THE JUBILEE CENTRE FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Virtues and Belief in God

Robert C. Roberts

This is an unpublished conference paper for the 3rd Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 8th – Saturday 10th January 2015.

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4865

Virtues and Belief in God

Robert C. Roberts, Baylor University

ABSTRACT: This paper describes a basic psychological mechanism by which beliefs about God affect the structure of virtues in human beings. Iris Murdoch calls it "the siege of the individual by concepts." A premise is that appetites, desires, emotions, pleasures and pains have a conceptual dimension that can be trained by regular exposure to relevant concepts. Theological concepts are among the relevant ones. Another premise is that our virtues and vices are largely dispositions to appetites, desires, emotions, pleasures and pains. The argument is made by way of discussing two virtues, temperance and compassion.

KEY WORDS: virtue, belief in God, temperance, compassion, appetites, desires, emotions, pleasures and pains

Introduction

In a person of faith, such virtues as temperance, self-control, compassion, justice, courage, gratitude, and humility will differ subtly or not so subtly from analogous virtues in a person without faith. I want here to think about what this difference is like and how it is made. How do beliefs about God enter into the structure of a virtue? What is the psychology of this differentiation? Answers may differ in detail depending on which virtue is in question — whether, for example, we're talking about self-control or compassion. Beliefs about God may enter into justice by a different way than they enter into humility. If this is so, then we need to answer the question with respect to each of the individual virtues or the various types of virtues, and that is far too big a task for this little paper.

But I think that one psychological truth that is likely to play an important role in the explanation is captured in Iris Murdoch's phrase, "the siege of the individual by

concepts." She illustrates with a story about a mother in law who dislikes the woman her son has married.

> M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly **common** yet certainly **unpolished** and **lacking in dignity and refinement**. D is inclined to be **pert** and **familiar**, **insufficiently ceremonious**, **brusque**, sometimes positively **rude**, always tiresomely **juvenile**. M does not like D's accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him (Murdoch 1970, 17).

But this mother in law also dislikes her own attitude toward the young woman, and imposes on herself the following discipline:

> M tells herself: 'I am **old-fashioned** and **conventional**. I may be **prejudiced** and **narrow-minded**. I may be **snobbish**. I am certainly **jealous**. Let me look again.' Here I assume that M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters. …D is discovered to be not vulgar but **refreshingly simple**, not undignified but **spontaneous**, not noisy but **gay**, not tiresomely juvenile but **delightfully youthful**, and so on (Murdoch 1970, 17–18).

She turns on herself the language of character-criticism: 'old-fashioned,' 'conventional,' 'narrow-minded,' 'snobbish,' 'jealous.' If not exactly words for vices, these are trait-words tending in that direction. And out of this cautioning self-criticism emerge the gentler and more positive descriptions of the daughter in law, wherewith the mother in law's taste for the daughter in law is transformed. Her appetitive-cognitive-evaluating individual nature has undergone a siege by concepts, and it's had this minor transformative effect.

The story is less about the acquisition of a virtue than about the adjustment of a personal relationship, yet it seems psychologically plausible that someone who made a regular habit of turning certain concepts of self-criticism on herself whenever she found herself using an invidious vocabulary in her perceptions of others, thus giving rise to more generous construals of those others, would tend to become, over time, more generous in her thoughts, feelings, and actions. The emotional-evaluative vocabulary that we habitually use forms our *habits* of perception, motivation, and feeling. And such habits are virtues and vices.

Now note the strong particularity of the concepts with which the mother in law lays siege to her soul. **Old fashioned** isn't the same as **narrow-minded**, and neither of these is the same as **snobbish**. Each concept is relevant to her relationship with her daughter in law, and each is critical in the negative judgmental sense; but each is a *different* self-construal. Each concept raises a different question, evokes a different experience of the self; each probes the soul for a somewhat different deficiency or distortion. This conceptual particularity will be important to my proposed explanation of the place of theological beliefs in the virtues.

