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# Jesus the Virtue Ethicist: A Metaethical Anticipation of Moral Sentimentalism, Empathy and Care

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

JESUS THE VIRTUE ETHICIST: A METAETHICAL ANTICIPATION OF MORAL  
SENTIMENTALISM, EMPATHY AND CARE

By

David Augustin Garnette Hodge, Sr.

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty  
of the University of Miami  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Coral Gables, Florida

May 2015

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GARNETTE HODGE, DAVID AUGUSTIN  
Jesus the Virtue Ethicist: A Metaethical Anticipation  
of Moral Sentimentalism, Empathy and Care

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The concept of Jesus as a virtue ethicist is not a new one. Most philosophical thinkers in the ancient world were virtue theorists in one way or another, even the Buddha and Confucius were not inconsistent with the belief that character was central to *ethos* (or *ethikos*). Among the philosophers, and primarily through reason, Aristotle is the philosopher with the greatest contribution to virtue theory. Jesus' *agape*-love doctrine, was quite thoroughly an other-regarding, universal benevolence. Although the love-of-neighbor language was in the Hebrew Bible, and the *agape* vernacular was in Homeric thought, Jesus was the first philosopher to wrestle the term from Homer, connect it to his Jewish heritage, and utilize it in virtue theory to signify something other-worldly (prevenient grace) and this-worldly (love of all neighbor, including enemies). I argue that *agape*-love qua Jesus-love was central to the Christian moral theory as it moved through the Middle Ages and up to the Enlightenment and the Romantic period. Moral sentimentalists like David Hume, Adam Smith, Bishop Butler, et.al., grounded morality in sentiments rather than reason, as say, Immanuel Kant's absolutist deontology. I further argue that the phenomenology of the Hebrew Bible seems rather absolutist deontological, particularly due to the Decalogue, and the phenomenology of the Christian Testament is virtue ethical, driven by the *agape*-love character trait. On a first read it appears that there exists a massive contradiction since absolutist deontology, and its rejection of motives,

and virtue ethics, with its necessity of motives, are quite incongruous to each other. On a second read I make clear that the Hebrew Bible, Christian ethically conjoined with the Christian Testament, can be viewed as less absolutist deontological and more *prima facie* deontological, which *a la* W.D. Ross, is motives inclusive. I also make clear that if we take the position that the virtue ethics of the Christian Testament is agent-based virtue ethics, following Michael Slote, and is sufficiently prone to empathy following David Hume (and to a larger extent, Slote) and Care, following the relational ethics of Nel Noddings, a new picture of how to treat (and include) Jesus as a moral theorist arises. This renewed concept gives moral theorists (including Christian ethicists) a different angle of analysis, particularly in the triangulation of love-empathy-care, for issues like abortion, justice, just war theory and so on. Christian ethics thus conceived doesn't perpetuate a bifurcation between mother and un-born child; it puts forth a moral education that emphasizes the triangulation in both lives.

For  
Mama (Alice Hodge)  
and Daddy (Alvin Hodge, 1928-2013)  
and Auntie Cara (Vivian Hodge, 1922-2012)  
They had a dream...

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seemed sincerely interested. I surmise that regardless of what I discuss with Risto, he makes me feel like it's important by seeming sincerely interested. Thanks Risto.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

This dissertation began as an intellectual discussion in the Fall of 2002 in Michael Slote's *Moral Sentimentalism* course. I was a first semester Ph.D student in the philosophy department but I had no formal philosophical training at that time, but I was accepted into the Ph.D program on the grounds that I had already completed a master in theological studies and a doctorate degree in theology. The scope of those prior degrees were such that I had already read a vast amount of literature on various ethical theories, philosophical inquiry and theological presuppositions, but even with such an intellectual gamut I still felt that I lacked the philosophical sophistication to raise questions that pushed the boundaries of my previous inquiries. Most theists would agree that the structure of theology presupposes, of course, that there exists a God who has a particular set of features definitions, and attributes like omnipotence, omnipresence, omnibenevolence, and omniscience. Theologically there seems to be no problem here, but philosophically the problems are tremendous, especially with the most promising objection to theism being the problem of evil. The problem of evil argument goes, in short, how can there be the simultaneous existence of a Multi-omni God (who hates evil) and evil within the same tempo-spatial region? This question resides in the theological discussion called theodicy, namely, how does God perceive and respond to evil and suffering. If God is a God of love who empathizes and cares for God's creation, how is it logically possible for God to not find evil to be of such repugnance that its eradication

would be necessary? An excellent example of this can be found in the morality rates of children under four.

The mortality rate of children ages 1-4 is higher in the state of Florida than any other state in the Union, the primary cause of death being drowning. If we were to define “evil” (quite generally) as the opposite of good, without even appealing to a supernatural evil like Satan or Lucifer or any such intelligent force, then one can say that the death of children (along these lines) is evil. If we say, for example, that a calm, rational person of average intelligence was present and witnessed a drowning child, and made no attempt to save the child, we would have to infer that either that person was evil, or we mischaracterized him (he may lack the features that we originally thought he had), or we lacked information that he had (perhaps there was a reason that we couldn’t see, like he knew that if he saved the child it would—on a utilitarian account—cause the death or suffering of a larger number of children imperceptible to us). The goal of theodicy is not to create an *a priori* argument (like the ontological argument) for the existence of God, but to demonstrate *aposteriori* how God is probable even in the wake of evil. So the evidentiary problem of the existence of God is resolved, for the believer, with faith, and the problem of evil is resolved, on some accounts, by invoking the limits of human faculty. In short, there are some things we cannot know about God because our faculty is limited to time and space; God’s infinitude is beyond our reach.

Christianity resolves the evidentiary and evil issues by offering a heroic argument: God demonstrates God’s love for tempo-spatial humans by becoming a human in the person of Jesus who is called the Christ. To be sure, this theological account is incongruent with all of the other major religions and posits Christianity (arguably) among

the most exclusive religion. Nevertheless, for Christians, Jesus is the *exegesis* and the *hermeneutics* of God. Theologian Karl Barth argues that we can know nothing about God without God's choosing to unveil God-self to humankind. The ontological structure of God makes God unknowable to human faculty, which poses massive epistemological challenges if we don't invoke the caveat of Jesus. Unlike other theologians and religious naturalist who believes that God is knowable through nature, Karl Barth is steadfast in his belief that God can only be known through the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus, on this account, is not only the exegesis and the hermeneutic of God, he is also the epistemology of God. Humans can only know and understood the moral teachings of God through Jesus Christ.

I begin my argument with the assumption that relativism is false and the divine command theory was clearly refuted in Plato's *Euthyphro*. Something is not moral, i.e., right as opposed to wrong, because God makes it right. Something is right because it is right. God's participation is one of reflection. God is positioned in such a way that God knows what is right and wrong. God reflects and agrees with right actions because they are right, then God, through some deontological criteria, establishes laws. The role of Jesus is to teach God's people that virtues are possible and how to develop them. There are several ways that one can go about interpreting Jesus' ethical framework, but a good many of them are insufficient for one reason or another. The utilitarian argument, for example, places too much emphasis on consequences. On this account, an action may be morally praiseworthy if it tends to promote happiness and pleasure for the maximum of individuals, even if the consequences are unbearable and insidious to the minority. Indeed Jesus' expiation is a utilitarian act, but not in moral terms. Jesus' death is a question for

theology and soteriology but not for morality. Jesus' moral theory is a virtue theory. Consistent with most ethicist who preceded him and of his time, from the Buddha and Confucius to Plato and Aristotle, Jesus was a virtue ethicist. Jesus was preoccupied with character and motivations. Jesus taught that love should be held paramount to any other theme, even the deontological theme of his forebears. His progenitors taught that the Decalogue should be absolute, but Jesus taught that love was absolute. Thus, if love of God and love of neighbor were taught and "habituated" (to use Aristotelian language) his disciples would be motivated to achieve good ends. Consequently, chapter two makes the case that Jesus is best described as a virtue ethicist whose primary virtue is love, rather than a consequentialist or a deontologist.

In chapter three I develop a concept I call triangulation. I begin by showing that the best place to ground Jesus virtue theory is in sentimental terms. Certainly Aristotle is seen as the person who wrote most substantially on virtue, but there are points where he and Jesus simply wouldn't agree. Virtue theory is not the same as virtue ethics. An ethicist is not a virtue ethicist simply because he or she put forth a theory of virtue. Immanuel Kant, the grand absolutist deontologist of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is not virtue ethicist, but certainly he would count as a virtuous act the disposition to altruism. Nevertheless, I argue in chapter two that Jesus is a virtue ethicist, he didn't simply put forth a theory of virtue. I argue, following Michael Slote, that not only was Jesus a virtue ethicist, but that he was an agent-based virtue ethicist. Moreover, I argue that Jesus' motivations and inclinations were relational. Jesus was fond of certain dispositions like love and compassion and those dispositions cohere, I argue, quite nicely with 18<sup>th</sup> century



sentimentalist and the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century relational-care ethicists, primarily Nel Noddings.

Having defended Jesus's ethical theory as agent-based virtue ethics and having showed how it would square with care ethics, I turn my attention to chapter four where I develop a contrast between deontology and agent-based virtue ethics. Part of the terrain is to develop a strong bond between empathy and care and the New Testament Jesus. Noddings' objection to God and care rests upon what I thought was a faulty and antiquated hermeneutic that no longer survives. Thus, I demonstrate that there are stronger hermeneutical theories to be found elsewhere, among them is the theory that is utilized in liberation theology. For example, womanist theology doesn't deny God's influence in the lives of women, but they do reject patriarchal hermeneutics or any hegemonic theology/philosophy that places masculine theory at the helm of a theological imagination.

The last chapter is a normative chapter. Having reconstructed empathy and care as theories anticipated by Jesus, I wondered how Jesus would respond to modern conversations on abortion. I am convinced that the triangulation of love-empathy-care, manifested and taught by caring agents, can bring a level of humanity to everyone involved—the unborn fetus/child and the mother. It's atypical for anyone, especially a pregnant woman, to find glee in abortion. Even if she vehemently rejects the pregnancy (or the fetus) she may find the abortion process a painful and uncomfortable imposition. So abortions are very tough to deal with physically, mentally, emotionally, and morally. The triangulation that I describe takes into consideration both entities—the unborn child and the pained mother.

## Chapter 2

### The Beginning of an Argument

*You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.”<sup>44</sup> But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,<sup>45</sup> that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.<sup>46</sup> If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?<sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?—Matthew 5:43-47*

*And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?”<sup>29</sup> Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one;’<sup>30</sup> and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’<sup>31</sup> The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.—Mark 12:28-31*

A few years ago there was a heart-wrenching news story regarding a little eight year old girl who was raped, set on fire, and left for dead. At the victim impact testimonial, the little girl was the last to speak. First the judge and the malefactor heard from the victim’s family and the prosecutor. The offender gazed straight ahead, emotionless, detached, and apathetic. Then the frail little girl approached the podium. She was too short to stand behind the podium so she was handed a microphone. Her face was dark brown with huge pink blotches from the seared pigmentation and the numerous skin graftings. The audience—the judge, bailiff, prosecutor, defense attorney, and the general audience—was completely silent as she made her remarks—but not for long. Destined to spend the rest of her life in excruciating pain having one surgery after another, and coupled with her interminable psychic scars, this child said only one sentence, “You hurt me very bad, but I forgive you and I love you.” She then turned and slowly walked back

to her seat, leaving in her wake a torrent of tears flowing down the judge's cheek and the conspicuous silence of the eloquent prosecutor. Even more amazingly, the convicted rapist who sat steely in his seat, who had remained emotionless all the while, began to weep. Spectators watched in amazement as apathy was transformed into empathy. When asked why she forgave him the child said, "That's what Jesus wanted me to do—everyone needs love and forgiveness." This child makes a very powerful interpretation of Jesus' love ethic. If Jesus is making a wholly deontological demand, one may be justified in concluding that Jesus is demanding far too much. Forgiveness is one thing, but to require the agent to love the person who has done an inconceivable and heinous wrong to her seems unmerciful to the agent. If the agent fails to love her victimizer, would she not feel like a failure? And if she did feel like she has failed Jesus for not loving, say, her rapist, would she not be, in effect, victimized (and indeed raped) all over again?

On the other hand, if Jesus is less instantiating a deontological obligation and more offering an ideal virtue, i.e., a noble goal to pursue, then do we not have good reasons to trust and pursue Jesus' virtue ethical standard?

In this chapter I will argue that Jesus, consistent with other philosophers and religious thinkers of the ancient world, is a virtue ethicist whose fundamental virtue can be found in the Christian concept of agape-love. Further, I will suggest that the propositional content of Jesus' virtue anticipates and approximates 21<sup>st</sup> century empathy and care moral theories. The following arguments will govern my trajectory. First, I will identify and clarify my hermeneutical framework by outlining the weakness of traditional biblical hermeneutics and demonstrate how contextual theory is more qualified and more promising to show how Jesus love ethic links well with a (relational) feminist model.

Secondly, I will argue that agape-love is not the same as phileo-love and represents a promising virtue theory. Thirdly, I will close this chapter by giving a preview of modern virtue theories that squares rather well with Jesus' ethical theory.

### **Hermeneutical Framing**

The Christian is a strange person indeed. Often we are perplexed by some of the things that they do in the name of love. From this child who forgave her rapist and tormentor from a most egregious act of “humanity’s inhumanity to human[kind]” to Mother Teresa’s *self-giving* love to the poor of Calcutta, to Martin Luther King, Jr’s refusal to hate those who would oppress him and his people, the Christian has had a long history (two millennia) of practicing love as a (theological) virtue. That Jesus of Nazareth, the first century Palestinian prognosticator of love, was a virtue ethicist, is hardly refutable. And that adherents or disciples of his unique pedagogy are themselves virtue ethicists are a matter for thorough exegesis and intentional hermeneutics. All interpretation of texts, regardless of how exacting one’s exegetical skills are, necessarily rests on the plethora of subjective variables of the hermeneutician. So I am immediately presented with two points that are begging for clarification: 1) can a clear and irrefutable case be made for Jesus as a virtue ethicist? 2) Which of several hermeneutical strategies should I employ to fortify my case (and why)? I will concern myself with the latter first, but I will couch my hermeneutical framework in contextualization.

Given that the Bible, particularly the Christian Testament, is the primary source of Christian doctrine and dogma, I will restrict my argument (largely) to the biblical text and its commentators, and at the same time avoid a possible protracted argument. It is only

the disingenuous (or naïve) hermeneutist who believes that one need not be suspicious when approaching texts. Even if the reader believes the Bible to be inerrant or infallible he or she cannot be dismissive of the other two constituents in the hermeneutical triangle (author and text—in this case the Bible). Because the Bible is such a tangibly (though not necessarily intellectually) accessible book, it is often approached with an uncritical eye, highlighting clichés (“The Bible is the Word of God. We should not question God”), while omitting more significant texts that tend to refute the cliché (“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you”). Or myopic passages are rendered sacred (sacrilization) rather than critiqued: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” and “For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>1</sup> This tendency towards either the omitting or sacrilization of text is unfortunate, problematic and (dare I say) suspicious. I am not overstating when I say that each person must have some prior understanding of a given text when he or she begins to engage it. How can there be a dialectical tension, one that would give credence to a justifiable synthesis, if the reader is either disingenuous about his or her pre-understanding?

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21 (NIV)

<sup>2</sup> Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance*, (New York: Crossroads,

The unwillingness of having one's perspectives challenged at all may point to 'ideological' behavior. An ideology may be understood as a rigid attitude over against any object of understanding. Due to personal or social reasons, ideological interpreters defend their particular 'readings' at all costs and remain hostile to all calls for a change of attitude, perspective, or world view.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, my hermeneutical narrative must include some suspicion about those who have rendered a theological hermeneutic in the past: "Whose hermeneutic?" And "Whose pre-understandings?" are important questions for my heuristic quest for understanding Jesus's role in virtue theory.

As a black man in America I choose to approach the hermeneutical task via a liberation motif. This may seem like an extreme or myopic negation of a proper hermeneutic system, but I am far from being alone in this enterprise. Womanist biblical scholar Renita Weems avers, "The experience of oppression has forced the marginalized reader to retain the right, as much as possible, to resist those things within the culture and the Bible that one finds obnoxious or antagonistic to one's innate sense of identity and to one's basic instincts for survival. The latter has not always been easy."<sup>3</sup> In this regard, I am significantly oppositional to repugnant interpretations of Jesus' teachings that tend to create hegemonic epistemologies and cosmologies. Liberation theologian Noel Erskine enhances this hermeneutical thrust when he says,

Oppressed peoples began to discover that their search in history for God was at the same time the search for self, and their search for self was often the search for God. So God became for them the one whom they encountered in history as freedom. God became the freeing one who, even in the midst of human bondage, signaled to them that they were meant for freedom.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance*, (New York: Crossroads, 1991), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Renita Weems, "African American Women and the Bible" in *Stony the Road We Trod*, ed. Cain Hope Felder, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 63.

<sup>4</sup> Noel Leo Erskine, *Deconlonizing Theology: A Caribbean Perspective*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1981), 1

Doing religious hermeneutics from this perspective, namely contextualization, recognizes the duality of being subject and object concurrently. The overwhelming majority of Africans, and descendants from what 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europeans referred to as the “Dark Continent,” are religious people, believing that they possess a mutual psychology about how concepts, particularly moral ones, are derived. Thus, models of hermeneutics, like the *historical-critical* or the *grammatical-historical* models that reject and refuse to include a person’s context, have traditionally affixed Jesus to the first century in such a way that he has only relativistic salience to subsequent centuries. A case can be made for Jesus as a militaristic agent (Jesus stands in “opposition” to Islam, thus on the side of United States “fight against terrorism”), a Wall Street executive (as with the prosperity gospel), a pacifist (as in American slavery), or a perpetuator of hate crimes (as with the Moral Majority’s war on homosexuality). Indeed the 21<sup>st</sup> century Jesus has been hermeneutically reshaped into a financially fecund Anglo-saxon male. He is part of the rich and powerful; he is a power broker for the elite. Re-shaped in this way is permission granting for religious commentators to say in the wake of Hurricane Katrina’s devastation of the Gulf Coast, “God sent Katrina in judgment of the black magic and sinful culture of New Orleans.” Of course this argument suggests that if you are wealthy enough or financially prepared enough to escape before the devastation, you’re righteous—indeed you’re virtuous. And if you were poor or destitute you are lazy and sinful, thus ignored (or even punished) by Jesus. Similarly, the 2010 devastation of Haiti by a 7.0 massive earthquake was seen, by religious commentators like Pat Robertson, as God’s will to devastate the evil “voodoo” practices on that tiny island nation. My hermeneutics will not allow me to share such an apathetic belief, one that flows in contrast to the Luke 4:18

mission statement of Jesus. “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed...” Jesus’ mission was derived from a liberation conscience, one that normatively instantiates empathy and care. Jesus empathizes and cares for those who are “the least”<sup>5</sup> as a normative act—a virtue. Any pedagogy or hermeneutics that takes seriously a rejection of this premise cannot be a functional feature of Jesus’ moral philosophy. Similarly, any ascription that empowers a hegemony is not a provenance that Jesus would find friendly to his concerns. But let me say more.

The modern masculinist psychology is such that it is incapable of viewing hegemonic traditions as evil and shared understandings as being inherently socially dominating. For example, Aristotle’s analogical themes in his *Politics* have been canonized in such a way as to promote the ongoing devaluation of women and slaves (and given the American psychological correlation of “slaves” with “black,” one can infer a devaluation of blackness—but I would not make that case here). Chiming in on this subject is Patricia Hills Collins, who pushes the subject beyond gender and into the category of race. She sees this very frustrating (social ontology<sup>6</sup>) and strange *double consciousness*<sup>7</sup> as the apodictic result of the white supremacist epistemological hubris:

Because elite white men and their representatives control structures of *knowledge validation*, white male interests pervade the thematic content of traditional scholarship. As a result, Black women’s experiences with work, family, motherhood, political activism, and sexual politics have been routinely distorted in or excluded from traditional academic discourse. Black feminist thought as

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Matt. 25

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Charles Mills, “But what are you really?: The Metaphysics of Race” in *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 44.

<sup>7</sup> W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, (Chicago: Dover Books, 1994), 2



specialized thought reflects the thematic content of African-American women's experiences.<sup>8</sup>

This "control" is an over-arching vice because it limits the imagination and restricts the sub-conscious gaze (or potential) of the oppressed individual. Once the thematic content has been fixed, it establishes boundaries that delimit the distance in which adherents to those boundaries can go. This epistemic restriction is what Collins (and others) calls "subjugated knowledge."<sup>9</sup>

Collins avers that the existing knowledge structures were not gained democratically, but were gained by the muscle of white hubris: "Just as the textbook's portrayal of community was impoverished because its truth had been arrived at via exclusionary practices, so are existing knowledges similarly compromised when developed in undemocratic contexts. This suggests that new standards for evaluating knowledge are needed."<sup>10</sup> A traditional hermeneutics that fosters a hegemonic system is inappropriate and inconsistent with the virtue teachings of Jesus. What Collins calls for is a different (or new) epistemology or an "alternative consciousness"<sup>11</sup> such that people whose lives have been fragmented by oppression can develop a different (or new) sense of self. This cannot occur with a hegemonic hermeneutic that is inconsistent with empathy and care.

There's another way for me to justify this anti-hegemonic hermeneutical mode. That Jesus is on the side of the oppressed is evident from his mission statement. That Jesus is a teacher of love and a virtue ethical moral philosopher, accentuating empathy

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<sup>8</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 1991), 201.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women & Search for Justice*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), xviii.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Bruggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978), 13.

and care, is evident from his teachings. But traditional hermeneutics is not in search of a liberation motif. As a matter of fact, traditional hermeneutical strategies maintain a white supremacist masculinist monologue without giving heed to tension or ‘distanciation’ (to utilize Paul Ricoeur’s grand term). *Distanciation* liberates the reader to let the text speak with its own autonomy and divorces him/her from a superficial myopic and uniform (one-size-fits-all) read. To be sure, Ricoeur “acknowledges that there is no single interpretative move which could rescue the meaning of the text, but that there are conflicting aims, interests and methods which seek to appropriate the text.”<sup>12</sup> The hermeneutical monopoly that maintained allegiance to a hegemonic model, denying that the root emphasis of Jesus’ teaching and ministry was empathy and care, mobilized by love, is flawed. Any analysis of Jesus’ ethics, therefore, that fails to treat this triangulation (love-empathy-care) with sufficient force is motivated by a faulty exegesis and hermeneutic. James Cone, the architect of black liberation theology in America, was quite demonstrative in his comment, “Any message that is not related to the liberation of the poor in a society is not Christ’s message. Any theology that is indifferent to theme of liberation is not Christian theology.”<sup>13</sup> An even more enlightening indictment of the oppressive nature of some traditional hermeneutical models can be found in the work of one of Cone’s most notable students and architect of womanist theology, Jacquelyn Grant who inveighs:

Feminists have sought to break the prison of patriarchy. Using gender analysis, many of the historical, biblical, and theological interpretations [of the Bible and Jesus] have been challenged. Feminist theologians have been working diligently to overcome the sin of patriarchy. They have been able to break from the conceptual trap by taking seriously women’s experiences as the context and one

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid..., Jeanrond, 71. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Idhe, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

<sup>13</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1990), back cover.

of the sources of biblical interpretation. Seeing reality through the eyes of women has led to the rereading of biblical texts and the revising of biblical and theological interpretations.<sup>14</sup>

This is the hermeneutical strand from where I derive my hermeneutics. My appreciation of the religious genre is enhanced only insofar as Jesus and his teachings are detached from traditions that are antagonistic to those suffering agents “who find themselves with their backs against the wall.”<sup>15</sup> Is not this what the mission of Jesus is all about, as he himself states it? How can one trust a hermeneutic that is intentional in its description of a Jesus who lacks empathy? How can anyone who appreciates the teachings of the Palestinian Carpenter not be weary of a white supremacist ideology that is an “intentional misinterpretation of the slave’s anthropological nature”?<sup>16</sup> An uncaring people interpreted and taught about an uncaring Jesus. But this is not the moral philosopher that I am inclined to heed. Let us consider for a moment the town of Skokie, Illinois, for there we shall see how a correct hermeneutic could generate a re-imaging of Jesus as a virtue ethicist devoted to empathic care.

Skokie, Illinois is a Chicago suburb that is approximately half an hour by car from downtown. It is not a community like Beverly Hills, California, or Palm Beach, Florida or Hamptons, New York where the homes are the most expensive (and expansive) in the country. Rather, Skokie of the 1970s was rich in an old-world community spirit and charm where neighbors were genuinely concerned about each other and common courtesies were not outdated notions. Over 5000 members of this community had stared down death in Adolf Hitler’s death camps, where by luck (or fate) they were almost

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<sup>14</sup> Jacquelyn Grant, “Womanist Jesus and the Mutual Struggle for Liberation” in *The Recovery of Black Presence: An Interdisciplinary Exploration*, ed. Randall C. Bailey & Jacquelyn Grant, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 132

<sup>15</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), 8.

<sup>16</sup> Riggins Earl, *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 5.

among the 6-7 million European Jews who died therein. In April of 1977 all of the inhabitants of Skokie were not escapees from the death camps, but there were sufficient refugees there to garner the interests of Frank Collin, leader of the National Socialist Party of America, who attempted to mobilize his adherents to march on this little oasis. The march never happened, but the Supreme Court defended the rights of the NSPA to march leaving the citizens of Skokie to ponder their fate:

We do not want to wake up on May 2 and find out nothing was done. You must understand our feelings. We might do things we do not know yet. We are a special breed of people, people who went through unbelievable things. History does not even know the things that happened to us... I appeal to you once more. This thing should not happen in our village.<sup>17</sup>

Ordinarily this incident would not register more than a passing interest to most bystanders or media outlets. Certainly groups have marched for one reason or another to show off their constitutional right to assemble and their First Amendment right of free speech: African-Americans, et.al., marched for their right to vote in the mid-sixties and, in our modern era, gays and lesbians march to win allegiance for their right to have legally protected marriages, which ought be an unequivocal option in a non-truncated democracy. But when Collin decided to sue (and won) Skokie for violating his First Amendment right to free speech, questions of how far a citizen can be allowed to push the limits of free speech became central. The notion that in a democracy censorship should be rejected and free speech (with its corollaries of autonomy and liberty) should be defended, by any means necessary, should always be held at a premium. Certainly many in our democracy would find Nazism and Neo-Nazism deplorable, as well as other fringe groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the Skinheads, but should not we defend their

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<sup>17</sup> Donald Alexander Downs, *Nazis in Skokie: Freedom Community and the First Amendment*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1985), 2.

right to say what they want to say? And should not the more reasonable among us contest their voices? Should not we match their nefarious and ignoble ideas with reputable and noble ones? I must say, *prima facie*, that the Supreme Court was right in allowing Collin and his fellow agitators to prevail, otherwise a Court that backed the Respondents would set precedence not easily maintainable democratically. That an egregious act to violate and cause harm to a community of people would win in the courts of our grand republic, which begun as a haven for those who wanted to escape the intolerance of England, seems nothing short of ignoble and immoral. That the *rights* of the *vicious* lion would be more protected than the *rights* of the *virtuous* lamb seems inconsistent with the humane claims of our grand democracy. And, to further build upon this dissonant irony, representing the Nazis in their desire to harm (or in the very least disrupt the harmony of) the Skokie residents was the ACLU, the American Civil Liberties Union, the national organization whose mission it is to protect and defend the rights of individuals. Thus, the *National Socialist Party of America, et.al vs. The Village of Skokie* became one of the most significant decisions of the *Burger* Court.

This was a town of American citizens, many of whom had seen humanity's inhumanity on its most heinous level. They had seen the starvation of their closest relatives, the execution of family and friends and the horrified look on their comrades' faces as they were marched into the gas chambers of the *Third Reich*. One survivor said, "We smelled the flesh of our families roasting. And for three days after a mass grave was covered with dirt the ground moved; many were still alive though buried."<sup>18</sup> The psychic scars and existential wounds of these battered humans likely found therapeutic value in

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<sup>18</sup> This is the testimony of a holocaust survivor who spoke to my PHI 2600 Ethics class at Broward College.

living among so many other survivors in Skokie who legitimately empathized with their pain. Then came an outside agitator who wanted to march in their hamlet and offer a “hate speech” for apparently no other practical reason other than he had a right to do so, a right that was protected by the first amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America. To be fair to the NSPA, Skokie was not the original focus. Frank Collin and his devotees first tried to march in Marquette Square, which was closer to their headquarters. But the city officials made the necessary insurance indemnification so excessive that it became financially unfeasible for the NSPA to have the march. It would seem that this country, which was founded by British expatriates escaping oppression, would have laws clearly demarcating the oppressed from the oppressor, the victim from the victimizer. It would further seem that an action as obviously egregious as the NSPA would be criminalized and the peace of Skokie would be revered. The contrary was true. The peace of Skokie was vilified and the autonomy of NSPA was sanctioned. Something just *feels* strange about this.

If the court were our only place of redress, the problem would have been less exacerbating. Indeed, calm, rational people of average intelligence would say, “Mmmmm the court got it wrong this time.” This would not be the first time laws and moralities were inconsistent with each other. Such inconsistencies existed in slave laws that envisaged blacks as non-humans or with German laws that decried the harboring and protection of Jews. Indeed, morality and laws can be strange bed-fellows at times, but what is most significant is that many excellent philosophers agreed with the court. They felt that the *defense of free speech* was a higher and more sanguine response than any additional psychic (and psychosomatic) pains that the survivors would endure via the hate

speeches and the Neo-Nazi march. Skokie is a troubling case because in their defense of free speech, most moral philosophers would (certainly by default) defend the NSPA right to free speech and assembly, even though it does not feel right.

Deontologist Immanuel Kant goes as far as saying that freedom of speech is sacrosanct. Freedom of speech, he says,

is the sole palladium of the people's rights. For to want to deny them this freedom is not only tantamount to taking from them any claim to a right with respect to the supreme commander (according to Hobbes), but it's also to withhold from the latter – whose will gives order to the subjects as citizens only by representing the general will of the people – all knowledge of matters that he himself would change if he knew about them and to put him in contradiction with himself....

Skokie is a marvelous counter-example to Kant's argument for free speech, one that highlights a defect for anyone willing to defend an absolutist deontological position. On Kant's view, the victimizer would be exalted and the victim would be disparaged.

Utilitarian John Stuart Mill states his case with even more gravity: "If the arguments of the present chapter are of any validity, there ought to exist the fullest liberty of professing and discussing, as a matter of ethical conviction, any doctrine, however immoral it may be considered." Mill's words, "however immoral it may be considered,"<sup>19</sup> seems to be permission-granting for the Skokie antagonists and for the plethora of hate crime and hate speech victims around the world, but it is especially so in American democracy. Indeed, "however immoral it may be considered," demonstrates a lack of empathy, care and love of neighbor that a sentimentalist and Christian ethicist would find appalling. As if this was not hard and fast enough, Mill further states, "If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the

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<sup>19</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978), 15.

power, would be justified in silencing mankind.”<sup>20</sup> Isaiah Berlin, following Mill, defends freedom of speech in what he calls “negative liberty.” In other words, “what is the area within which the subject—a person or group of persons—is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be without interference by other persons.” Berlin continues, “The wider the area of non-interference, the wider my freedom.”<sup>21</sup> People deserve the right to live as freely as possible, with as little interference as possible, in order that they may be able to pursue their own ends, which typically is happiness. Thus, to increase a person’s freedom, there must be a wide increase in her area. But how wide could that area be before it becomes an infringement upon another’s right to have the same economy of non-interference? Certainly this area of non-interference could not be unlimited, “because if it were, it would entail a state in which all men could boundlessly interfere with all other men and this kind of ‘natural’ freedom would lead to social chaos in which men’s minimum needs would not be satisfied; or else the liberties of the weak would be suppressed by the strong.”<sup>22</sup>

Who speaks for Skokie? Jesus does. Care ethics does. Suppression of the weak by the strong is viral. If no one comes to the aid of this community, or if a theoretical structure is not established by benevolent caring others, Skokie (real and symbolic) will be run over. My hermeneutics was inspired by theologian Howard Thurman who wrote over six decades ago, “Many and varied are the interpretations dealing with the teaching and the life of Jesus of Nazareth. But few of these interpretations deal with what the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid...

<sup>21</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty* ed. Henry Hardy, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 170.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid....



teaching and the life of Jesus have to say to those who stand, at a moment in human history, with their backs against the wall.”<sup>23</sup>

Thus I will state my exegetical and hermeneutical reflections here and give specific attention when it is necessary to clarify points germane to my overall thesis. As an infant I was baptized a Catholic. As an adolescent I was confirmed as an Episcopalian. At sixteen I formally accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and was straightway baptized in the Baptist church. It was at this time that I started taking Jesus and the Bible as my life work. I commenced molding myself into my Christian faith through the Baptist tradition, so upon my high school graduation in 1984 I matriculated at American Baptist College, a small HBCU (Historically Black College and Universities) that prided itself on its mission of producing stellar pastor/preachers, while making no great overtures about the fact that our primary theologians and ethicists were white Southern Baptist conservative scholars. There can be no gainsaying the fact that our primary theological education was predicated on such a high level of evangelical conservatism that the masses of us graduated with a strong bent toward biblical inerrancy and infallibility. In short, women belonged in the home, not the pulpit, homosexuals were hell bound, and abortion was the greatest anathema known to humanity (incidentally, racism was of no major consequence –and (a homosexual was quasi-acceptable if he was a musician). After ABC I attended the Pentecostal Charismatic Oral Roberts University as a graduate student in education. There the exegetical and hermeneutic strategies were the same but the spiritual conclusions were very different. I rejected the Pentecostal mysticism on theological grounds, but remained quite friendly to the glorified discriminatory teachings I encountered at ABC. Indeed, women still needed to know their place and gays and

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.... Thurman, 11.

lesbians were hell bound. Somehow, even with respect to “For God so loved the world...” and “Love your neighbor as yourself...” God found a loophole to dislike reprobates like homosexuals and others who were different: “Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do what ought not to be done.”<sup>24</sup>

Armed with a high level of conservative Christian ethical venom, I started studying for my Master of Theological Studies at Philips Graduate Seminary (Christian Church, Disciples of Christ) where I was introduced to Yale educated (Karl) Barthian scholar and theological ethicist Stuart B. McLean and Vanderbilt educated (Catholic) New Testament scholar, Bernard Brandon Scott. This was my intellectual and ethical turning point. I transferred from PGS to Emory University, Candler School of Theology (a Methodist school) to complete my graduate work. It was there that I encountered the works of Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Ramsey, James Gustafson, Stanley Hauerwas and a host of other thinkers in this genre. My doctoral work at Columbia Theological Seminary (Presbyterian school) was a review and fortification of the previous thinkers. In addition to these I was introduced to thinkers like Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann, symbolic anthropologist Clifford Geertz, and feminist theologians Phyllis Trible, Sallie McFague, Rosemary Radford Reuther and Renita Weems. And of course, my lens were shaped by the liberationist James Cone and J. Deotis Roberts (Black Theology) and Gustavo Gutierrez (Latin American liberation theology). Subsequently, my exegesis was sharpened and my hermeneutical strategy was shaped by a postmodern/postliberal garrison.

