

TEMPTATION, VIRTUE, AND THE CHARACTER OF CHRIST

Adam C. Pelsler

The author of Hebrews writes that Jesus Christ was “tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). Many Christians take the sinlessness of Jesus to imply that he was perfectly virtuous. Yet, susceptibility to the experience of at least some temptations, plausibly including those Jesus experienced, seems incompatible with the possession of perfect virtue. In an attempt to resolve this tension, I argue here that there are good reasons for believing that Jesus, while perfectly sinless, was not fully virtuous at the time of his temptations, but that he grew in virtue through overcoming temptation. If this is right, then Jesus Christ is an exemplar of character formation who is able to “sympathize with our weaknesses” in an important way that Christians have largely overlooked.

The author of Hebrews reminds Christians who are struggling with temptation that “because [Jesus] himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (2:18), and that “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (4:15).¹ While intended for comfort, these passages have led to much Christological confusion. Given that it is impossible for God to sin or even to be tempted to sin (cf. James 1:13), how can Jesus Christ (God Incarnate) be tempted to sin? Moreover, how can Jesus be morally responsible and praiseworthy for resisting temptation if he was impeccable (incapable of sinning) and his resistance of temptation was thus inevitable? These questions, which focus on the apparent tension between Jesus’s temptations and his divine moral perfection, have received a great deal of attention from Christian theologians and philosophers. For the purposes of this paper, I wish to set these questions to the side and focus instead on the underexplored relationship between Jesus’s temptations and his *human* moral character.

The traditional Christian view is that Jesus is not only the perfect atoning sacrifice for our sins, but also our perfectly virtuous moral exemplar. Linda Zagzebski notes that “For Christians, Jesus Christ is the central

¹Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*.



paradigmatic good person.”² Sylvia Walsh similarly observes that “The notion of a specifically Christian moral character receives its normative definition and paradigmatic existential expression in Jesus Christ, who is viewed in the New Testament not only as the redeemer of fallen humanity through his death and atonement but also as the prototype and perfect model of human moral character.”³ Describing Jesus’s moral perfection explicitly in terms of virtue, Brian Leftow writes, “It’s no stretch to suppose that Christ had no corrupt values. He was perfect in virtue.”⁴ This view is shared by a host of Christian philosophers and theologians throughout Church history, including Thomas Aquinas, who claims that “Christ had grace and all the virtues most perfectly” and that “in Christ the virtues were in their highest degree.”⁵

Yet, as some contemporary neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists have argued, many, if not all, temptation experiences seem incompatible with the possession of full or perfect virtue. John McDowell, for example, argues that the fully virtuous person would have such an appreciative perceptual sensitivity to the requirements of virtue that she would not even countenance any considerations in favor of acting otherwise as reasons at all. He writes, “If a situation in which virtue imposes a requirement is genuinely conceived as such . . . then considerations which, in the absence of the requirement, would have constituted reasons for acting otherwise are silenced altogether—not overridden—by the requirement.”⁶ Susan Stark defends a similar view, putting the point explicitly in terms of temptation: “the virtuous person is not even tempted by considerations that do tempt the ordinary run of humanity. . . . Perhaps the virtuous person was once tempted like the rest of us, but she has now overcome these temptations through clear moral vision and accurate emotions.”⁷ This view is sometimes referred to as “the harmony thesis” because it suggests that the virtuous person’s desires, emotions, and moral perceptions are completely in harmony with her practically wise will and actions.

Even if such strong versions of the neo-Aristotelian harmony thesis are wrong and the possession of full virtue is compatible with the experience of (not to say the submission to) some temptations, it certainly seems clear that there are many temptations that the virtuous person will be immune to experiencing. Indeed, I will argue below that it is plausible that at least some of the temptation experiences that render Jesus Christ sympathetic with our weaknesses are among those to which the fully virtuous person is (or would be) immune. If they are, then the Christian must either deny

²Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory*, 232.

³Walsh, “Moral Character and Temptation,” 121.

⁴Leftow, “Tempting God,” 15.

⁵Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIIa, Q 15, a 2. From this point forward I shall abbreviate *Summa Theologiae* with *ST*.

⁶McDowell, “Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?” 26.

⁷Stark, “Emotion and Virtue,” 446.

the teaching of Hebrews that Jesus is our sympathetic high priest or deny that Jesus was fully virtuous when tempted. Neither option will seem very appealing to many Christians. Indeed, I suspect that most Christians who affirm orthodox Christology and the authority of the New Testament will be inclined to reject both of these options. Rather, I expect that many will simply take Jesus to be the decisive counterexample to the claim that the fully virtuous person cannot be tempted in ways that make him sympathetic with our weaknesses. Obviously the fully virtuous person can be tempted in such ways—*Jesus was!*

As an alternative strategy for resolving the tension between Jesus's sympathy-grounding experience of temptation and his virtuous character, I argue here that there are good theological and philosophical reasons for believing that Jesus, while perfectly sinless, was not fully virtuous when tempted, but that he grew in virtue through overcoming temptation. I will argue that this view is not only a psychologically plausible account of Jesus's human moral development, but also that it is consistent with orthodox Christology. Moreover, this view has the practical benefit of helping Christians appreciate how Jesus, our perfect moral exemplar, is truly able to "sympathize with our weaknesses."

1. *The Nature of Temptation*

It will be helpful to begin with some preliminaries about the nature of temptation. First, temptation is directed at action. To be tempted is to be tempted to *do* something *willfully*. The actions toward which temptation is directed can be understood broadly to include such mental acts as entertaining thoughts, fantasizing about possible actions, and indulging emotions.

