

Is Athens Revived Jerusalem Denied?

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In his engaging reflections on the Aristotelian themes of happiness, virtue and friendship, Stanley Hauerwas extends and elaborates the pattern of his own ethical thought. He treats each of the three themes by first expounding Aristotle and then adding a theological postscript in which he suggests ways in which Aristotle's ethical thought might be appropriated by Christian ethics. The picture that emerges from this treatment is extremely generous to the pagan wisdom of Aristotle. Hauerwas gives the impression that Aristotle came close to being on target with respect to the ethical significance of happiness, virtue and friendship and so can be incorporated into Christian ethical thought with only minor modifications and a few additions.

I find this picture problematic. It seems to me to locate the center of gravity of Christian ethics too close to Athens and too far from Jerusalem. It also underestimates the extent to which Christian wisdom about the moral life can and should be seen as radically opposed to pagan wisdom. On many points of detail I have no quarrel with Hauerwas and find the crispness of his formulations and the shrewdness of his insights helpful. But I suspect that he and I would disagree sharply about fundamentals, for I am inclined to emphasize a different set of themes in trying to get at what is basic in Christian ethical thought. It is not that I have the temerity to suppose that Hauerwas is clearly mistaken in wanting to appropriate Aristotle. After all, Aquinas made a heroic effort to do just this, and he has had many followers among Christian theologians. It is rather that I am persuaded that other ways of understanding what is distinctive about Christian ethics are apt to yield deeper insights.

In these brief comments I can do no more than to sketch an alternative vision of what the fundamental themes of Christian ethical thought are and to indicate how they bear on the prospects for successfully appropriating Aristotle in the manner proposed by Hauerwas. To fix ideas about what is at stake in the conflict, I begin with some reflections on how the history of Western ethical thought

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should be narrated. I then discuss critically what Hauerwas has to say about happiness, virtue and friendship.

THE HISTORICAL STAKES

Nietzsche has taught us that we construct genealogies for two purposes: to help us understand our origins and to lend legitimacy to what we propose to do next. Histories of ethics are genealogical narratives for ethical theorists. So we should expect there to be a particular reading of the history of ethics in the background of the project of incorporating Aristotle into Christian ethics.

Alasdair MacIntyre, who is cited often and approvingly by Hauerwas, provides a narrative that lends legitimacy to the enterprise of appropriating Aristotle for Christian ethics.¹ This story hinges on the attempt by Thomas Aquinas to incorporate an Aristotelian view of ethics into an Augustinian understanding of Christianity. The Thomistic synthesis of Aristotle and Augustine has for various reasons not fared well at the hands of liberal modernity, but the tradition it represents contains untapped resources for dealing with the ethical problems Christians confront today. The task now facing Christian ethics is, therefore, to recover and exploit the riches of that tradition. Reflection on its roots in Aristotle is the natural starting point for such a project, and so theological reflections on Aristotelian themes are an important contribution to advancing the discussion among Christian ethical theorists.

That, in outline, is one story, but of course there are others that can be told. The one I prefer is meant to yield a genealogy that lends legitimacy to the enterprise of reviving the divine command tradition of Christian ethics. Its roots are in the scriptural narratives of a God who is lavish in commanding His chosen people. In this narrative, the Thomistic project will be portrayed as an audacious but unsuccessful attempt to graft the alien stock of Aristotelian paganism onto Augustinian Christianity. The failure of the Thomistic synthesis in ethics becomes apparent long before the heyday of liberal modernity, with its secularizing tendencies. It is foreshadowed by the flourishing of a fairly radical form of divine command ethics in the thought of the later medievals; scholastic sources of this progressive development are to be found in Scotus, Ockham, Pierre d'Ailly, Jean Gerson and Gabriel Biel, among others.² The decisive event in this story is the Reformation. It liberates Augustinian Christianity by pruning away the alien stock that had been grafted onto it.