Related is the question of background. How did M come to be willing to submit herself to the discomfort of siege by such concepts as *old fashioned, narrow-minded,* and the rest? Why does she do this, rather than just languish in semi-sweet haughty resentment of her daughter in law? M is a fictional character about whom Murdoch tells us little, so we can supply some possibilities. One that is pertinent to our present investigation is this: M has just returned home from church, and is awaiting the arrival of the young couple for Sunday dinner. Along with the rest of the congregation, M said a prayer that contains these words:

> Almighty and most merciful Father: We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws (*Book of Common Prayer*, Prayer of Confession).

By way of her catechism M knows that the way of the almighty and merciful Father is the way of love and forbearance, the way of compassion and putting a generous construction on the other sheep in the Father's flock. One "device" of M's heart that comes to her mind is her conventionality. Among its "desires," her snobbish distaste for D and her resentment about D's diversion of her son's love and attention from herself rise to the foreground. Under the direction of the prayer of confession she becomes a willing object of siege by these concepts.

The martial metaphor of a siege may seem too violent to be apt, and in what follows I will sometimes use gentler substitutes, such as the idea of subjecting ourselves to concepts of evaluation. But I think that Murdoch uses this metaphor advisedly, and her reason is congruent with Christian thinking about the recalcitrance of sin. We are often pretty resistant to reform, and need to be forcefully attacked, or attack ourselves. And similarly, we sometimes need to force on ourselves a gentler and more appreciative vocabulary for perceiving others, when our resentment, envy, and self-pity would shine a harsher light on them. I am indebted to Liz Gulliford for raising this issue.

Now I want to show how two virtues — temperance and compassion — can result from a siege by theological concepts.

Temperance

According to Aristotle (1980, book 3, chapters 10–12), temperance is the virtue that makes people excellent in respect of the desires and pleasures of touch — the pleasures that result from direct contact between the savored object and a person's body. These are the desires and pleasures of eating, drinking (especially alcoholic drinking), and sexual intercourse. We humans share the desires and pleasures of touch with other animals, though of course the other animals don't face the specific issues associated with alcohol. Aristotle says that the standard of excellence here is a *mean*: desiring to eat, drink, and copulate neither too much nor too little, and taking neither too much nor too little pleasure in these activities. But Aristotle's discussion soon makes clear that he's not just talking about a mean in any quantitative sense, but about getting these desires and pleasures *right* in a variety of ways, some but not all of which are quantitative. For example, temperance in sexual desires and pleasures is less a matter of amounts than it is of desiring and enjoying the *right* person — namely, one's own spouse and not the neighbor's. The same goes for food: a good diet is not just a matter of eating moderate *amounts*, but the *right kinds* of food, and the temperate person will be someone whose appetite and associated pleasures will be directed at things like spinach and nuts rather than cheeseburgers and french-fries. Being a rational animal, the temperate person will take pleasure in eating spinach and nuts *for reasons* such as their healthfulness, and will find cheeseburgers and fries less appetizing for equally good reasons. You can see, I think, that concepts — ways of *thinking* about food and drink and the sex partner — can enter into and shape and color these physical appetites and the pleasures that attend their satisfaction.

Aristotle distinguishes temperance from self-control. Self-control is the ability to *resist* inappropriate appetites and thus to *forestall* inappropriate pleasures. For example, you might have an appetite for your neighbor's husband, but if you have enough self-control, you will resist acting on that appetite. Such resistance is of course better than giving in to it, but it's not temperance, according to Aristotle, because temperance would be not to have an appetite for your neighbor's husband precisely *because he is your* ***neighbor's*** *husband*. Here again the appetite itself is tempered by the reason that bears on it; the agent does not actively control it. Self-control is the agent's ability to *manage* inappropriate appetites; to be temperate is *to have* only appropriate appetites, so that the agent does not need to manage them. To apply Murdoch's metaphor, in self-control you are actively laying siege to your appetite for the neighbor's husband, in part by reminding yourself that he is your neighbor's husband; but in temperance your "appetite" for him is muted simply by your recognizing him as your neighbor's husband. You might say that the siege has had its effect and the appetite has been penetrated by reason. Correct reasons are integral to the appetite.