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<sup>24</sup> Romans 1:28, NIV

For the first time I felt free to confront the assumptions I inherited from evangelical conservatism, analyze premises using formulae for demythologization as prescribed by Rudolf Bultmann, and engage in hermeneutical work that appreciated the exegesis of those vanguard thinkers who took serious the notion of “other” and “difference” and rejected notions of division. Bultmann (and philosophical theologian Paul Tillich), “regard the Bible as a fallible collection of religious writings on which the early church arbitrarily imposed an authority which evangelical piety has continued to uphold.”<sup>25</sup> Gone were the ontological authority and the “sola scriptura” of the Reformation. In was liberalism and the neo-orthodoxy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Gone was the mythology of, say, Adam and Eve as the first humans, and the narrative’s inconsistent jibe with the scientific world, and in was an anthropological scientific harmony. Read as reality, one has to give an account for only 6,000 years of human history, which seems grossly inadequate in the face of roughly (1) 600,000 to 1.6 million years of evidentiary human years and (2) the presence of other people beyond Adam and Eve, and their male sons, Cain and (deceased) Abel.<sup>26</sup> Demythologizing the biblical text, then, granted theologians and anthropologist access to a “thick description” when correlating culture and religion. A “thick description” as Clifford Geertz uses it, is the capacity to take seriously the structures, complexities, systems, imaginations, semiotics and metaphors that are part of the culture/religion. What exegesis and hermeneutics need to explicate “is the multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed or knotted into another, which is at once strange, irregular and explicit, and which he must contrive

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<sup>25</sup> H. D. McDonald, “Authority of Bible” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Ed. Walter A. Elwell, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 139.

<sup>26</sup> Genesis 4.

somehow first to grasp and then to render."<sup>27</sup> In short, for me, the hermeneutical task cannot and ought not to be a monolith, neither can it be the universal application of cultural metaphors and idioms. The task is far more complex than knee-jerk responses. And our present context (i.e., doing moral philosophy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century) and social location (i.e., gender, religion, race, politics, education, etc.) are subjective elements that are rather compelling for the discourse.

What is this present discourse of which I speak? This takes me to the first point I hinted at earlier: is there good evidence to envision Jesus as a virtue ethicist? The last three decades have witnessed a tremendous upswing on the landscape of virtue ethics, particularly in the realm of care and empathy. Although some of the language was implicit in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Michael Slote and Nel Noddings' ethical investigation of the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century have deepened and protracted the conversation. The semantics of Slote and Noddings are certainly not incongruous to the teachings of Jesus. As a matter of fact, I contend that what we are seeing in the literature is a philosophical expansion quite analogous to Jesus' teachings. The teachings of Jesus, Joseph Butler, David Hume, Adam Smith, Michael Slote, Nel Noddings, et.al, are all rooted in the same phenomenological soil.<sup>28</sup> Semantic variance is not sufficient to deny the obvious comparisons. The central preoccupation of the virtuous person is the development of one's character, as taught by Jesus and those disciples who continued in his tradition for two millennia. There are those who, for good reasons I suspect, accept Jesus more as a deontologist than as a virtue theorist. This group conceives of duty as

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<sup>27</sup> George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 115. Cf. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.

<sup>28</sup> The list fitting this concept is quite long. Other projects could include The Buddha, Confucius, Mencius, Mahavira, Zoroaster and the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, etc.

ontologically prior to virtue. The reason I am virtuous, they say, is because it's my duty. Among these thinkers are early 20<sup>th</sup> century ethicist, H. A. Prichard and W. K. Frankena. Their account, though their efforts are more philosophical ethics than Christian ethics, squares more handily with Immanuel Kant's obligations and duties than what I will be saying forthwith. From the non-religious side, Michael Slote's objection to my thesis is not against Jesus as a paragon of virtue, but on the incredible contrast between universal benevolence and universal love. Hence, with my hermeneutics in place, I venture now to discuss Jesus' central teaching: (agape) love.

### **Agape and Phileo: Is Love a Virtue?**

I began this chapter by saying that Christians are a strange lot. Socio-religious pundits have often contrasted this "strangeness" with the narcissistic "rugged individualism" that marked the Reagan Administration of the eighties. They would pontificate about how Reagan and Reaganomics (with its penchant to favor the rich over the poor) makes for a (strange) bedfellow with the *Christian Right* (or the Moral Majority of Rev. Jerry Falwell), for Christian love should not be for sale as it sometimes appears in politics. Christians are disciples of their teacher—Jesus Christ. Peter instructs, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, *in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*"<sup>29</sup> The primary "mighty act" that Christians are to proclaim is *agape*. They are to proclaim it (*the keryma*) and teach it (*didache*).

Modern Christians derive their moral philosophy from the (love) teachings of a first century Palestinian carpenter by the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Beginning with his

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<sup>29</sup> 1 Peter 2:9

baptism by his cousin John and the pronouncement of his most outspoken disciple, Peter, “Σὺ εἶ ὁ Χριστὸς” (lit. “You are the Christ”), Jesus’ role as a working class citizen of Palestine shifted to that of a Jewish Rabbi. For three years he walked through Palestine teaching and preaching about a possible world (βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ) that had seized the present world. The Kingdom of God (Kingdom of heaven—βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν being the preferred expression when speaking to a Jewish audience) was an idealized world that had love as its central teaching. A person reading an English version about the Kingdom of God and its moral philosophy may erroneously conclude that each time they saw the word “love” that it had the same referent in its original language, but the truth of the matter is that the English word “love” denotes two (perhaps even three) other Greek words in the (*koine* Greek) New Testament. First, one of the most utilized Greek words for love in the New Testament is *phileo* (φιλέω). Even though the etymology of *phileo* is unclear, there is a priority of its non-biblical usage as an adjective (φίλος as in “philosophia”), which is not utilized in the New Testament, and a primacy as a reflexive possessive pronoun that is quite apparent in Homer’s usage of it in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In this way, *phileo* (or to a lesser degree its derivative *philia*) carries the notion of “to like,” “to embrace,” and even “to kiss” (φίλημα). Thus, at this stage, *phileo* can encompass “caressing” and “fondling” as a sort of colloquialization that really means *eros*, which is the non-biblical Greek word that represents the more sexual form of love.

The second word for love, and the most utilized in the New Testament, is *agape* (ἀγαπάω). There are times when *agape* and *phileo* appear to be synonymous, but when this happens it is *phileo* that is an approximation of *agape*, but it is never the reverse. Thus *agape* (and this is so only in the Bible, elsewhere one can expect the reverse to be

true) is the higher-end love, and it is the primary love that Jesus and other New Testament writers are referencing. When the context has to do with familial or friendship relations, *phileo* becomes the preferred term. Consequently, *agape* is “Christian-love” or “God’s unconditional love”; it is the love that Jesus wrenches (particularly from Greek tragedies and comedies) from the ancient world and adapts it to his particular teaching on *self-giving* love.

There are a few questions that fuel my exploration regarding the love of Jesus. First, is love a virtue or can it best be described as something else, like a duty for instance? Second, can the ethical philosophy of Jesus be liberated from its theological constraints making it more accessible to the secular world? Third, is there a modern (secular) virtue theory that squares well with the moral philosophy of Jesus? At this point I think that it would be helpful to state my thesis, and then very quickly render a rather paradoxical proviso. One can make a case that Jesus’ ethical point of departure is a nice fit with any of the three most dominant normative ethical positions. His central teaching (a.k.a the Golden Rule) that believers should “Do unto others as you would have them to do unto you” coheres nicely with the *duty-centered* morality of deontologists. At the same time, a more theocentric avowal drapes the life and ministry of Jesus in a decidedly consequentialist framework with the words, “For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but should have eternal life.”<sup>30</sup> The soteriological notion of Jesus dying so that the “world” might live is, without question, distinctly utilitarian. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the strength of these two arguments is curtailed by a stronger argument: Jesus himself was motivated by a philosophy of love that emerged from his character. Unlike the premise of

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<sup>30</sup> John 3:16

the first two ethical theories, which are driven by the question: What should I do, the virtue ethicist is motivated by the question: What sort of a person should I be? In this regard, virtue theory appears to be ontologically prior to its rule and consequence driven counterparts outlined above. In other words, virtue ethics places a premium on character, nobility, and goodness (and love, from a Christian vantage point) as essential to a person's moral coding. From these virtues, one can derive a deontological premise (as in "It is my Christian duty to love my neighbor"). Or one can say, consequentially, "Society is better off when citizens are benevolent to each other," therefore, benevolence is a utilitarian virtue.<sup>31</sup> In short, for the virtue ethicists *character* precedes and motivates *action*. For the Christian, character as taught by Jesus, enhanced and emboldened with agape-love, has priority over duty and consequences.

Jesus' teaching is a virtue theory<sup>32</sup> and Jesus himself was a virtue ethicist. Virtue theory, as represented by Jesus, has ontological properties particular to Christian ethics. Invariably it seems that a person who buys into the Jesus of the Christian Testament must also buy into the ontological framework undergirding Christian dogmas. A necessary segment of what it means to believe in Jesus and this ontological framework is to embrace his soteriology ("Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again"<sup>33</sup>) and its methodology ("For by *grace* you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life"<sup>34</sup>). This is the

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<sup>31</sup> See Julia Driver, *Uneasy Virtue*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> In the following chapter I will argue that the particular virtue theory that jibes best is agent-based.

<sup>33</sup> John 3:3.

<sup>34</sup> Eph 2:8–10.



proviso I referenced earlier: grace. This ontological property that is quite germane to Christian virtue ethics and its absolute preoccupation with (ἀρετή) love is not at all entailed in secular virtue theory. This missing property in secular virtue theory is necessary for the ἀρετή-ἀγάπη (virtue/Christian-love) that Jesus embraces as being central to his (Kingdom of God) ethical philosophy. As I will show in due course, I do not think that the grace property should cause a problem for virtue ethics or empathic care ethics in terms of actions (i.e., those cared-for) but I am sure that it will pose a philosophical problem if one tries to use the love that Jesus advocates as a constitutive property in constructing a (secular) virtue ethical theory. In other words, the love that Jesus taught is unattainable via secularism but agape-love need not be a consideration because it is approximated with empathy and care (and perhaps even phileo-love). Therefore, I will show how these two (secular) approximations (empathy and care) square nicely with what Jesus' ethical philosophy was endeavoring to instantiate.

I have already demonstrated, and it must be absolutely clear, which *love* I am referencing when I utilize the term “love”; therefore, I will forthwith commence utilizing the Greek terms for love. I have already mentioned that *phileo* approximates *agape* (but not the reverse in the New Testament) so I will use either “agape-love” or “Christian-love” to refer to the love of Jesus; I will use “phileo-love” when the context merits or “agape-phileo” when such a hybrid is necessary. But let me set aside *eros-love* from this discussion altogether.<sup>35</sup>

To question the veridicality of love as a virtue is not necessarily an offbeat point of departure, but there is an inherent discomfort when one tries to amalgamate the

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<sup>35</sup> Plato's *Symposium* clearly demonstrates the unnecessary minefield that I would have to navigate if I were to try to show the virtue of *eros-love*, not to mention that *eros-love* is never the love instantiated by Jesus in any of his love talks.

theological world with the philosophical one. It would be prudent, it seems to me, to address an obvious prior question to our present discussion, namely, what is virtue? A quick definition of virtue is that it is a character trait of positive value. So if a person has a morally desirable or admirable quality like kindness, loyalty or patience, we tend to say, in our modern conception of virtue, that such a person is virtuous—even if it is only in that particular quality. The Greek *arête* (ἀρετή) is absent from the *Septuagint*<sup>36</sup> and very sparingly utilized in the New Testament. Jesus himself never referred to ἀρετή,<sup>37</sup> be it Aristotelian ἀρετή or any other, although there were accessible teachings on the subject given the Hellenistic culture's dominance in the Palestinian region. Almost four centuries earlier Plato and Aristotle had already canonized the cardinal virtues of *temperance*, *justice*, *wisdom*, and *courage*, but they said nothing of agape-love or phileo-love as virtues. They spoke only of those things that virtue *hinges* upon. For Plato and Aristotle, the virtuous person is he who embraces these four noble ideals and the corollaries that flow from them. A person lacking in virtue is he who does the opposite of virtue, namely vice. Taken at face, value this notion of a virtue-vice dichotomy is pretty straightforward and simple. Thus the opposite of justice is venality (or oppression); the opposite of wisdom is folly; the opposite of courage is cowardice; and the opposite of temperance is greed. Aristotle goes further by demonstrating the possibility (and plausibility) of there being more than one vice that is the opposite of a particular virtue. Thus, he says, virtue is the means between two extremes. For example, cowardice is the opposite of courage, but it can be polarized with impulsiveness (or recklessness), which is also imprudent.

Therefore, courage is betwixt the two vices (and thus a virtue) of cowardice and

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<sup>36</sup> Denoted by the Roman symbols “LXX,” it refers to the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible

<sup>37</sup> There is an admitted tension here. Jesus did not speak Greek; he spoke Aramaic. Whether or not he uses the Aramaic variant of the term, leaving his interpreters to decipher what he was referring to is unknown.

impulsiveness. These cardinal virtues are not irreligious, but they do not entail love (*agape-phileo*) as a contingent property. They are simply human values that make for a good person and human flourishing. Thus if *agape* is an ἀρετή, it is not so because of any espousal generated by the most popular of the ancient philosophers, and Plato fails to mention it anywhere.

From the outset this seems rather strange. Why would not “love” (in any form, with the possible exception of *eros*) be a constitutive property in the initial corpus of the cardinal virtues? Certainly its good making features are inarguable? Is it possible that love can be an agent of harm rather than an agent of benevolence? Is there any way in which love can be seen as a form of cowardice (thus weakness) rather than courage (and thus strength)? A primary consideration, one that I alluded to earlier, is that Plato and Aristotle lived three centuries before Jesus, and *circa* 4 centuries after Homer. Although Homer used *agape* and *phileo* synonymously, Jesus did not. Plato and Aristotle did not use *agape* at all, and *phileo* was in reference, for the most part, to friendship. Therefore, it is quite impossible to give a Platonic or Aristotelian account of Jesus’ “Love your enemies” without leaving oneself open to much skepticism. But one can venture a conjecture in the following way, taking *phileo* to be a secular approximation (at its best) of *agape*, one can argue that the notion of loving (i.e., befriending) the man who has raped your daughter is, perhaps, (or can be interpreted as being) a tremendous alienation of your daughter’s needs, affection, and care. Would not a daughter feel slighted (to say the least) by her parent’s diligence in forgiving (which would be more acceptable on a Christian paradigm) then befriending her violator? Love of enemy on this account may be constructive for the rapist but destructive to the raped.

Paul Ramsay, on his journey toward fleshing out “the meaning of Christian love,” confronts the subliminal manner in which Christian-love can be misconstrued in favor of a narcissistic appendage. He first quotes Erich Fromm as he gives a crafty (re)interpretation of Jesus’ most fundamental (love) teaching: “if it is a virtue to love my neighbor as a human being, it must be a virtue—and not a vice—to love myself since I am a human being too. There is no concept of man of which I myself am not included.”<sup>38</sup> Ramsey contends that Fromm takes Jesus’ aim too far into “a doctrine of the infinite, inherent value of human personality in general.” He goes on to say, “such a doctrine would logically lead to subtracting from obligation as much as the just claims of self require.”<sup>39</sup> If the trajectory is the neighbor, and an obligation to the neighbor, it is hard to see how Fromm’s objection logically coheres with the teachings of Jesus. The trajectory is not to “love my neighbor as a human being,” for I cannot know all human beings, neither is it within my scope to love all human beings. The charge that Jesus puts forth is to “love your neighbor as yourself.” This does not seem to be an impossible task (though it is, without question, a potentially difficult one<sup>40</sup>).

Ramsay lifts another rather important point, “Never is it said that ‘neighbor’ includes ‘enemy’ among those who ought to be loved because they are human beings, but rather that love for another *for his own sake*. Neighborly love, the Christian sense, discovers the neighbor in every [hu]man *it meets and as such has never yet met a friend or an enemy*” (italics mine).<sup>41</sup> It is upon this premise that the argument for *agape-love* is

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<sup>38</sup> Paul Ramsay, *Basic Christian Ethics*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1950), 94.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid...

<sup>40</sup> This conversation will resurface in chapters three and four. Slote believes that the notion of universal love and/or impartial love of neighbor is too high a demand for humans. What God and Jesus is demanding of us is (if not impossible) a concept that will leave us frustrated.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid... The poignant implications for care should be quite evident here. But it should be noted that this is care without reciprocity.

constructed (which, of course, was a point of view birthed three centuries after Plato and Aristotle). And it is here that we can begin seeing how and why it is that *agape-love* is in fact a virtue. Ramsey is on target when he says, “Properly understood in the same sense, loving one’s enemy is no more difficult than loving one’s friend or the man next door with Christian love.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, love of enemy is not a vacuous term. Love of enemy is the conclusion of an argument, not a premise. It is a valid hypothetical syllogism

1. If X is a Christian, X should receive a proper moral education.
2. If X receives a proper moral education, X will inhabit the love teachings of Jesus (including viewing enemies as friends).  
Therefore, If X is a Christian, X will inhabit the love teachings of Jesus (including viewing enemies as friends).

From the onset, in Jesus’ *Beatitudes* he says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” Restated, “The pure in heart will see God.” This verse implies that if someone’s heart is pure, she will see God *when she sees*. The Christian agent must be able to see “God” in everyone, giving that everyone was “created in the image and likeness of God.”<sup>43</sup> Seeing God does not imply a physical thing; it implies a metaphysical thing—a spiritual thing. Neither does it imply anything anthropomorphic, as in Moses and the burning bush or angels, etc. Implied is the following: the Hebrew transliteration for English “breath” or “breathe”(also “wind” and “air”) is *ruach* or *naphesh*. The Greek transliteration of the same two terms is *pneumatōs* (where we get the English word “pneumatic,” as in an air tool). These are the same Hebrew and Greek words that give us the English word “spirit.” So the metaphysics behind “God breathed [spirit] into the nostrils of man [lit, “Adamah” (which means “earth”) where we get “Adam”] the breath

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid..., 96.

<sup>43</sup> Genesis 1:26-27.

[spirit] of life and man [Adam] became a living soul”<sup>44</sup> is that God placed God’s essence into Adam and he lived, thus the Latin, *Imago Dei*. Each breathing human has God’s spirit, thus in loving one’s neighbor (even enemy neighbor or neighbor around the world) one is loving God. In loving God, one is loving neighbor. This is foundational to Western religious metaphysics,<sup>45</sup> but Jesus alone makes this distinction clear.

Subsequently, while Fromm’s conception and interpretation of Jesus’ love paradigm lends to a secular concept of *self-regarding*, Ramsey’s argument fits more squarely with the *other-regarding*, disinterested love that Jesus was advocating in his (Kingdom of God) moral philosophy. Thus objecting to Fromm’s refutation needs no more sophisticated an argument that this, primarily because Fromm is far from a clear understanding of Jesus’ moral philosophy. Objecting to Fromm is in essence objecting to a poor hermeneutic of a grand idea. This is not to say that the self/other-regarding dichotomy has been clearly developed, for I’ve said relatively nothing regarding this as yet. For the time being it seems like using narcissism as one’s primary grounds for a refutation of Jesus’ moral philosophy is question begging. It is true that Fromm can find an advocate in Aristotle, for Aristotle tends to lean in a similar fashion:

Of the good man it is true likewise that he does many things for the sake of his friends, and his country, even to the extent of dying for them, if need be: for money and honors, and, in short, all the good things which others fight for, he will throw away while eager to secure to himself the *καλον* [the beauty and nobility of the deed]... And this is perhaps that which befall men who die for their country and friends; they choose great glory for themselves: and they will lavish their own money that their friends may receive more, for hereby the friend gets the money but the man himself gets the *καλον*; so, in fact, he gives himself the greater good. It is the same with honors and offices; all things he will give up to his friend, because this reflects honor and praise on himself.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Genesis 2:7

<sup>45</sup> This is particularly true for Judaism, Christianity and Islam since they are all rooted in the ancient Judaism.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 97. Quoted from Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1169a (Everyman edition).

Aristotle calls this person a “self-lover”<sup>47</sup> (lit., σεαυτοῦ-φιλέω) in the same way that Fromm advocates, but this fails as a plausible objection to the agape-love (or ἀρετή-ἀγαπά) that Jesus is requiring in his (Kingdom of God) moral philosophy. Jesus is interested in a *disinterested* neighbor-love that is wholly other-regarding. What he is not interested in is a proviso or a footnote that encourages requital. Thus we are well on our way to comprehending how caring for others and caring relationships was anticipated by Jesus.

It seems, of course, that what Jesus is requiring in his moral philosophy is very difficult to attain without some penchant for self. How could one ever know that her motivations were totally selfless, totally other-regarding, totally ἀρετή-ἀγαπά? Soren Kierkegaard, as a philosophical theologian and a Christian, was certainly unwilling to go as far as Aristotle and Fromm, but he does show how difficult Jesus’ premise would be if he were trying to build his moral philosophy on phileo-love rather than agape-love. Kierkegaard argues, “If we wish to assure ourselves that love is entirely disinterested, we must remove every possibility of requital. But this is exactly what happens with respect to the dead.”<sup>48</sup> This extreme point demonstrates the difficulty in being disinterested, impartial, and without prejudice. Take the oft-cited case of the Vietnam soldier who jumps on a grenade to save his platoon. Or the more recent case of the pedestrian in a New York subway who selflessly jumped on the train track to save a man who was in the throes of an epileptic seizure. The hero grabbed the convulsing man and held him closely and tightly as the train passed over them. The mayor of the city named the day in his

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<sup>47</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1999), 146-7.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, Ramsey, 98.

honor, Donald Trump gave him a \$10,000 gift, and Disney World presented him with a free vacation package for himself and his two daughters (who, incidentally, were on the platform when their father committed this act of heroism). I think that we can safely say that this man did not commit this act of bravery for a trip to Disney World—which is a piece of good fortune that he had no idea would come, neither for a \$10,000 reward that was not suggested prior to his heroic act. Both of these heroes (the soldier and the man in the subway) can be said to have acted impartially, but in both cases (after the fact) each could have said something like, “If I had the time to think about it, I probably would not have done it. I reacted instinctively.” Thus, it seems like the only way to get at what Jesus is proposing with his concept of an agape-love (or ἀρετή-ἀγάπα, or other-regarding love) that is impartial or not desirous of repayment is for the neighbor to be dead (in Kierkegaardian language) or if one is able to act in such a way that she does not have time to think. But it seems as if these two possibilities are flimsy notions upon which to hinge a moral philosophy. Thus the virtue of agape-love (or ἀρετή-ἀγάπα) seems to be an unattainable virtue.

The difficulty of Jesus’ premise is further exacerbated when Fromm is paired with Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche avers, “Your neighbor-love is your bad love for yourselves. Ye flee unto your neighbor from yourselves and would fain make a virtue thereof! But I fathom your ‘unselfishness’... You cannot stand yourself and you do not love yourself sufficiently.”<sup>49</sup> His preoccupation with self-regarding love as strength and other-regarding love as weakness is not derived from the agape-love that Jesus advocates. It is, however, a congratulatory proposition for Nietzsche. Nietzsche’s famous dictum, that the Hebrew Jesus “died too early; he himself would have disavowed his doctrine had

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 104. See also, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), 86.



he attained to my age!”<sup>50</sup> demonstrates his complete disfavor with (the weak premise of) other-regarding love. For Fromm and Nietzsche, other-regarding love is not only weak—it is vice. It is not difficult to see how one can come to this conclusion if one understands the other-regarding love of Jesus to be derived from phileo-love rather than agape-love. For example, from 1955 to 1968 Martin Luther King, Jr. was an advocate of Jesus’ moral philosophy that individuals should “ἀγαπήτε τοὺς ἐχθροὺς” (lit. agape-love your enemies). This system of moral protest, which he termed (and borrowed in part from Mahatma Gandhi) “non-violent direct-action, passive resistance” was founded on a principle that if an oppressed person loved her enemy and turned her other cheek once struck, sooner or later the enemy would be moved by an inner virtue (or conscience, to use Bishop Butler’s designation) that would sway him toward his victim. Many people (not the least vocal of which was Malcolm X) thought that this method was absurd. They saw it as a sign of weakness to love those who hated you, particularly if those people were committing heinous acts against you and your family. King, on the other hand, was quick to point out that Jesus’ crucifixion was not an act of absurdity—it was an act of heroism and meekness. Meekness, contrary to the definition of the masses, is not simple modesty or timidity; meekness is power under control. Thus the agape-love strategy of the Civil Rights Movement was not a sign of weakness, modesty, or timidity; it was power under control. In this regard, one can see how phileo-love may be seen as weakness *qua* the arguments of Fromm and Nietzsche (and perhaps even Malcolm X), but there is a philosophical argument that should suffice in showing the difference between the two.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 98-99.

The following is an account of how one proposition can render a radically different scenario based upon one's reading of it. Consider the following (English) proposition: *Christian-love commands that its disciples should love their neighbors as themselves*. There are at least two ways I can view this proposition: one way takes for granted the term "love" as being accessible or attainable; a second way puts a premium on the Greek terms from which "love" is derived. What the English reader reads is different from what the text actually intends. Indeed this may be less of a philosophical point and more of a grammatical-hermeneutical point, but it is sufficient to say that Jesus was not instantiating a moral philosophy based upon friendship, which is what phileo-love describes. Rather, he was furthering a moral philosophy based upon agape-love. Agape-love is a higher order love that entails a greater commitment on the part of the agent. Though it is commonplace with the Christian, it is not as accessible or attainable as one might imagine (but I will get to this point later). As we have already seen, phileo-love is a steep mountain to climb, for I can imagine cases (as did Fromm and Nietzsche) where love (phileo) is either a weakening of an agent or where it was encumbered with self-regarding constraints. An example is a person who does an obvious kind act for her friend or neighbor, but secretly (consciously or unconsciously) she is desirous of requital. It seems plausible to suggest that phileo-love of this sort is always burdened by the possibility of requital (unless, of course, the recipient is dead as Kierkegaard suggests). Friends do good and unselfish acts for each other on a regular basis, but it seems like lurking somewhere in the background is the unspoken desire for repayment. If this is not the case why else would we be upset when our best friend fails to offer a loan when we are in dire need? Why would the pregnant mother feel slighted when her best friend fails

to attend her baby shower? Thus, we must say that phileo-love is self-regarding and more difficult to comprehend as a virtue. Jesus himself said, *“If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?”* It should be clear, then, that the love that Jesus was advocating as a part of his (Kingdom of God) moral philosophy is not phileo-love with its tendency towards self. A love that has the property of self (as its object) is not what Jesus was insisting upon. Thus we turn now to a philosophical hermeneutic that is a closer account of what Jesus was commanding. This view of love is closer to what a virtuous love would look like. This may sound simple, but it is not all simple. Phileo-love may at times look like agape-love; it can approximate it very similarly. But at the same time it is very different.

### **Can the moral philosophy of Jesus be liberated it from its theological constraints?**

Imagine a man on an airplane sitting beside you as he gazes forward, or out the window, totally oblivious to his surroundings. Add to this, there are two rowdy kids that are roaming the airplane, frustrating the other passengers—and worse, they are his kids! For a reason beyond what you can imagine he does not seem to care—he wins the poor-parent-of-the-year award (at least in your mind, not to mention the minds of many of the other passengers and flight attendants). As you deplane you are already marking this as the most frustrating flight you have ever endured. This is the “snapshot” you take with you.

Anyone gazing at this “snapshot” may say something like, “This father has no idea what it means to be a good parent or, at the very least, a disciplinarian parent. His

children have a poor guide for a father.” Now let us say that after you have deplaned the man looks around, alerts himself to what is happening, calls his children to order, then apologizes with the following words, “I beg your pardon; were my children disruptive on the plane? They probably were—weren’t they? I am so sorry. You see, we were on our family vacation and my wife had an allergic reaction to something she ate. She passed away. She is in the cargo area below—we are flying her home for her funeral. I am so sorry if my children were disruptive. I am still in a state of shock since it has only been a couple of days. I don’t know how to help them understand that Mommy is no longer coming home.” What is different between the “snapshot” that is in your memory before and the new one after more information was added? Your interpretation is different. It appears that the properties that make up the propositional content of this story would be the same both before and after. Everything that happened on the plane is as they were. They did occur just as you remembered: the children were acting up and the father was failing to pay attention. Thus you judged that he was a poor parent. Your new information does not change the snapshot as much as it gives a different interpretation to the event. The propositional content remains the same; the properties and predicates that make up the propositional content remain the same. The interpretation gives a different value (or propositional attitude) to the whole affair. Thus nothing changes but the interpretation and the resultant attitude (and these are both private to you the agent).

In this regard one can say that the interpretation that a secular thinker would render regarding Jesus’ moral (love) philosophy is one that entails a certain propositional content that is derived from certain properties and predicates, namely, you are to “love your neighbor as yourself” and “love your enemies.” If one abandons the phileo-love of

the secular philosopher and its entanglement with self-regarding, we will see more clearly that Jesus was advocating a different kind of love—one that is much more difficult to bring forth—one that makes for a more virtuous individual. He is advocating an agape-love that is wholly preoccupied with an other-regarding conception of love. Other-regarding is a necessary property of agape-love, while it is only an incidental property of phileo-love. So while the latter approximates the former in its visible propositional content, there is a different interpretation that renders a possibly unattainable propositional attitude. Let me say that in a clearer way: the propositional content that is derived from the properties and predicates that Jesus' Christian-love entails are unattainable unless one is willing *to accept all of the properties*. The prepositional phrase "to accept all of the properties" is not added for effect. It is constitutive to what Jesus is advocating in his account of (agape) love in his moral philosophy. In order to get to Jesus' (other-regarding) impartial love, one must be a part of a triangulation rather than a dichotomy. Whereas phileo-love is dichotomous (self/neighbor), agape-love is trichotomous (self/God/neighbor). This leads to a triangulation that is deeply problematic for the secular world due to the secular exclusion of God. Keep in mind that I am referring to the metaphysics of love here. Recall that phileo-love can approximate agape-love in word and deed. For example, a homeless man being cared for by an atheist or theist would not know (neither would he care) about the metaphysics/metaethics (or the motivations). If he cared at all about these matters, it would only be with respect to the warmth he is feeling. His approval of the demonstrated empathy and care would be the same to each (genuinely) "caring" agent. Thus, what is problematic has more to do with the metaethical teasing out of the theological phenomena, which is a phenomenology

rooted in faith more than fact. I submit that the theologized agape-love does no more for the “cared-for” than that of the virtue ethical sentimentalist agent of empathic care. They are both the same normatively and existentially, though constructed differently essentially, metaethically and phenomenologically. In what follows I will give a clearer account of the triangulation.

Paul believed that agape-love was in fact a virtue<sup>51</sup> and, unlike the ancient philosophers, it was one of the theological virtues that he himself placed in a cluster: “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” Elsewhere he states, “And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”<sup>52</sup> So far it seems as though there is nothing unattainable about ἀρετή-ἀγάπη; furthermore, it seems as attainable as any of the cardinal virtues. Through habituation, faith, hope and love are just as attainable (thus far) as justice, temperance, courage, or wisdom. And this very well may be true, but the triangulation has not yet been applied. Ramsey quotes Augustine, who was himself steeped in the virtue theory of Plato: “But as the divine Master inculcates two precepts—the love of God and the love of or neighbor—and as in these precepts a man finds three things he has to love—God, himself, and his neighbor—and that he who loves God loves himself...”<sup>53</sup> Ramsey says something similar, “If Christian love is a kind of acquisition desire, then Augustine concludes quite properly that nothing human or mundane, e.g., the neighbor, can be the final object of Christian love. The eternal good, or God alone is an adequate object for craving love; only he should be ‘enjoyed’ or ‘rested in with satisfaction for his own

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<sup>51</sup> 1 Cor. 13:13, NIV

<sup>52</sup> Colossians 3:14, NIV

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., Ramsey, 122.

sake.”<sup>54</sup> Quite simply, the latter, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*” cannot be taken in isolation from the former “*you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.*” Together they are the property of ἀρετή-ἀγάπη. Agape-love *qua* Jesus Kingdom of God moral philosophy cannot be circumscribed such that the triangulation is diminished in any way. Christian love puts a premium on God’s relationship to the whole account. God is not an incidental property; God is a constitutive property in the triangulation that would make agape-love possible. The Christian believes that God exists and creates the motivation for good will, virtue, etc. For example, a person may believe that he lacks the will, inclination, character or sobriety to perform acts of kindness, benevolence, love or generosity. At the same time he is aware of a history or convention that teaches the possibility of altruism and supererogation if he buys into the idea. Certainly, that there are several billion other participants in this “buy in,” adherents who give testimony to the positive gains, do not hurt at all. Phil Jackson, former coach of the Chicago Bulls (led by Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen) and the Los Angeles Lakers (led by Shaquille O’Neal and Kobe Bryant), won 11 championships with teams who had a losing record even though they had tremendous superstars on the roster. Jackson required each player on the team to buy-in to his “triangle offense” and team philosophy. Even pundits who criticized his system had to say, in the end, that they would love to play for Jackson. He had an unexplainable mystique that resulted in enormous wins and championships.