An ethics of divine commands is, at bottom, not an ethics of virtue but an ethics of duty. Divine commands impose obligations, and we who are commanded are bound to obey. So the great philosopher with whom divine command theorists can feel at home is not Aristotle but Kant. In a way, this is not at all surprising, since Kant's own moral sensibilities were shaped by the Lutheran Christianity of his culture. He tells us that "an ethical commonwealth can be thought of only as a people under divine commands, i.e., as a *people of God*, and indeed under *laws of virtue*."³ Sin, he says, is "the transgressing of the moral law as a *divine command*."⁴ Hence the task for Christian ethics today suggested by the story I have sketched is the assimilation of Kantian insights into the ongoing tra-

dition of divine command ethics. Aristotle, by contrast, is to be viewed from a considerable critical distance, though he will, to be sure, occasionally have something worthwhile to say. It is this kind of critical and skeptical eye that I propose to cast on Hauerwas's reflections on Aristotle.

I turn first to the question of happiness. Does the sort of human flourishing that Aristotle sets before us as an end comport well with Christian understandings of the great drama of sin and salvation?

SIN, SALVATION AND THE POSSIBILITY OF FLOURISHING

The conviction that humans generally are not as God meant them to be, that human nature itself is fallen, is central to Augustinian Christianity. Based on the scriptural narrative of the fall of Adam and Eve, this conviction is fleshed out in various accounts of the doctrine of original sin constructed by theologians and philosophers. In the radical version of the doctrine proposed by Augustine himself, original sin is transmitted from Adam to his progeny by biological inheritance, yet it brings with it individual guilt despite the fact that it is innate. In the milder version proposed by Schleiermacher, the sinfulness innate in the individual "is the sufficient ground of all actual sins, so that only something else outside of him, and not anything new within him, is needed for the generation of actual sin."⁵ In either case, humans left to themselves would not flourish in this life. Of course Augustinian Christianity is also convinced that humans have not been left to themselves; the incarnate Christ has superabundantly atoned for all human sin. Nevertheless such human flourishing as is possible involves a ceaseless struggle against interior evil. And it can never be a wholly human achievement but must always be at least in part a divine gift.

Contrast this grimly realistic assessment of the human moral situation with the optimistic paganism of Aristotle. As Martha Nussbaum puts it, Aristotle "holds that human beings are naturally drawn toward virtue rather than vice, love more than repudiation--and that, given sufficient education, material support, and personal effort, most people will be able to make good and reasonable lives *for themselves*" [my emphasis].⁶ It is thus reasonable for Aristotle to think that human beings can, operating on their own steam, so to speak, flourish and so be happy over the course of an earthly lifetime. Would it be reasonable for Christians to share this thought? I think not.

It might seem that Hauerwas would disagree. He professes to take it that "fundamental to Christian convictions is the assurance that anyone who has followed the way of life we call Christianity will be able to look back on their life and say, 'I would not have it otherwise.'" But actually this remark is ambiguous because it fails to specify the standpoint from which such a retrospective assessment is to be performed. In Christian eschatological hope, there is such a standpoint. It is loving union with God in the afterlife; there human beings will reach the goal for which God created them; there they will truly flourish and be happy. From that point of view alone will it be possible to look back on one's life as an earthly pilgrim and wish it unchanged. Or, at any rate, so says Christian faith.

But that is not the standpoint from which Aristotle proposes to evaluate hu-

man lives. Aristotle's perspective allows him to see nothing beyond completed earthly lives, and so he must judge flourishing and happiness in secular terms. From this point of view, it is quite reasonable to insist that good fortune is a prerequisite for human flourishing, for the activities that, according to Aristotle, constitute a happy life are not possible in the absence of such conditions as good health and a modicum of wealth. Christianity's larger vision makes other possibilities available. Misfortune, far from ruling out ultimate happiness, may prove a blessing in disguise if it enables the one who suffers it to draw closer to the suffering Christ in love. Providence may be giving to the wretched of the earth--those suffering most desperately from poverty and disease--opportunities that the comfortable would envy if they saw things in their true colors. This is a familiar litany, but it is very remote from Aristotle's way of seeing things. At least some lives in which Aristotle would not be able to find happiness will nevertheless, if the Christian promise is true, be crowned with a kind of happiness he at best only dimly imagines.

So I see a gulf that amounts to an abyss between Aristotle and Augustinian Christianity on the question of happiness. For Aristotle, it is a secular human achievement in favorable material circumstances; for Augustinian Christianity, it is an otherworldly hope and must ultimately be a divine gift. This disagreement is bound to be reflected in further differences in the way ethics is conceived in the two traditions. We may therefore expect Aristotle and Augustinian Christianity to disagree sharply over the place of the virtues in the moral life and even over which traits are genuine virtues. I propose next to argue that such expectations are not going to be disappointed.