In their book *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*, Roy Baumeister and John Tierney do not distinguish temperance from self-control (they call both self-control and temperance self-control). But they report evidence of the distinction brought to light by one of their experiments. Baumeister and his colleagues equipped some Germans with a beeper device that allowed them to monitor the subjects' efforts of self-control throughout the day. The strength of the subjects' willpower was independently measured.

> … the researchers were surprised to find that people with strong self-control spent *less* time resisting desires than other people did. At first

> Baumeister and his German collaborators were puzzled. Self-control is supposedly for resisting desires, so why are the people who have more self-control not using it more often? But then an explanation emerged: These people have less need to use willpower because they're beset by fewer temptations and inner conflicts (239, italics original).

I've said that reasons a person has for preferring some foods to others and for limiting his sexual desires and pleasures can actually alter those desires and pleasures, and that when the reasons are good, that formation of the desires and pleasures will be temperate. But the form that these reasons take in the subject's mental life makes a big difference. Merely believing the reasons to be true, plus caring about satisfying the reasons, will not make for temperance. It's perfectly possible to believe that spinach and nuts are better for you than cheeseburgers and fries, while caring about your health, without the belief's being incorporated into your taste for and pleasures in these substances. In fact, that's exactly the case in which you have to exercise self-control. For temperance to develop, the content of the belief has to acquire the form of *perception*: you have to "see" and "taste" the cheeseburgers and fries *as* not good, and the nuts and spinach *as* good for you. (Analogously, you need to go beyond merely *believing* that your daughter in law is not a family disaster, and come to *see* her as an asset.) This is why Aristotle (1980, book 2, chapters 1–4) talks about habituation in connection with acquiring the virtues. But he writes as though the habituating acts or events are all actions — say, the action of choosing something healthful when it's offered as an alternative to a cheeseburger. Of course actions are very important here. But Murdoch suggests that we can also be habituated in our *thoughts* by the *language* that we use — both in overtly expressed speech and in "talking" to ourselves.

Leonard Lee, Shane Frederick and Dan Ariely illustrate the integration of beliefs into our pleasures and desires by an experiment. They wanted to know whether our belief about something we drink merely creates a pleasant or unpleasant *association* with a given flavor experience, or whether it changes the *quality* of the flavor experience *itself*. Thus for example, if we put tap water into a Perrier bottle and serve it to our guests, will the water actually *taste like* Perrier water to them? Or is their liking it better simply a matter of associating the tap water flavor, which remains the same whether you pour it from a Perrier bottle or draw it from the tap, with something classy? They begin their article with their conclusion, which is reminiscent of Aristotle:

> The quality of an experience is jointly determined by bottom-up processes, which reflect characteristics of the stimulus impinging on the perceiver's sensory organs, and top-down processes, which reflect the perceiver's beliefs, desires, and expectations (Lee, Frederick, & Ariely 2006, p.1054).

They liken such a conceptually flavored olfactory pleasure to our experience of Jastrow's duck-rabbit figure: on the bottom-up sensory level we have a visual impression of the lines, but the figure has *the look* of a duck if, by way of top-down processes like thinking, we construe the lines according to the concept of a duck, and *the look* of a rabbit if we construe the very same lines using the concept of a rabbit. These two visual (sensory) looks are quite different, and the difference between them is due to the *concept* that we apply. To use the language of temperance, you could say that the experience of the lines is tempered by the thought of a duck, or the thought of a rabbit. It would be bad phenomenology to say that the two visual experiences are really identical, and that in the one case we *associate* the visual impression of the lines with rabbits, and in the other

with ducks. The rabbitiness or duckiness is too integral to the impression to be a mere association.

But classically, the virtue of temperance has to do, not with the mere looks of things, but with the way they give *pleasure* and arouse *appetite*, and in particular the pleasures and appetites of "touch" — direct bodily contact. Of course we should note that visual impressions come in even here, in the desire- (or repugnance-) laden look of foods and potential sex objects.