Second, temptation essentially involves desire. If a given way of acting is utterly unattractive and undesirable to a person, then she cannot be tempted so to act. Aquinas appeals to this connection between temptation and desire when he writes, "The temptation which comes from the enemy takes the form of a suggestion. . . . Now a suggestion cannot be made to everybody in the same way; it must arise from those things towards which each one has an inclination." Accordingly, the devil "tried to lead [Christ] from the desire of one sin to the commission of another; thus from the desire of food he tried to lead Him to the vanity of working a needless miracle; and from the desire of glory to tempt God by casting Himself headlong."⁸ Some philosophers argue that desires are perceptions of value.⁹ On this view, to desire something is to see it as good in some way that makes it an appropriate object of desire. Even if this is not true of all desires, many of the desires at work in temptation seem to take this form. In many paradigmatic cases to be tempted to do something is to see that action as (at least partly) good or attractive through one's desire to engage

⁸Aquinas, *ST IIIa*, Q 41, a 4.

⁹See, e.g., Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, and Oddie, *Value, Reality, and Desire*.

in it. Temptation thus often, though perhaps not always, involves what I call *desiderative perception*.

Third, the actions toward which temptation is directed, which the tempted individual desires, are morally bad. Christian theologians typically define temptation in terms of sin. John Owen, for example, defines temptation as “any thing, state, way or condition, that upon any account whatever, hath a force or efficacy to seduce, to draw the mind and heart of a man from its obedience which God requires of him, into any sin, in any degree of it whatever.”¹⁰ “Sin” is, however, a theologically loaded term and the concept of temptation is used and studied widely by theists and non-theists alike. For this and other reasons which I do not have space to develop here, I think temptation is best defined not as enticement to sin, but as enticement to act in a way that would be contrary to virtue.

It might be objected that it is possible for a morally immature or vicious person to be tempted to act virtuously, but I take that to be an unhelpful loosening of the term “temptation.” Rather than arguing for this claim here, however, it is enough to note that the temptations Jesus experienced—the experience of which render him a sympathetic moral exemplar for us sinful humans—were temptations to act contrary to virtue.

The distinction between sinful actions and unvirtuous actions is an important one because not every unvirtuous action is necessarily a sinful one. One reason I prefer to define temptation in terms of acting unvirtuously rather than in terms of sin is that I take it to be possible to be tempted to do that which is unvirtuous without being tempted to sin. It seems possible, for example, to be tempted to watch another episode of your favorite show before going to sleep when doing so would be mildly intemperate, even though it would not be sinful to watch another episode. Richard Swinburne draws a similar distinction between temptations to do wrong and temptations to do less than the best. He writes, “God Incarnate could have chosen at a time to allow himself to make his choice at that time under the influence of temptation to do less than the best. He would then have needed to fight against the temptation not to do that best action; and it would have been possible that he would yield to that temptation and done instead a less good action (and perhaps even a bad action, though certainly not a wrong action).”¹¹ The problem with Swinburne’s application of this distinction between what is wrong and what is less than the best, however, is that Jesus’s temptations were temptations to sin. And it does not seem right to say that Jesus was tempted to sin, but not to do any wrongs. Surely it would have been a wrong (against God the Father, if not against others) for Jesus to sin. So even if temptations are not essentially temptations to act unvirtuously (I maintain that they are), it is enough for our present purposes to note that Jesus’s temptations were temptations to act unvirtuously—indeed, they were temptations to sin. I will say more

¹⁰Owen, *Of Temptation*, 4.

¹¹Swinburne, *Was Jesus God?*, 46.

about the relationship between sin and virtue in section 3, but what I have said up to this point will suffice to illuminate the relationship between temptation and virtue.

2. *Temptation and Virtue*

So far I have suggested that temptation is enticement to act unvirtuously, often involving desiderative perception of an opportunity to act unvirtuously. According to this analysis, the reason that the fully virtuous person cannot experience most, if not all, temptations is that her desires and moral perceptions are so attuned to the relevant values and disvalues of the various actions available to her that she never fails to see the unvirtuous course of action in a predominantly negative light. That is, the reasons against acting unvirtuously are ever salient in her moral perception.¹² To adopt McDowell's terminology, any considerations in favor of the unvirtuous course of action are "silenced" for the virtuous person by her sensitivity to the reasons revealing a requirement of virtue. McDowell's auditory metaphor is, however, a bit ambiguous. Jeffrey Seidman argues that McDowell seems to have two distinct kinds of silencing in view—rational silencing and motivational silencing.¹³ According to Seidman, rational silencing is the inability to see how a reason favoring an unvirtuous course of action (that is, an action that would violate a requirement of virtue) counts as a reason at all, whereas motivational silencing is the complete lack of motivational appeal possessed by the reasons favoring an unvirtuous action. I am with Seidman in judging that the virtuous person's psychology need not be characterized by rational silencing, but that she is plausibly characterized by motivational silencing. In fact, I take it that motivational silencing is tantamount to the virtuous person's inability to experience the inner psychological experience of temptation.

Philippa Foot explains that "The fact that a man is *tempted* to steal is something about him that shows a certain lack of honesty: of the thoroughly honest man we say that it 'never entered his head,' meaning that it was never a real possibility for him."¹⁴ Yet, the concepts of never entering one's head and never being a real possibility for a person seem to pick out two distinct phenomena. The just and poor man who sees perfectly well that he could alleviate his poverty by stealing might never even momentarily desire to steal because the value of respecting other people's property and the wrongness of stealing are ever salient in his moral perception. Simply being aware of the opportunity to alleviate his poverty by stealing and simply recognizing the possible alleviation of poverty as a reason in favor of stealing is not yet a temptation. Would-be tempting opportunities can be presented to our minds by our own imaginations or

¹²Here I am drawing on McDowell's discussion of the perceptual salience of reasons for action ("Virtue and Reason," 344–347).