Many believers see the Jackson wins as analogous to God and God’s winning record with God’s adherents. Following God’s plan, through faith, may garner criticisms of irrationality, but not if one thinks in terms of following a convention, a team that has

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 122.

an agenda. In this case the agenda is love. I may not be able to prove, say, that numbers exists, but I can readily use 1,2,3,4, etc. with everyone who buys into the convention. I am a Democrat because I believe that the social policies that the party strives to uphold are more consistent with the way I think and feel about matters than most of what their counterparts suggest. This does not mean that I am correct, but it does mean that I am not alone in that I am consistent with all of those who have bought into the Democratic convention. God cannot be proven to exist, and thus it goes without saying that there can be no authentic or legitimate causal link between God and the Bible, but there certainly does exist a convention that holds love as a premium. As Justice Potter Stewart of the Burger Court famously said, "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description ["hard-core pornography"]; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But *I know it when I see it*, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that. [Emphasis added.]<sup>55</sup> So, in this regard, Christians cannot prove that their love triangulation exists, because they cannot prove that God exists, but they can prove that there is a convention preoccupied with love...and they know it when they see it.

Perhaps a Kripkean account of properties can be helpful here. Is there a possible world in which agape-love (other-regarding, love of neighbor), of the kind commanded by Jesus, can be a different kind of love, say an approximation of phileo-love, lacking the triangulation? Saul Kripke says the following about properties, "whether an object has the same property in all possible worlds depends not just on the object itself, but on how

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<sup>55</sup> Justice Potter Stewart, concurring opinion in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* 378 U.S. 184 (1964), regarding possible obscenity in *The Lovers*.



it is described.”<sup>56</sup> If an object is described with necessary condition, then that object must be the same object in all possible worlds, particularly if the *rigid designators* are accurately described.<sup>57</sup> This is similar to the law of identity which says that any object identical to itself must have all of the properties in common. If A is identical to B and B is identical to A, then B and A must have identical properties. So, is there a *rigid designator* (or necessary condition) of agape-love such that it is both distinguishable from phileo-love and identifiable as the particular moral philosophy of Jesus in all possible worlds? Yes. There is a property or rigid designator that is absent from phileo-love but necessary for agape-love: this property is *grace*. Grace is part of the Christian corpus. Grace is the belief that God offers something to believers that metaphysically moves them from one state of mind to another—it is part of the faith language.

Beginning with the incarnation John says, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of *grace* and truth.”<sup>58</sup> The first indication of this grace concept says very little of what it entails. That Jesus was full of grace is (at least initially) of little import for the believer (or for any human). Then we read, “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”<sup>59</sup> Immediately a bifurcation between the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Testament has been formed. For the first time we are seeing not only a religious shift from Judaism to Christianity, but we are shifting our hermeneutical lens from a more deontological absolutism to a *prima facie* deontology and agent-based virtue ethics. The word “grace” is mentioned 122 times in the Bible and only

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<sup>56</sup> Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 40-1.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. 48.

<sup>58</sup> John 1:14

<sup>59</sup> v.16. I will take up this law/grace (virtue) concept in the next chapter.

about a dozen of those times it is appertaining to the Hebrew Bible, and the majority of those times it “adorn” or “decorate” or “Beautify” as in, “They are a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck.”<sup>60</sup> When used in the Christian Testament, “grace” is part of a package deal. It is part of God’s love, benevolence and leniency toward a wayward humanity, regardless of how malevolent they are. God’s imputation of grace is the added ummph that a Christian appeals to in order to demonstrate love to neighbor and enemy. The notion that God inclined God-self toward a malignant humanity, and imparted love and forgiveness, while making that love and forgiveness a virtuous character trait, leaves the Christian humble enough to be other-regarding. Paul shapes the grace package in the following way, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world.”<sup>61</sup> If I can remember that I was metaphorically dead, and so was (and perhaps is) my neighbor and my enemy, I will be more inclined to be virtuous toward them. I am not better than my neighbor; I cannot be partialistic when I have the potential to be just as hideous. Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa said, “We each have a tremendous capacity for good, and we each have a tremendous capacity for evil.”<sup>62</sup> It is because of this enlightened Christian ethical response that President Nelson Mandela of South Africa appointed the Archbishop, the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize winner, to lead the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This gentle man has demonstrated in his living what Jesus was advocating. Certainly he was awarded several grand accolades, among them the Albert Schweitzer Prize for Humanitarianism in 1986; the Pacem in Terris Award in

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<sup>60</sup> Poverbs 1:9

<sup>61</sup> Ephesians 2:1-2b.

<sup>62</sup> Desmond Tutu, *God Has A Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*. (New York: Doubleday, 2004), back cover.

1987; the Sydney Peace Prize in 1999; the Gandhi Peace Prize in 2007; and the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2009, but these accolades came as he demonstrated the grace-love amalgam in defense of human rights. He uses his high profile to campaign for the oppressed. He has campaigned to fight AIDS, tuberculosis, poverty, racism, sexism, the imprisonment of Chelsea Manning, homophobia and transphobia.<sup>63</sup> On the matter of grace Paul, conclusively states, “For by *grace* you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, *which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*”<sup>64</sup> (emphasis added). Thus the grace factor for the Christian is unnegotiable; it is *a way of life*. This extends to every part of the Christian rubric: love, compassion, mercy, empathy and care. It is foundational to Christian virtue.

Grace is the rigid designator that the student of Jesus’ Kingdom of God moral philosophy is unwilling to give up—and not just cognitively unwilling, but ontologically *unable* to surrender. Well, perhaps, one can give a slightly different utterance that would alter the interpretation in such a way that the good-making features (that is, the accessibility and attainability) of agape-love can be grasped by others (or at least under the name of phileo-love without having to deal with the triangulation). Someone might say, “There is a possible world in which I *might* be able to have an agape-love for my neighbor” versus the more constraining “there is a possible world in which I *would* be able to have an agape-love for my neighbor.”<sup>65</sup> Certainly this would allow for an obfuscation of the rigid designation, which would actually lead to a circumvention of it as

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<sup>63</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desmond\\_Tutu](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desmond_Tutu)

<sup>64</sup> Ephesians 2:8-10, NRSV.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid... cf. fn 15.

well. But there is still an objection that is not so easy to overcome. Paul says, “And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”<sup>66</sup>

It is here that philosophy has collided with theology such that an impasse has occurred. Philosophy cannot utilize theological names and idioms, namely, agape-love; and theology cannot surrender its grace premise, namely the triangulation that includes God. I think what we have here is a conclusion not unlike that of Colin McGinn’s famed article, “Can we solve the mind-body problem.”<sup>67</sup> McGinn suggests in his essay that the solution to the problem is that it cannot be solved. In other words, human beings lack the faculty (and it is likely that they will never have it) to understand what mental-states are doing on a certain level. Mental-states will always be at least one step ahead of our best work. It stands above us looking down at our attempts, but it knows that we cannot get to it because it is too high—by definition. It is like a human being trying to hear the high frequency dog-whistle. Humans are simply not hardwired to hear frequencies on so high a level. And there is nothing we can do about it. If we were to give this computer that I am presently writing on to a South Pacific tribe that has never seen such an object, do not have electricity, nor are aware of what electricity is, they will never understand the tremendous capacity of this computer — neither would they have too. They lack the faculty or capacity to engage this technological device. Consequently, the secular world can neither access grace, nor are they interested in it. The nature of grace is inconceivable and incomprehensible to those lacking it. A secularist may rightly ask, “Why should I even seek grace? Would not a phileo-love (which tends to approximate agape-love)

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<sup>66</sup> Rom. 5:5.

<sup>67</sup> Colin McGinn, “Can we solve the mind-body problem?” in *Mind*, July 1989, (349-266).

enhanced by empathy and care suffice?” I think so. Grace is irrelevant to the secularist and the only way to render grace relevant is to access it, which would make one a believer, thus shifting to agape-love as a priority. But given the dogmatic union between agape-love and grace, which the Christian sees as germane to his virtue ethical vernacular, this love remains outside the explanatory (and prescriptive) reach of the secularist, though well within his descriptive grasp. Again, one only needs to look as far as the altruistic (or any supererogatory) work of either the Christian virtuous person or any virtuous non-Christian person and (unless there is mention of Jesus) the striking resemblance will be obvious. Indeed, the discordance between empathy and care Christianized with agape-love and empathy and care accentuated by phileo-love (or sentimentalism more generally) is negligible. What Christian virtue ethics call “other-regarding” or “Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart,”<sup>68</sup> secular care ethics similarly proclaims, natural caring is “that relation in which we respond as one-caring out of love or natural inclination.”<sup>69</sup>

Summarily, the family resemblance between the two is profound. For example,<sup>70</sup> Hebrew Bible writers have long since identified justice as being a constitutive part of a liberation triad: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”<sup>71</sup> And as justice is the central ethical theme in the Hebrew Bible, love is the central ethical theme of the Christian Testament. The word “agape-love” is not a Hebrew Bible concept;

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<sup>68</sup> 1 Peter 1:22

<sup>69</sup> Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>70</sup> Much shall be said about this in a subsequent chapter on moral education and justice.

<sup>71</sup> Micah 6:8

and the word “justice” is used very sparingly, usually either in quotations of the Hebrew Bible or are concepts in a narrative, like say in a parable, but never as a major ethical human concern. That distinction is wholly Hebrew Bible. Where the family relationship is most robust is when we see justice as a necessary feature of agape-love of neighbor. As an out flow of the virtue ethic paradigm, which includes the triangulation of care and empathy, this point does not go unnoticed by Virginia Held: “Leading virtue theorist Michael Slote argues extensively for the position that caring is the primary virtue and that a morality based on the motive of caring can offer a general account of right and wrong action and political justice.”<sup>72</sup> For the Christian, the family resemblance continues. Secular care (which is similar in scope to the triangulation of the Christian) and Christian ethics acknowledge and are beholden to the care lens through which justice must be seen and appropriated.

In closing, Jesus’ Kingdom of God moral philosophy is contingent upon a theistic construct in which love of neighbor is triangulated with love of God. Agape-love is imputed through salvation and belief in Jesus Christ, which makes the recipient of God’s grace (favor) other-regarding in a totally impartial way. It is unattainable by simply shifting one’s interpretation of it. Having said this, I think that an important question is this: is there a way that one can take a snapshot of Christian-love and create an other-regarding scenario that looks and act very similar? I think so. Earlier I said that phileo-love can approximate agape-love, but not the other way around, which places agape-love of the sort that Jesus was advocating in a particular arena. I think that there are two conceptions of modern virtue ethics that can be amalgamated with phileo-love such that

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<sup>72</sup> Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care*, (New York: Oxford Press, 2006), 19. Cf. Michael Slote, *Morals From Motives*, (New York: Oxford Press, 2001).

its hybrid looks very familiar to what Jesus was advocating. I will briefly sketch these two as I conclude, examining them in more detail in the next chapter. They are the *ethics of care* and *moral sentimentalism*.

### **Modern Virtue Theories That Square Well With Jesus**

Both the ethics of care and moral sentimentalism (re-surfaced) developed as an objection to the masculinist way in which ethics was being done in the twentieth century. I think that it would be fair to say that these two moral theories are siblings (furthermore, at times they look like identical twins—same yet different), both (arguably) being children of (or have strong ties to) virtue ethics. They are both willing to reject the notion that abstractions and universals should be the premium in moral theorizing. In this regard they are willing to reject the subsequent notion that rationality should be the basis of moral theorizing. The rightness and wrongness of an action should not be wholly dependent upon reason; rather, moral actions lean more toward *care* (and the emotions entailed therein) and feelings (according to moral sentimentalism). But before I say any more about the theories themselves, let me give a very terse sketch of how these two ethical theories developed over the last two to three decades and how they may be related to virtue ethics.

Elizabeth Anscombe's 1958 essay entitled, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, was a call to revisit moral philosophical theories' preoccupation with moral "obligations" and "rules." Consequentialism is defined as (roughly) the right action is that which would bring about the best consequences over all, even when the consequences are not good for the agent (I am assuming here that *ethical egoism* is not in view). Under this theory there

is a call to sacrifice for the good of the many; in short, this other-regarding (rule-regarding) moral theory seems to be going too far into sacrifice. Per deontology or Kantianism, commitment to duty and promise keeping can seem pretty absurd at times. Shelly Kagan, *Limits of Morality*, emphasizes that deontology can only go so far before it becomes absurd. When (absolutist) deontology is pushed to the extreme it necessarily collapses into utilitarianism—which is the most notable child of consequentialism. For example, we are likely to say that it is (motivated intuitively by a kind of Kantian rationalism) wrong to, say, harvest Ned’s body parts in order to distribute them to a family of five. That would be pejorative to Ned, but at the same time if we increase the threshold such that killing Ned would save thousands or millions of people, it seems immoral not to do so. Kantian’s “obligations” seems more like *rule-worship* than intuition and commonsense. Anscombe’s concern was that moral philosophy had ventured so far into rules that it missed the importance of virtuous character traits were emphasized by the ancient philosophers, especially Aristotle. Hence, her paper was a clarion call for the revitalization of and re-accentuation of the virtues. Motives matter in moral philosophy. Good character and excellence traits are more important than rigid and inflexible rules.

Given this emerging virtue milieu (beginning with the door that Anscombe (re) opened), one can see how Carol Gilligan’s text, *In a Different Voice*, would have an audience some 25 years after Anscombe. Gilligan took exception to the androcentric moral psychology of her teacher, Lawrence Kohlberg, and set out to uncover whether or not men and women thought about morality differently. What she discovered was that behaviorally men are more prone to autonomy, rationality and disconnection (or



separation). Women, on the other hand, are more predisposed to care, emotions and connection (or relationships). What was most intriguing is that the very impulses that women thought to be natural were the same ones that the philosophers (particularly Kantian based, rationalistic philosophers) rejected as impractical and non-essential. Indeed, if care is in fact a good character trait—i.e., a good virtue to have for human flourishing, then certainly it would fulfill (at least part of) what it means to be a virtuous person. Virginia Held has demonstrated how central *care* is to the life of the human being.<sup>73</sup> Humans spend far too much time being dependent creatures. We come into the world requiring care, and in the last days of our lives (be it from age or tragedy) more often than not we need someone to care for us (such a person is uniquely called a *care-taker*). Along these lines, there is a sense in which care is not only a *needed* virtue, it is also a *necessary* virtue if human beings are going to flourish and co-exist. It is this necessity that brings me back to (a secular counterpart) the other-regarding (phileo-approximating-agape-love) love that Jesus endorsed. I am suggesting here that as moral philosophers search for an appropriate name for “ethics of care” some have considered “love ethics” or “ethics of love.” And notwithstanding the complexity of the agape-love that Jesus was advocating, the two have the same idea in view. Jesus’ judgment of the world is based upon a moral judgment of care, which is the scope of the *Final Judgment* parable (Matt. 25:31-46).

In the parable of the Final Judgment, the sheep (the Christian believer) and the goats (the non-believer) were both judged on the same moral question: *what kind of care was given to the least of these?* Jesus clearly states that the criterion for moral judgment was whether or not human beings offered care to each other, namely, the least among us:

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., Held, 9-10.

Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.’<sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in,<sup>36</sup> I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.<sup>74</sup>

Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.<sup>42</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,<sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.<sup>75</sup>

Regardless of whether or not one is a sheep, thereby having access to agape-love, or a goat, thereby relying on agape’s closest approximation (phileo), the criterion for moral judgment in Jesus’ Kingdom of God moral philosophy is care. This care is a practical response that any agent can render, even if agape-love is absent.

I will now suggest a very brief sketch as I try to show how it is possible to attain a snapshot of what Jesus was referring to with his Kingdom of God moral philosophy. Earlier I mentioned that the ethics of care and moral sentimentalism have some similar objections to the prevailing traditional ethical corpus. Beginning with the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Adam Smith, Bishop Joseph Butler, et.al., the sentimentalists endorsed a non-rational way of looking at moral actions. While the moral rationalist asks what is the right action based upon reason, the moral sentimentalist suggests that this is “one question too many.” We should act in accord with or sentiments, the most profound emotion being empathy. This methodology of doing ethics, of course, is a firm rejection to Hobbesian egoism. Thus, given this refutation of psychological egoism, one can see clearly how the other-regarding agape-love of Jesus’

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<sup>74</sup> Matthew 25:34, NIV

<sup>75</sup> 25:41

moral philosophy would accord nicely with the early prognosticators of empathy. For years empathy (“sympathy” in the words of Hume) sat on the shelf, but it has been revived with Gilligan’s work demonstrating empathy as a fundamental female trait and Martin Hoffman’s work in *Empathy and Moral Development*. Time would not permit me to engage these works, but one can see how Jesus’ moral philosophy would work here. Take for example the most famous of Jesus’ parabolic teachings, the *Good Samaritan*. In his last sermon, Martin Luther King, Jr. said that the priest and Levite who passed by looked at the battered man and from an utterly self-regarding and self-preservation thought asked the question, “If I *stop* and help this man, what is going to happen to *me*?”<sup>76</sup> King then said that the correct moral response came in reversing the question, which is what the Samaritan did, “If I *do not stop* and help this man, what is going to happen to *him*?” The Samaritan was wholly empathic. He was a moral sentimentalist before there was such a label, but what is most interesting is that he was not operating from an agape-love stand point. He was motivated by what we can term a phileo-love (stand point), which of course is the closest approximation to the love that Jesus advocates in his Kingdom of God (virtue ethical) moral philosophy.

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<sup>76</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “I See the Promised Land” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1986), 285.

## Chapter 3

### Triangulation as Anticipation of Sentimentalism

*But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”<sup>30</sup> In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.<sup>31</sup> A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.<sup>32</sup> So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.<sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.<sup>34</sup> He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him.<sup>35</sup> The next day he took out two silver coins<sup>c</sup> and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’<sup>36</sup> “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”<sup>37</sup> The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.” –Luke 10:29-37*

### Noddings, Slote, God and Care

Paul Tillich once said, “No theologian should be taken seriously as a theologian, even if he [or she] is a great Christian and a great scholar, if his work shows that he does not take philosophy seriously.”<sup>77</sup> Prior to my matriculation at Emory University, my theological training was attained at schools that boasted a more “conservative” and “fundamentalist” way of *doing* theology. Even their philosophy classes enshrined doctrine and dogma that were ironically *anti*-philosophical. Philosophy and Christian ethics courses were taught in such a manner that anything other than a deontological, duty-centered, “means justified the ends” doctrine was heresy, anti-Jesus, and anti-Christian. This was an uncomfortable doctrine because of the requirement that one should always do “the right thing,” even if it was obviously *wrong*, because in doing the right

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<sup>c</sup> Greek *two denarii*

<sup>77</sup> Paul Tillich, “The Problem of Theological Method,” *Journal of Religion* 27 (1947), 7-8.

thing (through some magical or mystical, spiritual or faith-based imposition) Jesus was going to work it out in the end.

There exists as a general consensus in the conservative Christian literature that the Bible is the inerrant and infallible “Word of God.” Those Christians who are from a more liberal bent, including Martin Luther King, Jr. and me, are more likely to modulate such a superfluous conclusion in favor of a more substantial analysis. It is far less of an evidentiary burden to say that the “*word of God is in the Bible*” than the “*Bible is the Word of God.*” One can barely give a thorough ontological argument for God’s existent without delving into a rational, logical, and metaphysical quagmire. Imagine the ontological pressure of demonstrating a causal relationship between *God* (or GOD, or LORD, or *Lord*, or LORD GOD, or Lord Jesus Christ, relatively, Elohim, Yah Veh ‘Jehovah,’ Adonai, Yah Veh ELOHIM, and [Christian Testament] kyrios Yah Shua Cristos)<sup>78</sup> and the Bible. Thus the Bible is not as “cookie-cutter,” nice and nifty as some would like to think. Extant in the text is a foundation for ambiguity, moral dilemma, epistemological privilege, and sensitivity. But the one idea where the majority of Christians find consensus is in the propositional and thematic content of Jesus’ prevailing message of *agape-love*. Christians typically agree that *agape-love* is the central teaching of Jesus, but constructing an empathic, caring, and compassionate *modus operandi* to aide in the demystification of *agape-love* can be quite tendentious.

Some, like Paul Tillich and Martin Luther King, Jr., argue that *agape-love* is not sentimental (neither is *agape-love* based in reason). King identifies the love that Jesus

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<sup>78</sup> These are all proper descriptions for El Elyon [the Most High] as rendered by the different originators and transmitters of the oral tradition: Elohist, Yahwist (Jahwist), Priestly, and of course the Christian Testament writers who saw Jesus Christ as the incarnation of the Most High. The biblical (and religious) waters become far murkier if we were to add Allah, Ahura Mazda, and Jah to the nomenclature.

was advocating as a “redemptive good will,” but when he and Tillich attempts to define the phenomenology of love they end up with either a rational sentimentalism or something that defies human biological (and or physiological) constraints. Long ago epistemology was bifurcated into two primary options: reason and experience. The former aspires to ground all propositions in rational terms and the latter grounds propositions in empirical terms. These remain our only two options. The two can amalgamate as in Kant’s *synthetic a priori*, in which case the result could be a third category of say, rational emotions or deontological sentimentalism, and I think that this lode seems quite friendly to what I am about to discuss. Unless there is a modification of Tillich and King’s moral epistemology, particularly with respect to how Jesus envisioned agape-love, their language becomes far too esoteric and ambiguous, but I will take this up in the last section.

It *seems* intuitional that Jesus and the other evangelists in the Christian Testament felt that the agape-love message of the Way<sup>79</sup> was clear: ““Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”<sup>80</sup> In chapter one I pointed out that agape is the Greek word for love in this passage, and it is the governing theme of the Christian *kerygma* (message) and the apostolic *Didache*.<sup>81</sup> I also argued that agape is conjoined with grace in Christian theology and establishes a seemingly dogmatic exclusivity in a way that Christians alone have access; the secular community’s best effort is an indistinguishable approximation, especially when amalgamated with care and empathy.

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<sup>79</sup> People of “The Way” are the first century identification of those who would later be known as Christians in the late first Century. This term was derived from Jesus’ Johannine self-description, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6, NIV).

<sup>80</sup> Luke 10:27, NIV

<sup>81</sup> The *Didache* is the teaching of the Twelve Apostles ca. 96 C.E.

Does not Nel Noddings have this in view when she speaks of the *ideal* “best picture of ourselves”? Noddings write, “It is not just any picture. Rather, it is our best picture of ourselves caring and being cared for. It may be colored by acquaintance with one superior to us in caring, but, as I shall describe it, it is both constrained and attainable.”<sup>82</sup> To be sure, I have good reasons to believe that a similar tenor is *en vogue* in Michael Slote’s positive claims for empathy. Slote avers, “What we have so far been talking about, then, is a morality of empathic caring, where care takes in not only the attitudes/motives people have, or are supposed to have, toward intimates, but also less strongly felt but still substantial humanitarian concern for distant and/or personally unknown others.”<sup>83</sup> What Slote says here is not inconsistent with what Christian ethics claims.

Noddings and Slote’s grounding of care and empathy in sentimentalist terms, rather than, say, Christian (virtue) ethical terms, is quite formidable. It makes good sense to say that feelings are natural and universal. This universalizability provides the impetus to launch a persuasive didactic against virtue ethics two most venerable critics: deontology and utilitarianism. To this end, Noddings care “relies on a basic desire, universal in all human beings, to be in relation—to care and be cared for.”<sup>84</sup> It would seem, given her preoccupation with human sentiments, and its derivative value ‘care,’ that hers is a straightforward virtue ethical concept. For Noddings, it is a sufficient condition to characterize care ethics as virtue ethics, but it is not a necessary one. Virtue

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<sup>82</sup> Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 80.

<sup>83</sup> Michael Slote, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*, (Routledge: New York, 2007), 42.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, Noddings, 206n.

is seen as “the energizing factor in moral behavior,”<sup>85</sup> but this does not go far enough. On this view, virtue can give a definitive account of character while saying little to nothing about relationships. The foundational premise for Noddings is relational: “The virtue described by the ethical ideal of one-caring is built up in relation. It reaches out to the other and grows in response to the other.”<sup>86</sup> Christian ethics is relational as well. Love of neighbor is, of course, necessarily other-regarding. The corollaries of Christian ethics—like compassion, care, mercy and such—are other-regarding as well. But guiding Noddings’ argument is the mother/child metaphor. Noddings grounds care ethics in distinctively (and unapologetically) feminine (and relational) terms. So, although the language is quite similar, namely, other-regarding, relational ethics, Noddings denies any compulsion to ground relational ethics in theistic terms. Noddings is beholden to a masculinist reading of the Bible and the patriarchal metaphors incumbent in any read ingratiating such a hermeneutic. I find such an uncritical reading of the Bible inconsistent with the girth of its overall trajectory.

Michael Slote’s secular sentimentalist approach to these matters, though remaining consistent with a metaethics that preclude a theistic account as a rational or justifiable foundation upon which one can ground morality, does treat the phenomenology of (agent-based) virtue ethics as being friendly to Christian ethics. Slote muses about how this can be possible.

Perhaps a more promising historical lode of agent-basing may be found in the Christian ethics of agapic love. Augustine, Malebranche, and many other Christian thinkers have regarded love for God as grounding love for one’s fellow creatures and all moral virtue as well, and since love is an inner state, Christian morality (of this kind) may well be thought to resemble agent-basing... Much depends on how one understands God love for us and the relation between that

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 80-81.



love and human love toward God and other (human) creatures. If loving all other human beings is admirable or obligatory simply because all (agapic) love, whether our own or God's, is clearly morally good and praiseworthy, then we probably have an instance of agent-basing.<sup>87</sup>

Slote virtue theory connects chronologically and theoretically with the ethics of care's derivation from the 18<sup>th</sup> century sentimentalists and hints at a connection with the Christian virtue of agape-love. Slote says, "The ethics of care is historically rooted in the moral sentimentalism of Shaftsbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Adam Smith, all of whom were men. Moreover, the moral sentimentalists' emphasis on benevolence itself shows the influence of the Christian ideal of agape, and the founder of Christianity was no woman. So historically, some important male thinkers have thought and/or written in terms congenial to care."<sup>88</sup> The Romantic period, with its rejection of the Enlightenment's cold rationality and alienation of sentiments,<sup>89</sup> did not resurrect the God language that was so forceful for eighteen centuries; rather, it placed its preoccupation in ideas. Indeed, these ideas were borne on the wings of Christianity's religious and moral trek. On this account, care ethics is conterminous with Christian ethics.

In short, neither Noddings nor Slote are necessarily oppositional to agape-love as the ideal (virtue) place to ground empathy and care. As a matter of fact, I find their arguments quite friendly to the notion. Both regard David Hume's sentimentalism (et.al)

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<sup>87</sup> Michael Slote, *Morals From Motives*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 9, 114-140.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., Slote, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*, 3.

<sup>89</sup> See, e.g., Micheal Frazer, *The Enlightenment and Sympathy: Justice and the Moral Sentiments in the Eighteenth Century and Today*. (New York: Oxford Press, 2010), 3-14. Frazer argues in favor of two Enlightenments. First, there is the rational enlightenment, commonly denoted as the "Age of Reason." This period was dominated by the reflective autonomy of Immanuel Kant. The second Enlightenment, denoted by the moniker "Romantic Period," engendered reflection, but it staunchly advocated feelings, particularly "sympathy." Without invoking Christianity or anything Godlike, Frazer avers, "Without a single governing faculty that is identified with the higher self—without a single sovereign in the soul bringing the rest of the soul in line—many worry that the individual is reduced to a kind of psychic chaos, doing whatever he or she feels like doing at the moment, without the guidance of stable, reflectively endorsed standard." The sentimentalists generally agree on "...the fact that we can have higher-order moral sentiments—that we can approve and disapprove of our own approval and disapproval...."

as paramount, and I agree. I simply extend my foundation to Jesus. They do not reject Hume's sentimentalism; they begin with it as a salient point of departure for their care and empathy projects, respectively. J. W. Drane summarizes a point that smacks of the kind of language that Noddings and Slote would both concede at certain points, and find absurd at others,

Jesus' teaching was intended as a way of life only for those people who subjected their lives to God's rule. This is the point at which Jesus' ethic has most frequently been misunderstood. Those who claim to be able to accept the Sermon on the Mount, but not the other claims made about Jesus in the New Testament, have failed to recognize the essential character of Jesus' teaching. *It is impossible to isolate his theology from his ethics, and to do so destroys the integrity of them both.*<sup>90</sup> (italics mine).

I, too, find this traditional read of the Bible and Jesus far too simplistic. Thinking such as this is unimpressive (and perhaps even absurd). At best, it is filled with uncritical assumptions that lead to a troubling inference. Even in the initial sentence there are several problems. Noddings would object to the judgmental tone. Referring to the story of the Rich man and Lazarus, Noddings herself comes to an interesting and quite troubling conclusion, which demonstrates her incongruence with Dane's (et.al) traditional reading of the Bible.

But what prevents their passage? The judgmental love of the harsh father establishes the chasm. This is not the love of the mother, for even in despair she would cast herself across the chasm to relieve the suffering of her child. If he calls her, she will respond. Even the wickedest, if he calls, she must meet as one-caring. Now, I ask again, what ethical need has woman for God?<sup>91</sup>

Note that Noddings is not giving an objection to men, or to God more general. She is giving an objection to a particular reading of God that cast God as an inspiration of

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<sup>90</sup> Drane, J. W. *Introducing the New Testament*, completely rev. and updated. (Oxford: Lion Publishing plc., 2000), 163

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, Noddings, 98.

patriarchy, androcentricism, and (possibly, at times) misogyny. But I am hard-pressed to see Jesus interpreted in these terms, neither do I see Jesus as being the architect of any hegemonic or marginalizing metaphor. Consequently, Noddings must be reinterpreted in light of a less traditional reading of the biblical text. Slote must be interpreted in light of a clearer understanding of agape-love, one that goes far beyond what I was willing to say in the first chapter. In the first chapter I attempted to show the tension that exists between an interpretation of Jesus as a virtue ethicist who is friendly to 21<sup>st</sup> century ethics of care and empathy and how the metaphysics of his brand of love, moderated by grace, leaves agape accessible only to believers. But by the end of this chapter I will demonstrate a different way to view agape-love, one that is not often talked about.

Noddings is not alone in her suspicions, but what I want to give attention to right now is that her reaction is more of *an* interpretation of God that is not necessarily the only way to envisage the text. When she asks the question, “what ethical need has woman for God?” it is clear to me that she’s reacting to a view of God that seems rather unfriendly to women. Any view that sees God as being antagonistic to feminine sensibilities is inconsistent with a plethora of texts that speaks to the opposite. I will first offer justification for Noddings’ claim, and then I will show how a variant reading would suggest something much different. There can be no gainsaying the fact that the Bible is a book of bias. It was not written by a Holy God, thus not the Word of God. The Bible was written with God’s *inspiration* rather than God’s *domination*. God cannot be a God of love if that love implies oppression. Men wrote the Bible while living in a patriarchal, androcentric, and, dare I say, misogynistic culture. Writing in their day to day context did not afford much opportunity to preclude images (lending to potential structures) of

marginalization of women, certain kinds of homosexual acts, cultural hegemonic structures, and class stratification. Valerie Saiving Goldstein demonstrates a suspicion not incongruous with Noddings,

I am no longer certain as I once was that, when theologians speak of “man,” they are using the word in its generic sense. It is, after all, a well-known fact that theology has been written almost exclusively by men. This alone should put us on guard, especially since contemporary theologians constantly remind us that one of man’s strongest temptations is to identify his own limited perspective with universal truth.<sup>92</sup>

The difference between the two suspicions is that Noddings places her suspicion on God and Goldstein places her suspicion on a masculinist interpretation of God. This leads to Noddings distrusting God and Goldstein distrusting the men who were interpreting God. Goldstein continues her diatribe against hegemonic interpretations of text by aligning these interpretations with her suspicion that such views are injurious to the Christian conception of agape-love;

Contemporary theological doctrines of love have, I believe, been constructed primarily upon the basis of masculine experience and thus view the human condition from the male standpoint. Consequently, these doctrines do not provide an adequate interpretation of the situation of women—nor, for that matter, of men, especially in light of certain fundamental changes now taking place in our own society.<sup>93</sup>

On Goldstein view, the issue of love is not ineffective or faulty or circumscribed by God-imposed biases; rather, such constraints are the imposition of masculine tendency to assume transcendence over anything (like the earth) or anyone (often women and children) within their range of subjugation. Summarily, Goldstein’s argument sounds

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<sup>92</sup> Valerie Saiving Goldstein, “The Human Situation of a Feminine,” in *Journal of Religion* 40 (April 1960), 100.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

very similar to Noddings. A woman is a care-giver and nurturer by natural disposition, but if a woman trusts

...the theologians, she will try to strangle other impulses in herself. She will believe that, having chosen marriage and children and thus being face to face with the needs of her family for love, refreshment, and forgiveness she has no right to ask anything for herself but must without qualification to the strictly feminine role.<sup>94</sup>

Women must be liberated from constraints and ideologies that marginalize, but more importantly, she needs to wrestle her God from the dominant hands that have reimagined God as an agent for viciousness. Justification of acts that shackle women can be found not in God-self but in interpretations for God. Hispanic women, for instance, have challenged these masculine and marginalizing interpretations of God with their own brand of theology that says, “Our mission is to challenge oppressive structures which refuse to allow us to be full members of society while preserving our distinctiveness as Hispanic women.”<sup>95</sup> Part of these structures is the systems of knowledge validation that excludes their voices. Monolithic interpretations of God, Jesus and the Bible is marginalizing to those who were not in the conversation.