Lee, Frederick, and Ariely asked some patrons of a pub to evaluate regular beer and "MIT brew," which was regular beer with a few drops of balsamic vinegar added. They divided the patrons into three conditions. The first group were never told the difference between the drinks, the second group were informed of the difference *before* tasting, and the third group were told *after* tasting, but before evaluating the drinks. Preference for the MIT brew was higher in the blind condition than in either of the disclosure conditions, but the timing of the disclosure made a difference as well. Disclosure that vinegar had been added reduced preference significantly only when the disclosure *preceded* tasting.

This result suggests that the belief about the vinegar functioned not as an extra negative influence or modifying retrospective construal of the flavor, but influenced the *flavor experience itself*, and thus the quality of the *pleasure.* So thinking your beer has vinegar in it may make it taste less good than if you think it's just a special brew. This is analogous to your having less or no appetite for your neighbor's husband because you think of him as your neighbor's husband. For the temperate person, that *thought* has bearing on your sexual appetite, and the more bearing *appropriate* thoughts have on your appetites and pleasures of touch, the more temperate you are. If you are merely self-

controlled, the thought that he is your neighbor's husband doesn't affect the appetite, but acts as a compass for managing your behavior.

Having made Aristotle's strong distinction between temperance and self-control, I note now a certain interaction between them. The integration of thought into our appetites seems to be a matter of degree. Thus the thought that this beautiful man is your neighbor's husband might mitigate your appetite for him without completely erasing it. In that case, you might still need some self-control, but you would seem to need less than you would if your appetite for him had been completely erased. Thus temperance can be an aid to self-control. And somewhat symmetrically, once you've successfully controlled your desire for him, a kind of transitory temperance will probably set in. That is, your appetite for him will be mitigated by the thought that guided your self-control. In this dynamic interaction between temperance and self-control we perhaps have part of the wherewithal to explain how disciplines of self-control can lead, over time, to the virtue of temperance. This explanation might be tested empirically.

A distinctively Christian virtue of temperance is possible because it is possible to have distinctively Christian reasons for your appetite for your spouse, and your appetites (or lack thereof, or repugnance) for foods and drinks. In a discussion of whether the "infused" or theological virtue of temperance differs in kind from an ordinary pagan virtue of temperance, Thomas Aquinas says, "Now it is evident that the mean [that is, the kind of reason] that is appointed in [the desires and pleasures of touch] according to the rule of human reason, differs from the mean that is fixed according to Divine rule" (*ST* 1a2ae 63 art. 4, *respondeo*, translation altered).

An example of an ordinary pagan reason for desiring and enjoying food is whether the food will promote or destroy the health of the body, and a temperate pagan

might neither desire nor enjoy an alcoholic drink on a particular occasion because it will dull the use of her faculties. (Perhaps she has to drive home in a few minutes, or to give a talk at a conference on the virtues.) A Christian might find himself losing his appetite for meat because his eating companion, for whom Christ died, thinks it was sacrificed to an idol (I Cor. 8.11). Or a Christian husband might experience a special enjoyment of sex with his wife because she is a gift to him from the Lord and the mother of their precious children for whom he is also grateful to the Lord. Thus his sense of God's grace is deeply implicated in his erotic desires and pleasures. These are exemplifications of distinctively Christian temperance because the reasons for or against desire and pleasure, the reasons *embodied in* the desire or pleasure, are distinctive of a Christian way of life and thought. Because Christians, according to Christian doctrine, are never completely temperate, it is prudent for them to subject themselves, by a regular discipline, to a siege of their souls by Christian theological concepts. This is a major purpose of Christian preaching and of the use of well-formulated prayers such as we find in the *Book of Common Prayer* and other conceptual devices of God's grace.

Do religious beliefs make a better thought-basis for temperance than more mundane beliefs? Baumeister and Tierney (2011) think that the *kind* of desire-modifying thoughts that religions provide are especially effective.

> [S]elf-control improved among people who were encouraged to think in high-level terms, and got worse among those who thought in low-level terms. Different measures were used in assorted experiments, but the results were consistent. After engaging in high-level thinking, people were more likely to pass up a quick reward for something better in the future. When asked to squeeze a handgrip, they could hold on longer. The results

> showed that a narrow, concrete, here-and-now focus works against self-control, whereas a broad, abstract, long-terms focus supports it. That's one reason why religious people score relatively high in measures of self-control… (164–5).