¹³Seidman, "Two Sides of 'Silencing,'" 68–77.

¹⁴Foot, "Virtues and Vices," 11, italics in original.

by the suggestion of a tempter. Left alone, the thoroughly honest person might not even notice or imagine an opportunity to steal—it is in that sense that we might say that “it never enters his head.” Yet, when presented with the suggestion to steal by an external tempter (or by “the world”), even the thoroughly honest person will be able to see how stealing might alleviate his poverty. And, assuming that it would be good for him not to be so poor, he might well see the alleviation of his poverty as a reason that weighs in favor of stealing, yet without revealing a lack of virtue, contra rational silencing. He simply will not mull over the prospect of stealing or have any desire to steal—it will not be, for him, a “live option” in William James’s sense—on account of his utter distaste for stealing. The poor man who is tempted by such an opportunity reveals his lack of perfect virtue by failing, even if only momentarily, to respond to the relevant goods with appropriate desires, or, rather, by failing to keep the reasons favoring the virtuous action (and against stealing) salient in his moral perception. Compared to the tempted person, the fully virtuous person’s desiderative perception is clearer and steadier.

Yet, even the fully virtuous person sometimes will experience pain and difficulty in acting virtuously when doing so requires the sacrifice of important goods. For example, Karen Stohr offers the case of the owner of a small business who, due to an economic downturn and diminished product demand, must lay off several employees in order to save her company.¹⁵ The owner cares about each of her employees and thus finds it “extremely difficult” to deliver the news of their impending job loss, grieving over the stress and sadness they experience, and worrying about their future prospects.¹⁶

Stohr’s case effectively demonstrates that acting virtuously can be quite painful and difficult even for the fully virtuous person. This is because the virtuous person is appropriately attuned to the value of the goods that must sometimes be sacrificed for the sake of overriding goods. We might even consider such difficulties a kind of pseudo-temptation. For, like temptations, they involve psychological difficulties for virtuous action that can take a great amount of commitment and strength of character to overcome; also, they often develop into full-fledged temptations in less than fully virtuous people.

But the difficulty the fully virtuous person experiences is not the difficulty of resisting temptation. Despite her deep concern to avoid causing pain to her employees, the virtuous owner who has judged that the right—indeed, the virtuous—thing to do is to lay off several employees for the sake of the company will not have an occurrent desire to avoid laying off those employees *in this situation* (as opposed to a merely dispositional or generic desire to promote their wellbeing). For, she will see the laying off of the employees in light of the overriding value of saving the company

¹⁵Stohr, “Moral Cacophony,” 342–344.

¹⁶Stohr, “Moral Cacophony,” 345.

along with other employees' jobs. Likewise, she will see the alternative of failing to lay off the employees in light of the disvalue of the company's demise and the consequent loss of work for all of her employees. It is part of virtuous moral perception not to miss the forest for the trees.

In the face of such pseudo-temptation, even the fully virtuous person can manifest virtues such as courage, perseverance, and endurance in remaining steadfast to the end. In cases where the disvalue of acting contrary to virtue is sufficiently weighty, however, the fully virtuous person does not have to exercise the virtue of self-control (continence) because she does not have to resist a tempting desire to act unvirtuously. Here, I disagree with Stohr's claim that even the fully virtuous person will sometimes need to exercise the virtue of continence. Painful and difficult as the virtuous action may be, the fully virtuous person will not desire to act unvirtuously because she will not lose sight of the disvalue of the unvirtuous course of action. By contrast, those of us who are less than fully virtuous often must exercise self-control in order to keep from giving in to temptation. As McDowell explains, "This view of virtue obviously involves a high degree of idealization; the best we usually encounter is to some degree tainted with continence. But in view of what genuine virtue is, idealization is not something to be avoided or apologized for."¹⁷

3. *The Temptations and Virtue Formation of Jesus*

But, of course, Christians believe that one man—God Incarnate, Jesus Christ—exemplified the ideal of human virtue. And yet, following the writer of Hebrews, we also believe that Jesus was "tempted as we are" in a way that renders him sympathetic with at least some of the weaknesses we experience in temptation. What, then, should we say about the apparent tension between the virtue and the sympathy-grounding temptations of Jesus? One option is to say that Jesus never experienced the psychological pull of temptation (or at least of those temptations to which the fully virtuous person is immune). Perhaps he merely experienced external tests that elicited no internal struggle, difficulty, or pain. The problem with this view is that it does not comport with the New Testament accounts of the extreme emotional and psychological pain experienced by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane prior to his crucifixion—"being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22:44; cf., Hebrews 5:7).

Neither does an external test view of Jesus's temptations comport with the gospel narratives of his temptations in the desert (Matthew 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13). The temptations Jesus experienced in the desert seem to have appealed to strong desires Jesus would have had, especially after a forty-day fast and prior to embarking on the final stage of his Messianic journey toward the Cross. In the first temptation, for example, Satan appeals to Jesus's desire to prove his identity as the Son of God, as well as

¹⁷McDowell, "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?" 28.

his hunger: "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread" (Matthew 4:3). It is not psychologically plausible to imagine Jesus easily and painlessly rejecting these proposals since doing so involved temporarily refusing to satisfy his intense hunger and demonstrate his divinity.

Jesus must have experienced at least the pain and suffering involved in the kind of pseudo-temptation described above. It was excruciatingly painful—emotionally, not just physically—for Jesus to overcome his natural aversion to death and humiliation, enduring the Cross. Likewise, it must have been painful for Jesus to forgo satisfying his intense hunger and proving his divinity, even if he never desired (perceived) the opportunity to turn the stones into bread (or any of Satan's other proposals) as an attractive or tempting possibility. Would such an experience of pseudo-temptation be enough to render Jesus a sympathetic moral exemplar? I do not think so.