There is another way at getting at the care imagery of God in the Bible, one that eliminates the tendency toward masculine supremacy while legitimating the natural care and relationship intuitions that Noddings wants to defend, and that is by inviting the notion of solidarity into the conversation. Latin American Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez (and others) has written extensively about re-imagining God as he paints a picture of God as omniscient and able to identify with the *Minjung* community of Korea,

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, “Solidarity: Love of Neighbor in 1980s” in *Feminist Theological Ethics*, ed. Lois K. Daly, (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1994), 77.

the *campesinos* in El Salvador, or blacks in America. A similar case can be made for the homosexual or the female worldwide. At the same time it is highly unlikely that people who wear lenses that are categorically different from marginalized groups will strive for solidarity. Some may be inclined in this direction, but many will not take this step.<sup>96</sup> As Reinhold Niebuhr reminds us, individuals gravitate towards groups, and groups amass power and defend their own self-interest.<sup>97</sup> Once empowered, says Niebuhr, groups do not voluntarily surrender their power. It has to be taken through acts of coercion if necessary. Solidarity with each other is more prevalent than solidarity with those who are in need of genuine care and empathy. Consequently, it is these groups, typically white males, who are in the power position, even with respect to the lens construction of devalued individuals. J. Deotis Roberts asserts,

The main rejoinder I hear from theological establishments is that theology is universal. To assert that Western Theology is universal is to fly in the face of compelling evidence. It is not universal. It takes a very provincial point of view and attempts to *totalize* it. The situation demands that theology first be contextualized. This does not rule out the possibility of partnership in a pluralistic situation. If we reach a universal situation, it must take seriously the several contexts in which theological reflection is being done.<sup>98</sup>

Casting God as quasi co-conspirator with those who have constructed the knowledge validation process, due to the hermeneutics established by this same group, is not the best way to envisage God and God's love for humanity. Given the overall tenor of the Christian Testament, any interpretation of God that is stated in such a way that God is aligned with an oppressive system should be rejected and abandoned.

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<sup>96</sup> Of course this is an ambiguous statement. An empathic person who meets the narrower category that I suggest would not fit. Furthermore, an empathic person who is moved to be in solidarity with the marginalized may very well become marginalized.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), 1-5.

<sup>98</sup> J. Deotis Roberts, *Black Theology in Dialogue*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 13.

What ethical need has woman for God, asks Noddings. For Noddings, care is a natural virtue for women, and I believe that it's a natural virtue for God as well. Inherent in the phenomenology of love is the dynamic of care. If we were to define the structure of care in Heidegger's terms, we would get that care is part of human *Dasein*, which seems rather limiting and artificial to me. But if we were to define care as Martin Heidegger has, we would be further ahead in our interpretation of God and God's work through Jesus.

The formally existential totality of Dasein's ontological structural whole must therefore be grasped in the following structure: the Being of Dasein means ahead-of-itself-Being-already-in-(the-world) as Being-alongside (entities encountered within-the-world). This Being fills in the signification of the term "care," which is used in a purely ontological-existential manner... Because Being-in-the-world is essentially care, Being-alongside the ready-to-hand could be taken in our previous analyses as concern, and Being with the Dasein-with of Others as we encounter it within-the world could be solicitude.<sup>99</sup>

For Heidegger, care is a "primordial structural totality," and "willing and wishing are rooted with ontological necessity in Dasein as care."<sup>100</sup> He sees care as "ontologically earlier than "theory" and "practice" and, as such, is inescapable "even if only privately." If this tenet is the true essence of existence, i.e. our natural virtue, then we are in moral error if we violate this principle. Additionally, if I were to be so bold as to endorse Paul Tillich's proper descriptions of God, then God's rigid designators would be "Being-itself," "the Ground of All Being," and humanity's "Ultimate Concern." Says Tillich, "If God is not Being-itself, [God] is subordinate to it."<sup>101</sup> On this interpretation of God, God is conjoined with care as God's ontological nature. Humanity, being in the image of God, is also conjoined with care. Humanity is ontologically hard-wired to be in caring relationships. Viewing care as an ontological feature of God is quite singular. On this

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<sup>99</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962), 237 [193].

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 238 [194].

<sup>101</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 235-6.

view God would readily jump across the chasm! God is care. Embedded in the triangulation of God's identity is the notion of (agape-) love-empathy-care. If someone makes the assertion that God is uncaring, she is not making an apodictic claim because there may be limitations to her aspectual shape, especially when it comes to morality. I think Noddings is shortsighted in this regard. Let me now reflect on the narrative that she uses to argue against God's participation in care.

Noddings begins with the punishment and the reward as she tells the story. Dives<sup>102</sup> is on one side of the chasm, in absolute torment, agonizing in flames. Lazarus is in eternal bliss, resting in the bosom of Abraham. From this point of view one can derive, as Noddings does, a God who is exponentially uncaring. But the story is incomplete if we fail to analyze its depth. If we fail to ask how it became such that Dives is in an exasperatingly perilous situation, far removed (or beyond) God's ontological capacity to extend care, then we are not being true to the integrity of the text. Is it not the case that Dives finds himself in such a precarious position because he refused to care-for Lazarus, even though he had the means and the opportunity to do so? Recall Jesus' words elsewhere, "When you give a feast do not invite your friends and rich neighbors, instead invite Lazarus—"the poor the crippled, the lame and the blind."<sup>103</sup> Did Lazarus freeze to death one night outside the house where the rich man slept on linen sheets? ...Or did the dogs...<sup>104</sup> If we are going to defend an ethic of care as a paradigm for how humans ought to conduct themselves, then we should be willing to say that those acting contrary to empathy and care are in violation of what this moral theory demands. Dives was in hell

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<sup>102</sup> "Dives" is the term used in the Latin Vulgate for "wealthy." Traditionally this common noun has been used as a proper noun to establish the rich man's identity.

<sup>103</sup> Luke 14:13; 14:21, 23.

<sup>104</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, "Luke" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995). 316.



“not because he was wealthy, but because he was not tenderhearted enough to see Lazarus and because he made no attempt bridge the gulf between himself and his brother.”<sup>105</sup> His lack of caring and concern for others, and his depraved indifference coupled with a totally impoverished empathy, was a contradiction to the ontological structure of human nature and of God. Similarly inclined is Charles Darwin’s socio-biological structure’s affirmation of humanity’s need to foster altruism if we are going to survive as a species. “A teacher had just related to a class of boys the story of the rich man and Lazarus; then he asked, ‘Now, which would you rather be, boys—the rich man or Lazarus?’ One boy replied: ‘I’d want to be the rich man while I’m living and Lazarus when I die.’”<sup>106</sup> This anecdote is illustrative of what is congenial: this boy wanted the rewards without the burden of care. Care is synonymous with burden. Even if one enjoys care-acts, it still represents a foreboding responsibility that needs attention. The Rich man, Dives, violated this principle, rejected the burden in favor of the congenial and should not be rewarded. He had ample opportunity for solicitude and not once did he give heed to his fellow *imago dei*. So in hell “he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off.” Is not it remarkable how hell has the capacity to increase one’s visual acuity and revitalize one’s ontology? Dives was unable to see the poor infectious beggar who sat at his gate though he was in close proximity, but he was able to recognize him in Abraham’s embrace though he was “afar off.” His socio-pathology exhibited no empathy for Lazarus, but it seems as though his final torment begged to be in relation with him. As Nathaniel Holmes points out, “the Rich Man’s intention is not relationship but the

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<sup>105</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 18.

<sup>106</sup> P. L. Tan. *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times*. (Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc, 1996).

requirement of Lazarus' service. One could argue the absence of care and empathy continues even in hell."<sup>107</sup>

Now that I've advance the conversation to the point where Noddings' exploration begins, let me now give a variant reading that comes to a different conclusion germane to the triangulation of love-empathy-care. I think that it would be a hyperbole to say that Lazarus was a saved Christian thus he went to paradise (metaphorically, Abraham's bosom) and Dives was an unsaved sinner, thus he went to hell. Any such hermeneutic would have to give an account for how this could be the case pre-resurrection and without endorsing a salvation based upon works. So let's set aside the theological *mysterium tremendum* inherent in this parable and focus on God's love-empathy-care triangulation.

There's much that one can find exculpatory for Dives: 1) there is no evidence that the issue was his salvation or lack thereof, as I mentioned above; 2) this "hell" is hades, the place of the departed as they await their final spot, and apparently both Dives and Lazarus are there. And God is there in the person of Abraham. I want to suggest that it is within the scope of liberation theology to suggest that God/Abraham would do as Noddings infers from her care perspective: God would jump across the chasm! David gives legitimacy to this claim as he peruses a very similar scenario:

6       Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
           it is so high that I cannot attain it.

7       Where can I go from your spirit?  
           Or where can I flee from your presence?

8       *If I ascend to heaven, you are there;*  
           *if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.*

9       If I take the wings of the morning

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<sup>107</sup> I appreciate this insight from Nathaniel Holmes, a colleague who served as proofreader on this chapter.

10 and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
 even there your hand shall lead me,  
 and your right hand shall hold me fast.  
 11 If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
 and the light around me become night,”  
 12 even the darkness is not dark to you;  
 the night is as bright as the day,  
 for darkness is as light to you.<sup>108</sup> (*italics mine*).

God’s love, which grounds God’s caring nature, will seek out humanity to ensure the permanence of God’s prevenient grace. There is no hiding place. There is no distance so far that God’s empathy and care lacks extension or interminability—this is the essence of the triangulation of which I speak. Paul’s language in Romans is facilitative of this idea, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through [God] who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”<sup>109</sup> Earlier in the chapter Paul asserts, “for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”<sup>110</sup> Thus it’s not implausible to suggest that God’s care for humanity and creation is ontologically prior and entails God’s desire to redeem them both. If God is in fact our “Ultimate Concern” as Tillich seems to think, then our ultimate concern for each other is facilitative in the triangulation. Consequently, we do in fact have a hermeneutic of God that can act as pedagogy for women (and men). In short, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every

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<sup>108</sup> Psalm 139:6–12 (NRSV) “Sheol” is the Hebrew term for the Greek “Hades” which is often translated in the King James Version as “hell,” i.e., the grave.

<sup>109</sup> Romans 8:37–39 (NRSV)

<sup>110</sup> Romans 8:20–21.

respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.”<sup>111</sup> Jesus as High Priest empathizes even with Dives.

This interpretation of God is much more instructive than anything I’ve said thus far, but the implication goes far beyond this. If Heidegger and Tillich are correct, that care is an inherent part of God’s ontological structure, (and I believe they are correct) then humankind’s disposition to care is not just a consequence of natural virtues. Indeed, it’s part of an ontological network that derives Godly dispositions as a consequence of the *Imago Dei*. God is ontologically connected to humankind and, subsequently, humankind is connected to each other. King was quite fond of saying, “In a real sense, all of life is interrelated. All [humankind] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be unless you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be unless I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.”<sup>112</sup> King calls our structure “interrelated,” which is consistent with Noddings. In our interrelationships we care-for each other. It is morally wrong to be uncaring to someone in need.

Everything I have said so far has had the goal of grounding the agape-love priority ethics of Jesus in an ontology that is not antagonistic to sentimentalism, care or empathy. As a matter of fact, I think that Tillich and King are existentially overly harsh on sentiments. They seem to think that the ontological basis for sentiments (especially Tillich) is fine, but it’s insufficient for what God’s prevenient grace demands. In other words, I think that Tillich is far too abstract and esoteric to be convincing about his

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<sup>111</sup> Hebrews 4:15.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., King, 72.

stance on sentiments and I think that King's definition of agape-love is a tad ambiguous—namely, “redemptive good will.” Hence, I will take up these matters at the end of this chapter, but now let me give some reasons for departing from rule-based moral philosophy.

### **Reasons to Depart From Rule-Based Ethics**

Three questions present themselves and have become a life long wrestle (particularly against dogmatic and conservative theology) and move me toward philosophy: 1) derived from a very simple question in moral epistemology, how is one to know what this “right thing” is in order to do it? Doing the right thing, according to this conservative perspective, seems more like question begging than rendering a substantial response to what I take to be a salient question. For the conservative Protestant Christian, doing the right thing seems *extremely Kantian* (but its not). To be sure, a Kantian methodology (i.e., a rational approach that is committed to universal principles and Kant's categorical imperatives, rather than to the more emotion driven sentiments) may be a nifty way of interpreting Christianity, but it is not the *best* way to interpret Jesus. I am suggesting here that there is a radical difference between conservative Protestant Christianity's *interpretation* of Jesus and Jesus' actual moral philosophy. The former is similar to a traditional Kantian (or deontological) doctrine and the latter is more akin to the moral sentimentalism of Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, (and to a lesser degree) Adam Smith, and the recent care and empathy educators. This is not to suggest than an appeal to the latter is at the same time a jettison of the former. The deontology that conservative Christianity would endorse is only Kantian in that it is universal (i.e.

categorical); indeed it does not appeal to reason at all. Its appeal (to many of the not so obvious ethical questions) is to invoke a *Euthyphroian* “something is right because the gods say it is.” It is a Divine Command Theory that ignores the Socratic refutation in Plato’s *Euthyphro*; 2) If the right thing was (as I was taught) a commitment to certain moral obligatory codes, like always telling the truth (regardless of consequences) and always keeping promises (even when a clear and present harm was present), then how should I make sense of particular biblical narratives that contradicted their validity? Two examples immediately come to mind: Rahab and the Egyptian midwives. Rahab the prostitute lied to the king when he inquired concerning the Israelite spies who had entered Canaan to scout their land and military. Though she had intentionally hid the two spies in her home, she told the king and his men that she sent the spies away in a different direction.<sup>113</sup> But in the New Testament book of Hebrews Rahab is listed with the heroes of Israel and called a woman of faith and obedience.<sup>114</sup> In the book of James she is also called “righteous,” even though she was a prostitute, and even though she was a proven liar.<sup>115</sup> The conservative Protestant (or Evangelicals) would argue for some providential rationale even though it defies the logic of the text. They would argue that Rahab had inclinations derived from “God” so she was right in her actions, but the Bible does not yield this point of view at all. Such an interpretation is more conjecture than sound hermeneutics.

A second example can be found in Pharaoh’s attempt at infanticide as he directed the midwives to throw all newborn Hebrew boys into the Nile River. The midwives disobeyed, giving a rather ridiculous and transparent red herring to rationalize their

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<sup>113</sup> Joshua 2:1-24.

<sup>114</sup> Hebrews 11:31.

<sup>115</sup> James 2:25.

disobedience. Even though they were guilty of both lying and breaking their promise, the Bible says that “God was kind to the midwives” and even rewarded them with “families of their own.”<sup>116</sup> Once again, conservative Protestants tend to offer a (non-existent) mystical spin on what took place. 3) Given that (misguided) Christians have been the architects (or at least participants) of some of history’s most vile discrimination practices and laws (e.g. slavery, gender bias, homosexual ostracism), which were predicated on faulty hermeneutics, how could I trust a (quasi) deontological perspective that is derived from defective perspectives and overwhelmingly biased thinking? For example, if someone enters a classroom wielding a .357 Magnum saying, “I mean no harm to anyone here, but I do want to kill David Hodge. Do you know where he is?” And let’s say that I was in fact cowering under a nearby desk. Lying about my true whereabouts would be, quite obviously (and, I think, intuitively), the right thing to do. The conservative (Evangelical) Protestant would say that the right thing to do is to tell the truth and allow “Jesus” to work it out. Well, let’s revisit this illustration with a focus on slavery (or homosexuality, or female subjugation, etc.) and public policy. The conservative Protestant would argue that such laws, which were derived from biblical moral principles and admonishments to “obey those who have rule over you,”<sup>117</sup> are right because the Bible (Word of God) says they are, even if they are obviously wrong or absurd. Once canonized in this way, discriminatory readings erroneously become a human duty. Canonization of this sort has taken place even though Jesus himself would have

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<sup>116</sup> Exodus 1:20-21.

<sup>117</sup> Romans 13:1; cf. 2-7.

objected.<sup>118</sup> Hebrew Bible scholar Renita Weems argues against such oppressive canonization saying, “The experience of oppression has forced the marginalized reader to retain the right, as much as possible, to resist those things within the culture and the Bible that one finds obnoxious and antagonistic to one’s innate sense of identity and to one’s basic instinct for survival.”<sup>119</sup>

It is my contention that we find in the teachings of Jesus an anticipation of the modern conception of empathy and care. In what follows I will utilize two of his parables as heuristic tools to demonstrate my claim that empathy and care are central to his teaching. Indeed, Jesus’ thematic content was overwhelmingly predicated on the virtue of love mediated my empathy and care. His virtue ethics (as opposed to Aristotelian virtue ethics that is grounded in reason) is grounded in love, and his love produces empathy and care. I believe that what Jesus was expecting from *humans* is not just an other-worldly and impossible ethic of *agape*-love (as conservative Christians would render, for example), but something more doable. To suggest a (quasi) deontological perspective that is not mitigated by empathy and care would be an error. I will show that it would be a misinterpretation of Jesus’ (Kingdom of God) moral philosophy to suggest that what Jesus was anticipating was a love that only Christians had access.<sup>120</sup> In short, there is something radically coherent with what Jesus the Palestinian teacher taught in the first century with what David Hume’s (and Adam Smith’s) moral sentimentalism and the

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<sup>118</sup> Jesus’ mission statement is as follows, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18).

<sup>119</sup> Renita Weems, “African American Women and the Bible” in *Stony the Road We Trod*. ed. Cain Hope Felder, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 63.

<sup>120</sup> The body of this information will be discussed in more detail in chapter three, which deals with Bishop Butler and Martin Luther King’s interpretation of Christian love. What King saw with his “Beloved community” and what Butler had in view with his “benevolence” was not a doctrine of love for Christians in particular; it was a doctrine of love for humanity in general.



architects of empathy and care moral philosophy are advocating today. I will further show that there is a strong correlation with Martin Hoffman's "other-oriented prosocial moral reasoning" (and its friendliness with empathy) and what is anticipated by Jesus.

### **Jesus' Moral Philosophy Derived from Sentiments Not Reason**

In this section three points will mark my focus: 1) if one was to apply modern exegetical and hermeneutical strategies to understand the gamut and wealth of Jesus' moral philosophy, one could argue that he was more consistent with Humean moral sentimentalism than Kantian (or Aristotelian) rationality. A descriptive account of David Hume's moral philosophy would generate a tripartite canon that includes benevolence, compassion and empathy (née sympathy), but makes no sophisticated statement about care. By omitting care we see the shortsightedness of Hume's grand project given its availability (and centrality) in the moral philosophy of Jesus; 2) I will look at how one can derive an ethics of care and empathy from the moral philosophy of Jesus, particularly with respect to his parables. Through the exegesis and hermeneutic of his *Good Samaritan*, I will show how it demonstrates a positive approach to care and empathy. 3) Finally, I will explore the parable of the *Rich Farmer* and show who it demonstrates Jesus' sentiments about indifference and how it is counterintuitive to Jesus' moral philosophy.

I think it is fair to say that even though Jesus had access to the moral teachings of Aristotle, namely virtue ethics derived from reason, Jesus would qualify less as a

rationalist and more as a sentimentalist.<sup>121</sup> Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.) was not a contemporary of Jesus, predating the author of Christian moral philosophy by more than three centuries. By the time of Jesus birth, however, Aristotle's teachings (as well as Plato's) were very popular, as is evidenced by those contemporaneous with Jesus, namely Paul. The Hellenistic (Athenian) influence was extremely strong, such that Greek was the official language and many of the Jews had given their children Grecian names. Paul, the self-proclaimed Christian missionary to the Greeks, utilized the same "household management" language of Aristotle in what is known as the *Haustafeln* (Household Codes).<sup>122</sup> "The essential concern of the passages is the relationship of the "weaker" or "inferior" groups to the dominant male-master figure. The male, who was head of the Greco-Roman household, exercised full authority over the wife, child, and slave..."<sup>123</sup> Hellenistic Jewish historians like Philo and Josephus clearly articulated Aristotle's views in their works, patriarchal works that New Testament writers accessed and quoted as normative.<sup>124</sup> "The household was believed to be an economically independent, self-sufficient unit that was the basis for the state. Several households constituted a village, and several villages, a city-state or *politeia*."<sup>125</sup> Paul's words in his letter to the Ephesians and Timothy, "Slave obey your masters" and "Women keep silent in the church" sounds remarkably similar to Aristotle's "a slave has no faculty at all" and "a woman's silence is

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<sup>121</sup> Grecian culture was so marked in the Palestinian world that Greek had become synonymous with gentile, which is a term in English translations to denote non-Hebrew people and nations. Thus there is little reason to believe that Aristotle and other Grecian influences were not commonplace at the time of Jesus.

<sup>122</sup> Cf., Colossians 3:18-4:1; Ephesians 5:21-6:9; and 1 Peter 2:18-3:7

<sup>123</sup> Clarice J. Martin, "The *Haustafeln* (Household Codes) in African American Biblical Interpretation: "Free Slaves" and "Subordinate Women" in *Stony the Road We Trod*. Cain Hope Felder, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 206.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 209. Also cf. Aristotle *Politics* 1.1253b.

her glory.”<sup>126</sup> This suggests to us that Aristotle’s ethical philosophy, including his virtue ethics, were not alien to first century Palestinians, among them was Jesus of Nazareth. But as I shall show through the parables, where Aristotle derives his ethics from reason, Jesus derives his from sentiments. Aristotle believes that *man is essentially a rational animal. The good for man is the activity of the soul in accordance with reason.* Jesus believes that humankind should demonstrate love for neighbor through mercy and compassion—essentially, empathy and care. The best place to access this account of Jesus’ ethical philosophy is through the parables, which are the main corpus of his teachings.

It is widely held accepted that Jesus’ most fecund didactic method was through the utilization of parables, but it would be an egregious error to attempt and exegetical work of Jesus’ moral philosophy, as derived from the parables, without considering two (similar, but not identical) important factors. First, Jesus was neither the architect of the parabolic method nor many of the parables that he declared. For four millennia Jewish rabbis utilized this device as a method of conveying Jewish theology and ethics. Parables were a grand device for teaching because the stories imbued the rabbinic ethics and moral conduct; they also served as a way to transmit these concepts to subsequent generations.<sup>127</sup> As a Jew, Jesus learned these stories and was able to retell them to a new generation, at times reshaping them toward his personal ethical philosophy of love ratified by empathy and compassion (and care). There were thousands of these stories from which to choose. The most successful parables for Jesus’ usage were those that had a particular ethical inclination, thus it is appropriate to derive Jesus’ teachings on moral

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<sup>126</sup> See above Bible references.

<sup>127</sup> cf. Deut. 6:4-9

philosophy from this didactic tool. Secondly, it is very important to assert what I take to be a difference between Jesus' ethical philosophy and, say, (conservative) Christian ethics or Theological ethics. In many respects, Jesus' ethical philosophy is pre-Christian and more Jewish than any alternative. Jesus was Jewish—he was not a Christian. Though Christian ethics is derived from his teachings, one can also make the claim that his ethical philosophy was less soteriological and more didactic or community building (namely, Kingdom of God). To this end, it seems to me that a demythologization<sup>128</sup> of what Jesus taught and did should be a salient feature in understanding his ethical philosophy. Any further allegorizing of the text (that Jesus himself may have been allegorizing from his Jewish background) would be unfruitful, perhaps disingenuous, and further convolute the essence (or principle) of what the parable was trying to instruct.<sup>129</sup> It is noteworthy, with one exception, that Jesus himself was never one of the characters in the parables he gave. Thus we need not anticipate any immortal or fantastic ascendancy of the parabolic characters. What we can take from them is a human and achievable moral philosophy that seeks to demonstrate what it means to have a virtuous character.

### **The Good Samaritan as a Positive Approach to Empathic Care**

The parable of the Good Samaritan is perhaps the most famous of all the parables Jesus taught. A first century Jew would have taken the conflation of these two terms

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<sup>128</sup> Demythologization is the 1941 project of Rudolf Bultmann, a German theologian and evangelical protestant, who called for historical-criticism as the primary method of interpreting the synoptic gospels. Sometimes deemed as “existential theology,” it attempted to get at what Jesus actually did and said without the baggage of mythological assumptions and inclinations.

<sup>129</sup> Cf. Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 13-14. Hultgren argues, with respect to allegory as a correct interpretive mechanism, that the interpreter should not assume allegory. S/he should adopt the posture, “it is what it is” rather than “this means that.” Allegories, or extended metaphors, may reflect more the disposition of the interpreter than the mind of Jesus. Thus, I shall refrain, as much as possible, from allegorizing and spend most of my time with a historical description of the characters as they were.

(“good” and “Samaritan”) to be an oxymoron and likely not have uttered them in this fashion. That hospitals, parks, nursing homes (and other venues where altruism is being demonstrated daily) have adopted the name “Good Samaritan” would have been extremely perplexing for first century Jews to conceptualize since Jews and Samaritans were distant cousins and loathsome neighbors. It is due to Jesus’ characterization of the Samaritan in this story that the word “Samaritan” has become (almost) synonymous with compassion, care, empathy and altruism.

It appears that this parable was motivated by a question asked of Jesus by a teacher of the law: “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”<sup>130</sup> Jesus asked two clarification questions that gave the legal scholar an opportunity to respond within his area of expertise: “What is written in the Law?” and “How do you read it?” The scholar’s response is a conflation of two prominent Hebrew Bible themes: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>131</sup> “Normally the term ‘neighbor’ would refer to a fellow Jew or proselyte,” which would thus render the following reading, “love your people as your self.”<sup>132</sup> Furthermore, based upon this caveat, the expert’s final question—“Who is my neighbor?”—may have been more for *justification* and less for *definition*. Attempting to justify himself he may have been trying to limit the scope of ‘neighbor.’ He could have really been saying, “Where do I draw the line? How large must the circle be? If I know who my neighbor is, I also know who is *not*

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<sup>130</sup> Luke 10:29b.

<sup>131</sup> Deut. 6:5 represents perhaps the most prominent of ancient Judaism classical demonstration of monotheism: *The Shema*. Lev. 19:18 was not as prominent and was embedded in a list of other Hebrew laws. The legal scholar, very interestingly, brings the two together.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, Hultgren.

my “neighbor.”<sup>133</sup> In a worldview dominated by partiality and sectarianism, Jesus is pushing for inclusion and impartiality. Neighbor is being re-defined just as agape is. The ancient world understood agape as a Homeric concept. Jesus is ratifying the term for his own purposes.

The scholar’s response, and the response that Jesus gives, create a tension in the way neighbor is defined, whether objectively (as per the scholar’s definition) or subjectively (as per Jesus’ definition). The former is saying, “The neighbor is someone I must love”; the neighbor is an object. The latter is saying “The neighbor is someone who shows mercy on me”; the neighbor is a subject.<sup>134</sup> To use the language of Nel Noddings, the legal scholar interprets the *neighbor* as someone who is “cared-for,” but Jesus appears to interpret the *neighbor* from the standpoint of the “one-caring.”<sup>135</sup> But this ambiguity in the text does not necessarily suggest ambiguity in the mind of Jesus. If we are willing to embrace the reflexivity of care as outlined by Noddings, namely, care requires two parties, then it should not be difficult to comprehend that Jesus was expanding (as well as challenging) the traditional view that the legal expert was espousing.<sup>136</sup> But before I delve too far into this hermeneutical possibility, I need to say more about the parable itself.

The parable of the Good Samaritan begins as mysterious as it ends. The canvas where this grand image is being painted is somewhere along the winding, meandering dirt

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., Hultgren, 94.

<sup>134</sup> Cf. Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then The Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 191-192.

<sup>135</sup> Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 16-19.

<sup>136</sup> Brad Young, *the Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*, (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishing, 1998), 102-104. Young argues that most scholars would prefer to deal only with the neighbor as the person in need, but that would be to great a departure from the intent of the text or of Jesus. The ambiguity of the Hebrew term for neighbor, “rea,” which means “close companion” fails to make the interpretive challenge less difficult. But it does open the door to show how Jesus could have anticipated Noddings’ dichotomy.

road that led from the rich religious and sacred culture of Jerusalem to picturesque Jericho with its picturesque palm trees. Jerusalem was a city set on a hill about 2300 miles above sea level and about 20 miles away from Jericho. Jericho on the other hand was 1300 miles below sea level, representing a 3,600 feet incline. Adding to this was the constant fear of bandits who (as late as the 1930s) laid in wait for individuals who dared travel alone. So ominous was the threat of assault that the road was nicknamed “The Red or Bloody Way” and prudential travelers opted to await the assembling of a convoy to avoid individual travel.<sup>137</sup> It is likely that Jesus’ Jewish audience’s interest was peaked when they heard that one person dared traverse this deadly journey alone, but what are the chances of four individuals taking this imprudent trip all alone? What about their journey was so important that they each utilized such tremendously poor judgment? This question leads to another question that Jesus may have wanted us to consider: what is our responsibility to those who are afflicted because of their own folly? Should we empathize with them in the same way?<sup>138</sup> Should our interpretation of the events that caused the wounded man’s affliction be taken into consideration when trying to analyze our moral responsibility? And for our present discussion, what is our obligation to those who are different?

The ethnic group of this “certain man” who was going down from Jerusalem remains veiled in the text, thus its reference could be for anyone. The anonymity of the stranger, who was left “half-dead,” is conspicuous and leaves the reader to ponder. Notice the specificity in “stripped of his clothes,” thus removing any tribal, cultural, religious, or

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<sup>137</sup> Cf. William Barclay, *The Parables of Jesus*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1970), 79.

<sup>138</sup> I will revisit these questions in chapter four when I look at abortion.

national identification markers.<sup>139</sup> As far as we know this man is *any* man, and (perhaps) quashes any substantial conversation about our obligations to those who are near and dear versus those who are far and away. But I shall take up this point later. A more complicated point is the ambiguous “half-dead” (ήμιθάνη) reference. Since this term is stated nowhere else in the New Testament, it is difficult to be conclusive about its meaning. The truth of the matter is this: the way we interpret ήμιθάνη could either legitimize or delegitimize the actions and resolutions of the three subsequent characters, particularly the priest and the Levite. Our moral approval or disapproval should take into account the relevant facts.

There were two sets of laws: the oral and the written. The oral laws were favored by Jesus and the written laws were favored by the Sadducees, who themselves were antagonistic to Pharisaic preoccupation with the laws while minimizing the priests preoccupation with ritualistic purity. Thus the *met mitvah*, i.e. the laws concerning corpses and how they should be treated, had a dual interpretation (and contradiction) for dealing with an abandoned corpse. To begin with, if we interpret ήμιθάνη to mean the man looked like he was dead and could be taken for a corpse, perhaps he was either unconscious or in a coma, and if we further claim that the priest and the Levite<sup>140</sup> were potentially strict adherents to Sadducean tradition, then they would be justified in leaving the man without further aid. The written law stated, “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Speak to

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid. Young, 105. Young suggests that the only other identification marker would have been some reference to the man’s circumcision or lack thereof. A parenthetical reference would have surely help, but this absent information gives further reason to conclude that Jesus wanted the man and his external associations to remain anonymous. Scott, 194, argues that a Jewish audience would have assumed that he was Jewish like them, unless there were obvious identification markers to the contrary. But such speculation is unfounded and may, in fact, circumvent the anonymity that Jesus wanted to ensure.

<sup>140</sup> Both men were of the tribe of Levi from which all Hebrew priests were to come. The difference was that the priest was a direct descendant of Aaron (Moses’ brother, the priest) within the Levite tradition. The Levite was unlikely a descendant of Aaron, but as a Levite he was allowed to serve in the temple.



the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: ‘A priest must not make himself ceremonially unclean for any of his people who die.’”<sup>141</sup> According to this law, touching a corpse would have been a wrong action. The priest and the Levite may have been doing the right thing based upon their interpretation of the event and the laws, but their actions may have still be morally reprehensible.

On the other hand, the Mishnah states, “A High Priest or a Nazirite may not contract uncleanness because of their [dead] kindred, but they may contract uncleanness because of a neglected corpse” (m. *Naz.* 7:1). But regardless of the spiritual persuasion of the priest and the Levite, be they oral or written adherents of the law, the way Jesus frames the parable is telling. Sounding *almost* like G.E.M. Anscombe, Jesus seems to be advocating a jettisoning of rule based moral philosophy in favor of a virtue ethics framed in moral sentimentalist terms. Indeed, one can argue in the following way: if they were more concerned about their purity than a potentially ailing man, then their preoccupation with rules needs to be jettisoned. And if their actions were more akin to what we would call an ethical egoism framed within consequentialism, we (like Jesus’s intimation) are still inclined to categorize their behavior as reprehensible. Says Anscombe,

And so it will follow that you can exculpate yourself from the *actual* consequences of the most disgraceful actions, so long as you can make out a case for not having foreseen them. Whereas I should contend that a man is responsible for the bad consequences of his bad actions, but gets no credit for the good ones; and contrariwise is not responsible for the bad consequences of his good actions.<sup>142</sup>

In short, the priest and the Levite’s interpretation of the situation could have been mitigated by their allegiance to the written law, but what Jesus is advocating in this

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<sup>141</sup> Leviticus 21:1.