Thus, it would seem that thinking that sexual restraint is God's will for you is a better psychological basis for long-term avoidance of extramarital affairs than thinking that such affairs complicate your life unpleasantly. This is a thesis that could be studied empirically.

I have distinguished among three possible modes of the "thought" that can be integrated into a person's desires and pleasures of "touch." These modes are belief (in which the subject is disposed to assent to the content of the thought), perception (tasting-as, experiencing-as), and mere thought (an attitude of thinking or "entertaining" the thought without a disposition to assent to it). And I have said that in the virtue of temperance the tempering thought is integrated into a perception. In the beer tasting experiment, those who were told about the vinegar presumably believed that they would taste or had tasted beer with vinegar in it. But on the account offered here, the difference between those in whom the flavor itself was most tempered by the belief and those in whom the flavor experience was less tempered is the degree to which the thought of the vinegar was integrated into the (olfactory) *perception* of the beer. In connection with religiously qualified temperance, the question may arise whether, to be integrated into the desires and pleasures of touch, the religious thought needs to be *believed*, or whether the virtue can be erected on the mere thought. I do think that thoughts that are not believed can enter into our perceptions; perception doesn't require assent. But I am inclined to think that theologians who treat Christian beliefs as "mere stories" or as "mythology"

thereby undercut theological resources for the virtues. My reason is that virtues are by their nature reliable, stable dispositions, and I doubt that anything short of belief can give most people's virtuous perceptions the kind of reliability they require to be virtues. That's what I think about individual appropriation of religious thoughts. Intergenerationally I think the case is even stronger. I think it very unlikely for the Christian virtues to be passed from one generation to the next if the theological propositions are held and passed on as mere thoughts. Empirical studies, both psychological and historical-sociological, could be conducted on this question. I am grateful to Philip Gorski for raising this issue.

Let's turn now to a rather different virtue, compassion.

Compassion

Aristotle again offers a good place to start. He doesn't treat compassion (*eleos*) as a virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but he does have a neat account of it in his *Rhetoric*. There he treats it as a passion (emotion). Moral traditions that do regard compassion as a virtue also acknowledge it to be an emotion, something that can be episodically felt (the *virtue* of compassion is not a feeling). The relation between compassion the emotion and compassion the virtue is that the virtue is a firm disposition to feel the emotion in situations that call for it, to the extent that they call for it, in the way they call for it, for the reason that they call for it, and so on. Compassion the emotion, says Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*,

> is a pain at an impression (*epi phainomenô*) of destructive or painful evil as befalling one who doesn't deserve it, and which one might expect oneself or someone close to oneself to suffer, when it seems (*phainêtai*) nearby (1926, 1385b14–18).

I take the odd final clause, "when it seems nearby," to say that the impression of the evil is vivid. This seeming "nearbyness" of the evil can be achieved in a variety of ways. You might actually witness the injury or disability or the contorted face or groaning of the sufferer. Or a skillful narrative description or a photograph of, say, an Ebola victim might accomplish this effect. By contrast, a set of statistics about the number of people suffering and dying from the Ebola virus is less likely to bring the actual suffering "home" to most people (Slovic 2010). One of the features of the virtue of compassion is a disposition to empathize or enter into the sufferer's subjectivity by an exercise of imagination. A person who doesn't need the stronger devices to initiate the emotion might be able to feel compassion even in response to statistics. Having a strong capacity for such imagination is one of the features of the virtue of compassion.

The rest of the formula divides nicely into three propositions that govern the feeling of compassion according to Aristotle: a) *S is suffering evil*; b) *S doesn't deserve it*; c) *I and mine could suffer something similar*. Let's call these three clauses the proposition of evil, the proposition of non-desert, and the proposition of common vulnerability.