For, this pseudo-temptation-only view does not seem to do justice to the comforting message of the temptation passages in Hebrews. While pseudo-temptation can be painful and difficult to endure, it involves no desire, not even a momentary desire, to engage in the unvirtuous action in view. There is something especially difficult about resisting temptation and correcting our desiderative perception when we are seeing an unvirtuous course of action as a desirable, or at least partly desirable, opportunity. If Jesus only ever experienced the pain and difficulty of pseudo-temptation, absent any desire to act in a way that would be contrary to virtue, it is hard to see how that would be sufficient to render him sympathetic with our weaknesses in responding to the kind of full-fledged temptations that beset us. Being able to sympathize with the emotional pain we feel when we must sacrifice some great goods for the sake of other, greater goods is one thing. Being able to sympathize with our lack of desiderative-perceptual clarity that makes objectively undesirable opportunities seem desirable is quite another. Overcoming temptation requires not only the strength to persevere in our commitment to do that which seems obviously best, but also the strength to do that which we know is best even when an alternative action really seems better. A moral exemplar who has felt the pull of such desiderative misperception would seem to be more sympathetic with our weaknesses in temptation than one who has never experienced such temptation.

But perhaps interpreting Jesus's temptations as mere external tests of obedience or pseudo-temptations is preferable to denying that he was fully virtuous when tempted? I am not convinced of this. In what follows, I will suggest two reasons, which are largely independent of the biblical testimony concerning Jesus's temptations and the neo-Aristotelian harmony thesis, for thinking that Jesus might not have been perfect in virtue throughout his earthly life. If there are good reasons to believe that Jesus was not perfectly virtuous in his human moral character throughout his earthly life, then perhaps we do not need to punt to a pseudo-temptation-only view in order to explain Jesus's sympathy with our weaknesses in temptation.

I then conclude this section by considering how it is that Jesus could have been less than fully virtuous without being guilty of sin.

3.1 *The Psychological Maturity of Virtue*

The first main reason for thinking that Jesus was not fully virtuous in his human nature throughout his earthly life is that possessing virtues such as justice, courage, generosity, temperance, and honesty is a significant human achievement that requires a high level of psychological maturity. These and other virtues involve a deep appreciative understanding of the value of the goods they are “for” — viz., justice, human flourishing, and truth. Such deep appreciative understanding is manifest in apt emotions and desires (desiderative perception).¹⁸ The virtues also involve skillful perceptual and deliberative abilities to notice the morally relevant features of a situation, spot potential obstacles to virtuous action, and wisely navigate the fluid contexts of the conversations and events that fill our lives. It is a common human experience to walk away from a quickly unfolding event or conversation and then think to oneself afterward, “If only I had said or done X.” As we develop the virtues, we experience less lag-time in our perceptions, deliberations, and actions, often arriving at accurate judgments about how to act or what to say “on the spot.” Just as a skilled dancer or athlete perceives how a situation is unfolding on the stage or field and changes her movement in anticipation of developing events, the virtuous person deftly navigates the complex and ever-evolving contexts of the moral life.

In light of all this, it is implausible that Jesus would have possessed the level of psychological maturity necessary for virtue as a child, or even as a young adult. According to orthodox Christology, Jesus was fully God and fully human. The Council of Chalcedon (451 a.d.), for example, codifies the doctrine of the Incarnation in the following way:

Following therefore the holy Fathers, we unanimously teach to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man composed of rational soul and body, the same one in being (*homoousios*) with the Father as to the divinity and one in being with us as to the humanity, like unto us in all things but sin [cf. Hebrews 4:15].¹⁹

In taking on human nature, the Son of God did not simply inhabit a body. He took on every aspect of essential human nature, including human psychology. It is hard to imagine what it would mean for Christ’s human nature to be “like unto us in all things but sin” if he were born into the world with the body of a baby, but with the psychological maturity of a fully virtuous adult. Accordingly, Gregory of Nyssa, one of the leading theologians present at the Council of Chalcedon, observes, “Now everything we see included in the good is fitting to God. In consequence, either

¹⁸Robert Roberts and I discuss the relationship between emotion, appreciative understanding, and virtue in “Emotions, Character, and Associationist Psychology.”

¹⁹Dupuis and Neuner, *The Christian Faith*, 227.

our opponents must show that the birth, the upbringing, the growth, *the natural advance to maturity*, the experience of death and the return from it are evil. Or else, if they concede that these things fall outside the category of evil, they must of necessity acknowledge there is nothing shameful in what is alien to evil."²⁰ Indeed, the natural advance to psychological maturity and, hence, virtue seems essential to the full human nature of Christ.

Moreover, there are biblical reasons for believing that Jesus grew in virtue. Luke, for example, tells us that "Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52). If Jesus grew in wisdom in his human psychology, then he also must have grown in the virtues. After all, wisdom is itself a virtue. Many philosophers, following Aristotle, have held that a practical kind of wisdom is a constituent of all the moral virtues, or at least of a large subset of them. As Jay Wood explains, "Practical wisdom, or prudence, is thus a 'bridge virtue,' connecting reason with moral activity. Put briefly, prudence is the deeply anchored, acquired habit of thinking well in order to live and act well."²¹

Here it might be objected that Jesus, in his human nature, could have grown in the purely cognitive dimensions of wisdom, or in a purely theoretical kind of wisdom, without growing in the moral dimensions of practical wisdom. The problem with this objection is that it drives too sharp a wedge between the cognitive and moral dimensions of wisdom, or between practical and theoretical wisdom. Wisdom, especially as understood by the ancient Greeks and Hebrews (Aristotle's distinction between σοφία [sophiā] and φρόνησις [phrōnēsis] notwithstanding²²), is itself a kind of rich moral understanding that is manifest in apt emotions, judgments, and moral deliberations. As we deepen our understanding of how to live well in the world, we deepen our love and appreciation for those goods that are worth pursuing and we strengthen our commitment to pursuing them. It thus is not possible to grow in the cognitive or intellectual dimensions of wisdom without growing in the moral dimensions of wisdom. Even if we could sharply distinguish practical from theoretical wisdom, Luke's juxtaposition of the claim that Jesus grew in wisdom with the claim that he grew "in favor with God and man" is telling; it suggests that the kind of wisdom Jesus developed was concerned with living well in obedience to God and in relationships with others, as opposed to being a kind of practically irrelevant theoretical understanding.

