a particular community and one's account of what one should do and how one should be may then be built upon the closely related conceptions of a virtuous life and a virtuous community. Or, like Adams, one might begin with an account of the good and virtues may be included among one's set of fundamental goods. But one may also have other normative notions within one's account that, while constrained by virtues and other goods, nevertheless work according to their own internal logic. Within such a system some of what one should do or how one should be will be decided by virtue-related considerations, but some may not. I hope that, by drawing attention to these differences, this chapter may encourage ethicists to consider the comparative strengths of these structures as well as to imagine other ways in which one might construct an ethics of virtue.

Second, there is more than one way in which one's theology might shape one's ethics. Take, for example, one's conception of God. God might be an authority who issues commands, or an agent whose motives create value, or an exemplar we should imitate, or something like a Platonic form that we should try to glimpse and in whose mode of being we should participate, or a person with whom we should seek to be in an intimate relationship. These conceptions need not be mutually exclusive. In fact, traditionally, Christian

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theologians have endorsed several of them at the same time. However, making one of them more (or less) central to one's theorizing can have a profound effect on the way in which one develops one's ethics. It is hoped that noticing this feature in the theologically informed accounts of ethics discussed in this chapter will encourage contemporary virtue ethicists to reflect upon these and other assumptions – many of which may be working in the background – that shape the way we think about ethics.

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NOTES

1. Thomas Hibbs makes a similar point arguing that Aquinas "introduces law into what is fundamentally an ethics of virtue; indeed, the very structure of Aquinas's greatest ethical work, the second part of the voluminous *Summa Theologiae*, indicates the primacy of virtue" (2007: 20).
2. "Choosing a good course of action is arduous because its goodness is contingent and it is contingent precisely because 'actions are about things singular and contingent' (ST I–II 14.3)" (Bowlin 1999: 72).
3. Aquinas is referring to Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II 3.1105a9–14.
4. The gendered pronoun is intentional. This storyline would have been gender-specific in the early twentieth century.
5. Hauerwas discusses the inadequacy of profession-driven narratives to provide the resources needed to become virtuous (Hauerwas 1981: 127; Hauerwas & Burrell ([1974] 2001).
6. Hauerwas repeatedly emphasizes the importance of this storyline for shaping a Christian narrative. For one example, see (1981: 131).
7. Hauerwas (1981: 263 n. 17) criticizes Geach for paying too much attention to the virtues and not enough attention to virtue.
8. Hauerwas is describing a feature of MacIntyre's work that he endorses and that has influenced his own thinking. One can find Hauerwas making similar assertions in his own voice (Hauerwas [1974] 1981: 11–29) and in numerous pieces thereafter.
9. Similarly, see *ibid.* (1997: 25).
10. See, for example, Romans 13.11–14; I Corinthians 6.13; Ephesians 6.10–18; I Thessalonians 5.1–11; Hebrews 12.1–4; and I Peter 5.8–10.
11. Annette Baier, Michael Brady, Martha Nussbaum, Justin Oakley, Robert Roberts, Nancy Sherman, Michael Stocker, Charles Taylor, Gabrielle Taylor, David Wiggins and Bernard Williams are just a few of the many examples.
12. For example, Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Protestant liberalism, had contended, "Religion's essence is neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling" ([1799] 1988: 102).
13. For example, both Dietrich von Hildebrand and Bernard Lonergan suggest that we identify value through emotional responses such as "our desires and our fears, our hope and despair, our joys and sorrows, our enthusiasm and indignation, our esteem and contempt, our trust and distrust, our love and hatred, our tenderness and wrath, our admiration, veneration, reverence, our dread, horror, terror" (Lonergan [1971] 1990: 31). See also von Hildebrand (1953).
14. See, for example, Tillich (1954), Niebuhr ([1935] 1979), Nygren (1982), Moltmann ([1965] 1993), Pieper ([1986] 1997), Volf & Katerberg (2004), von Balthasar ([1963] 2004).