How are these propositions to be held in mind by the compassionate one? The force of the final phrase, "when it seems (*phainêtai*) nearby," is plausibly taken to imply that if I *merely believe* that someone is suffering who doesn't deserve it and that his suffering is of a kind to which I too am vulnerable, I would *not* feel compassion. These facts have to strike me, and further, they have to strike in me a concern: I care about people and their suffering and want the suffering to end. The person feeling compassion thus a) sees the other as suffering either harm or pain or both; b) sees the sufferer as not deserving his suffering; and c) sees the suffering as just the kind of thing that he — the person feeling compassion — or someone he cares about might suffer. The person who

has the *virtue* of compassion is reliably "sensitive" in this way — by way of his concern for people and their wellbeing, and by way of his lively empathic imagination. Let's now look at each of the three propositions in the structure of Aristotelian compassion, and ask how belief in God might affect the proposition, and thus the character of a person's compassion.

The proposition of evil

What a person takes to be evil can depend on her beliefs. Most people share a lot of beliefs about what is evil. Lists will include bodily injury, disease, homelessness, loss of friends, chronic hunger, and deprivation of freedom to move about and choose one's own activities. A compassionate person who believes that such things are evil will feel compassion for those he sees as suffering these harms and difficulties. The Stoics, however, rejected the above beliefs. They thought the only real evil is lack of virtue (Nussbaum 1994). They admitted that the things in the list are "not to be preferred," but they thought it was wrong to feel compassion for people who "suffer" in these ways. That these discomforts are not really evil is one reason the Stoics didn't regard compassion as a virtue; I'll tell you another reason shortly. The Stoics have a different concept of evil than most people, and their spiritual discipline, aiming at Stoic virtue, includes reminding themselves that what other people regard as evil is not evil and that the lack of virtue is *real* evil. That is, a major part of the Stoic discipline for evading the emotion of compassion is the practice of besieging themselves with their own special concept of evil.

Christians accept the commonsense list. That's why we found hospitals, work for the abolition of slavery, sponsor homeless shelters, food pantries, disaster relief efforts, agricultural development, women's rights, and similar things. But in addition to the commonsense evils, Christians think with Søren Kierkegaard that "there is really nothing

in the wide world that can . . . compensate a person for the harm he would inflict on his soul if he gave up the thought of God" (Kierkegaard 1990, 235). That's why, besides seeking to relieve the evils that fall under the commonsense concept, Christians encourage others to join us in the adoration and service and trust of God, and typically couple efforts to relieve hunger, oppression, and disease with efforts to relieve godlessness.

This, then, is one way that belief in God affects a person's virtue of compassion. The "pain" that Aristotle's definition refers to includes pain at the impression of godlessness. Mark the evangelist notes about Jesus of Nazareth that when "he saw a great crowd he felt compassion for them (*esplanchnisthê ep'autôn*) because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6.34). Just as the Stoics remind themselves regularly that the only real harm to which human beings are vulnerable is loss of virtue, Christians remind themselves regularly that godlessness is a real harm.

The Proposition of Non-Desert

On Aristotle's analysis of compassion, it isn't fitting to feel compassion for someone who is responsible for having brought his suffering on himself by his own action. I think we all have some sympathy, or can at least imagine having some sympathy, with this understanding of compassion. We may be less inclined to feel compassion for the miseries of a drug addict who has clearly brought his wretchedness on himself through negligently ignoring the well-known consequences of experimenting with cocaine, than for someone who has contracted cancer because of industrial pollution beyond his control. Aristotle's thinking on this point seems to assume injustice as a condition for compassion. That is, if the sufferer "deserves" his suffering, then we can be complacent about his suffering; it is not appropriate for us to "regret" it.

I said a moment ago that I would give you another reason that the Stoics took compassion not to be a virtue. You might think that even the Stoics could allow that compassion is virtuous as long as the sufferer is suffering from the evil of vice. *That*, at least, is a real evil on the Stoic reckoning. But if the Stoics accept non-desert as necessary for genuine compassion, then even though the sufferer is suffering a genuine evil, compassion is still not in order because on the Stoic view virtue and vice are within the control of whoever exhibits the one or the other. A person who suffers from vice deserves to suffer. Thus no one who is suffering from vice is a proper object of compassion.

In the proposition of non-desert, Aristotle may be articulating a sentiment that is the default setting for human beings, but if so, the concept of compassion in the New Testament resists this natural intuition, and seeks to form the hearers of its word in a better way. One of the main New Testament texts about compassion is the parable known as The Prodigal Son. Here is part of the parable.