3.2 *Virtue Formation through Temptation*

At this point, it might be objected that even if Jesus was less than fully virtuous as a child, he must have achieved full virtue by the time of his desert temptations. He was, after all, a grown man by that time and was about to embark on his public ministry. This worry suggests the importance of a

²⁰Gregory of Nyssa, "Address on Religious Instruction," 287 (italics added).

²¹Wood, "Prudence," 37.

²²Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.

second reason for thinking that Jesus might have been less than perfectly virtuous throughout much of his life, even while being perfectly sinless. That is, in the ordinary course of human moral psychological development, moral virtues are cultivated through resisting temptation. In fact, it is hard to see why a person would deserve any credit for possessing full virtue and whatever degree of immunity to temptation attends it without having resisted some temptations by an application of will. Robert Roberts argues that

the virtues of will power are needed not only for their 'corrective' function, but also because they are essential to the development of the agent's agent-hood. Struggles are an important part of the way we become centers of initiation of actions and passions. They are the contexts in which the shape of our personality takes on that toughness and independence which we call 'autonomy,' and which seems to be a basic feature of mature personhood.²³

The fact that humans typically develop virtue at least in part through struggles to overcome temptations is at least a good *prima facie* reason to think that Jesus did not already possess full virtue when he experienced genuine temptations, but that he grew in virtue through resisting temptation. Since the desert temptations are presented to us as paradigmatic examples of his temptations, we have reason to believe that he was less than perfectly virtuous at the time of his desert temptations and that his virtue was actually completed and perfected in part through those temptations. In fact, there is some biblical evidence that Jesus's growth in virtue was not completed until he resisted the temptation to forgo the Cross. Referring to Jesus's agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, the author of Hebrews writes, "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he *learned obedience* through what he suffered. And *being made perfect*, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (Hebrews 5:8–9, italics added). There are certainly other ways to read this passage than suggesting that Jesus's virtue was made perfect through his obedience on the Cross, but this is one viable interpretation. Of course, this is not to suggest that Jesus was morally immature or vicious prior to his public ministry and eventual crucifixion. It is important to distinguish flawlessness from full maturity and psychological development.²⁴ Nevertheless, I admit I am uneasy about the implication that Jesus might not have been perfected in his human virtue until just prior to his death. But perhaps death is such a formidable obstacle to the achievement of the human good and the facing of death such a unique moral challenge that it is only through overcoming the temptation to forgo a noble death that humans can be perfected in virtue.

²³Roberts, "Will Power and the Virtues," 234.

²⁴I am grateful to Tom Morris for helpful conversation on this distinction.

Although she never explicitly claims that Jesus grew in virtue or moral character, Walsh emphasizes the way in which temptation contributes to virtue formation in ordinary human psychological development. Walsh quotes Paul, who encourages us to “rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (Romans 5:3–4). She then writes,

The New Testament thus provides ample attestation to the importance of the temptations of Christ as a test in which he proved his faithfulness and obedience to God and became not only the redeemer of humankind but also the prototype for all those who believe in him to follow and emulate by enduring their own tests of suffering, which in turn produce character and hope. There is therefore an intimate connection among temptation, testing, suffering, endurance, and the formation of character in the biblical writings that provides the basis for philosophical and theological reflection on temptation and moral character in the Christian tradition.²⁵

It is unclear whether Walsh thinks that Jesus himself underwent a process of character formation through temptation but, as we have seen, there are good reasons to think that he did. What is clear is that if Jesus was perfectly virtuous throughout his life, then we cannot look to Jesus and the biblical accounts of his suffering in temptation as our model of Christian character formation. We could look to him as our exemplar of perfect virtue, but not as our model of virtue formation. As I will explain in section 4, there is immense practical value in understanding Jesus as a sympathetic moral exemplar who did not come into the world perfect in virtue, but rather was made perfect in virtue through his resistance of temptation. Before turning to that discussion, however, I must address a pressing objection to my thesis.

3.3 *Sinlessness and Virtue*

According to Chalcedonian Christology, Jesus was “like unto us in all things *but sin*.” If lacking perfect virtue entails being sinful at all, then the central claim of this paper is inconsistent with traditional, orthodox Christology. I think it is mistake, however, to equate sinlessness with perfect or full virtue. Both sinlessness and perfect virtue are kinds of moral perfection, but they are distinct and they can come apart.²⁶

Sinlessness is a negative concept in that it expresses the absence of something, as opposed to the presence of something. When we say that Jesus was perfectly sinless, we mean that he was completely free from sinful inclinations and desires and that he was never guilty of any sinful action, thought, attitude, emotion, etc. As Aquinas puts it, there was no

²⁵Walsh, “Moral Character and Temptation,” 123.

²⁶The account that follows reflects a Western theology of sin and might seem inconsistent with Eastern Orthodox accounts of sin. I think my view might, with some modification, be brought in line with Orthodox views of sin, but I do not have space to explore that possibility here.