WHOSE VIRTUES?

As has often been noted, the virtues suffer from severe cultural relativity. To be sure, there may be some character traits such as prudence that everyone needs in order to live well, but the sort of industriousness needed for flourishing in a bourgeois mercantile society would be out of place in a traditional African culture. So we should expect there to be only partial overlap between Aristotle's virtues and the Christian virtues. This is exactly what we find. And the differences go much deeper than the fact that many Christians would supplement Aristotle's list of virtues by adding to it the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity.

It is striking that Aristotle does not even include piety in his long list of virtues. Nussbaum conjectures that "this probably indicates his interest in separating practical reason from religious authority, and in keeping reason, rather than such authorities, in control of the most important matters."⁷ Augustinian Christians, who hold that human reason was enfeebled but not utterly corrupted by the fall of Adam and Eve, will quite properly be skeptical of such naive confidence in the ability of human practical reason to rule well in the most important matters. Moreover, Aristotle clearly would not have counted as blessed all the people Jesus did: the poor in spirit, the sorrowing, the lowly, those who hunger and thirst for holiness, the merciful, the simple-hearted, the peacemakers, and

those who are persecuted for holiness's sake (Matthew 5:3-10). Not all such people would have flourished in ancient Athenian society, but Jesus promises them a great reward in heaven.

Aristotle differs from Augustinian Christians not only in what he fails to praise but also in what he praises. As Hauerwas points out, Aristotle's high-minded man welcomes great risks because he desires to do good but is ashamed to accept a good turn; "he is so because by doing good he is able to put the other in his debt while providing himself with an added benefit." Aristotle shows his astuteness as an observer of human psychology in noticing that those who regard themselves as self-sufficient find it easier to give than to receive. But Augustinian Christians should, I think, look on Aristotelian high-mindedness as a manifestation of vice rather than of virtue. It bespeaks sinful pride, if not serious self-deception, not to acknowledge that we cannot be self-sufficient, that we need divine gifts if we are to have even a chance of overcoming interior evil and attaining happiness. Hauerwas is, of course, aware of the strains in Christian thought that would support such a judgment. In a footnote, he cites a passage in which Gilbert Meilaender speaks of "the Christian emphasis on grace, the sense of the sinner's constant need of forgiveness, and the belief that we can have no claims upon the freedom of God."⁸ He does not, in my opinion, fully appreciate how deeply alien the Aristotelian emphasis on self-sufficiency is to this way of thinking.

But it is at another, more theoretical level that the deepest difference between Aristotle's conception of the virtues and the divine command moralist's conception emerges. For Aristotle, the virtues hold pride of place in ethical theory. They are not properly understood as dispositions to produce independently defined or recognizable good actions or states of affairs; rather good actions or states of affairs are defined as those a virtuous person would voluntarily produce. From the point of view of the divine command theorist, Aristotle has got things backwards. The will of God, the commands that express it, and the moral laws those commands establish are primary for ethics, and so obligations to obey moral laws will be the fundamental facts of morality. Virtues will be construed as dispositions to obey various divine commands, and the virtue of obedience itself will be at center stage. Indeed, even Aquinas, who follows Aristotle as far as he thinks he safely can, allows that obedience is the greatest of the moral virtues and that all acts of virtue, insofar as they come under a precept, belong to obedience. He says that "properly speaking, the virtue of obedience, whereby we condemn our own will for God's sake, is more praiseworthy than the moral virtues, which condemn other goods for the sake of God."⁹ This is, I take it, a far cry from Aristotle.

Yet it is part of Christian thought's legacy to modernity, transmitted by way of a Kantian morality of duty, that it seems perfectly natural to many people to think of the virtues as secondary to laws, principles or rules. Hauerwas notes this in passing by remarking in a footnote that most philosophers and theologians who write about ethics still "treat the virtues as dependent on more 'principled' approaches to ethics." In a way, it is puzzling to find secular moral philosophers