<sup>142</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe in “Modern Moral Philosophy” in *Virtue Ethics*, Roger Crisp and Michael Slote, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 37.

parable is a departure from such rule-based commitments in favor of moral actions derived from one's virtuous disposition. After the two holy men jettied off, here comes a despised Samaritan. The audience may have wrongly anticipated that he too would have scurried off, but this was not to be. Martin Luther King, Jr. summed up the essence of this parable in the following way:

That's a dangerous road. In the days of Jesus it came to be known as the "Bloody Pass."<sup>143</sup> And you know, it's possible that the priest and the Levite looked over that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around. Or it's possible that they felt that the man on the ground was merely faking. And he was acting like he had been robbed and hurt, in order to seize them over there, lure them over for quick and easy seizure. And so the first question that the Levite asked was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But then the Good Samaritan came by. And he reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"<sup>144</sup>

All four men faced the same danger. One was hurt and his future depended upon the empathy and care of the subsequent three. Given the discussion above, one can say that the difference between the holy men and the Samaritan is that of interpretation, responsibility, accountability and solidarity. Given their (potentially) different interpretations of the situation, they achieved different levels of responsibility. H. Richard Niebuhr defines responsibility as one's ability to respond to a particular situation or event.<sup>145</sup> Inherent in any situation or event, or at least a constitutive dynamic, there is a correct understanding, which is based upon the agent's interpretation. An agent's accountability level has to do with how much faith she has in her interpretation of the

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<sup>143</sup> George A. Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1928), 150. Buttrick adds to the litany of those who describes this iniquitous highway in morbid terms. He calls it the "Bloody Pass" as well. Even St. Augustine chimed in about how treacherous and dangerous this road was. It appears that this man was extremely foolish and perhaps (in a sense) brought this down upon himself (cf. Hultgren).

<sup>144</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "I See The Promised Land" in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, James M. Washington, ed., (San Francisco: Harper, 1986), 284-285.

<sup>145</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1963), 57-67.

event. Consequently, a responsible agent (in this context the priest, Levite, and Samaritan) is only as responsible as his/her genuine interpretation of the events given the available evidence. According to this guideline, the subjective moorings of the priest and Levite are subject to first person authority<sup>146</sup> and are quite impenetrable. Thus their desire to continue on their journey fails, in this context, to qualify as a (necessarily) wrong action. It does not seem wise to advocate for a moral obligation to help others if it means putting ourselves in harms way. Creating such a high standard for morality seems unfair, counterintuitive, and supererogatory. The Jericho road was an extremely treacherous one; any person coming to the aid of another in this context, particular with respect to how Jesus has outlined it, ascends to the level of supererogation. In other words, it would be beyond the scope of (commonsense) morality to require intervention in such a case. Thus it is not implausible to assert that the priest and the Levite were not acting maliciously (though they could have, or they could have been preoccupied with their own ritualistic concerns), but the truth is that at best we have to say that we are agnostic about their intentions. An argument for or against their moral aptitude is left undetermined.

We now turn our attention to the Samaritan, the fourth character in this parable, and the one to whom we are to derive an understanding of Jesus' perspective of empathy and care. A quick review of what the Samaritan did upon arriving on the scene is particularly helpful: *"he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him...'"* Upon seeing the wounded, half-dead man, the Samaritan's

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<sup>146</sup> See Donald Davidson, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3-14.

first response was pity. The Greek term for pity, and its corresponding meaning, demonstrates the affinity between the moral philosophy of Jesus, Smith and Hume. Once defined, we will note that the vocabulary of Jesus' ethical philosophy correlates quite nicely with that of 18<sup>th</sup> century moral sentimentalists.

In the New Testament, the term used for pity (and mercy) is synonymous with the verb for compassion (εσπλαγγισθη), but only with respect to the synoptic gospels. Elsewhere, the noun, in particular, has messianic significance, especially when "mercy" is emphasized. What is most jarring about εσπλαγγισθη is that it is used and defined in the same way as empathy, even though the word "sympathy" is used. We see this anachronistic connotation for empathy in the works of David Hume and Adam Smith, who themselves used sympathy to mean, "Feeling the pain that others feel," which, of course, is the modern definition of empathy. Adam Smith's discussion of "sympathy" seems to amount to an extreme of empathy—almost hyper-empathy. Says Smith, "Persons of delicate fibres (sic) and a weak constitution of body complain, that in looking at the sores and ulcers which are exposed by beggars in the streets, they are apt to feel an itching or an uneasy sensation in the correspondent part of their own bodies."<sup>147</sup> I do not think it's the case that Smith was advocating for a phenomenal or mystical kind of empathy,<sup>148</sup> but I think that his illustration is instructive. Empathic care is not just feeling sorry for someone, rather, it is a feeling what someone else is feeling such that one is moved to action. Like Jesus, Smith envisages a moral philosophy of empathy that is synonymous with compassion and is defined as εσπλαγγισθη. Thus Smith says, "The

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<sup>147</sup> Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in *The Essential Adam Smith*, Robert L. Heilbroner, ed. (New York: Norton and Co., 1986), 66.

<sup>148</sup> As in the work of Octavia Butler who conceptualizes a world where individual can feel and even bleed in response to the pains of others. See Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, (New York: Aspect, 1993)

compassion of the spectator must arise altogether from the consideration of what he himself would feel if he was reduced to the same unhappy situation, and, what perhaps is impossible, was at the same able to regard it with this present reason and judgment.”<sup>149</sup>

Smith’s explanation of empathy and compassion is undoubtedly what Jesus was trying to demonstrate in the parable of the Good Samaritan (as well as the other two places where *εσπλαγγισθη* is used in the New Testament), and it further demonstrates—implicitly if not explicitly—(the need for) the role of the one caring. Smith says nothing about care, but he seems to be moving in this direction.

Jesus, on the other hand, fails to see empathy and care as mutually exclusive phenomena, as say, a kind of *empathy without action*. Empathy without action, i.e., feeling without doing, seems to be oxymoronic to the ethical philosophy that Jesus was trying to espouse. Empathy requires action, and that action is called care. The reader has no way of knowing whether or not the priest or the Levite empathized with this man. They may have had feelings of empathy, but the nervosa associated with “The Bloody Pass” may have been enough to mitigate their empathic reactions. Certainly one or both of these men may have fallen to one of empathy’s (in the words of Martin Hoffman) “self-destructive capabilities.” For example, Hoffman asserts, “self-focused role-taking can trigger a process in which one gets caught up in ruminating about one’s own experiences and concerns and drifts out of the empathic mode... One imagines oneself in the victim’s situation; this leads to empathic distress plus associations to similar painful events in one’s past that provokes personal distress.”<sup>150</sup> This could have been true for the

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>150</sup> Martin Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 2000), 205.

two men, and we have no (hermeneutically) justifiable reason to say otherwise.<sup>151</sup> The difference maker, therefore, between the two men and their Samaritan counterpart is that the Samaritan *cared enough* go get involved. Care then, it seems, is the difference maker between empathy that is *indifferent* (or constrained for any number of reasons—justifiable or not) and empathy that *gets involved*. There are at least two other New Testament ways of making the same case. First, Paul says, “Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.”<sup>152</sup> In this text, the language of *seek the good of his neighbor* can also be interpreted “seek the well-being” or “wealth” of his neighbor. Being an aspirant for one’s neighbor more than being an aspirant for oneself seems counterintuitive, but this is the radical nature of Christian love, particularly as expressed in caring terms. This text clearly purports that there is a prohibition against *failing to care*. This text, more than any other, indicts the priest and the Levite. Even if they had reasons to be empathic and uncaring, those reasons must be seen as secondary to the needs of the man in distress. There can be no gainsaying the fact that they should have done something, they should have cared; they should have done as King suggested—they should have asked a different question.

A second New Testament way of making the same case can be found in James

2:14-17:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? <sup>15</sup> Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup> If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? <sup>17</sup> In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

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<sup>151</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), 92-95. Ramsey refutes the Stoic argument for universal brotherhood. What Jesus was attempting was much more personal. Jesus was suggesting that we should not just be friendly and acknowledge humans, but that we should extend ourselves in a “neighbor-regarding love for others.”

<sup>152</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:24.

Christian faith can be viewed in three ways, but two are of particular interest here: “faith as believing” and “faith as doing.” The former is a cognitive embrace of ideas (or an idea). It’s wholly mental. Analogously, Sherlock Holmes’ brother, Mycroft Holmes, can solve a case by never leaving his armchair. Sedentary and obese, he prefers the confines of his Diogenes club rather than actively and physically getting involved. Sherlock, on the other hand, was a man of physical action. Believing requires no action. Doing, on the hand, requires action. Faith as doing requires getting involved. It is not enough, according to the ethical philosophy of Jesus, to just have faith for some one’s well-being or flourishing. The agent must demonstrate her empathy by getting involved, by showing care even if it’s dangerous. The agent must allow his agape-love to empathize and care—and (in Noddings words) *jump across the chasm*. Martin Luther King, Jr. says, “Agape is not a weak passive love. It is love in action.”<sup>153</sup> Along these lines, caring is not supererogatory; it’s normative. The Samaritan, therefore, was not doing something supererogatory; he was just doing the right thing by caring. He was reversing the non-verbal questions of his predecessors on the Bloody Pass: *If I do not empathize with this man, if I do not stop to care for this man, what is going to happen to him?* (paraphrasing King).

Consequently, one can sum up this grand parable in the following way. There is no reason to believe that the priest or the Levite was evil or malicious, but there is reason to believe that they were indifferent or un-caring—apparently reason was more of a gripping force than sentiments. Their thought process seems eerily similar to Mary Wollstonecraft’s 18<sup>th</sup> century objection to Romantic sentimentalism as she heralded her contradiction of Jean Jacques Rousseau’s law of the heart. She said that sentiments

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., King, “An Experiment in Love,” 20.

should be held to the light of reason. Granted her primary objection was against the pigeon-holing of women as irrational creatures of feelings, unable to reason, but her rational preoccupation precluded any functional covet of the sentiments. Nevertheless, given their clerical profession of helping others, it is probably safer to say that these two men—the priest and the Levite—were fearful. Their fear led them to a misinterpretation of the facts and poor moral action. Jesus wants us to be chilled by the fact that these holy men of necessarily high moral content are obvious moral failures—and we are chilled. This chill is a biological stimulation that alerts our mechanism of disapproval. The converse would be the warmth we may feel toward the actions of the Samaritan, which is indicative of our approval.<sup>154</sup> On the other hand, with respect to the Samaritan, we can sum up his actions in more moral sentimentalist terms. Hoffman would say that the Samaritan’s empathy was congruent with his care. This language is explicit in the narrative as the Samaritan literally, “took care of him.” Noddings values this kind of caring relation of the one caring as a necessary requirement to the caring mechanism. In her words, “The caring relation, in particular, requires engrossment and motivational displacement on the part of the one caring and a form of responsiveness and reciprocity on the part of the one cared-for.”<sup>155</sup> As Slote points out, “engrossment” for Noddings is not the same as a garden-variety empathy—but it’s a kind of empathy (borrowing from Martin Hoffman) called mediated associative empathy. On this view, mediated associative empathy is not disharmonious with engrossment, which is more receptive. Caring persons “pays attention to, and are absorbed in, the way the other person structures the world and his or her relationship to the world—in the process of helping

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<sup>154</sup> For a more extensive conversation about moral approval and disapproval derived from sentiments, see Michael Slote, *Moral Sentimentalism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 27-44.

<sup>155</sup> Nel Noddings, *Caring*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 150.



that person.<sup>156</sup> The Samaritan demonstrates this empathy/engrossment phenomenology rather well. He unselfishly pays attention to and absorbs himself into the world of the man in need—the cared-for. No conjecture is needed—this parable clearly demonstrates Jesus an advocacy for moral approbation based upon empathic care.

### **Indifference as Counterintuitive to Jesus' Ethical Philosophy**

*And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop."<sup>17</sup> He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'*

<sup>18</sup> *"Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.'<sup>19</sup> And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"*

<sup>20</sup> *"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'*

<sup>21</sup> *"This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."<sup>157</sup>*

This parable is not as obvious a defense of empathy and care as the previous one. But it does show the congruence of deontology, empathy and care from a different angle, namely, that even in an act of omission (i.e. an agent's failure to include the well being of others—be they near and dear or far and away—in his contemplation), a reasonable observer would consider an action (or lack of action, or indifference) morally incongruous with her intuition. Indeed, it is morally worse to kill an innocent person than allowing her to die (if the agent can help), but our intuition, for the most part, asserts that there is something wrong with indifference. Thus surrendering deontology would not be in the best interest of empathy and care. As a matter of fact, deontology tends to cohere intuitively with the way we normally think about many acts: it is wrong to commit

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<sup>156</sup> Michael Slote, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 12.

<sup>157</sup> Luke 12:16-21.

murder, tell lies, harm others, break promises, etc. Giving up on deontology is tantamount to giving up on a good many of our intuitions, and are not these intuitions the driving force behind empathy and care? The task then, it seems to me, is to set aside the more rule-based features of deontology—particularly those that are held too closely to the weakest segment of Kant’s absolutist deontology—and hold deontology in tandem with empathy and care. This seems closer to what Jesus was trying to assert than what is garnered in the literature by most biblical interpreters—and even me a few years ago. It seems more plausible to assert that there is a sense of duty that we can derive from our intuitions, but it is the ‘motivation’ property inherent in empathy that motivates us to care-for others. The parable of the rich farmer is illuminating in this way.

That this parable is saddled with a plethora of theological jargon is one superficial reason why it is not as obviously about empathy and care as, say, the Samaritan parable, but it represents one of Jesus’ indirect teachings on moral sentimentalism. In other words, if we set aside the notion of divine judgment what we would get is a sentimentalist account of moral approval and disapproval with respect to Jesus’ moral philosophy. Contrasted, the two parables can represent a way to derive a sentimentalist approach to moral education from Jesus’ public talks. The moral sentimentalist understands that there is an intuitive (almost relativist, projectivist and/or emotivist) property to virtue theory, which is something that I think Jesus anticipated centuries ahead of the modern moral sentimentalist.

This “certain man” was already wealthy, for he owed his land and the crop that it produced. Although the text does not say he was a Jew, we can make this assumption since there is no contrary identification, like him being a Samaritan or any such

nationality. Written into the religious language of his day was the belief that “the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world and all who live in it.”<sup>158</sup> Thus common mythology would have encouraged the belief that God was the author of this great bounty. The narrative then shifts to a soliloquy where the reader is given access (thus more exegetical and hermeneutical privilege) to his private thoughts, but what we are able to see is not a positive soliloquy on care and concern. Indeed, what the reader is privy to is an apparent lonely man whose land was his world; he had a country to himself. His rumination reads more like a loss rather than a gain. His, “What shall I do?” was a pained *sigh* rather than a jubilant, fist-pumping: YES! The man was full of perplexity and conflicting emotions as he pondered his fate in life: he was blessed with abundance, having more than he would need for years to come—perhaps for the rest of his life—and the best resolution he can engender is that he would tear down his conventionally sized barns and build bigger ones. His morbid preoccupation with self and his profound sense of egoism blinds him to external cares and concerns. He says nothing about the world outside his private sphere; he ignored even the codes, adherence to which was a necessary part of citizenry.

The national code demanded that provisions be made for widows and orphans. Moses said, “When you reap your harvest in your field, and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.”<sup>159</sup> Two millennia of habituation made this a national “ought” such that one is even “warmed” (in sentimental terms) by this act of approbation. Upon hearing this parable one wonders if

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<sup>158</sup> Psalm 24:1.

<sup>159</sup> Deut. 24:19.

the hearers felt a sense of disapproval because the rich farmer failed to do what his duty demanded with respect to the law (which was derived from a universal benevolent code) or were they chilled in a sentimentalist way? At this point we cannot determine the stronger case, be it rationalism or sentimentalism, which Jesus may have been espousing. It can go both ways.

We can extend this objection to the farmer's behavior even further by including an additional policy that was already dealt with in detail earlier in this essay. It is clear that he was in violation of the law, but it's not so clear that he was in violation of Jesus' ethical philosophy unless we hold his actions in juxtaposition with what we already know about what Jesus would approve and disapprove. Per our earlier discussion, Jesus approves of all things consistent with "othering"—i.e. any action associated with loving one's neighbor (e.g., anyone who is in need like the widows and orphans). Jesus would disapprove of its contradiction. Thus we can see the periphery of deontology, but we can also see the makings of care and empathy *a fortiori*. The farmer's failure to be concerned (indeed to care-for or have empathy) for those that the (deontological) codes (and intuition) demands he should have some concern about, or his neighbor, whom Jesus had already declared we should have feelings for, demonstrates wrong action beyond the deontological account, and he is in error from a sentimentalist perspective as well. His indifference to the world around him; his lack of feelings (not reason) is what places his actions in contradiction to Jesus' sentimentalism. Plowing ahead in the parable would help to illuminate my point.

The rich farmer who gets his windfall bounty does something that is quite capitalistic; he builds more and bigger barns to enhance his private holdings. He does

nothing to enhance the public morale. Apparently, in his mind, the greater his gain is the greater his need for a comparable storage facility. The greater his large barns is the greater his cares—but for the wrong thing. Solomon avers, “Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless.”<sup>160</sup> One can infer that his failure to ascend to any deontological considerations can be offset by an appeal to a form of consequentialism, namely, ethical egoism. Truly, his entire rumination is an appeal to egoism: “Here’s what I will do: I will tear down my barns, I will build bigger ones, and I will store my grains and my goods. Then I will eat, drink, and be merry.” He never considers that the barns could burn or that moths, dust, rust and other elements may corrupt his fortune. His only care is that he will take his ease. Being a neighbor (i.e. feeling for others in a way that one empathizes for and are thus motivated to care) is alien to him.

Consequently, we can say in deontological and consequential terms (respectively) that a deontologist would find the rich farmer’s actions deplorable and the consequentialist (ethical egoist in particular) would find his actions admirable (the utilitarian would object as well and it is easy to see why. His refusal to sacrifice to create a maximized blessing for the masses would be deplorable). How then are we to understand this parable as a model for moral education regarding moral sentimentalism? From this narrative, how are we to understand wrong actions and right actions with respect to empathic care? We need look no further than the conclusion of the parable: *“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ ‘This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.’”* This

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<sup>160</sup> Ecclesiastes 5:10.

indictment of the rich farmer brings us full circle as well as gives us a clearer picture of what moral approval and disapproval means for Jesus. Being called a fool is one of the most derogatory expletives in the Bible. This term is set aside for anyone who holds a position that is a moral contradiction (not just a difference of opinion) to that of God (and in this case Jesus, who is the author of the teaching). It is not clear from the narrative that the death that will shortly seize this man is the direct result of his omission of others, or perhaps it is just his time to leave this world, but regardless of which, God's wrath is still kindled against the rich man's apathy.

The most salient phrase for our present concern is "but is not rich toward God." This phrase defines what Jesus is trying to teach. If we understand what is "rich toward God" (vs. what is materially rich) we would be in a better position to articulate those things that are approved by God (thus having moral warmth) and those things that are disapproved (thus having a moral chill). Having said this, we must understand rich-toward-God based upon what has already been stated. The Samaritan, i.e. anyone who exhibits empathic care derived from a virtuous love, is the personification of being rich-toward-God. Loving one's neighbor can be taken as having the moral weight and approval of rich-toward-God—they are synonymous. The rich farmer in his rumination never once considered his neighbor, and in so doing we have a chill, a disapproval—a wrong action. There is nothing in the text to suggest he was a sociopath, lacking the capacity to care about others; his pathology seems to be an egoism that is indifferent to the care and concern of others. Essentially, this rich farmer was poor toward God.

In conclusion, if the moral philosophy of Jesus is going to ever play a mainstream role in conversations about empathy and care, he must first be wrestled from the

theologically conservative pundits through a clearer and more precise hermeneutic and exegesis. Certainly Jesus' had the didactic tools to promote a moral education. The force of Christianity for two millennia alone is evidence, but one can be even more specific and point to his parables. From the parables we can derive the most specific teachings of Jesus. With this specificity we can locate particular moral themes like virtue, empathy and care, which are also terms that are appropriately used in the sentimental literature. It is interesting that although the Decalogue was present, and in some cases additional laws from the *midrash* and *Talmud*, these are not where Jesus references to make his point. He does not appeal to a universal rationality. He begins with the intuition that certain kinds of actions are inherently wrong, and we disapprove of them because we fail to see any empathic care in the agent's response to an event or situation. Such that empathic care is present, we emotive a certain feeling of approval. I have shown how this works in the ethical teachings of Jesus by examining his parables; now I want to demonstrate a practical approach from two interpreters of Jesus: Bishop Joseph Butler and Martin Luther King, Jr.

### **Joseph Butler and Martin Luther King, Jr., Reinvention of Christian Love**

Actress Sandra Bullock adopted a black child from Africa. When questioned about the morality of such an insensitive act, she responded, "*It does not matter what race, religion, ethnicity, or creed a child is. If I'm operating out of love how can I be wrong?*" Among the many things for which St. Augustine is famous is the dictum, "Love God and do whatever you please: for the soul trained in love to God will do nothing to offend the One who is Beloved." *Ahah!* Moments dominate the landscape of history with the advent of each new discovery or invention. From the 15<sup>th</sup> thru the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries such

*Ahah!* moments dominated the planet beginning with the Copernican Revolution, moving through Galileo, and unto Sir Isaac Newton. Something of an *Ahah!* moment happened for me when I read Michael Slote's important essay, "Ancient Ethics and Modern Moral Philosophy."<sup>161</sup> For a while I had been trying to locate the import of Jesus' moral philosophy, which seems to be distinctively religious, on a landscape that is dominated by secular theories. A cursory reading of the New Testament would suggest that the dominant love feature is agape-love, which is quite exclusive, limiting its scope to a religious view that is tied to salvation, heaven, (the Kingdom of God) and other other-worldly and metaphysical declarations.<sup>162</sup> But I find this way of understanding the rumination of Jesus as he traversed the first century Palestinian planes wholly unconvincing.<sup>163</sup> It seems to me that a more compensatory reading of the Gospels is necessary, and perhaps an approach other than the standard *Historical-Critical* method, given the myriad of different approaches at our disposal. Slote hints at the impact and contribution of Jesus' moral philosophy (at least with respect to agent-basing) in his *Morals From Motives* when he says, "Perhaps a more promising historical lode of agent – basing may be found in the Christian ethics of agapic love. Augustine, Malebranche, and many other Christian thinkers have regarded love for God as grounding love for one's fellow creatures and all moral virtue as well, and since love is an inner state, Christian morality (of this kind) may well be thought to exemplify agent-basing. And it may well be so."<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Michael Slote, "Ancient Ethics and Modern Moral Philosophy," in *Essays in the History of Ethics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 38-52.

<sup>162</sup> Writers, from St. Augustine to Paul Ramsey, has assumed this position.

<sup>163</sup> This is a major shift from a previous essay as I will mention later.

<sup>164</sup> Slote, *Morals From Motives*, 8-9



This section begins with an ontological analysis of love and the properties of love that are derived from such an analysis.<sup>165</sup> Ontology is always operating in the descriptive mode as it attempts give an account for the basic structure of any given thing. It cannot be speculative; it must describe the essence of things as they really are. For the purposes of the philosophy of love, I'm most interested in the kind of purchase that these properties have in the assembling of a moral theory, particularly the ethical philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth. Fundamentally this is quite complex for the following presumptive reason: Jesus spoke Aramaic while the evangelists documented his words in *koine* Greek. Therefore, how are we to be clear that the propositional attitudes or the intentional language, which Jesus had in his mind, were the exact correlation of the Greek terms (namely, *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*)? This is a rather dicey problem because later, in English, the tripartite Greek terms collapse into one term: love.<sup>166</sup> King argues that the first two are more sentimental (*eros* and *philia*), and the last one (*agape*) is not sentimental at all. If we attempt to embrace the three under one umbrella (the term "love") we find ourselves struggling to comprehend a rather unique idea. Even more complex, it seems to me, is trying to identify which hermeneutical stance is most meritorious. The traditional reading of the verse, "Love thy neighbor" can be interpreted as a notion of idealism that appears unachievable by the secularist. It seems partialistic to the secularist and it is interpreted as impartial to the theist. As taught by St. Augustine (354-430), love is the center of Jesus' teaching; it is an extremist position that incorporates even the love for one's enemy. As taught by Paul Ramsey (1913-1988), it is

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<sup>165</sup> I am significantly informed by Paul Tillich's claim, "And it may well be that the ethical nature of love is dependent on its ontological nature, and the ontological nature of love gets its qualifications from its ethical character." (Tillich,1954).

<sup>166</sup> Given the tenor and spatial limitations of this essay, I will assume that the Greek terms do in fact reflect the propositional attitudes and intentional language of Jesus.

inextricably bound to the Kingdom of God, utilizing a partialistic soteriological notion of grace.

On the other hand, Bishop Joseph Butler (1692-1752) and Martin Luther King Jr. (1928-1968) fashions the agape-love ethic of Jesus in more impartial terms. Butler envisages the virtues as appetites, affections, or passions that are accessible to all humans. Neighbor for him (like Mahatma Gandhi), and the lover of neighbor, is not necessarily beholden to an agape conception—agape and phileo seem merged into the English word “love.” He makes this interesting shift with the use of the term benevolence to represent love. King, quite similarly, though a Christian, was a liberal thinker who saw love in the sense of Butler. For King, the Greek form was not as obviously a soteriological constraint. The love of God (agape) was not something that Jesus had in view only for Christians. It was more of a universal phenomenon that was accessible to all humans of good will. King rejected St. Augustine’s and John Calvin’s concepts of original sin and the total depravity of each human being. As I will later show, right action was choice driven; it was not an anachronistic embrace of Adam’s disobedience.

From these four thinkers I will attempt to develop a rubric (i.e., a blueprint) for understanding Jesus’ philosophy of love. Let me be anticlimactic and stipulate that the virtue theory that encapsulates Jesus was quite unique. He was sentimentalist in that he was deeply empathic toward any particular human. He rejected the idea that reason should be the basis of our moral action; empathy should be the guiding light. At the same time he rejected love based upon sentiments—emotions. Such a love concept can be swayed to partialism (and even nationalism, classism, racism, ageism, etc). The kind of love Jesus espoused was contingent upon a genuine volition (indeed reasoning) that says

something like, “I choose to love not because of how I feel towards my neighbor—I’m disinterested; I am motivated by something much more impartial, much more deontological. I love because it is my duty as a citizen in a broader community.” This seems genuinely right and true. Philosophical theologian Paul Tillich queries, “The Great Commandment demands of everyone the total love of God and the total love of one’s neighbor...[but] if love is emotion, how can it be demanded? Emotions cannot be demanded. We cannot demand them of ourselves. If we try something artificial is produced...”<sup>167</sup> Tillich further avers, “love as an emotion cannot be commanded. *Either love is something other than emotions or the great commission is meaningless*” (italics mine).<sup>168</sup> Correlating this concept with the fact that the economy of love is generally passionate and emotion driven (consider any marriage, family or friendship. For example, what drives gay and lesbians desire for marriage is largely, in part, for an authentication of their mutual affections, passions, emotions) is the enigma of love being something else—something other than emotions. Consequently, the kind of moral philosophy that captured Jesus’ imagination (and later, Butler and King), is one that says, I love because it’s my duty, but I empathize because of my sentiments. My empathy flows from my duty to love (rather than my emotions in loving). This is the thesis I am attempting to develop.

### **Love of Neighbor in the Traditional Sense**

At any given time when an agent makes the English utterance, “I love you,” that agent can be saying something quite differently with respect to the Grecian meanings to which the term “love” subsumes. For example, the agent can be saying, “I *eros*-love

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<sup>167</sup> Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 4.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

you,” which connotes a romantic reference that a husband may utter to his wife. Or the agent can be saying, “I *philia*-love you,” which connotes the kind of reciprocal sentiment that two friends may have for each other. Or the agent can be saying, “I *agape*-love you,” which is the instantiating of a creative and redemptive good will for all human kind, that may or may not include a God consciousness, but does include a universal (less sentimental, more volitional) ordering. These three qualifications of love can be quite confusing and contribute to what Tillich calls “a jungle of ambiguity,”<sup>169</sup> the most complex being the last term, *agape*-love. In the previous chapter I remarked, “the most utilized Greek word for love in the New Testament, is *agape* (ἀγαπάω). There are times when *agape* and *phileo* appear to be synonymous, but when this happens it is *phileo* that is an approximation of *agape*, but it is never the reverse. Thus *agape* (and this is so only in the Bible, elsewhere one can expect the reverse to be true) is the higher-end love, and it is the primary love that Jesus and other New Testament writers are referencing. When the context has to do with familial or friendship relations, *phileo* becomes the preferred term. Consequently, *agape* is “Christian-love”; it is the love that Jesus wrenches (particularly from Greek tragedies and comedies) from the ancient world and adapts it to his particular teaching on *self-giving* love.”

After much contemplation and with a more intentional review of the literature, I no longer find the aforementioned view as compelling. I think that the traditional Christian interpretation of *agape* is far too constraining and is actually discourteous to the view that Jesus was advocating. It is my contention that a review of Bishop Butler and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr’s philosophy of *agape*-love would reveal a love-ethic that is much more congruent with the actual words of Jesus, and less myopic with respect to the

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 3.

triangulation of God-grace-love that points to a Christian soteriology. Let me give a brief review of the architects of this tradition as a point of departure: St. Augustine and Paul Ramsey.

St. Augustine, seventeen centuries after the publication of his two greatest works, *Confessions* and *City of God*, is arguably the greatest of the Christian theologians. His rejection of Pelagius' preoccupation with the doctrine of *Free Will* (i.e. personal choice in salvation) as well as his doctrine of *Original Sin*<sup>170</sup> is legendary. Today his work and influence, though popularized by John Calvin in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, is still at the helm of many protestant denominations, among them Baptists, Presbyterians, and Lutherans. Though radical (and perhaps liberal) in his day, Augustine's work is quite conservative by today's standards. Augustine argues for an objective and universal dichotomy of right and wrong that is delineated metaphorically through images of "light and dark" but ideally governed by love as the center. Those who are the "children of light" are ostensibly the children of God. The main corollary to God is Jesus Christ and he is the light of the world. The most prudential activity that a human being can perform is any action or activity that brings one closer to Jesus Christ. Says Augustine in his hermeneutic of 1 John 1:4, "Perhaps we shall come near that light, if we know what it is and set ourselves before it that we may have enlightenment from it. *In ourselves we are darkness: enlightened by it we may become light*" (italics mine).<sup>171</sup> There are only two options here: if one is in close proximity to Jesus, such a person is moving in the right direction, they are committing right action as children of light. If one is not in close proximity to Jesus, such is one of the children of darkness. It appears, therefore, that what

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<sup>170</sup> This is the doctrine that Adam's fall cast all human beings into sin, which is one's disobedience or transgressing of God's will. Our blood connection to Adam demands that we are never free from sin.

<sup>171</sup> St. Augustine, *Augustine: Later Works*, 262.

determines what is right or wrong has to do with proximity to the mind of Jesus—one’s moral philosophy is contingent about how well one can excavate Jesus’ moral epistemology. But how does this work? Augustine further argues that what brings one into juxtaposition with the mind of Jesus is one’s willingness to yield to the concept of love that Jesus espouses. Whatever leads to the maximization of love, that love which yields from a pure heart, is the right thing to do. Governing this inference is John’s words, “He that says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is still in darkness.”<sup>172</sup>

According to this principle, the love ethic is not recipient-dependent; it is other-regarding, for the same one who says, “Love your neighbor” also says, “Love your enemies.” There is no stipulation with respect to the recipient. The instructions are to the *lover* not the *loved*. It is the responsibility of those who are in the light to love anyone, regardless if they are children of light or children of dark. In short, a person who stays in close proximity to Jesus, walking in his steps, following in his precepts, will eventually develop his moral epistemology and moral psychology. This is similar indeed to Aristotle’s penchant for moral education (I will set aside pedigree here) first by parenting, then by habituation. The main property of Jesus’ moral epistemology is an other-regarding love, regardless of the recipient.

The final part of the brief summation above is the thorniest. Later in his treatise John mentions that we ought to “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If anyone loves the world the love of the father is not in him.”<sup>173</sup> Are we to take this to mean a rejection of material things? Or should we go further to include people? Augustine argues, “Two loves there are, of the world and of God: if the love of the world

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<sup>172</sup> 1 John 2:9-10.

<sup>173</sup> 1 John 2:15.

dwells in us, the love of God can find no entrance. The love of the world must depart, the love of God come in to dwell: make room for the better love.”<sup>174</sup> The inclination seems to be (per Augustine’s interpretation) that we must ascend toward an internal, and exclusive, God love. We should not “love the world,” but we should become so saturated with God’s love (through proximity to God through Jesus) that we are able to love our enemies. In other words, God would show us how to love in this partialistic moral epistemology that includes some (the children of light) and excludes others (children of darkness). Humankind does not know who and how to love until we are somehow saturated with God, which appears to be, in principle, somewhat like Aristotle’s contemplation of the divine.<sup>175</sup> Proximity to God equals a kind of contemplation of and in God so that adherents can determine right from wrong. Augustine sees a connection between the will of God, word of God, and love of God such that contemplation on these matters brings about a proximity to God and right action. I would submit, in defense of Augustine, that he is not trying to say that the Christian should only assist her Christian neighbor, who is a child of the light. This is an obvious contradiction to what the Jesus was trying to put forth in the *Good Samaritan* and other parables of assisting neighbor, but Aristotle does seem to be ambiguous with respect to how far we should extend the neighbor metaphor. Perhaps his moral philosophy is limited to his lack of mass communication. For him every neighbor is of the *near and dear* type. Globalization was nowhere near his imagination. Pictures of starving, “heathen” children in Darfur region of the Sudan was not in his view, therefore understanding our obligation to those who are *far and away* is not helped by Augustine. We come away from his writing with the

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid, Augustine, 274.