“‘fomes’ of sin” in Christ.²⁷ In Scripture and in Christian theology, the concept of sin is closely bound up with the concept of law. As the Apostle Paul explains in his epistle to the Romans, “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law” (5:12–13). One common way to conceive of sin is as a violation of a divine command. Plausibly, the reason that “sin is not counted where there is no law” is that the law is the primary way in which God reveals His commands. If that is so, then it is right to think of sin primarily as a violation of a command or law of God. Expressed positively, then, perfect sinlessness is perfect obedience to the laws (or commands) of God.

By contrast with sin and sinlessness, the concept of virtue is not, or at least not primarily, a legal concept. A virtue is an excellent trait of character. The Greek word for virtue—ἀρετή (*areté*)—literally means an “excellence.” To paraphrase Aristotle, a virtue is a set of dispositions to act, think, and feel in the right way, at the right time, toward the right object. As we saw above, the virtues, at least those traditionally classified as “moral virtues” or “virtues of character,” involve skill-like capacities that are informed and directed by appreciative moral understanding of the goods the virtues are for. The concept of perfect or full virtue, therefore, is a thoroughly positive concept. It refers to a state of positive excellence, as opposed to a state of lacking a negative quality like guilt or disobedience or sin. The person who is fully virtuous possesses all of the virtues and possesses them in their highest degree. To be fully virtuous is to have a perfect moral character.

It might be objected that this notion of full or perfect virtue is not a coherent notion at all.²⁸ Perhaps the virtues do not admit of a definite upper limit. Even if they do not, we might adopt a threshold view of full virtue according to which the fully virtuous person possesses all of the virtues to a degree at or above a given level. On such a view, given the considerations offered in sections 1 and 2, the fully virtuous person would be the one who has all of the virtues at or above that degree that eliminates the possibility of at least many types of temptation. Moreover, even on a threshold view of perfect virtue it would make sense to say that to be sinless is not the same as to be fully virtuous.

Paul explains that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). This image of falling short is helpful in comparing the concepts of sinlessness and perfect virtue. Whereas sinlessness is the state of having not fallen short, perfect virtue is the state of having achieved the heights of human excellence. Of course, this is not to say that sinlessness is an unimpressive accomplishment. Sinlessness surely would be an impressive and praiseworthy moral achievement, even if it were only maintained

²⁷Aquinas, *ST* IIIa, Q 15, a 2.

²⁸I am grateful to Stephen Davis for suggesting this objection.

for one day, let alone an entire life. We all have fallen and continue to fall short. Nevertheless, it seems possible to achieve perfect sinlessness even without achieving the robust excellence of character that is full or perfect virtue. Indeed, according to the Genesis account, Adam and Eve were without sin prior to the Fall, but the narrative of their Fall (and, perhaps, their experience of the temptation of Satan) reveals that they were not perfect in virtue.²⁹

In particular, it seems possible to lack some of the skill-like aspects of the virtues without being guilty of sin. It does not seem at all sinful, for example, to lack the well-honed perceptual sensitivity and steadiness that is at the heart of many, if not all, of the moral virtues. An example will help. Recall Jesus's temptation to turn the stones into bread. In light of the gospel accounts of Jesus's miracles, it does not seem that there would have been anything sinful in principle about Jesus turning a stone into bread or doing a miracle to demonstrate his divinity. After all, shortly after his desert temptations, he "manifested his glory" by turning water into wine (John 2:1–11) and on at least two occasions he miraculously multiplied loaves of bread to feed large crowds of hungry people (Matthew 14:13–21, Matthew 15:32–39). The reason that it would have been sinful, and hence unvirtuous, for Jesus to turn the stones into bread in the desert, therefore, must have had something to do with the special circumstances of that situation. Jesus had been "led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (Matthew 4:1), indicating that his period of fasting in the desert was in obedience to the direct and special leading of God. To have ended his fast early presumably would have constituted disobedience to God's special leading.

Moreover, the fast itself and the manner of Jesus's quotation of Scripture in response to each of Satan's temptations suggests that if Jesus had given in to the temptations, that would have constituted a lack of dependence on God for the provision of his needs. After all, Jesus himself asks in his Sermon on the Mount, "Or which one of you, if his son asks for bread will give him a stone? . . . If you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:9, 11). Had Jesus given in to Satan's temptation, perhaps it would have constituted a failure to trust his Father to give him bread and not a stone and thus a sin of over-self-reliance. But for Jesus to desire to turn the stone into bread and to see turning the stone into bread as a partially attractive option, momentarily losing focus on the faithlessness (and sinfulness) that such an act would embody, does not seem to be sinful.

This is not to say that desires cannot be sinful. Had Jesus nurtured his desire to turn the stone into bread and fantasized about the action after

²⁹Although I do not have space to explore it here, one important theological benefit of the view under consideration here is that it helps to make sense of the New Testament theme of Jesus as the New Adam. I am grateful to Daniel Johnson for this suggestion.

having recognized that it would be sinful, his desire plausibly would have constituted sin. Here, the distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* propositional attitudes might prove helpful.³⁰ Presumably, it is always sinful to desire to perform a sinful action where it is the sinfulness of the action that is desired, as in Augustine's famous desire to steal pears simply because he knew it was wrong.³¹ In other words, it seems sinful to *desire to sin* in something like the *de dicto* sense. Were Jesus to have *desired to sin* (under the description of sin) by turning the stone into bread and eating it, he plausibly would have been guilty of sin. Moreover, and here the *de dicto/de re* distinction is less helpful, were the sinfulness of turning the stone into bread to have been readily apparent to Jesus and were he to have desired to do it anyway—not desiring it *for* its sinfulness, but desiring it *despite* its obvious sinfulness—he plausibly would have been guilty of sin. But were Jesus to have desired to turn the stone into bread while not clearly perceiving the sinfulness of the act—hence, desiring to sin in something like a *de re* sense only—this would not seem to reveal any sinfulness on his part, especially if the lack of perceptual salience of the sinfulness of the action were not due to any willful ignorance or negligence in his own moral-spiritual formation. In other words, a momentary lack of clarity in his moral vision, absent any willful disobedience or desire for disobedience, would not have been sinful, though it would seem to reveal a lack of perfect virtue, as explained above. This example is far from a definitive proof of the compatibility of perfect sinlessness and less-than-perfect virtue, but I think it should cause us to question a simplistic equating of sinlessness with perfect virtue.