> Then Jesus said, "A man had two sons. And the younger said to his father, 'Give me my share of the inheritance.' So the father divided his property between his sons. A few days later the younger gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine befell that country, and he began to be in want. So he hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He'd have gladly filled his belly with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. Coming to himself he said, 'How many of my father's workers have bread enough and to spare, and here I am perishing of hunger. I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, "Father, I have

> sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’
>
> “So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But his father said to his servants, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe — the best one — and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ And they began to celebrate” (Luke 15.11–24).

This text, with which Christians besiege themselves on a regular basis, expresses a concept of compassion that denies the proposition of non-desert. Thus Christians are encouraged to combine compassion with forgiveness. But now consider the second part of the parable, in which the older son, who was working in the field, hears all the commotion at the house and asks a servant what’s going on down there. When the servant tells him that his wayward brother has come back and his father has ordered a feast to celebrate his return, the older son is resentful and feels slighted. He’s been steady and faithful all these years and has never been given even a goat to celebrate with his friends, and this ne’re-do-well, having devoured his inheritance in riotous living and made a mess of his life, is received with open arms and celebrated with an extravagant party. It’s unfair! The father gives him a word by which to see his brother more lovingly: “It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found” (Luke 15.32).

Jesus' point is that God's compassion is like that of the father in the parable, and that the religious leaders of his day who despise the outcast members of society, those outcast Jews who treacherously collect taxes for the Roman oppressors and the harlots who've flouted the law of God — those religious despisers are out of harmony with God, while the "sinners" who repent are being welcomed and celebrated into God's bosom in the person of Jesus. The father's compassion and forgiveness are of course predisposed by the natural love of a father for his child, which makes him generous and not insistent on strict justice. Christians who seriously besiege themselves with this word about God may come to see all sinners as lovable because they are beloved of their divine Father. The father's word to the older son, who seems to be a kind of Aristotelian in this matter, is an effort to get him to see his little brother in a softer light.

Christians who take to heart the word in this parable draw nearer to a virtue of compassion from which the condition of non-desert is absent. The Christian's practices of worship, private prayer, and meditation on Scripture are ways in which he or she undergoes siege by this somewhat countercultural concept of compassion. Christian compassion lacks the condition of non-desert for a theological reason: the compassion of God our Father lacks the condition.

The Proposition of Common Vulnerability

You'll remember that the proposition of common vulnerability specifies that the person feeling compassion construes the sufferer's suffering as of a kind to which he or she, or someone close to him or her, is also vulnerable. A beautiful example of compassion that satisfies this condition is found in Tolstoy's story *The Death of Ivan Ilych*.

Ivan Ilych is in the last stages of his illness, and his suffering is compounded by his family's inability or unwillingness to be "with" him in his woe. They are healthy; he is sick. They are full of projects and enjoyments; he lies miserable on his deathbed. He is "different," and what's more, something of an annoyance and impediment to their lives. His little son shows some concern for his Papa, but the real exemplar of compassion is the servant boy Gerasim.

> [Ivan Ilych] saw that no one felt for him, because no one even wished to grasp his position. Only Gerasim recognized it and pitied him. And so Ivan Ilych felt at ease only with him. He felt comforted when Gerasim supported his legs (sometimes all night long) and refused to go to bed, saying: "Don't you worry, Ivan Ilych, I'll get sleep enough later on," or when he suddenly became familiar and exclaimed: "If you weren't sick it would be another matter, but as it is, why should I grudge a little trouble?" Gerasim alone did not lie; everything showed that he alone understood the facts of the case and did not consider it necessary to disguise them, but simply felt sorry for his emaciated and enfeebled master. Once when Ivan Ilych was sending him away he even said straight out: "We shall all of us die, so why should I grudge a little trouble?" — expressing the fact that he did not think his work burdensome, because he was doing it for a dying man and hoped someone would do the same for him when his time came (Tolstoy 1960, 138).