<sup>175</sup> See, M. F. Burnyeat, “Aristotle on Learning to be Good,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*. ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 69-92.

concession that his moral philosophy is limited to his antiquity and is inherently partialistic.

One of the most durable and enterprising themes of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s liberation crusade was his interpretation of "love your enemies" and the force of this "Christian" doctrine with respect to his chief goal of a quasi-utopian "Beloved Community." There is a *prima facie* sense in which his prognostication of this virtue is not dissimilar to what Jesus was advocating and what Bishop Joseph Butler anticipated, but a closer analytical scrutiny would reveal that what King was advocating was different from Jesus and St. Augustine. His attempt was a much more ambitious reinvention of Christian love—something that perhaps was never more clearly outlined than in his and Butler's work. What both King and Butler were able to accomplish was a secularized version of agape (in the form of the Beloved Community) that was not too different from Jesus' Kingdom of God.



## Chapter 4

### The Challenge of Conceptualizing Christian Ethics

*Perhaps a more promising historical lode of agent-basing may be found in the Christian ethics of agapic love. Augustine, Malebranche, and many other Christian thinkers have regarded love for God as grounding love for one's fellow creatures and all moral virtue as well, and since love is an inner state, Christian morality (of this kind) may well be thought to resemble agent-basing. And it may well do so. But that conclusion is, nonetheless, far from unproblematic and obvious. Much depends on how one understands God love for us and the relation between that love and human love toward God and other (human) creatures. If loving all other human beings is admirable or obligatory simply because all (agapic) love, whether our own or God's, is clearly morally good and praiseworthy, then we probably have an instance of agent-basing. But if we say...that love is obligatory for and praiseworthy in us, because we owe God obedience or submission as our Creator and/or Redeemer, and God wants us to love one another, then we seem to be presupposing an independent deontological rule or standard, and the view we are committed to is not (purely or primarily) agent-based.—Michael Slote*

*The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: Jealous and proud of it; A petty, unjust and unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.--Richard Dawkins*

*Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue,<sup>10</sup> and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"<sup>11</sup> He said to them, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?"<sup>12</sup> How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! **Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.**"<sup>13</sup> Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other.<sup>14</sup> But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.<sup>176</sup>*

### A Re-imagining of God and the Word of God

This chapter screams for a prolegomena, i.e., a place where I can demystify my vernacular, idioms and my binary (religious and racial) point of departure. I am a Christian/black amalgam. I view the world through the lenses of my faith and my race,

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<sup>176</sup>Matthew 12:9-14

but I do not view either one as monolithic. From the early 16<sup>th</sup> century birth of the Protestant Reformation, and from the 17<sup>th</sup> century Western embrace of black slavery, Christianity conceded its Catholic uniformity in favor of a heterogeneous (and often disparaged) movement. There no longer exists a unified Christianity. I think I had already come to this conclusion—i.e., that there is no one size fits all Christianity—before I read David Tracy, whose argument to expand pluralism was already indigenous to my Christian/black community:

To expand the cultural, philosophical, and religious horizons of the discussion, so prominent across the disciplines today, between modernity and postmodernity is also to let go of a category that was once my favorite, namely pluralism. Pluralism still seems to assume that there is a center with margins. In fact, anyone who is aware of the contemporary discussion now knows that there is no such center any longer. Pluralism is no longer adequate to describe our situation. Perhaps we need a new word like polycentrism—a word that tries to articulate the reality of the many centers that are now present in our culture.<sup>177</sup>

Tracy contrasts the homogenous category of totality with the heterogeneous category of *fragments*, which he develops to indicate the influence of subjectivity on broader categories. Thus I cannot speak of a catholic (nor Catholic) Christianity since this is a category that no longer exists. And I cannot speak of African American, because this category smacks of myopia and ambiguity. The terms “black” and “African American” are quite synonymous in America, but not elsewhere in the world, and even in America there is confusion, as with blacks who are not American (e.g., Africans, Jamaicans, and other Caribbean natives) though living in America. So I choose to avoid “African American” as a racial classification, utilizing it only within very narrow political parameters. I must now strengthen my case and demonstrate this relevance to biblical hermeneutics and agent-based virtue ethics.

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<sup>177</sup> David Tracy, “African American Thought: The Discovery of Fragments,” in *Black Faith and Public Talk*, ed. Dwight Hopkins, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 30.

Black and Christian may seem like artificial values or additive features of an already saturated quest for normativity, and this well may be the case had it not been for the very real “psychic scars and existential wounds”<sup>178</sup> of blacks in the occidental world. It would be imprudent to pursue normativity at the expense of my binary features—black and Christian. My normative quest, i.e., my quest to comprehend and defend a particular (Christian) moral system, should not be an advocate for the dismissal or sacrifice of my racial/cultural worldview. My normative quest should be based upon a metaethics that is far too sophisticated and robust to concede to historical marginalization and minimization. Giving up any of these two values are inconceivable and regressive. Professor Peter Paris fortifies my thoughts when he says, “Europeans long viewed the goodwill of Africans toward strangers as evidence of their ‘child-like’ nature and, hence, justification for their enslavement.”<sup>179</sup> Similarly, Cornel West offers an interesting critique of Martin Luther King, Jr’s perspective on the black/Christian amalgam,

The most recent instance of weak exceptionalism is surprisingly the great Martin Luther King’s doctrine of nonviolence. This doctrine tends to assume tacitly that Afro-Americans have acquired, as a result of their experience, a peculiar capacity to love their enemies, to endure patiently suffering, pain, and hardship and thereby ‘teach the white man how to love’ or ‘cure the white man of his sickness.’ King seemed to believe that Afro-Americans possess a unique proclivity for nonviolence, more so than do other racial groups, that they have a certain bent toward humility, meekness, and forbearance, hence are quite naturally disposed toward nonviolent action. In King’s broad overview, God is utilizing Afro-Americans—this community of *caritas* (other-directed love)—to bring about ‘the blessed community.’ He seemed confident that his nonviolent movement was part of a divine plan. He was the drum major of ‘this mighty army of love.’<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Cornel West in a speech given at Kennesaw State University in the spring of 1995.

<sup>179</sup> Peter Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for Common Moral Discourse*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 23

<sup>180</sup> Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: an Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 74-5.

Black Christianity in American has always been more ambivalent than Christianity more general. Any oppressed group or person would do well to understand, as early as is humanly possible, what their options are (and, indeed, what their implied limitations are). If there exists, whether figurative or literal, a “Colored” and “Whites Only” pair of water fountains, or two churches within a single church building (as in the balcony where blacks were relegated, known as “Nigger-Heaven”), or two First Baptist churches in most towns, thus demarcating Black Christianity and White Christianity, then these parameters and options should be made clear in order for there to be a disambiguated phenomenology of black religiosity and morality. A central idea to my thesis was argued by black theologian, Major Jones, “The essential question for the average black person within the context of a pro-white society is not ‘Does God exist?’ It is, rather, the much deeper question: ‘Does God care?’<sup>181</sup> In the previous chapter I argued, following Heidegger, that care lies at the core of God’s ontology. Hermeneutics that cast God as masculine (thus wholly justice and rarely merciful) only serves to harm to the text’s authenticity, and this is precisely how God has been cast in the minds of Christians in general, and blacks more particularly. Consider the conversation between Miss. Celie and her lesbian lover, Shug Avery, in Alice Walker’s, *The Color Purple*.

...Us worry about God a lot. But when you feel loved by God, us do the best us can do to please him with what us like.  
 You telling me God love you, and you ain’t never done nothing for him? I mean, not go to church, sing in the choir, feed the preacher and all like that?  
 But if God love me, I don’t have to do all that. Unless I want to. There’s a lot of other things I can do that I speck God likes.  
 Like what? I ast.  
 Oh, she say, I can just lay back and admire stuff. Be happy. Have a good time.  
 Well, this sounds like blasphemy, sure nuff.  
 She say, Celie, tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church

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<sup>181</sup> Major Jones, *Christian Ethics for Black Theology*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 67.

I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They came to church to *share* God, not find God.  
 ...Then she say, Tell me what your God look like, Celie.  
 Aw naw, I say. I'm too shame. Nobody ever ast me this before. So I'm sort of took by surprise. Besides, when I think about it, it don't seem quite right. But it all I got. I decided to stick up for him, just to see what Shug say.  
 Okay, I say. He big and old and tall and graybearded and white...that's the one in the White folks' Bible.  
 There ain't no way to read the Bible and not think God white, she say. When I find out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest.<sup>182</sup>

This interaction between two marginalized black women is consistent with other conceptions of God in this genre.<sup>183</sup> To be sure, considering how theodicy is often linked to people of color, it just doesn't seem like God cares about blacks in America (and to some extent, worldwide). Nevertheless, three prominent motifs in the dialogue between Miss. Celie and Shug Avery are germane to black Christian ideology.

First, God is male. In the minds of most theists (and non-theists) God is perceived as a masculine overlord. Inquiries about whether or not God cares about women are derived from interpretations of God as masculine, but the Hebrew Bible never makes this claim; it is patriarchal culture that manufactures such images. From as far back as chapter one of Genesis, feminine images of God were popular, though not prominent given the level of androcentricism. The Priestly writers said, "The Spirit of Elohim was hovering over the waters."<sup>184</sup> This is a motherly protective metaphor, not unlike that of a hen brooding over her chicken. This metaphor is evident elsewhere in the Pentateuch when God renders several soliloquies, "Did I conceive this entire people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking

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<sup>182</sup> Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1982), 200-2

<sup>183</sup> Cf. Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, et.al.

<sup>184</sup> Genesis 1:2.

child,’ to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors?”<sup>185</sup> “As an eagle, teaching her young to make their flight, with her wings outstretched over them, takes them up on her strong feathers...”<sup>186</sup> But these texts matter very little to generations of peoples who were taught to conceive of God only as masculine. Asking whether or not God cares is neither aloof nor arrogant; it is central to the mental state of those longing to identify with God as a primary caregiver. Blacks, however, (particularly black women) have developed an alternative consciousness in order to help them deal with the image of a dissociative God; they moved away from high Christology in favor of a low Christology. Or, they moved from the metaphysical Christ—who is a figure far too abstract to be relatable—to an existential (physical) Jesus. Professor Jacqueline Grant articulates this point rather well,

In the experiences of Black people, Jesus was ‘all things.’ Chief among these however, was the belief in Jesus as the divine co-sufferer, who empowers them in situations of oppression. For Christian Black women in the past, Jesus was their central frame of reference. They identified with Jesus because they believed that Jesus identified with them. As Jesus was persecuted and made to suffer undeservedly, so were they. His suffering culminated in the crucifixion. *Their crucifixion included rape, and babies being sold.*<sup>187</sup> (Italics mine)

The italicized statement above represents an additional wedge for how black (Christian) women envisioned the notion of care. White women and black women were motivated by two very different epistemologies: “Because Black women were not considered the sisters of White women during slavery, they were not exempt from the tyranny of the system...The terms ‘misus’ and ‘mistress’ implied for White women a status which

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<sup>185</sup> Hebrews 11:12.

<sup>186</sup> Deuteronomy 32:11

<sup>187</sup> Jacqueline Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Black Womanist Response*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 212.

Black women did not have.”<sup>188</sup> In short, when we compare the needs of black and white women, a chasm appears between their experiences and their care concerns. The title of black female novelist Bebe Moore Campbell’s novel, “*Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine*” conveys the tacit contrasts between black and white women.

A second point that we can glean from the dialogue between Miss. Celie and Shug Avery is how comfortable they are in their image of God as being a quasi-masochist. Indeed, as God is aesthetically identified with the white male slave master, there is an inherent adversarial relationship between (conceptions of) God and blacks. Theologian and philosopher Howard Thurman illustrates this point rather well as he relates an encounter he had while lecturing in Sri Lanka. He and the principal of the Law College, University of Colombo, had a very interesting exchange:

What are you doing over here? I know what the newspapers say about a pilgrimage of friendship and the rest, but that is not my question. What are *you* doing over here? This is what I mean. More than three hundred years ago your forefathers were taken from the western coast of Africa as slaves. The people who dealt in the slave traffic were Christians. One of your famous Christian hymn writers, Sir John Newton, made his money from the sale of slaves to the New World. He is the man who wrote ‘How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds’ and ‘Amazing Grace’—there may be others, but these are the only ones I know. The name of one of the famous British slave vessels was ‘Jesus.’ The men who bought the slaves were Christians. Christian ministers, quoting the Christian apostle Paul, gave the sanction of religion to the system of slavery. Some seventy years or more ago you were freed by a man who was not a professing Christian, but was rather the spearhead of certain political, social and economic forces, the significance of which he himself did not understand. During all the period since then you have lived in a Christian nation in which you are segregated, lynched, and burned. Even in the church, I understand, there is segregation. One of my students who went to your country sent me a clipping telling about a Christian church in which the regular Sunday worship was interrupted so that many could join a mob against one of your fellows. When he had been caught and done to death, they came back to resume their worship of their Christian God.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>189</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1949), 13-4.

The Hindu host said, in closing, “Sir, I don’t mean to be rude...but I think you are a traitor to all the darker skin peoples of the earth.”<sup>190</sup> Indeed, being a Christian and black is a strange amalgam in America. It is quite a thought to ponder, for the whole idea seems rather schizophrenic and fragmenting. But it appears that Blacks are used to this dualistic phenomenon. In W.E.B. Dubois 1903 collection of essays entitled *The Souls of Black Folks*, he says that there remains an unasked question between white Americans and the American Negro, “How does it feel to be a problem?”<sup>191</sup> Not only is the black Christian a unique oxymoron, she and he are also thought to be a “problem.” How many races of people in human history embraced the language, identity, and the God of their overlords? To this end, Dubois illustrates what he calls the “double-consciousness” of the American Negro:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the eyes of others, by measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that look’s on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being tossed asunder.<sup>192</sup>

Subsequently, Dubois avers, “[The American Negro] simply wishes to make it possible for a [person] to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly on his face.”<sup>193</sup> Even though Dubois is clear that there are two worlds (i.e., an American / a Negro), he is also clear that these two are a unique amalgam in which “two warring ideals” struggle to find some sense of self. His perception of the *self* is one that anticipates an ongoing

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990; 1903), 7.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 9.



vilification of being an *outsider-within*.<sup>194</sup> White God. White Christianity. White America. White Justice. White System.<sup>195</sup> It doesn't appear that God cares or is empathic about the historical black plight and the struggle against what Ralph Ellison calls black *invisibility*.<sup>196</sup> Ellison, of course, was not referring to physical invisibility; he was using figurative language to highlight the refusal of society to see him as a human person.

It is truly difficult to understand the dualistic metaphysics of black Christianity. Ostensibly, black Americans must either accept secular systems like slavery, racism and discrimination while denying God's apparent malevolence, or they can embrace God and reconstruct a sacred hermeneutic that explains God's silence on salient matters. This seems oxymoronic, but this is only the case if one is referring to black Christianity in America. For the African, there is no disunity between the sacred and the secular. African theologian, John Mbiti is quite affirming when he states,

Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the field where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated he takes religion with him to the examination room in school or to the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament. Although many African languages do not have a word for religion as such, it nevertheless accompanies the individual from long before his death to long after his physical death.<sup>197</sup>

Peter Paris continues, "In spite of their many and varied religious systems, the ubiquity of religious consciousness among African peoples constitutes the single most important common characteristic. Thus John Mbiti's claim that secularity has no reality in the African experience is affirmed by all scholars of African religion."<sup>198</sup> In Jesus (more so

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<sup>194</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 14-16.

<sup>195</sup> Cf. Bruce Wright, *Black Robes, White Justice*, (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1993) and Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black & White: separate, hostile, Unequal*, (New York: Scribner, 1992).

<sup>196</sup> Cf. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, (New York: Vintage International, 1947).

<sup>197</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1970), 2-3.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, Paris, 27.

than “God”) black Christians can derive a “quality of life”<sup>199</sup> where Jesus cares, even if God seems more masochistic than helpful. James Scott in his text, *Weapons of the Weak*, makes the claim that oppressed people have weapons that can be used against hegemonic systems, including a hegemony orchestrated by “God.”<sup>200</sup> For black Christians Jesus is the main weapon of the weak. The popular hymn “No, not one”<sup>201</sup> illustrates this idea.

There’s not a friend like the lowly Jesus, no, not one! no, not one! None else could heal all your soul’s diseases, no, not one! no, not one!

No friend like Him is so high and holy, no, not one! no, not one! And yet no friend is so meek and lowly, no, not one! no, not one!

There’s not an hour that He is not near us, no, not one! no, not one! No night so dark but His love can cheer us, no, not one! no, not one!

Did ever saint find this Friend forsake him? no, not one! no, not one! Or sinner find that He would not take him? no, not one! no, not one!

Was e’er a gift like the Savior given? no, not one! no, not one! Will He refuse us a home in heaven? no, not one! no, not one!

**Refrain:** Jesus knows all about our struggles; He will guide till the day is done. There’s not a friend like the lowly Jesus, no, not one! no, not one!<sup>202</sup>

Jesus serves as the antithesis to any appearance of a malevolent Hebrew God.

This point is illustrated well in Genesis 4:2b where there is a rather intriguing story about the “first” two recorded biblical brothers (Cain and Abel), one that (phenomenologically) casts God as an absolutist deontologist. Cain was a farmer and Abel was a shepherd.

Apparently, God is displeased with Cain’s sacrifice because he failed to offer his “first-fruit,” but God is pleased with Abel’s sacrifice because he intuitively offers his

“firstling.” Quite bothersome is the fact that we can find no information in any of the previous chapters to suggest that God had rendered a prohibition against anything less

<sup>199</sup> Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Press, 1993), 20-33.

<sup>200</sup> James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, (Hartford: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>201</sup> Although this hymn was written by a white hymnologist, Johnson Oatman, it has become one of the mainstays of black Christianity.

<sup>202</sup> Osbeck, K. W., *Amazing grace: 366 inspiring hymn stories for daily devotions*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1996), 77.

than “first.” But as a consequence, what we are told is that because of God’s graciousness to Abel, Cain was so tremendously upset with Abel that he decided to murder his little brother. God (having instigated the rift) then raises a most peculiar question, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted?”<sup>203</sup> Stephen Breck Reid correlates this text and the black American experience as he offers a fitting response to God’s inquiry, “‘No!’ Cain would say, ‘I will not be acceptable.’ No matter where you teach, no matter how much money you make ...you cannot make a person of color into a white person.”<sup>204</sup> In this passage the writer masterfully initiates a blame-the-victim motif. Cain, the victim, is angered by God. Cain is thus offended and wants to lash out against his oppressor—in Cain’s mind, an uncaring God with an egoistic and masochistic complex—but his oppressor is too big. “The self-indulgent king in the guise of God has mistreated Cain. Now Cain attacks the innocent Abel. What better analogy is there for black on black crime? When you cannot effectively victimize those who structurally keep you out, then you victimize those close at hand,<sup>205</sup> which is a perpetuation of the charge that God has rarely been favorable to blacks in the West. From slavery to the Haitian earthquake, to the HIV/AIDS crisis, to the overrepresentation of blacks in penal institutions, there is a very bothersome question asked in the black community, “why does God hate niggers?” Many black pastors, while publically authenticating the love, empathy and care of God, may privately state, “There is no empirical proof to suggest that God loves Black people.”

Perhaps this conclusion would have been easier to reject if it was an isolated event, but this is not the case. In Luke 7:11-17 the reader is confronted with a mother

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<sup>203</sup> Genesis 4:6.

<sup>204</sup> Stephen Breck Reid, *Experience and Tradition*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990): 40.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

losing her son. This woman was left alone to run her household, just like the black female who disproportionately runs her household without the benefit of her dead or incarcerated or AWOL male companion. For at least the second time in her life death had visited this woman's home. And this time, her prosperity and fecundity of her future were all but eliminated. Then,

soon afterwards [Jesus] went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had *compassion* for her and said to her, 'Do not weep.' Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, rise!' The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.

Thus the black mother asks today (given her contextual vernacular), "Why isn't Jesus having compassion; YHWH obviously hates niggers, does Jesus hate niggers too?" How then must black (Christian) Americans read texts hinting that God is a white racist? Is there any redeeming value to this God? Does God care about people of color?<sup>206</sup>

Renita Weems, in her very important article, "explore(s) the way by which African American women (marginalized by gender and ethnicity, and often class) continue to regard the Bible as meaningful." She seeks to demystify (or demythologize) the biblical record insofar as it is injurious to the community of the marginalized. For example, slaves en masse were not individually acquainted with the Bible. Because reading was outlawed they had to meet God on a "spiritual" rather than a biblical level. Therefore, since they "were without allegiance to an official text, translation or interpretation ...once they heard biblical passages read and interpreted to them, they in turn were free to remember and repeat in accordance with their own tastes and interests."

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<sup>206</sup> Cf. William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).

More bluntly, “the experience of oppression has forced the marginalized reader to retain the right, as much as possible, to resist those things within the culture and the Bible that one finds obnoxious or antagonistic to one’s innate sense of identity and to one’s basic instincts for survival.” This is the reading of the marginalized: he or she must no longer subjugate his or her experiences in favor of the dominant or overarching voices or themes in the Bible.<sup>207</sup>

In short, the reader must choose where to align himself/herself when reading the Bible. By and large the Bible was written by men for men. Women then are forced to accept this second class citizenry or be adversarial to this text (or ethos) which has not considered their plight. People of color must find hope in other texts that are in favor of their experiences, wholly recognizing that the Bible was never (necessarily) their point of departure. Whereas it seems like the God of a European hegemony is indifferent to black concerns, an alternative consciousness would reveal a God who moves based upon certain dynamics.

My final reflection on the dialogue between Miss. Celie and Shug Avery points to the thrust of this chapter, namely, the ethical philosophy of Jesus, and the agent-based, virtue ethical Christian tradition that stands as my point of departure. Recall the interchange, “You telling me God love you, and you ain’t never done nothing for him? I mean, not go to church, sing in the choir, feed the preacher and all like that? But if God love me, I don’t have to do all that. Unless I want to.” God’s love for all humans is motivation for us to do admirable acts; God’s love doesn’t make our actions obligatory. This is the impetus that allows me to take seriously Jesus’ ethical philosophy as central to

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<sup>207</sup> Renita Weems, “African American Women and the Bible” in *Stony the Road We Trod*, ed. Cain Hope Felder, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 59

my life and vocation. Love is paramount in my life, and it is here that I ground my moral sentiments of empathy and care in what I scheme *the triangulation*. I don't believe that the metaphysics of the triangulation is only accessible for Christians. This seems like reductionism. The love of God is far too immense, in my estimation, to be central to Christians while being elusive to adherents of Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism and so on. As a matter of fact, my convictions are *anathema* to some (I am referring to Christian evangelicals, conservatives, and fundamentalists), but I believe that I have biblical basis for the angle of analysis I defend. Consequently, my hermeneutics do not vilify whites and revere blacks, but my hermeneutics do take into account a necessary suspicion of texts that seem antagonistic to God's ontological structure, which is a structure that that accentuates the triangulation.

### **The Conceptual Challenge Continues: The Abusing God**

How is Christian ethics best conceived? The metaethics of some moral theories fails to cohere with the general thesis of Christian ethics. Non-cognitivist arguments, like emotivism, are far too unstable for Christian ethics. Consequentialist theories demand far too much of the moral agent, is far too dismissive of the integrity of actions, and places far too much weight on certainty of consequences, which is beyond what is legitimate for human faculty. Relativism, of any kind, can be quite nerve racking. Ethical subjectivism (at its worst) can produce megalomaniacal Hitlers or socio-pathological Bundys, while cultural relativism can be far too supportive of the American Slavocracy or the Jewish Holocaust. Socrates summarily refuted the Divine Command theory, putting to rest the idea that even God can't make right something that is categorically wrong. Inherent

contradiction in this way means that God's multi-omni attributes (omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, omnipresent) immediately begs the question.

The metaethical theories demonstrating the most fecundity for Christian ethics are deontology and virtue ethics, but creating a positive account of how such an amalgam will work is not *prima facie* clear and unproblematic. Christian ethics has a cornucopia of twists and turns. Conceiving a theory that jibes well with it, negotiating the many pitfalls, while staying true to the propositions and teachings of Jesus, is not easy. One of the most immediate problems is that Christian ethics is different from biblical ethics. Christian conservatives and fundamentalists would likely see little difference between the two, but there is a genuine difference. Biblical ethics is founded on the principles of two conflated religions, thus grounding morality in the Old Testament (model of God) and perpetuating this narrative into the gospels (image of Jesus the incarnation of God) and the evangelic thrust. Christian ethics, on the other hand, takes the birth, ministry, teachings, life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the primary point of departure. Thus, Biblical ethics is grounded in rules, especially the Old Testament Decalogue<sup>208</sup> and Christian ethics is grounded in virtue, primarily the virtue of love. In short, the ambivalence in Michael Slote's words above is rooted in the incongruity of the Biblical ethics / Christian ethics dichotomy. Notice Slote's caution with the language of "*we seem*

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<sup>208</sup> The Decalogue was synonymously the moral law. As such it is "the standard of moral measurement in deciding what was right or wrong, good or evil, was fixed in the unwavering and impeccably holy character of Yahweh, Israel's God. His nature, attributes, character, and qualities provided the measuring stick for all ethical decision."

Enns, P. P. (1989). *The Moody handbook of theology* (57). Chicago, IL: Moody Press as quoted from Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, p. 114. The moral law (i.e. The Decalogue) differs radically from the ceremonial laws described mainly in Exodus 25:1–40:38 (as well as in Leviticus and Deuteronomy) and the civil law. Ceremonial law involves the tabernacle, the clothing and function of the priests, and the sacrifices and offerings. The civil law involves many of the laws appearing in Exodus 21:1–24:18, as well as in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. These laws reflect social concerns whereby the Israelites would live with proper concern for their neighbors in the mediatorial kingdom. The laws have reference to slaves, injury to others, property rights, oppression of widows and orphans, money lending, and many other concerns.

to be presupposing” and his restraint with, “*is not (purely or primarily) agent-based.*” He is not being capricious or banal; he’s being quite intelligent. The virgin indeed looks pregnant.

Of course not everyone agrees with my assessment of the Slotian analysis. Others have weighed in with their critique. And I will give more space to their observations later, but the tenor of this essay is quite ambitious: Christian ethics is best conceived as agent-based virtue ethics. Inculcated in all believers of Jesus Christ is agape-love; believers are dispositionally grounded in the agape-love that Jesus spoke and taught. As representatives of the love-ethic of Jesus, their admirable traits and nobility can be seen in their other-regarding dispositions of care and empathy to neighbor, enemy and the world community.

One can argue, and they would be fully justified in doing so, that Judaism and Christianity are fundamentally *not* the same. They are two different (monotheistic) religions, and two different ethical/moral systems that are sometimes far more dissimilar than they are similar. Their moral structures are not the same, especially when they are conceived independently of each other. Still the Judeo-Christian amalgam is regularly articulated as a monolith. Independently, Judaism has a legalistic structure that is wholly dependent upon (and derived from) Moses furnishing the Jews two sets of laws on Mount Sinai: a written law (the Decalogue) and an oral law.<sup>209</sup> Such that the positive objectives of these laws were to constrain the behaviors of the moral agents by compelling them to act in accordance with a particular set of rules, commands, laws and obligations, one can

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<sup>209</sup> John Rogerson, “The Old Testament and Christian Ethics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Robin Gill, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 29. The oral law can be found in the third century Mishnah, the fourth century Tosephta, and the fourth to ninth century Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds.



infer that the moral structure of Judaism in the Old Testament (hereafter called “Hebrew Bible” or HB) is clearly deontological (either categorical or prima facie; but we shall see later). On the other hand, between Babylonian captivity of 586 B.C.E. and the birth of Christianity<sup>210</sup> there emerged a triumvirate of Athenian virtue ethical philosophers, namely, Socrates (469-399 B.C.E), Plato (ca. 428-348 B.C.E.), and Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.). Their influence, and the influence of the ancient world that saw virtue ethics as the disposition to act in accordance with an admirable or praiseworthy character, established a milieu that moved away from the deontological world of Judaism to a Christian perspective that was more consistent with a “structure of grace.”<sup>211</sup> The structure of grace that brought about Christianity spent a voluminous amount of the Christian Testament (CT) inveighing against the legalistic structure that emerged after two millennia of rule-worship. Hence, in the CT, led by the ethical philosophy of Jesus, “an ethics of virtue thinks primarily in terms of what is noble or ignoble, admirable or deplorable, good or bad, rather than in terms of what is obligatory, permissible, or wrong...,”<sup>212</sup> which is a departure from what is accentuated in the HB.

So let me state my thesis in a terse but candid way. The Bible is often seen as one book that inerrantly conflates two major ideas: the Hebrew Bible is a book of law; the Christian Testament is book of (agape) love. The former is deontic; the latter is virtue ethical. When we read the Hebrew Bible as a Jewish religious text, we get law. When we read it with a Christian hermeneutic, we derive virtue as agent-based. Indeed, the Hebrew Bible looks a lot less deontic and a lot more virtue ethical. Jewish philosophical-theology

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<sup>210</sup> ca. 4-6 B.C.E, with the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, to 90 C.E., upon the massive evangelical work of Paul and the death of John, the brother of James.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid. 37.

<sup>212</sup> Michael Slote, *Morals From Motives*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 4.

would never subordinate the law to the Christian ethical belief that love of neighbor is essential, but Christianity has groomed the heart to be (agape) pure, through an ongoing discipleship moral education. Judaism's primary ethical focus was to demonstrate an outward showing of purity. As a matter of fact, Jewish philosophical-theologian Ronald M. Green says, "this aspect of Judaism has led some scholars to question whether the category of ethics even exists in Judaism, since most normative requirements are instantiated as a binding or socially enforced rule of behavior."<sup>213</sup> This is not so with Christianity. "Christianity has chosen to reject the Jewish emphasis on outer expression of purity... From its inception, Christianity has chosen to focus on interior, 'intentional' or spiritual expressions of purity as opposed to outer physical forms."<sup>214</sup> Indeed there is an obvious tension in this polarity. Such that there are poles that are moving in opposite directions, it is not unremarkable to assert the analytic (and apodictic) proposition that the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Testament are moving in different directions. The Decalogue, as well as a plethora of other places in the HB, is smattered with the words "thou shalt not..." or "The LORD [YHWH] says, speak to Israel saying, you shall not..." Jesus, on the other, especially in his Sermon on the Mount, more than a few times, says "You have heard that it has been said, but I say unto you..." Jesus summarily established poles that were so extreme, so polarized, that a new religion (and a new ethical system) was birthed in his death. Judaism was, and still remains, outwardly expressed, an ethnic religion. Christianity emerged as an inward edification, agent-based virtue ethical religion. Quite significant to this discussion is Jesus' claim that "I came not to destroy the law, but to fulfill it" and Paul's further claim, "But now we are discharged from the law,

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<sup>213</sup> Ronald M. Green, "Christian Ethics: A Jewish Perspective," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Robin Gill, (New York: Cambridge, 2012), 147.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*

dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves, not under the old written code but in the new life of the spirit.”<sup>215</sup> If my exegesis and hermeneutics are correct, and I have no reason to believe that they are not, then I can argue that God’s intent was for humankind to be (agent-based) virtuous. Christian ethics, when used as a heuristic and hermeneutic tool to envisage the HB, sees everything through the lens of virtue, particularly love, compassion, hope and forgiveness, which translates into a triangulation of love, empathy and care. Thus, it appears that Christian ethics, properly conceived, is agent-based virtue ethics, which subdues the ambivalence Michael Slote initially drew attention to in the above passage, but certainly much more needs to be said about these matters.

Slote’s dichotomy highlights an inconsistency in the development of Christian ethics and draws attention to one of its stressors: is Christian ethics best conceived as a deontological moral theory, fully consistent with the absolutism of Immanuel Kant’s Categorical Imperatives, or is a more promising conception to be found elsewhere in the deontological framework? Or perhaps this way of thinking about things “ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible; because they are survivals, or derivatives of survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer survives.”<sup>216</sup> Indeed there is a sense in which, and I shall argue later, that an absolutist deontology is unfriendly to Jesus’ primary motivation (namely agape-love) and discourteous to the overarching Christian moral structure. There are many in the Christian tradition, particularly those who are of a more fundamentalist (or conservative) preoccupation, who argue that Christian ethics is primarily *best* conceived as “[owing] God obedience or submission as

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<sup>215</sup> Romans 7:6, NRSV.

<sup>216</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy” in *Virtue Ethics*. Eds. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 26.

our Creator and/or Redeemer, and God wants us to love one another.” I argue that there is a sense in which this way of thinking about things is perhaps correct from a Hebrew Bible perspective, i.e., from an Old Testament perspective of absolute allegiance to the Decalogue, and thus an inarguable way of viewing Hebraic ethics, but it is inharmonious to Christian ethics.<sup>217</sup>

In the prolegomena of this chapter I argue that Christianity can be ambiguous, thus its ethical structure rises and falls on the strength of the correlative exegesis and hermeneutics that establishes its point of departure, taking seriously the social locus of the hermeneutician.<sup>218</sup> Thus the black Christian, and the white Christian, and the gay and lesbian, and the feminist, and the environmentalist, and the sentient and non-sentient animals, and the *Minjung* community of Korea, the *campesinos* in El Salvador or any locus can have a different read or understanding of the same text. For this reason I need to pinpoint a particular viewing of God that I find objectionable (or at the very least, suspicious) and stipulate that any such reading that fails to cohere with God as empathic and caring must be abandoned. Sectarian and syncretistic views, which posit God as capricious and malevolent, need to be re-visited and re-interpreted for the modern world. Pouring “new wine into old wineskins” can no longer be done with impunity, for this is a phenomenon that even Jesus found objectionable. Jesus says, “but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.”<sup>219</sup> When my father was about 75 years old I bought him his first microwave, with the caution that he should never use metallic objects in the oven. For ten years subsequent, until his final day, each time I visited him I had to

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<sup>217</sup> Perhaps there is a biblical ethics structure where this can fit, like one that fosters an absolutist deontology of the sort that I am about to inveigh against, but it is not Christian ethics.