3.4 Impeccability and Virtue

Even granting that it is possible for a perfectly sinless Jesus to lack perfect virtue, some will argue that if Jesus was ever less than fully virtuous, then at the very least he must have been *capable of sinning*. Timothy Pawl and Kevin Timpe, for example, emphasize a close connection between full virtue and impeccability, and between the lack of full virtue and the ability to sin, when they write, “While Christ grows in wisdom and stature (Luke 2:52), we do not think it is consonant with the traditional view to claim that he grows from lacking virtue or being able to sin, to having virtue and being unable to sin.”³² If lacking full virtue entails the ability to sin, so much the worse for the claim that Jesus lacked full virtue, because there are theological reasons to worry about denying Jesus's impeccability (i.e., his complete inability to sin).

³⁰I am not here suggesting that desires are propositional attitudes. Insofar as at least some desires seem to function like perceptions, those might have a kind of propositional structure. But even if desires are not propositional attitudes, we can apply the *de dicto/de re* distinction to desires analogically since it is possible to desire something under a certain description, where that description can be more or less accurate.

³¹Augustine, *Confessions* 2.6.12.

³²Pawl and Timpe, “Freedom and the Incarnation,” 749.

In response to this concern, I must clarify that I am not claiming that Jesus might have been capable of sinning. Rather, I am suggesting that it is possible that Jesus, who we have good reasons to believe was impeccable, might nevertheless have lacked full or perfect virtue in his human nature for much of his earthly life.

Christian philosophers have argued for a variety of ways in which the impeccability of Jesus can be shown to be compatible with his moral responsibility and praiseworthiness for remaining sinless throughout his earthly life. I do not have space to explore these views in any depth here, much less defend them. Yet, I will briefly suggest, by way of example, how one type of defense of Jesus's impeccability and moral responsibility might illuminate how Jesus could have been impeccable while lacking perfect virtue in his human nature.

One popular approach to reconciling Jesus's impeccability with his moral responsibility for resisting temptation is to argue that Jesus, in his human nature, did not know that he was impeccable. In other words, although he was incapable of sinning, Jesus did not know *qua* human that he was incapable of sinning, so from his human perspective succumbing to temptation was a possibility. Thomas Morris, for example, argues for a "two minds view" of the Incarnation, according to which Jesus's divine mind maintained all of its divine knowledge throughout the Incarnation, but his human mind lacked access to some of his divine knowledge.³³ Although he rejects Morris's two minds view in favor of a Freud-inspired "divided mind" account, Swinburne similarly argues that "Even though he cannot do wrong, [an incarnate divine individual] may however, through not allowing himself to be aware of his divine beliefs, be inclined to believe that he may succumb to temptation to do wrong and thus, in the situation of temptation he may *feel* as we do."³⁴ Whichever metaphysical account of the Incarnation you prefer, the suggestion is that as long as Jesus *qua* human did not know that sinning was not a possibility for him and as long as he did not rely on any special divine power to overcome temptation, his resistance of temptation is something for which Jesus in his human nature was morally responsible and praiseworthy. Of course, simply lacking knowledge in his human mind might not be enough to render him sympathetic with our weaknesses, but that is where the account in this paper can help. An impeccable Jesus who does not know about his impeccability and does not possess whatever immunity to temptation comes along with perfect virtue is plausibly in a better position to sympathize with our weaknesses than an impeccable and perfectly virtuous Jesus.

Again, I do not mean to support the two-minds or divided mind approach, but only to show how these general strategies for reconciling Jesus's impeccability with his praiseworthiness for overcoming temptation can

³³Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate*.

³⁴Swinburne, *The Christian God*, 205.

illuminate the compatibility between impeccability and growth in virtue. If Jesus's human mind (or human nature) can lack knowledge possessed by his divine mind (or nature) without impugning his divine omniscience, why couldn't Jesus's human moral character lack perfect (human) virtue even while his divine nature remained morally perfect in every way? His lack of perfect virtue might have provided him less of a purely human safeguard against experiencing and giving in to temptation, but perhaps that is precisely what the writer of Hebrews means when he says that Jesus can "sympathize with our weaknesses." Perhaps Jesus overcame temptation solely through the exercise of his less than perfect (weak) human virtue, and with no more help from the Holy Spirit than is available to all Christians (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:13).

It is important to note here that this "qua move," often referred to as "the reduplicative strategy," does not by itself solve the problem that is the focus of this paper. Even if it is metaphysically possible for Christ to be perfect in virtue *qua* God, while less than perfect in virtue *qua* human, the question before us is whether it is possible to reconcile Christ's perfect sinlessness *qua* human with his less than perfect virtue *qua* human. Neither does dyothelitism resolve the issue. Simply distinguishing Christ's human will from his divine will does not resolve the tension between Christ's temptations and his perfect virtue, if those two things are in fact in tension as I have suggested that they are. It might well be that the "qua move" and dyothelitism are both necessary for preserving the moral perfection of Jesus's divine nature in the light of his growth in virtue *qua* human, but it is a further question whether we can reconcile Jesus's growth in virtue *qua* human (and all that entails for the moral status of his human will) with his perfect sinlessness *qua* human.