doing this. Such puzzlement seems to lie behind Elizabeth Anscombe's celebrated claim that it is not possible to have a law conception of ethics "unless you believe in God as a lawgiver."¹⁰ And Bernard Williams, who displays a certain amount of sympathy for Aristotle, regards morality, whose purest and deepest representation he finds in Kant's ethics of moral obligation, as something we would be better off without. Alluding to American slavery, he styles morality "the peculiar institution," though he admits that it is "the outlook, or, incoherently, part of the outlook, of almost all of us."¹¹ Doubtless our Judeo-Christian heritage helps explain why a morality of laws and obligations to obey them is a part of our outlook, and I confess to feeling a great allegiance to morality so understood. I also suspect that this is a point at which Christians may be called upon to take a stand against those who, like Williams, would like to liberate us from morality. Such a stand would, as I see it, also be a stand against Aristotle's notion of the virtues and their primacy in ethical life.

So another abyss yawns between Aristotle and Augustinian Christianity on the questions of what the virtues are and of whether they are fundamental in the moral life. Perhaps the quarrel is at its sharpest over the nature of authority. If Nussbaum is right, Aristotle's view is that ethical authority lies with human practical reason and religious piety is not a virtue in the moral sphere. For Augustinian Christianity, ethical authority resides in the divine will commanding and religious obedience is the greatest of moral virtues. And, as we shall next see, the urgency of God's claims on us will make it difficult, if not impossible, for Augustinian Christians to go along with Aristotle's account of the importance of human friendships.

WHICH FRIENDSHIPS?

Jesus commanded His followers to love the Lord their God with their whole hearts, with their whole souls, and with all their minds (Matthew 22:37). He immediately added that they should love their neighbors as themselves (Matthew 22:39). It seems that there is tension, if not outright conflict, between these two commands. If we are required to devote ourselves wholeheartedly and totally to love of God, then we may not have left over time or energy enough to do a proper job of loving either self or neighbor. So perhaps Christians will have to confront hard choices between divine friendship and human friendships of certain sorts. This is what Robert M. Adams calls the problem of total devotion.¹² Total devotion to God appears to press us in the direction of exclusive devotion to God.

Augustine responds to the pressure by downplaying the importance of human friendships. In a famous but troubling passage, he cites the commandment to love the neighbor and goes on to ask whether man is to be loved by man for his own sake or for the sake of something else. Appealing to a distinction between enjoyment and use, he says: "If for his own sake, we enjoy him; if for the sake of something else, we use him."¹³ Augustine then registers his own conviction that man is to be loved for the sake of something else, from which it follows that human love of self and others should be a matter of use. Referring back to the

commandment to love God with all one's heart, soul and mind, Augustine remarks that God "did not leave any part of life which should be free and find itself room to desire the enjoyment of something else."¹⁴ And from this it follows that human love of self and others should not be a matter of enjoyment. So it appears that for Augustine friendships among humans are to be restricted to the realm of the useful.

This position stands in sharp contrast to Aristotle's views on human friendship. As Hauerwas points out, Aristotle holds that the highest form of human friendship obtains between good people who are alike in excellence or virtue. In such friendships between virtuous equals, the friends find joy in one another. Utility friendships and pleasure friendships are, for Aristotle, only inferior forms of friendship; indeed, they are only called friendship by analogy because they bear some resemblance to virtue friendships. Aristotle's ideal of friendship transcends the bounds of the useful and makes room for equals in virtue to enjoy and take pleasure in one another's good qualities of character.

Even Augustinian Christians may not wish to adopt Augustine's own severe attitude toward human friendships, and so perhaps the stark contrast between Augustine and Aristotle on this point can be mitigated if not entirely eliminated. One way for Christians to proceed, it seems to me, is to suppose that God wishes us to love ourselves and our neighbors as He loves them. Lacking nothing, God does not love His creatures because they are useful to Him but for their own sakes; knowing that His creation is good, God delights in it. If we do likewise, it will not interfere with whole-hearted devotion to God but will strengthen it by uniting us more closely to Him in shared activity. Thus, Augustine notwithstanding, God did leave a part of life free for loving creatures for their own sakes and for enjoying one another. Total devotion to God does not entail exclusive devotion to God because our love should diffuse itself over the whole of creation as His does. In this respect, Francis of Assisi is the exemplary Christian saint.