<sup>218</sup> Cf. David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), chapter 4.

<sup>219</sup> Mt 9:17

plug in the microwave oven before I used it. And as soon as I left he would unplug it and stow it away. Shaking my head, I regularly inquired why he continued with his outdated method of heating his food in a frying pan on the stove, and he regularly told me (in his strong St. Kitts accent, “Me nuh wan da ting deh blow up pan me! Me cud use me frying pan. Me like do tings de ole weh.” My response was always the same: “Why don’t you sell your car and get a donkey and cart? Why don’t you cancel your phone and get two cans and a long string?” We always laughed at this. He never changed (neither did I) but the point was clear—science and technology has advanced beyond parochialism; either we change to reflect advancements or we remain hostage to antiquity. In short, conceptions of God need to be reconsidered within a modern (or dare I say, postmodern) framework. Modern, parochial views of God makes God seem uncaring and indifferent. Given the canonization of these view in the “Word of God” these views become sacred, holy, infallible and inerrant. Thus an uncaring and a non-empathic God becomes a necessary (and acceptable) contradiction to the work of God personified in Jesus. I will now give attention to one such conception.

The story of Noah and the ark is a perennial myth told around the world to children and adults of all ages. It is inconceivable that a boat could be constructed that is large enough to house two of every creature that walks this planet and some even believe that among these animals are prehistoric animals like the tyrannosaurus rex, the stegosaurus, the woolly mammoth and the brontosaurus, even though the Bible gives no basis for the existence of those creatures at the time it was written. Moreover, historical and archeological evidence don’t substantiate a flood so immense that it covered the entire planet. There have been many flood stories in the ancient world and there are many

flood stories today. Hardly a year goes by without the news media alerting us to another flood somewhere in the mid-west or elsewhere in the world. There was a severe flood circa 3000 B.C.E., which covered much if not all of Mesopotamia. This implies that there may have been an epic flood, but not so destructive that it obliterated all living things and neither was it so expansive that it covered the entire planet. The first and second Egyptian dynastic periods lasted from 3100 B.C.E. to 2980 B.C.E. and they recorded no flow neither was there found any archaeological evidence to support such a catastrophe.

Biblical scholar, Rudolf Bultmann ponders,

Can Christian proclamations today expect men and women to acknowledge the mythical world picture as true? To do so would be pointless and impossible. It would be pointless because there is nothing specifically Christian about the mythical world picture, which is simply the world picture of a time now past that was not yet formed by scientific thinking. It would be impossible because no one can appropriate a world picture by sheer resolve, since it is already given with ones' particular historical situation. Naturally, it is not unalterable, and even an individual can work to change it. . . Thus, the world picture can be changed, for example, as a result of Nicolaus Copernicus' discovery or as a result of atomic theory; or, again, because romanticism discovers that the human subject is richer and more complicated than the world view of the Enlightenment and of idealism allowed for; or, yet again, because there is a new consciousness of the significance of history and rationality.<sup>220</sup>

Bultmann further states that a “blind acceptance” of mythos would be “arbitrariness.”

There can be no better candidate for Bultmann's *demythologization* project than the Flood story. To get to the veridicality Moses' flood story requires a radical demythologizing of the text. Fiction must be separated from facts. The implication is clear: the existence of a flood that covered the “known” world is possible and practical, but the existence of a worldwide flood destroying all living things is suspicious, implausible and highly unlikely.

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<sup>220</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984), 3.

By the time children are old enough to apply facts to fiction most are so totally immersed in the sacredness of the Bible and the plausibility of the “Word of God” narratives that any critical questioning would appear as anathema. The impetus for the narrative event is the emergence of out-of-control wickedness canonized in Calvinistic literature as humanity’s total depravity.

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.” But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord.<sup>221</sup>

This passage is quite troubling, especially since it is buttressed with later passages arguing that humanity is totally evil. The term “wickedness” refers to both the nefarious deeds and their reprehensible consequences, and the term “inclination” refers to every potential for words, thoughts or deeds. For instance, David’s negative affirmation, “There is none righteous, no not one” was picked up by Paul and others in the Christian Testament and, as a result, became a normative moniker in the early Church.<sup>222</sup> Deutero-Isaiah’s proclamation, “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.”<sup>223</sup> I think that the biblical writers were engaging in a bit of hyperbole here. If it was the case that humanity was totally wicked, depraved and evil, then God need not have dirty God’s hands by obliterating all but eight people—Noah, his

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<sup>221</sup> Genesis 6:5-8.

<sup>222</sup> Cf., Job 15:14, Psalm 14:3; Gal 2:21, 3:21;

<sup>223</sup> Isaiah 64:6.

sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth and the (unnamed) wives of the four men. If all humans were in fact catatonically depraved, then we can make the following plausible inference:

If all humans are wicked, then none are morally good.

If none are morally good, then humans are non-altruistic.

If humans are non-altruistic, then absolute egoism is a natural consequence.

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∴ If all humans are wicked, then absolute egoism is a natural consequence.

As Charles Darwin has suggested, altruism is a fundamental part of human being's socio-biology. We are hardwired for altruism—we are hardwired to care as a natural virtue.

Caring for each other, i.e. extending ourselves toward each other is a natural disposition, the absence of which would lead to our genocide. If infants are not cared for they cannot survive. The same is true for the elderly, particularly those in advance stages of dementia, senility or Alzheimer's, and the severely mentally retarded. Total absence of altruism, and with it empathy, care, and love—the triangulation—would lead to demise of humanity, a total and complete (Hobbsian) anarchy. Consequently, if God's anger was waxed hot because of humanity's absolute wickedness, God needn't have intervened. Death was imminent. It doesn't seem logically possible that every human being was so thoroughly saturated with evil, yet they survived for so long without self-destructing. It also seems quite implausible that God could find favor with Noah and disfavor with the many infants and children that were obviously part of the world—Noah's world.

There are a couple of other logical contradictions here. First, we are told in Genesis 1:26-27 that God created male and female after God's own image and likeness. God's decision to "blot out" the humans created in God's image is horrific. Could not an all-wise and omniscient and omnipotent God create another option? Moreover, review God's words after the flood, "And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord



said in his heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.’<sup>224</sup> God seems quite repentant here. Could not God, who can see the future, see that God would be sorrowful (and dare I say, contrite) for being so menacing, to the point that God is sanctioning Godself? God decided to blot out, obliterate, and annihilate all human beings. Why? Because God was being irrational and (apparently) contradictory to what God’s ontological image instructs. A fundamental opposition to abortion is based upon the belief that human beings are created in the image of God—*imageo dei*—and to destroy human life, even if the concession is that a zygote is only potential for human personhood, is in some ways an attempt to annihilate God’s presence in the “temple of God.” Any annihilation of a human being disrespects God, whether that human life is Christian or otherwise. For example, recall God’s silence after David committed adultery with Bathsheba. God was absolutely silent on the matter until David thought himself forward enough to kill Uriah.<sup>225</sup> The consequences for David’s murderous act were extremely dire—the child that was conceived in the adulterous act died, the men of Israel publicly violated David’s wives, David was publicly exposed before the nation and the world, and the sword never left his house, beginning with David’s son Absalom’s murder of his other son Amnon due to Amnon’s rape of David’s daughter, Tamar. It doesn’t appear that David would have received a reprimand for his adultery, as a matter of fact the prophet Nathan told him that God said, “I gave you your master’s house, and your master’s wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of

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<sup>224</sup> Gen 8:21.

<sup>225</sup> 2 Samuel 11:21.

Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added much more.”<sup>226</sup>

Adultery was not the issue here; murder was. God said that God would have given David “much more” wives and material goods had it not been enough. Taking a life, annihilating the temple of the *imago dei*, was going too far. What then must we say if we attach the same criteria to God? God killed all but eight, including infants, mentally retarded and the elderly who were living with dementia and senility. Can a more uncaring and non-empathic picture be painted? Perhaps. Let me plow forward.

There is a second troubling factor. After Elohim created each part of the created things, Elohim said, “It was good,” including humankind. Adam and Eve were the only ones in the Garden, thus the only ones to sin. The other humans were living elsewhere. If they were created good, then how are they now described as “wicked” and “evil”? Even Cain, the so called second man on earth, was quite presumptuous about the evil tendencies of other humans: Cain said to the Lord, “My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.”<sup>227</sup> Should not Cain’s presumption have been one of safety and security, given that his father Adam was created in the *image of* (a loving-caring-empathic) *God*, and so were the other inhabitants of the earth? It should have been, but it was not. Cain was terrified for his life. One wonders what could have predisposed the (created good) inhabitants of the world to total and complete evil and wickedness, in view of the fact that they were not privy to the fall of Genesis chapter 3. And if they were not privy to the fall, then they ought not to have been privy to the total depravity doctrine. The slippery slope of this

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<sup>226</sup> 2 Samuel 12:8

<sup>227</sup> Genesis 4:13–15.

traditional belief is exculpatory for anyone who was not in the Garden, or descendants of such, therefore creating a CT contradiction: “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned—for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come.”<sup>228</sup>

My point here is quite singular, if these massive contradictions exist, do we have any good reason to believe the Flood story that was passed down from antiquity? If we accept the Flood, that is, a holy and caring God had the mental and emotive capacity to destroy all life, including infants, children, retarded and senile, and animals, lacking as they are of autonomy and moral capacity, then that God is identical to the descriptions leveled by Richard Dawkins in my prologue. This then leads me to two final considerations about this most unfortunate description of God. First, I am not necessarily convinced that Peter Singers’ utilitarian *specieism* argument has sufficient force to upstage other moral considerations, but I can see how a utilitarian of the Singerian school may have another basis to find God’s conduct (on the conception that I’ve been antagonistically outlining) reprehensible. God’s vitriol is not just leveled against humanity; it extends toward non-human animals as well. The Priestly (and the Yahwist) writers assert, “I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth—men *and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air*—for I

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<sup>228</sup>Rom 5:12–14.

am grieved that I have made them.’ But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.’”<sup>229</sup>

Even if we were to find some sophisticated and complex justification for God’s indifference toward “wicked” humanity, how can we find justification for God’s irrational rant such that God obliterates even the non-human animals? Singer argues that there are non-human animals that are persons, particularly primates such as monkeys, orangutans, chimpanzees and such.<sup>230</sup> Killing them, especially without justification, is morally reprehensible. Should we excuse the uncaring vitriol of any person, even if that person is God? I realize that at this juncture I probably sound more like Richard Dawkins, Colin McGinn, and Percy Bysshe Shelly than like a theist or *a fortiori* a Christian. Faced with this image of a malevolent and uncaring, McGinn says, “Religion is harmful in this world and I am anti-thesis, which means I am actively opposed to it.” Similarly, Shelley states, “Every reflecting mind must acknowledge that there is no proof of the existence of a Deity.”<sup>231</sup>

My final consideration about conceptual problems with “God” is that one can argue that there is little difference between what we see in how God responds in Genesis chapter 6 and abusive parents and the Holocaust. In all three cases a deeply emotionally troubled demagogue creates and defends a system of interminable abuse. Theodicy is among the myriad of justifications McGinn gives for his rejection of God. “You have the innocent child with some terrible disease and God is up there saying to Himself, ‘I really need to test some people here...let me pick on this little two year old girl, put her through this terrible ordeal, and I will test the other people. If any human beings said that this is

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<sup>229</sup> Gen 6:7–8.

<sup>230</sup> Cf. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 111-117.

<sup>231</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Necessity of Atheism*, (New York: Prometheus Books, 1993), 35.

what they had done... Suppose I said to you, in my wisdom, I need to test some people, I need to improve their moral character, so I did this terrible thing to their child, you would think that I was the wickedest person in the world to do that. If this is what God does, I have no respect for Him.”<sup>232</sup> Any rational person, who is fully connected to his or her rational powers, who does an act as horrendous as McGinn’s scenario suggests, cannot at the same time claim a moral ascendancy. Earlier I took great pains to illustrate a justifiable vitriol that blacks may have with a Hebrew Bible conception of God, and now I want to extend that argument a little further to the Jewish community, for they too have justification for the rejection of obnoxious Hebrew Bible narratives and metaphors.

In chapter one I alluded to a Holocaust survivor who I invited to my ethics class at Broward College. This wonderful diminutive woman spoke with a robust voice that captivated the hearts, minds and emotions of this 45 member class. She showed us her registration number, still tattooed on her fore-arm, representing the wisdom that physical and mental scars are reminders of where we’ve been. She told us that she can still smell the burning flesh of her father and uncles, forever stamped on her lungs and in her nostrils, emanating from the crematorium. And she told her that the life expectancy for anyone entering the camp was six months, but she lasted three years. Apparently, they assigned her to clean the latrines and each time they began their slaughter she found it convenient to busy herself at her assigned task. When asked by one of the Gestapo how she was able to survive so long she told them the truth. She said, “They granted me the respect of staying alive because I was a good latrine cleaner.” The atrocities of the Holocaust are well documented: 6-7 million Jewish lives lost, and up to 78 million lives

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<sup>232</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwwOYgXPhGk>

lost either in the Allied forces liberation struggle, or in the Axis forces efforts—all from the maniacal vision of one man. The fear of these people must have been unimaginable, knowing that their hopes and dreams were crushed and their death was imminent. I asked the presenter why it was that she, being a Jew, an ethnicity that has from inception believed in and heralded Adonai as their God, did not mention God or anything religious in her talk. She responded, “When you live and see the level of atrocity that was so commonplace, and the amount of death and hate and evil that came as a result, you are left with two choices: either you can become very religious and thank God for bringing your through, or you can become quite irreligious, abandoning the belief in God for allowing in it. I chose the latter.” Of course I nodded my head and made no further comment or inquiry. This beautiful octogenarian was an institution, fully deserving my respect.

If God is all-loving, why didn't God stop this evil? If God is all-powerful, thus having the power to stop this evil, why didn't God do so? How is God more caring than Hitler if God was the architect of the Flood? And, what about abused children? They too live in unimaginable fear. They are small humans who are bullied, sometimes to death, by an uncaring adult, but God says nothing. Lingering are the questions, “How *can* one speak to beauty or meaning with six million ghosts hovering in the background? How *can* one write poetry or paint in the shadow of the holocaust? How *can* one do theology in the presence of one million burning children?”<sup>233</sup> These are all questions—impetus—“for a new way of doing theology.”<sup>234</sup> I began by asking, as a point of departure, does God care

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<sup>233</sup> David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest*, (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1993), 9.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvii.

about black people? In the previous chapter Nel Noddings asks if God cares about women? But neither question goes far enough.

In the course of liberation and discovering the otherness of other people, we stumbled upon battered women, women who lived in violent and abusive conditions. And, in the course of talking with battered women, we discovered child abuse—children who had been beaten, burned, raped, emotionally abused, and some even killed. Beatings, even torture; rape, even incest; young children and crippled adults, some striving mightily to recover their sense of self and healing. How did one survive child abuse? How did one put one's life back together? How did one face God?

Suffer me now an opportunity to face Blumenthal questions and my own queries with a personal testimony. I am 48 years old and my aunt who raised me died April 2012; she was 89. I was raised by my aunt and was incredibly abusive. She would beat me with anything she got her hands on, but her weapon of choice was the vacuum cleaner cord—quadrupled.

I recall one night she called me from my bed at 8:05pm to bring her a couple of Doan's pills for her aching back. I went quickly to get her the pills. I was a doting child in every sense of the word, so when the container said "20" pills I decided to check by emptying the canister on the counter. As I was dutifully counting, my aunt yelled, in her wonderful St.Kitts' accent, "Boi me case!" (i.e., Boy, make haste!) The sitcom *Good Times* with J.J. was playing on her television and it caught my attention. Because my bedtime was 8 o'clock each night, and television was off limits during the week, I was only allowed to see this show during Christmas and summer breaks, the rest of the time I had to be satisfied with what I was able to glean by listening to the jokes as they emanated through the wall dividing both rooms. I could hardly contain my excitement when my aunt told me to stand by the door and wait because she was going to drink the

entire glass of water. She took her time drinking it, but I was grateful for the little bit of unexpected TV time.

When she was finished drinking she gave me the glass and I took it back to the kitchen and went to bed, forgetting that I had emptied the Doan's pills canister on the counter. This little act of forgetfulness would have repercussions that would alter my life forever. The following morning when my aunt discovered the pills on the counter she went berserk. Granted she was a very cross woman, rarely allowing an infraction to pass her without unleashing her penchant for doom. To this very day I can still recall how scared I was when she viciously dragged me from my slumber by my neck. I was like a rag doll in her powerful nurse hands as she hauled me through her bedroom, around a corner passing the door to the basement and into our small, yet well stocked with copper-tone appliances, kitchen. I was thoroughly incoherent as she yelled for me to pick up the pills. I heard her voice through a fog. Everything was in slow motion, but I can still recall her fists pounding against the back of my head, the blinding tears, and my confused thoughts about how the green pills were now red. As she continued pommelling me I felt no pain; I felt only confusion over the amount of *red paint*. I was jolted from my reveries when she yelled, "Oh Me God!! Look wah you do yourself!! Boi you a bleed!" I was intrigued by her blaming me, because I was in my peaceful slumber only moments before—how could it be my fault? Why was I to be blamed for painting the pills red? Nevertheless, I continued to put the blood covered pills back into the canister as she stopped me to tend to my wound. The cut was small, but it must have hit a vein or artery in my head because the amount of blood was enormous. During these moments I was



never angry at my aunt, I was just mad at myself for being so inconsiderate and shameful by “dirtying up” her pills. I was a bad little 12 year old boy and I had to do better.

For the rest of the day I noticed something funny about my vision but I couldn't really put my finger on the problem. The following day the snow fall accumulated so we stayed home from school and I did as I would normally do when I was home alone; I snuck into my aunt's room, where the television was, and watched my favorite cartoons, like *The Flintstones*, *Bugs Bunny*, and *The Jetsons*. I felt a little eye discomfort as I watched. It wasn't painful, that would come 48 hours later after the emergency surgery, but it was uncomfortable for sure. My aunt was genuinely concerned when I called her at work and told her that I was having some difficulty with my vision and that I was partially blind in my right eye. Looking back, and as a parent myself, I can only imagine how nervous she must have felt. That she was at fault must have really put her in tension.

It was a very cold afternoon as we headed to downtown Perth Amboy, New Jersey, to see Dr. Rosner (it could have been Dr. Rosen, my memory fails me). He checked my eyes and said that my situation was graver than his field can serve. He was an optometrist thus his focus was to test eyes and to give a prescription for glasses if he deemed them necessary, but my situation was beyond his scope. He directed us to Dr. Fishkoff on Market Street; his office was a few blocks away. Dr. Fishkoff saw me right away after Dr. Rosner spoke to him. He had very stern features, but he seemed rather empathic. He told us that his specialty was in cataracts, but my trauma was retinal. He then said that he was going to admit me to New Brunswick hospital and that I would have to undergo emergency surgery immediately. The next morning, amid a snow storm that left cars stuck and abandoned in the middle of the street, my aunt, Mary Ann Detras (our

upstairs renter) and her husband Larry Detras, who served as our driver, braved the trip to New Brunswick. I wasn't scared....I was in shock...I was stunned.

It was late afternoon when we arrived. They admitted me then quickly sent me for my evaluation by Dr. Leo Mascuilli, a young ophthalmologist of about 32 years of age. His afro-like big curly hair made his Italian heritage quite apparent. He had migrated to America twenty years prior, attended the great Rutgers University, earned his medical degree at Albert Einstein School of Medicine, and was a Harvard University Fellow in retina vitreous. A more qualified doctor for a terrified twelve year old, I could not have had. The eye exam, though necessary, was excruciating. The light he shined in my eye in order to gain clear access to my retina was nothing short of tortuous, but he continued to comfort me by telling me how well I was doing. Now, my aunt and I had already rehearsed our cover story: while sleeping I fell off the bed, hitting my head on the night stand. We toted this story tale from Rosner to Fishkoff to Masciulli. Each time the hyperbole grew to include elements not included in the previous yarn, and each time my aunt was less the culprit and more the anguished and loving single mother who was now living the agony of seeing the child in her care go through pain. To this day, however, I still recall a hint of skepticism in the medical triumvirate's inquiries. I am sure that if I had told the truth my aunt would have been whisked off to the penal system for a few years. But like the plethora of other victims of abuse who came before and after me, I dutifully kept my mouth shut and stuck with the game plan. Years later I was introduced to a pathology called Stockholm Syndrome (or capture bonding).

This is a psychological phenomenon in which hostages express positive feelings of empathy and sympathy toward their abductors, sometimes to the point of defending

them. “These feelings are generally considered irrational in light of the danger or risk endured by the victims, who essentially mistake a lack of abuse from their captors for an act of kindness.” For six days in August, 1973, bank robbers in Stockholm, Sweden held bank employees captive in a bank while they negotiated with the police. During this time the hostages bonded with their captors, even to the point of defending them after they were released. Our brain is hardwired for survival. People who are oppressed or victimized tend to do things that others may deem irrational, but if being irrational is what it takes to survive in traumatic situations, then victims are quite rational in their irrationality.

Stockholm syndrome can be seen as a form of traumatic bonding, which does not necessarily require a hostage scenario, but which describes strong emotional ties that develop between two persons where one person intermittently harasses, beats, threatens, abuses, or intimidates the other. One commonly used hypothesis to explain the effect of Stockholm syndrome is based on Freudian theory. It suggests that the bonding is the individual's response to trauma in becoming a victim. Identifying with the aggressor is one way that the ego defends itself. When a victim believes the same values as the aggressor, they cease to be a threat.<sup>235</sup>

Consequently, building a cover story to defend my aunt’s abuse was not at all strange. It was normal. Dr. Masciulli did a fantastic job, but the retina was so traumatically torn that he had to use creative techniques to save my eye. I’ve had nine subsequent surgeries. Today, as I look back and remember how my aunt would savagely beat me until she was too tired to beat me any further, it is still quite painful. It’s amazing to me that one human being could inflict such a high level of physical pain and trauma on anyone, but to do so to your own kin is quite painful. Family is supposed to love us, protect us, and care for us, especially when we are children, but this wasn’t my case. Blumenthal avers,

Adult survivors of child abuse have much in common with survivors of the holocaust. First and foremost, the abuse was real, physical; it was not a bourgeois

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<sup>235</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stockholm\\_syndrome](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stockholm_syndrome)

act of fantasy. And the abuse was extended, not a single incident. And it was massive not incidental or trifling. There are dissimilarities toll. Abuse for children went on for a long time, longer than the usual stay of an inmate in the camps. And it was interspersed with moments that were more or less normal, not a continuous terrorization. And it was usually suffered without support, no one with whom one could share the terror. Worst of all, child abuse comes from those one is supposed to love—indeed from those whom one love in some way, not from an identifiable enemy.<sup>236</sup>

Growing up I was always very scared and extremely terrified. Each time my aunt walked into a room where I was, even if I only heard her coming down the hall, I would jump in terror. I knew what terrorism was far before September 11, 2001. I lived it. I thank God, however, that my-story didn't end in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. I survived, but questions linger. Like Blumenthal I ask, "How can one speak responsibly of God and the Holocaust without excluding God's action for the event?"<sup>237</sup>

My response to this *mysterium tremendum* is conceptually complex, but quite simply stated: Jesus. The writer of Hebrews candidly states, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin."<sup>238</sup> Patriarchal and maniacal HB conceptions of God lack purchase for me. It is not clear to me that God is the architect neither the orchestrator of massive evils in the HB, slavery, the Holocaust, nor individual abuse, but it is clear to me that Jesus demonstrates the requisite empathy and care for me to buy-in to his authority. As a matter of fact, Jesus asks the same question I ask! His final disposition on the cross is as follows, "And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is, "My God, My God, why have

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., Blumenthal.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., xviii.

<sup>238</sup> Hebrews 4:15.

You forsaken Me?”<sup>239</sup> The conception of God in the HB is very different from the conception of God in the CT. Certainly there are images of God in the HB where God is tender and merciful, but there is no evidence in the CT where Jesus is uncaring or fails to demonstrate empathy and love. If my Christian ethics was based upon the HB I would not be a Christian. My history of abuse, be it in my personal life, race, religion and culture, moves me to my triangulation, and Jesus is fully correlative in this regard.

### ***Christian Ethics Best Conceived***

In this section I will argue that (1) there is a *possible* asymmetry or a legitimate bifurcation between the ethics of the Hebrew Bible and the ethics of the Christian Testament that demands attention. The Hebrew Bible content appears to entail an absolutist deontological structure, replete with having an obligation to God the Redeemer, devoid of personal volition, and (almost) robotically deontological. The Christian Testament, on the other hand, is consistent with the virtue ethical flavor of the ancient world. The (Christian) agent is empowered (by God through Jesus)<sup>240</sup> to love all human animals (and all creation, but this would be a separate conversation) in the same way that they love themselves.

I will further argue (2) that if one applies New Testament hermeneutics to the HB, i.e., the foundation upon which the Christian Testament (CT) was conceived and groomed, we can advocate for the entire Bible (HB and CT) being a virtue document. In this way, with the HB thoroughly grounded in a CT cosmology, a new moral

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<sup>239</sup> Matt 27:46

<sup>240</sup> And how this is to come to fruition remains unclear. One can argue that there is a metaphysical empowerment theologically conceived as the Holy Spirit, or one can say that there is a convention embraced by all Christians, or one can argue along Oriental lines (not unlike Buddhism) that the power that Christians reference is found in a disciplined adherence to the love ethic taught by Jesus.

epistemology evolves. Indeed, in my view, the God of wrath and justice will be conceived in a different light, particularly as a God of love, mercy and compassion. Humankind will be less robotic and more adventurous. To be sure, wasn't God's first instruction to all humankind one of liberation and empowerment, "Have dominion over the earth and rule over it"?<sup>241</sup> But something is still missing. I thus argue that what is missing is the notion of motives. In both cases of deontology, one can have splendid outcomes, but a glaring disharmony breathes discomfort. In both the absolutist and the prima-facie deontological ways of viewing morality one can do any manner of good, decent and noble works, such that obligations and duties are fulfilled, and yet one's intention may be less than good, decent, and honorable, and this just doesn't seem to be the best moral picture. Michael Stocker says, "motive and reason must be in harmony for the values to be realized. For this reason and for the reason that such harmony is a mark of a good life, any theory that ignores such harmony does so at great peril. Any theory that makes difficult, or precludes, such harmony stands, if not convicted, then in need of much and powerful defense."<sup>242</sup> Consequently, Stocker argues, "you can do what is right, obligatory, your duty, no matter what your motive for so acting."<sup>243</sup> The agent's motive is the difference maker.

Finally, I will argue (3) that a fully developed Christian (biblical) ethics is very similar to an agent-based virtue ethics, one that thinks substantially along the lines of the empathy and care of (Noddings and) Michael Slote. The same motivational structure that lends itself to empathy and care are evident in the love ethic of Jesus. The biblical

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<sup>241</sup> Gen. 1:28.

<sup>242</sup> Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," in *Virtue Ethics*, eds. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 67

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

language, indeed Jesus's "Sermon on the Mount," is replete with vernacular synonymous with motives, primarily the notion of "pure heart." If this is what Christians are to develop, and if it is more of a premium than, say, obligations and duties (though these factors are potent), then Christian ethics is best conceived as (agent-based) virtue ethics that is profoundly consistent with the ethics of care and empathy as outlined by Slote (and, to a lesser degree, Nel Noddings).

I believe that I can show in this writing that the structure of grace, which can be found in the "love ethic of Jesus," is "entirely derivative from independent and fundamental aretaic (as opposed to deontic [as characterized in the "prophetic religion" of the Hebrew Bible]) ethical characterizations of motives, character traits, or individuals."<sup>244</sup> In this regard, I think that there exists a purer form of virtue ethics, namely, agent-based virtue ethics, but it is not obvious without clear exegesis or hermeneutics. Beginning with Gertrude Anscombe's 1958 influential essay, in which she calls for a serious and intentional revisiting of rule-based moral philosophy, and a compelling charge to revisit Aristotle's *Ethics*, virtue ethics has had resurgence. Once again Aristotle is a central figure in the conversation. On its face, the virtue ethics of the CT is agent-focused, lending itself to the Platonic, Augustinian, Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas tradition. I call this agent-focused view *quietism*: essentially, says Paul, "for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."<sup>245</sup> Clearly, on this view, the agent remains "quiet" as God does the work through the agent to make him or her virtuous.

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid., Green, 5. Also, The language of "Prophetic religion" and "love ethic of Jesus" can be found in Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1935), chps 1 and 2. These symbolic constructs are further developed by Jeffrey S. Siker, *Scripture and Ethics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 11.

<sup>245</sup>Philippians 2:13, (NIV).

And certainly this is one way to view virtue ethics—a way that is perfectly consistent with a particular reading of Aristotle. But there is another way to view the CT, one that is agent-based (or *pietism*). Peter Abelard follows in the tradition of the latter, and apparently so does Jesus. “Pietism stresses aggressive Bible study, self-discipline, holy living through diligent obedience, and pursuit of Christian duty.”<sup>246</sup> On this account the agent learns (following Aristotle and Jesus) to habituate features of virtue like love, caring, and empathy, that is morally praiseworthy. I will set this aside for later.

So, how should Christian ethics be conceived? One can argue that Christian ethics is more clearly understood as “loving all other human beings is admirable or obligatory simply because all (agapic) love, whether our own or God’s, is clearly morally good and praiseworthy, then we probably have an instance of agent-basing.” This way of thinking about things substitutes the absolutist constraints with a more contextual prima-facie deontological view, which leaves an agent more freedom to act as a free (moral) agent who can make normative discernments (ideally through the wisdom of Jesus’s teachings), thus the agent is, e.g., not constrained to tell the truth in every instance, but she can use her own discretion (born out of a moral education not unlike that of Aristotelian “parented well,” “habituation,” and “virtue”) in truth-telling or truth-avoidance if a greater moral principle, like the saving of a life, would be had. Thus, in this regard, it may be that Christian ethics is best conceived as prima-facie deontology rather than a Hebraic deontology that looks remarkably similar to the absolutism of Kant.

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<sup>246</sup> J. F. MacArthur, Jr., *Our sufficiency in Christ* (Electronic ed.) (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1991), 195.



### *A Legitimate Bifurcation in the Bible?*

There seems to be a legitimate bifurcation in the Bible. Any serious student of the Bible is immediately captivated by the obvious distinctions between the Hebrew Bible (pejoratively referred to as the Old Testament) and the Christian Testament (heroically referred to as the New Testament). This divergence stems from the agreed upon doctrine that both distinctions are grounded in the God of Israel, but metaphors, themes and arguments are constructed differently. Take, for example, the strong “judge” metaphors of YHWH-Elohim in the HB, “God is the Rock, God’s works are perfect, and all of God’s ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is God.”<sup>247</sup> In this regard YHWH is conceived as a moral judge, perfect in justice and capable of rendering retributive justice, which is an admirable attribute. But we get the sense that Moses was not totally comfortable with God in this ubiquitous moral role. Notice the vehement and (almost) vituperative tone of Moses’ critique: “Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”<sup>248</sup> On one hand, YHWH is conceived as having an impeccable character, a justice who brings judgment to those who promote oppression and forgiveness to those demonstrating sincere contrition for their recalcitrance. On the other hand, YHWH can have a vitriol that seems wanton, childish, and out of control.

On one occasion YHWH gives specific instructions to Saul, the first king of the United Kingdom of Israel, “This is what the YHWH ADONAI says: ‘I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from

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<sup>247</sup> Deut. 32:4.

<sup>248</sup> Gen. 18:25.

Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.”<sup>249</sup> Saul chose to plunder the Amalekites without killing them, and for this came a scathing indictment from YHWH through Samuel the high priest,

I will not go back with you. You have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you as king over Israel!” As Samuel turned to leave, Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe, and it tore. Samuel said to him, “The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbors—to one better than you. He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for [God] is not a man, that he should change his mind.”<sup>250</sup>

The prophets of the HB were not unfamiliar with the potent level of bile that would be the resultant judgment of anyone who crossed the Most High. Time and time again warnings were on the lips of Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, and Jonah as they heralded the impending doom that would befall anyone failing to assuage YHWH’s wrath. And if the prophets refused to herald precisely how austere YHWH was, their own lives hung in the balances. Seared on our minds is the image of Jonah being tossed overboard during a calamitous storm solely due to his apprehension about going to the sin-ridden city of Nineveh. Refusing to obey YHWH, whether one is a king (as in Saul) or a prophet (as in Jonah), was not an option. The word of YHWH was sacrosanct and absolute; YHWH-Elohim was resolute. YHWH is *the* original Lawgiver.

These images of God as a vituperative demagogue or a Machiavellian retaliator who would be retributive for seemingly minor acts (as with Saul eating the bread from the priest’s altar) and cacophonously silent on obviously major acts of disobedience (as with David’s adultery with Bathsheba) lends themselves as fodder for the blatant

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<sup>249</sup> 1 Sam 15:2–3.

<sup>250</sup> 1 Sam 15:26–29.

asymmetrical case that I am building here. We get the sense that YHWH means exactly what YHWH is saying, categorically, absolutely, and obligatorily. If but for a moment we can assume that YHWH-Elohim is the same person that Jesus refers to as Father in the CT, then the fodder for the asymmetry increases. Are we not told that humans are to “be perfect even as the Father in heaven is perfect.”<sup>251</sup> If perfect means to be like YHWH, and YHWH is often conceptualized as an angry judge, one who has the capacity to condemn living humans to an eternal fire, then we have been confronted with a massive contradiction as Percy Bysshe Shelly points out.<sup>252</sup>

The prevailing point here is that God is a Law-giver. God as conceptualized in the HB (YHWH) is unswerving and austere about the rules God passes down to humankind. In this regard, the God of the HB seems to be unquestioningly, unequivocally, and unreservedly, deontic. God establishes rules that humans are duty bound to follow. There are two rules, which are quite germane to this discourse that stands out as primary: The Tree of Knowledge and the Decalogue. There’s a prima facie sense in which these two rules seem deontological (deontological absolutism in a Kantian sense), and if this is so, then clearly the HB (namely, the “Judeo” side of “Judeo-Christian”) is a deontological text. And if it holds that the CT is a text that advocates the virtues of love, mercy, compassion, empathy and care, then there exists a clear bifurcation in the Bible: deontological Old Testament and virtue ethical New Testament. First let me build (what I think is) a stronger case for an absolutist deontology (not unlike that of Kant’s Categorical Imperatives) in the Pentateuch.