What we ought to conclude, I have claimed, is that Jesus's sympathy-grounding temptation experiences, together with his possession of a full human nature "like unto us in all things but sin," might reveal him to have been less than fully virtuous at the time of his temptations without calling into question his perfect sinlessness and impeccability. In fact, it is consistent with Jesus lacking full virtue at the time of his temptations that Jesus was as perfectly virtuous as a human being without a sin nature can be at every stage of his moral development. While this would be an impressive and unique moral achievement, it does not entail that he was perfectly or fully virtuous at every stage of his psychological and moral development.

To return to the example we have been considering, it seems plausible that Jesus momentarily experienced as attractive and desirable the possibility of turning a stone into bread to satisfy his intense hunger. He could have done this even while remaining so committed in his human will to obeying his Father and so attuned (though less than perfectly so) to the importance of depending solely on His Father's provision in that moment that he quickly corrected his tempting desiderative perception, fixing his gaze firmly on the undesirable (indeed, unvirtuous) features of the tempting

opportunity. While this would reveal a lack of full virtue, it would reveal an impressive *degree* of virtue and strength of will, and it would be consistent with Jesus being perfectly sinless and even impeccable.

4. *The Sympathy and Moral Exemplarity of Jesus*

I recognize that the claim that Jesus might not have been fully virtuous at the time of his temptations likely will not sit comfortably with many Christians. I admit that I, too, have theological hesitations about the view. Nevertheless, I hope to have demonstrated that, while it might at first seem irreverent, there are good theological and philosophical reasons for believing that Jesus was not fully virtuous when tempted, but rather that he grew in virtue through overcoming temptation. Lest anyone be inclined to write off the arguments offered here simply on the grounds that the view strikes them as irreverent, I am reminded of C. S. Lewis's words in the introduction to J. B. Phillips's *Letters to Young Churches*:

The same divine humility which decreed that God should become a baby in a peasant-woman's breast, and later an arrested field-preacher in the hands of the Roman police, decreed also that He should be preached in a vulgar, prosaic and unliterary language. If you can stomach the one, you can stomach the other. The Incarnation is in that sense an irreverent doctrine: Christianity, in that sense, an incurably irreverent religion.³⁵

If we can get past the irreverent look of it, I think we will see not only that the view presented here is consistent with biblical and Chalcedonian Christology, but also that it has immense value for Christian faith and character formation.

In my experience many Christians are confused by the claim that Jesus is sympathetic with our weaknesses, having been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. They think that if Jesus was impeccable, or even just perfectly sinless, he cannot possibly have experienced the struggle that we sinful humans must endure in order to resist temptation. They therefore have a hard time thinking of Jesus as a moral exemplar who can sympathize with their weaknesses. If they think of Jesus as a moral exemplar at all, they think of him as an exemplar that is a bit aloof and disconnected from our own daily moral and spiritual struggles.

The identification and imitation of moral exemplars plays an important role in human character formation. Moral exemplars not only inspire us to grow in our character; they also provide us a model of virtue formation to imitate. Of course, it might be possible for some moral exemplars to model the moral ideal, while others model virtue formation toward that ideal.³⁶ Yet, there seems to be something especially fitting and helpful about an archetypal moral exemplar who, in addition to modelling moral perfection, also models moral growth through weakness and thus

³⁵Lewis, "Introduction," vii.

³⁶I am grateful to an anonymous referee for suggesting this point.

can sympathize with our weakness. The author of Hebrews realized this. In support of the passages quoted above in which he argues that Jesus is able to sympathize with our weaknesses and sufferings, the author of Hebrews writes: “For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness” (Hebrews 5:1–2). According to this biblical author, the high priest’s weaknesses, and his resultant sympathy with our weaknesses, are precisely what make him an excellent exemplar and intercessor for God’s people. The author thus goes out of his way, time and again, to emphasize that Jesus himself is our perfect high priest—perfectly weak, yet without sin.

Of course, whatever we say about his experience of temptation and growth in virtue, Jesus still is quite removed from us in his moral character on account of his perfect sinlessness. The proposal I offer in this paper does not deny this. My proposal does not suggest that Jesus is a moral exemplar who shares all (or any) of our flaws. Again, we must distinguish flawlessness from lack of full maturity and development. Moreover, in addition to being perfectly sinless throughout his life, Jesus is also quite removed from us in his eventual achievement of perfect virtue. Perfect virtue arguably is a state of character that no other human being is capable of achieving in this life, sinful as we are.

Yet, if Jesus really did grow in virtue throughout his life, if he struggled to resist temptation just as those of us who lack complete virtue do, and if he overcame temptation through the exercise of his imperfect human virtue, those are very significant and meaningful ways in which he can sympathize with our weaknesses—including our weaknesses of character—when we are tempted. We thus can look to Jesus as a moral exemplar who not only exemplifies the ideal for which we ought to strive, but also as one who grew and developed in his moral character in ways that we can understand and imitate. In our efforts to grow in virtue, we can engage in the same disciplines that Jesus practiced as he grew in virtue, and we can be confident in their effectiveness. Though Jesus’s perfect sinlessness and impeccability sets him apart from us as our moral superior, his growth in virtue would make him more like us in his human moral character than Christian theologians and philosophers have traditionally acknowledged. And once we see that the view is consistent with orthodox Christology, there is great comfort to be found in the thought that Jesus is a moral exemplar who might really be able to sympathize with our lack of full virtue in temptation.³⁷

United States Air Force Academy

³⁷I began working on the philosophy of Jesus’s temptations for my undergraduate thesis at Biola University fifteen years ago. Since then I have benefited from so many helpful con-

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