But this line of thought, though it softens the clash between Aristotle and Augustinian Christianity in one way, only serves to heighten the contrast between them in another. Aristotle restricts the highest kind of friendship to good people who are equal in virtue and insists that we must be satisfied with only a few friends of this kind. This does not mean, as Hauerwas takes pains to emphasize, that Aristotelian virtue friendships are limited by gender or social class, for man and woman, slave and free can be equal in virtue. It does mean, however, that Aristotle's ideal of friendship is much less inclusive than the ideal of love of neighbor if that Christian ideal is understood, as the parable of the Good Samaritan suggests it should be, to imply that our love of one another should be a reflection, albeit a pale one, of God's love for us. Surely God's love is not restricted to His equals in excellence or virtue. If it were, it would not reach out beyond the boundaries of the Trinity to seek us. And plainly God's love is not limited to the virtuous among His human creatures. If there is no love between God and a human creature, it is not because God has not offered love but because the creature has refused it. The atoning work of Christ's suffering and death is, after all, a gift to all humankind. If that is the paradigm we are to imi-

tate, then Christian love of neighbor must be on offer to all and cannot be confined, without being stunted in its growth, to the narrow circle of one's equals in virtue. No doubt space can be made inside the realm of Christian love for something like Aristotle's virtue friendships as well as for other attractive forms of interpersonal bonding. What needs to be emphasized, however, is that Christian love lays on us much more extensive and stringent demands than Aristotelian friendship does.

"It is interesting," Hauerwas notes near the end of his discussion of friendship, "that Jesus does not ask the disciples to be friends, but he commands them to be friends." Indeed, it is interesting; but from my point of view it is not surprising. Hauerwas is commenting on the passage in Christ's last discourse which says: "The command I give you is this, that you love one another" (John 15:17). It is easy to see how Aristotelian friendships between equals in virtue could arise spontaneously and naturally. According to the old saw, like is attracted to like, and virtue friendships are defined as relationships between those alike in their excellences. But even Christ's first disciples were a mixed bag, and his followers today are a very motley crew. So the requirement that they love one another will not necessarily square with their natural inclinations and must have the constraining force of a command. There is, however, nothing special about this case. As Augustinian Christians see it, our moral obligations are generally contrary to the rebellious tendencies of the Old Adam within us; and as we divine command theorists would insist, they are imposed on us by a God who by right lays down the law for us.

CONCLUSION

In biology, taxonomists are often divided into lumpers and splitters. Lumpers stress similarities and downplay differences; splitters draw attention to differences and deemphasize similarities. Those who, like Aquinas and Hauerwas, wish to appropriate Aristotle's pagan wisdom for Christian ethical thought tend to be lumpers. These comments should make it very clear that I am a splitter by temperament. Wishing to highlight what is distinctive in Christian ethical thought, I picture Aristotle as deeply alien to it and so find attempts to assimilate his pagan wisdom to Augustinian Christianity problematic at best. I think Aristotle should be read with suspicion by Christian theologians and philosophers. But Christian ethics is the property of a community, not of a single individual. If the community is to learn to correct for the tendencies to exaggerate manifest in the work of both lumpers and splitters, it will have to discover how to give due weight to both similarities and differences between Athens and Jerusalem. So we splitters should be grateful for the work of lumpers like Hauerwas; such work provides a counterweight to our propensities to make too much of differences. And, speaking personally, though I continue to disagree with Hauerwas over matters of substance and emphasis of the sort I have endeavored to bring to the fore in these comments, it is only fair to conclude by acknowledging that thinking about his reflections on Aristotle's ethics has helped me to clarify and deepen my own vision of what Christian ethics is and should be.

Notes

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice: Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).
2. For selected texts, see Janine Marie Idziak, ed., *Divine Command Morality: Historical and Contemporary Readings* (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1979).
3. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, tr. T. M. Greene and H. H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 91.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
5. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. MacKintosh and J. S. Stewart (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 286.
6. Martha Nussbaum, "Recoiling from Reason," *The New York Review of Books* (December 7, 1989), p. 40.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Gilbert Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. x.
9. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, 104, 3.
10. Elizabeth Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Collected Papers; Volume III: Ethics, Religion, and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), p. 30.
11. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 174.
12. Robert Merrihew Adams, "The Problem of Total Devotion," *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, ed. R. Audi and W. J. Wainwright (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 169-194. I have found this excellent paper very helpful in clarifying my own thoughts on the problem.
13. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 1, 22, 20.
14. *Ibid.*, 1, 22, 21.