It's arguable that Tolstoy regards the peasant Gerasim as a Christian character and would suppose the proposition of common vulnerability as Aristotle describes it to be characteristic of Christian compassion. And if so, I think he could be right in a sense. But

it is instructive to compare the compassion depicted here with a more richly doctrinal and biblical version of the Christian trait. Consider the compassion sketched in a prayer used daily by Mother Teresa of Calcutta and her Sisters of Charity in their Home for the Dying.

JESUS MY PATIENT

Dearest Lord, may I see you today and every day in the person of your sick, and while nursing them, minister to you.

Though you hide yourself behind the unattractive disguise of the irritable, the exacting, the unreasonable, may I still recognize you, and say:

"Jesus, my patient, how sweet it is to serve you."

Lord, give me this seeing faith, then my work will never be monotonous. I will ever find joy in humoring the fancies and gratifying the wishes of all poor sufferers.

O beloved sick, how doubly dear you are to me, when you personify Christ; and what a privilege is mine to be allowed to tend you.

Sweetest Lord, make me appreciative of the dignity of my high vocation, and its many responsibilities. Never permit me to disgrace it by giving way to coldness, unkindness, or impatience.

And O God, while you are Jesus, my patient, deign also to be to me a patient Jesus, bearing with my faults, looking only to my intention, which is to love and serve you in the person of each of your sick.

Lord, increase my faith, bless my efforts and work, now and for evermore. Amen.

Here the construal is not of the Sisters' vulnerability to a kind of suffering in common with that of the sick (though that would be certainly be acknowledged, it doesn't seem to play an explicit motivational role), but a double commonality with Jesus Christ.

The Sisters pray that, as the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 commends, they may construe the sick to whom they minister as personifying the suffering Christ. So the first commonality is that between the sick and Christ. Against the risk that their compassion may be put off by the surly behavior and outward ugliness of the suffering people, the Sisters pray that they may see through it to the beauty conferred on the sufferers by Christ's identification with them. This is not a matter of loving Christ *instead of* the sufferers: "O beloved sick, how *doubly* dear you are to me, when you personify Christ."

The second commonality is that between the working Sister and Christ. She ministers as Christ's deputy; she ministers, not only *to* Christ, but *for* Christ, on his *behalf*. In this intensely doctrinal Christian compassion, then, Christ is "all in all." He is everybody on the scene: he is the compassionate minister and he is the compassionated sufferer.

Mother Teresa's prayer is crafted with skillful affective rhetoric to besiege her soul and her Sisters' souls with some of the theological concepts that shape the vision and heart of members of the Christian community. The daily use of this prayer, combined with the embodied work of the community, must have, over time, a powerful formative effect on the character of its practitioners.[1]

[1] Gratitude is due to the Society for Christian Psychology and the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham for invitations to present earlier drafts of this paper and for discussions that led to its improvement.

References

Aristotle (1926). *Rhetoric*, translated by John Henry Freese (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1926).

Aristotle (1980). *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by W. D. Ross and revised by J. L. Ackrill and J. O. Urmson. New York: Oxford University Press.

Baumeister, Roy, and John Tierney (2011). *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*. New York: Penguin.

Book of Common Prayer (1979). Church Publishing Corporation.

Kierkegaard, Søren (1990). *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*. Translated by Howard and Edna Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Lee, Leonard, Shane Frederick, and Dan Ariely (2006). "Try It, You'll Like It: The Influence of Expectation, Consumption, and Revelation on Preferences for Beer." *Psychological Science 17,* 1054–58.

Muggeridge, Malcolm (1971). *Something Beautiful for God*. New York: Harper and Row.

Murdoch, Iris (1970). *The Sovereignty of Good*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Nussbaum, Martha (1994). *The Therapy of Desire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Slovic, Paul (2010). "If I Look at the Mass, I Will Never Act: Psychic Numbing and Genocide" in Sabine Roeser, editor, *Emotions and Risky Technologies*. New York: Springer.

Thomas Aquinas (1948). *Summa Theologiae*. Translated by the fathers of the English Dominican Province. Benziger Brothers.

Tolstoy, Leo (1960). *The Death of Ivan Ilych and Other Stories.* New York: New American Library.