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<sup>251</sup> Matthew 5:48.

<sup>252</sup> *The Necessity of Atheism and Other Essays*. 14-15.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are conjoined with respect to at least one major premise: the first five books of the Bible are the foundation upon which their religions are grounded. Such that these three gigantic religions rely upon the same fundamental texts, and such that these texts represent the law and ethics of their progenitors, we are obligated to arrive at the following deduction: the essential nature and ethical concepts of the ancient religious world were deeply imbedded in deontological considerations. Their devotion to God (YHWH, Adonai and Allah), and the Laws reflected by God and declared by Moses, obligated the progenitors to a deontological disposition. The Torah, i.e., the Pentateuch (the five books of laws), were to be adhered to categorically, absolutely. Death was the consequence of disobedience—if you were lucky.

However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you: You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country. Your basket and your kneading trough will be cursed. The fruit of your womb will be cursed, and the crops of your land, and the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. You will be cursed when you come in and cursed when you go out. The LORD will send on you curses, confusion and rebuke in everything you put your hand to, until you are destroyed and come to sudden ruin because of the evil you have done in forsaking him. The LORD will plague you with diseases until he has destroyed you from the land you are entering to possess. The LORD will strike you with wasting disease, with fever and inflammation, with scorching heat and drought, with blight and mildew, which will plague you until you perish...<sup>253</sup>

In short, disobedience to YHWH was of no small consequence!

The first law given by the Lawgiver, YHWH-Elohim, was the first law broken: “And the LORD God [YHWH-Elohim] commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.’”<sup>254</sup> The biblical text doesn’t share how

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<sup>253</sup> Dt 28:15–22.

<sup>254</sup> Ge 2:16–17.

long Adam and Eve were mesmerized by the tree, but as the myth goes they were “manipulated” by the serpent: “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. *Then the eyes of both of them were opened...*” (italics mine).<sup>255</sup> Note the birth of ethics, namely, the capacity to differentiate right and wrong action, but note also the very human rejection of the deontological structure in favor of an ethical subjectivism or an ethical egoism. Adam and Eve’s rejection of the imposed deontology was tantamount to saying, “We will act in a way that will further our own self-interest.” Had they refrain from eating the fruit, the “first couple” would have acknowledged the absolutist deontological constraints imposed by YHWH-Elohim, but their choice to eat the fruit confirms humanity’s central desire for autonomy and independence of will. There is no room for motives in an absolutist deontology. Either one commits to the law or rule in its entirety, or they’ve broken said rule. Their quest for independence had the consequence of a dishonorable discharge from their comfortable home.

This period in their lives marked humanity’s estrangement from God. This is a critical point: in the garden there is no knowledge of good and evil (though both were metaphorically and phenomenologically present). Their original position is one of moral virtue, which is the human destination: a return to the “pre-fallen” state. By opting for autonomy, humankind unceremoniously opted for a plethora of additional laws to constrain their autonomy. This way of thinking is similar to Thomas Hobbes’ “state of nature.” Humanity’s autonomy lends itself to selfishness, aggressiveness, and cantankerousness, thus necessitating the imposition of additional laws to constrain them.

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<sup>255</sup> Ge 3:6–7.

YHWH imposes law to constrain a corrupt human autonomy, which would aid in returning them to their original position. I will return to this notion later, but suffice to say that deontic considerations are evident in the earliest segment of the Torah/Pentateuch. I turn now to the Decalogue to analyze the depth of its deontological considerations.

There are serious and critical exegetical points with respect to the authorship of the Decalogue, whether they were of Moses' intuitions about things or whether they are the product of supernaturalism. Established legal material of the ancient Near East had already encompassed these laws. Given that the first four laws are supernatural and are of little import to humanity at large, we will set aside that particular corpus. The latter portion, namely, the six laws that reference neighbor or community, are fully consistent with a naturalistic view of the world. But more importantly for this discussion, they represent a very straightforward deontological view and they embrace no hermeneutical challenge...right now.

Israel's most fundamental relationship to God is in no small part indebted to a psychology of liberation. The Children of Israel are the children of Jacob, whose name is later changed to Israel,<sup>256</sup> but they are not the children of Esau, neither are they the children of Ishmael (the son of Abraham/Hagar's union, father of the Ishmaelites, later referred to as Arabs). The Children of Israel were enslaved in Egypt and oppressed under heavy bondage and labor. Their liberation from Egypt came under the leadership of Moses, who claimed he had received instruction from YHWH (Exodus 4). They were already familiar with the covenant that YHWH-Elohim had established with Abraham their grandest progenitor, so their sense of entitlement (as seen in Joshua 1-3) was not

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<sup>256</sup> Gen. 32.

without justification. God had told them, “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”<sup>257</sup> Armed with this beatitude, and given their positive liberation from Egyptian hard bondage, the Children of Israel were not without justification for their allegiance to YHWH and the laws established in the name of YHWH. Upon entering Canaan, the Promised Land, they make the following categorical vow:

Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake [YHWH] to serve other gods! It was [YHWH our Elohim] who brought us and our fathers up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. And [YHWH] drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve [YHWH], because [YHWH is our Elohim].”<sup>258</sup>

Notwithstanding the grand pioneering work done by Moses, and the van guardian spirit of Joshua, having lead them across the Jordan river into the Promised Land of Canaan, the allegiance of the Jews were now affixed squarely upon the shoulders of YHWH-Elohim. The Decalogue, which was handed to them at the base of Mount Sinai, represents a deontological view of the world. The Jews were governed by rules, rules they had a duty to maintain without wavering. Regardless of their opinions, it would seem, they had to abide by an absolutist deontology in which God was the absolute. Similar to Hobbes state of nature, Hebrew Bible scholar, Walter Bruggemann, avers, “Thus the Decalogue stands as a critical principle of protest against every kind of exploitative social relations and as a social vision of possibility that every social relation

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<sup>257</sup> Gen. 12:2–3.

<sup>258</sup> Jos. 24:16–18.

can be transformed and made into a liberating relation.”<sup>259</sup> The absolutist deontological format of the HB, a format that has a Divine Lawgiver, seems to be a plausible structure for the maintenance of a society.

This way of thinking about things, I might add, is very similar to Immanuel Kant’s moral theory, which is also a plausible way to maintain a consistent moral pattern in a society.<sup>260</sup> Certainly the Decalogue came to the Jews via command (if we are to accept Moses’ supernaturalist view) and Kant’s categorical imperatives are via reason (thus a naturalist view), but critiquing Kant’s motivation and inclination is not without precedence. Arthur Schopenhauer was quite scathing in his disregard of Kant’s absolutist deontology, for it necessarily leads to a *petitio principii*, a vicious circularity, if a divine transcendence is not imposed. But if a transcendent Lawgiver is imposed, additional circularity is entailed (namely, the impossible task of proving God’s existence, or any metaphysical thing for that matter). This, however, is not a major point so I shall set it aside. What is major is that the similarities between Kant’s deontological perspective and the deontological perspective of the Hebrew Bible have not gone unnoticed by Kant’s critics. Anticipating G.E.M. Anscombe’s 1958 essay on “Modern Moral Philosophy,” Schopenhauer goes as far as saying that Kant and the Lawgiver are wed together, whether or not Kant would admit the veridicality of his claim. Schopenhauer clearly states that Kant has attempted a grand “trick” that must be “removed before we pursue a different course.”<sup>261</sup> Kant’s rejection of *eudaimonia*, the grand moral foundation of the ancient world, namely (and roughly), “that virtue and supreme happiness were identical,” is

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<sup>259</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “Exodus” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 840.

<sup>260</sup> This way of thinking is foundational for John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*.

<sup>261</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1995), 58 and 47 respectively.



trickery because he later resurrects the notion that he kicked out the back door, as he “creeps it through the front door under the name of highest good.”<sup>262</sup> The achievement of the highest good is invariably linked to obligations and duties, which Kant places in an imperative frame. “Putting ethics in an imperative form as a doctrine of duties, and thinking of the moral worth or worthlessness of human actions as the fulfillment or violation of duties, undeniably spring, together with the obligation, solely from theological morals, and accordingly from the Decalogue.”<sup>263</sup>

Whether or not Kant borrows from the Decalogue (aka, “the moral law”) is inconsequential to my argument. The salience of my argument points to the correlation between Kant’s absolute deontology and the absolute deontology of the Decalogue, and how it is a rule of both to deprive the agent from utilizing her motives in normative ethical judgments. Schopenhauer makes the following indictment (lengthy as it is, he tends to ground my point rather well):

Kant, then, without more ado or any close examination, borrowed this imperative form of ethics from theological morals. The hypotheses of the latter (in other words, Theology) really lie at the root of his system, and as these alone in point of fact lend it any meaning or sense, so they cannot be separated from, indeed are implicitly contained in, it. After this, when he had expounded his position the task of developing, in turn a Theology out of his Morals the famous Moraltheologie was easy enough. For the conceptions which are implicitly involved in his Imperative, and which lie hidden at the base of his Morals, only required to be brought forward and expressed explicitly as postulates of Practical Reason. And so it was, to the world’s great edification, a Theology appeared depending simply on Ethics, indeed actually derived there from. But this came about because the ethical system itself rests on concealed theological hypotheses. ..Kant’s procedure is this: what ought to have been his first principle, or hypothesis (viz. Theology) he made the conclusion, and what ought to have been deduced as the conclusion (viz., the Categorical Command) he took as his hypothesis. But after he had thus turned the thing upside down, nobody, not even himself, recognized it as being what it really was, namely the old well-known system of theological morals.<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 49 and 56.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid. 56.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 57-58.

Summarily, (some conceptions of) the HB, and certainly the Decalogue, seems stalwart and resolute when it comes to its absolutist deontological structure. On the other hand, the CT is not at all accommodating to this way of thinking. As a matter of fact, it seems very suspicious (even antagonistic) to the matrix that gave it a foundation and birth. The perceived absolutist deontological structure of the HB became the armamentarium that Jesus (and the evangelists) fulminated against on a consistent basis. I will demonstrate this with a terse review of Jesus and the other CT writers.

### **Toward a Slotean view**

The synoptic gospels tell the story of a paralytic man who Jesus healed on the Sabbath day. Of course there's nothing naturalistic or even super-naturalistic about benevolence on a certain day, but the Sabbath was a unique day, the blaspheming of which represented a vicious immorality for the Jews.<sup>265</sup> The Sabbath was holy for two reasons: 1) it was attached to the seventh day, the day marking the end of creation and ELOHIM's day of rest; 2) Since ELOHIM rested on this day, YHWH-ELOHIM designated this day as the rest day for embattled Israel upon their physical liberation from Egyptian oppression. It is imperative that one understands that day and its corollary obligations were specific to ancient Judaism and had/has little significance to Christians. Obedience or disobedience to the Sabbath law meant righteousness or unrighteousness for the Jews—no one else.

Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as YHWH your ELOHIM has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work,<sup>14</sup> but the seventh day is a Sabbath to YHWH your ELOHIM. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so

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<sup>265</sup> Cf. Ex. 20:8; Deut. 5:15.

that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do. <sup>15</sup>*Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that YHWH your ELOHIM brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. **Therefore** the YHWH your ELOHIM has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.* <sup>266</sup> (italics and bold, mine.)

There is no basis for the Sabbath being of any consequence, moral or otherwise, in the CT. Hence we have grounds to challenge the supremacy of the Decalogue as a moral code for all human beings and not just the Jews. Applying CT exegesis and hermeneutics confirm that although the Decalogue appears quite ubiquitous, it is not as absolutist as the HB seems to indicate. Thus we have a legitimate bifurcation between the two testaments and the two religions.

But Jesus' healing of the paralytic on the Sabbath goes far beyond demonstrating that there is a bifurcation, it actually opens the door to advance two more moral theories: prima facie deontology *à la* W.D. Ross or agent-based virtue ethics *à la* Slote. Having lain to rest the HB as an absolutist deontological moral theory, the question of whether or not we can do the same for prima facie deontology is still looming. After all, the manner of Jesus' healing and the conversation with the Pharisees seems to be a very compelling case. The Pharisees, representing (at least) a dogmatic deontology, with their unwavering prescription of the law, can be envisaged as the Kantians of their moral day. Categorical in their approach, they were extremely pedantic in all things "duty to the law." Such that the Sabbath was a law in the Decalogue, it was part of the moral law corpus and ought to be obeyed without question. The Pharisees were on hand to carefully monitor and scrutinize how Jesus was going to deal with this paralytic man. Was Jesus going to adhere to their moral law, or was he going to break the laws that all good Jews, including Jesus himself, were obliged to follow?

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<sup>266</sup> Dt 5:12–15.

The question put to Jesus was, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” Given their history as representatives of the Jewish legal system, his interlocutors’ questions were derived from the proposition: “It is wrong to work/heal on the Sabbath” or “It is wrong for Jews to work/heal on the Sabbath.” Since the command failed to differentiate between devout Jews and any other kind of Jews, it was wrong for any Jewish person to work on the Sabbath. Jesus was a Jewish person. Healing on the Sabbath was a breach of his moral obligation; healing the man on the Sabbath was a blasphemous act of commandment breaking, a fundamental disrespect of the absolutist deontology that the Pharisees were advocating.

Jesus’ response to his interlocutors appears to be advocating a *prima facie* deontological idea: “*If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.*” (emphases mine). Juxtaposed with Ross this point becomes quite rich:

It is necessary to say something by way of clearing up the relation between *prima facie* duties and actual or absolute duty to one particular act in particular circumstances. If, as almost all moralists except Kant are agreed, and as most plain men think, it is sometimes right to tell a lie or to break a promise, it must be maintained that there is a difference between *prima facie* duty and actual or absolute duty. When we think ourselves justified in breaking, and indeed morally obliged to break, a promise in order to relieve someone’s distress, we do not for a moment cease to recognize a *prima facie* duty to keep our promise, and this leads us to feel, not indeed shame or repentance, but certainly compunction, for behaving as we do; we recognize, further, *that it is our duty to make up somehow to the promised for the breaking of the promise.*<sup>267</sup> (italics mine).

According to Ross, there is a bifurcation in deontology, and certainly there is a similar bifurcation in the Bible. The first state is an absolutist view in the HB; the second state is a (supposed) *prima facie* in CT. Certainly Jesus’ willingness to subjugate the law to the

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<sup>267</sup> W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 28.

fulfillment of the good, in order to relieve someone's distress, is (*prima facie*) a *prima facie* deontology. I think we have a problem here, the resolution of which would give magnificent clarity to the ambivalence in Slote's work.

If we are going to infer this *prima facie* deontology as a hermeneutical analysis of Jesus' moral theory, then, by definition, we have to include the salience of motives. Whereas Kant's absolutism has no place for motives, Ross' *prima facie* deontology and Slote's agent-based virtue ethics do. I must remind the reader that the moral law of the HB is deontological thus alienating to the concept of motives, but the CT appears to be *prima facie*, thus demanding of motives. So how are we to understand Jesus' motives on these accounts? I must tease this out by giving an account of motives *a la* Ross:

Suppose, for instance, that a man pays a particular debt simply from fear of the legal consequences of not doing so, some people would say he had done what is right, and others would deny this: they would say that no moral value attaches to such an act, and since 'right' is meant to imply moral value, the act cannot be right. They might generalize and say that no act is right unless it is done from a sense of duty, or if they shrank from so rigorous a doctrine, they might at least say that no act is right unless done from some good motive, such as either sense of duty or benevolence.<sup>268</sup>

There's a bifurcation in the CT, one that yields two major differences in the way moral theory can be conceptualized. Arguably, one can take a *prima facie* deontological route, and certainly Christian ethics would support such a move, or one can attempt to glean a stronger account based upon the exegetical evidence. I suspect that that the stronger account will be less *prima facie* deontology and more agent-based virtue ethics of the Slotean sort. Thus I summarily end this section by suggesting that motives are a side concern in HB ethics and central in CT ethics. And in CT ethics, motives are evident in both *prima facie* deontology and agent-based virtue ethics, but the moral theory that

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid. 2.

fosters the strongest account of how best to conceive CT ethics is (agent based) virtue ethics that agrees with a (prima facie) sentimentalist deontology.

I am herewith faced with quite a conundrum, but there may be a way to conceptualizing if one thinks more along the lines of *amalgamation* than *bifurcation*—and I am convinced that this was a primary mission of Jesus. I am arguing that the entire Bible is a (an agent based) virtue ethical document. Few would argue (and I am referring to biblical ethics/theology not a theology of the Torah, which of course, excludes the CT) that a major trajectory of the HB is the birth of Jesus the Christ (the anointed one). There are many prophesies in the HB that speaks of a special person who was to come, the most venerated of these prophesies was, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”<sup>269</sup> And equally suggestive is “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”<sup>270</sup> Thus the HB is the beginning of the conversation that ushers in Jesus. The model that Jesus brings, particularly the moral structure, does not serve to bifurcate the moral context into a deontological and virtue ethical stance, but to amalgamate the two structures into one.

This idea of amalgamation is not a radical one. There is an old adage in Christian Theology, “The Old Testament is the New Testament concealed. The New Testament is the Old Testament revealed.” The fecundity of this idiom can be found in the psychology of the early Christians. Paul, connecting the presence of Jesus to the Hebrew Bible, says, “But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under

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<sup>269</sup> Isa 7:14.

<sup>270</sup> Mic 5:2.

law.”<sup>271</sup> Indeed, as the son of a Jewish mother, Jesus was born under the law of Moses.

Are we to understand from this that the apparent absolutist deontological structure of the Hebrew Bible has found new life and new permanence in the birth of Jesus? Or is a more promising hermeneutic to be found elsewhere? I think the latter position is more tenable. Jesus was indeed “born under the law,” and he did say, in his renowned *Sermon on the Mount*,

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. <sup>19</sup> Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.<sup>272</sup>

From these words it seems quite contradictory to defend an agent-based virtue ethical position, over/against an absolutist deontology, but I think that such a defense is not only plausible but compulsory. Everything that I am now saying rests upon the amalgamation and re-imaging of the “Law” as it was conceived before Jesus added emotions and love, yea, virtue *a la* agent-based sentimentalist deontology. Paul empathetically says, “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!”<sup>273</sup>

Thus the law, viewed through the lens that Jesus offers, is a thing of the past. Reading Jesus as a child of the law, there is a bifurcation between these two religious constructs, but reading Jesus as a liberator from the law, there is an amalgamation of the two that is re-imaged in a (prima facie) sentimentalist deontology. Recall Slote’s ambivalence:

*If loving all other human beings is admirable or obligatory simply because all (agapic) love, whether our own or God’s, is clearly morally good and praiseworthy, then we probably have an instance of agent-basing. But if we*

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<sup>271</sup> Ga 4:3–4.

<sup>272</sup> Mt 5:17–19.

<sup>273</sup> Ro 6:15).

*say...that love is obligatory for and praiseworthy in us, because we owe God obedience or submission as our Creator and/or Redeemer, and God wants us to love one another, then we seem to be presupposing an independent deontological rule or standard, and the view we are committed to is not (purely or primarily) agent-based.*

Under Jesus' ethical philosophy, Paul writes, "All things are lawful for me," but not all things are beneficial. "*All things are lawful for me,*" but I will not be dominated by anything."<sup>274</sup> Paul's proposition is a universal affirmation that ensures that our motivations are *agent*-based rather than *law*-based. If all things are lawful for the Christian, as Paul is here affirming, then there are no obligations that bind her. She can do as she pleases. In Jesus' words, "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."<sup>275</sup> This is affirmed by Peter who reminds Christians (not as a law, but through love), "as servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil."<sup>276</sup> Christians are expected to cultivate ("habituate" in Aristotelian language) virtue. Hence, Christ attenuates the austerity of the law by amalgamating law with love, thus uniting the "old" with the "new." Nowhere is this idea more clear than in Paul's letters to the church at Ephesus and the church at Colosse, respectively:

For he is our peace; in his flesh *he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace,* and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.<sup>277</sup> (italics mine)

...having *canceled the written code, with its regulations [legal demands], that was against us and that stood opposed to us;* he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.<sup>278</sup> *Therefore do not let*

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<sup>274</sup> 1 Cor 6:12–13.

<sup>275</sup> Jn 8:36–37.

<sup>276</sup> 1 Pet 2:16.

<sup>277</sup> Eph 2:14–16.

<sup>278</sup> Col 2:14–15.



*anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day*<sup>279</sup> (italics mine)

The law had a purpose. It was a *theophany*, according to Christian theology, which is the singular thought upon which Christian ethics is constructed. It was to be a temporary (and prototypical) Jesus. It was not a universal, everlasting and omnipotent treatise. It was a particular, temporary and potent tutor that pointed to the celebrated Jesus. Once again Paul clears up the metaphysics of the law in metaphorical language: “Now before faith came, *we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed*. Therefore *the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came*, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.<sup>280</sup> No doubt faith is a metaphor for Jesus Christ in this passage.

The CT writers painstakingly crafted a narrative that empowered Jesus in such a way that he was not acting blasphemous in his re-imagining of the ethical structure as it was then conceived. Jesus incorporated the lenses of love as a contrivance through which we can view, interpret, re-interpret and re-image both the HB ethical matrix and the future trajectory of biblical and Christian ethics. Love, for the Christian, is a normative gaze, a virtue—a rational emotion. By rational emotions I am not going as far as Martha Nussbaum’s objection to Nel Noddings, in which Nussbaum seems to think that there must be second-order rationality critiquing a first-order sentiment. In Noddings *Caring* she makes note of the sentimental purity of maternal joy when she arrives home to her basketball fatigued daughter resting on the couch. Noddings’ appraisal is wholly sentimental with “no conscious assessment.” Nussbaum seems to think that this is way of

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<sup>279</sup> Col 2:16.

<sup>280</sup> Gal. 3:23–26.

thinking about thinks is unwise: “Doesn’t Noddings have to have, in fact, the belief that her daughter is alive and asleep on the couch, rather than dead? ... Doesn’t her joy presuppose the recognition that it is her daughter on the couch than, say, a burglar?”<sup>281</sup> I don’t think that Nussbaum is on point here. Why can’t Noddings assume, following foundationalism, that her belief that her daughter is just resting is fully justified until such a time good evidence proves her belief unjustified? A strength of foundationalism is its passion to stop the infinite regression of beliefs, which may be wholly unjustified. Susan Haack says about foundationalism, “Some justified beliefs are basic; a basic belief is justified independently of any other belief. All other justified beliefs are derived.”<sup>282</sup> Noddings seem fully justified in deriving joyous beliefs from seeing her tired daughter on the couch. If there is no other evidence like, say, a broken window, or a barking dog, or wailing burglar alarm, why make the inference that it may be a burglar (or dead child or any such thing).

So what do I mean by love being a rational emotion? Paul reminds that Christian faith is based upon a reverse way of looking at the world: “but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”<sup>283</sup> Consider the notion of “love your enemies.” This is all irrational to the secular world but rational to Christian faith. Love and forgiveness may seem like an irrational way of going about morality, but not for the Christian. An appropriate way of making this point can be found in Ronald DeSousa’s work on the rationality of the

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<sup>281</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 75.

<sup>282</sup> Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry*, (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995), 14.

<sup>283</sup> 1 Cor. 1:23–25

emotions when he suggests, “This problem dissolves, however, if we remember that there are several types of subjectivity. Patterns of salience can be subjective in some senses, without being viciously projective. But we need a concept of individual normality, in terms of which the rationality of an emotion might be judged. Correct axiological assessment is then control of salience by a normal scenario.”<sup>284</sup> For the Christian, this “concept of individual rationality rests solely (and squarely) on the back of Jesus. Sentiments and moral judgments that are consistent with the demythologized teachings of Jesus are rational. Controverting this thesis is irrational. Rational emotions, of the sort that I am suggesting, are a way of viewing the world and other humans (and non-human animals) with empathy, care and compassion. There’s no doubt that something of deontology exists in CT ethics, but it’s more of what we can glean from Hume and less of what we find in Kant. Alan Gerwirth is not oppositional to this view when he says,

Thus the Golden Rule sets forth a criterion for the moral rightness on inter-personal actions or transactions. This criterion consists in the agent’s desires or wishes for himself qua recipient: what determines the moral rightness of a transaction initiated or controlled by some person is whether he could himself want to undergo such a transaction at the hand of other persons.<sup>285</sup>

Now, I am not taking an extreme position, one that is nihilistic to the rationality of morals, but I am saying that I can be polemical about the sentimentalist feature of Jesus’ moral philosophy, which seems consistent with “advocates of care ethics such as Nel Noddings [and Michael Slote who] see caring as grounded in feeling.”<sup>286</sup>

There is no gainsaying that love is a feeling; it’s an inward and admirable disposition that inclines us to an object. The Law and the prophets are grounded in this admirable trait.

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<sup>284</sup> Ronald DeSousa, *The Rationality of Emotion*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1987), 172.

<sup>285</sup> Alan Gerwirth, “The Golden Rule Rationalized,” in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* vol 3, 133-47

<sup>286</sup> Michael Slote, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 104.

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together.<sup>35</sup> One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question:<sup>36</sup> “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”<sup>37</sup> Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’<sup>38</sup> This is the first and greatest commandment.<sup>39</sup> And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’<sup>40</sup> All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”<sup>287</sup>

Clearly the amalgamation is extant here. We finally, I believe, have before us an agent-based virtue ethic that’s grounded in a sentimentalist deontology. Slote avers, “But what I want to argue in what follows is that an agent-based morality of (balanced) caring can allow for and even help us to understand the moral underpinning of deontology the same may be true for morality as universal benevolence, but it is better, easier to focus the argument on partialistic care).” Slote doesn’t dismiss the possibility of sentimentalist deontology, of the sort that I am here advocating, but he does demonstrate that emotions, particularly dispositions of empathy and care, “does allow for a substantial kind of deontology.”<sup>288</sup> Is this not the sort of thought that grips our imagination when we consider the command to love our neighbor? Do we not embolden thoughts of empathy, care, and compassion when we extend ourselves to others? Indeed, the universalizability of the Golden Rule as a sentimentalist deontology was before Jesus and was already contemporaneous with the Buddha and Confucius.<sup>289</sup> In short, when it comes to agent-based virtue ethics, the notion of sentimentalist deontology *seems* rather oxymoronic, but not necessarily so.<sup>290</sup> If we can give an account of deontology that arise from sentiments

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<sup>287</sup> Mt 22:34–40.

<sup>288</sup> Michael Slote, *Morals from Motives*, (New York: Oxford, 2001), 79.

<sup>289</sup> Cf. Richard Reilly, *Ethics of Compassion*, (New York: Lexington Books, 2008), 8-10.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, Slote, 80.

rather than rules, we will advance our conception of Jesus and the other CT writers and how they understood CT ethics.<sup>291</sup>

In closing, I think that much more work needs to be done here. It would be prudential and necessary to enhance the hermeneutics that I am advocating a little more, if it's going to be a true agent-based sentimental (prima facie) deontology. The NT practices a subjugation of the law in favor of love. For example, "The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>10</sup> Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."<sup>292</sup> Love is not wholly sentimental on this account, thus unstable, bending toward variant and subjective concepts. Neither is love cold rationality, like Kantian absolutism may project. Love is a rational emotion that needs to be inculcated in the hearts and moral education of Jesus' disciples, if one takes into consideration the entire HB/CT corpus. (The concept of love of enemies need more conversation but not here. This concept seems to be an irrational emotion, particularly if it is referencing, say, the murderer who has killed someone's child). This argument needs to say much more about love as a rational emotion and what this would entail for care and empathy. Questions of love "fatigue" like Martin Hoffman's "compassion fatigue" is haunting and daunting. Certainly Christians are humans, therefore, it is not at all implausible for them to tire, especially in a world that has conceded to a "rugged individualism" policy perhaps more that we are willing to accept. Compassion, as Jesus expresses it, does seem to be synonymous with empathy, but it can be synonymous with sympathy, kindness,

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<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 85-7.

<sup>292</sup> Rom. 13:9-10.

care, concern, benevolence, etc. But I contend that one factor remains undeniable: Richard Dawkins Old Testament description of God is nowhere close to the New Testament description of Jesus. Jesus gives Christians (and others) the lenses and the motivation to be free enough to love from an inner disposition rather than from a moral obligation. Prima facie deontology is friendly to this way of thinking and I believe it's the kind of "deontology" Michael Slote is referring to in his project. It is a sentimentalist deontology that considers David Hume's subjectivism as being very attractive to virtue, thus shunning the possibility of subjectivism being a tool for the socio-pathological Ted Bundy, who murdered approximately 120 women, or the megalomaniacal Adolf Hitler, whose reign of terror cost the world 72-78 million lives. An agent-based virtue ethicist uses sentiments as the primary tool for moral decision making. The Christian agent-based virtue ethicist is committed to cultivating the love, empathy, care and compassion that Jesus taught, not out of obligation, but as a result of freedom.

## Chapter 5

### Christian Ethics' Triangulated Response to Abortion

*You shall not murder—Exodus 20:13*

*Abortion is often approached as if it were only an issue of fetal rights; and often as if it were only an issue of women's rights. The denial of safe and legal abortion infringes upon women's life, liberty, and physical integrity. Yet if the fetus had the same right to life as a person, abortion would still be a tragic event, and difficult to justify except in the most extreme cases. Thus, even those who argue for women's rights must be concerned with the moral status of the fetuses. —Mary Anne Warren*

*Love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone—we find it with another.—Thomas Merton*

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:34–35 (NRSV)*

#### Prologue

On the second Sunday in August, 1985, just prior to entering my sophomore year at American Baptist College, a four-year Bible college with the mission of educating black preachers, I was invited to preach at a church in Cocoa, Florida. I don't recall the biblical passage from where I was preaching, neither do I recall the topic of the message, but I am fairly certain that this was either my fourth or fifth time preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to a congregation. Two things are indelibly stamped on my mind: a comment I made in the message and the reaction of a woman in a purple dress. My words went something like this, “God told Jeremiah, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’<sup>293</sup> This text is clear: each of us were known by God before we were in our mother's womb. God made us and placed us in our respective mother. We were persons, just very small

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<sup>293</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Je 1:5). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

ones—we were teeny-tiny humans. We were children—God’s children and our parents’ children. Anyone who interrupted this process is taking a life and is a murderer. We were commanded in the Old and New Testaments not to murder. Abortion is murder! Abortion is sin! If you murder your child you are worse than a common murderer.” I suspect that I immersed myself in self-congratulations for having enough Calvinistic sense not to say, “And all murderers,” as John says in the Book of Revelation, “shall have their place in the Lake of Fire.” Yes! You will burn for all eternity in hell!” But it’s not implausible to believe that that inference was deduced by many in the audience. I was on fire and I was proud of myself. I was even proud when the young lady wearing a very nice purple dress got up and walked out—I had accomplished my goal; I levied guilt on a sinner.

Three decades later and considerably more educated, and hopefully more prudential with my words, I still think of the young lady in the purple dress. And I am still quite remorseful for how I used the “word of God” and the love of Jesus to enact egoistic hate and vengeance rather than love, empathy and care. On that climacteric day in my ministerial career (and I am quite sure there were other such days) I was guilty of facilitating a cold-hearted and uncaring message that was diametrically opposite to a central 20<sup>th</sup> century popular motif: WWJD (What would Jesus do?). In contrast to my youthful imprudent disposition, I no longer embrace even a diminutive portion of my former thoughts. I no longer hold that abortion is murder (ending a life is another matter altogether), though I do believe abortion is morally objectionable because I am not convinced it is what Jesus desires for us, nor is it the direction he wants us to take. I also don’t believe in a literal *gehenna*, or place of eternal torture. The very thought is a paradox. I reject pro-lifers because they are far too one dimensional and myopic to be



empathic representatives of Jesus' love ethic. And I reject the pro-choice faction for being far too capricious and indifferent to the entire scope. In this chapter I will argue that Jesus is neither pro-life nor pro-choice—finding too close a kinship with social labels can lead to psychic and existential dissonance. The depth of Jesus' moral philosophy is best described as *for-life*. Moving in this regard I want to develop the following ideas: 1) a review of the strongest arguments for and against abortion by examining J. J. Thomson, Mary Anne Warren, and Rosalind Hursthouse; 2) reflections on the religious rejections of abortions; 3) clarification of secular arguments for abortion; and 4) offer a Jesus for-life ethical response to abortion by expanding our common notions of empathy and care.

## **Introduction**

From the end of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century the most polarizing issue in the American democracy was arguably about race and racism. The issue that has most significantly galvanized the American republic at the commencement of the twenty-first century is arguably the gay and lesbian debate, alongside heated conversations about illegal immigration. Nestled betwixt and between these two incendiary conversations is the abortion debate. What each of these disputes has in common is, on the one hand, a liberation motif, i.e., some human person is being oppressed in some way and that person needs liberation. On the other hand, there is the belief that the *other* is less than human in some way. In this regard a person is either 3/5<sup>th</sup> human (e.g., 1787 Constitutional Convention where slavery was extended twenty years, and Three-Fifth Compromise that decreased the slaves humanity to 3/5<sup>th</sup> that of whites in order to lessen the amount of humans counted, thus reducing southern taxation), deviant

humans (as in the DSM-I 1952 labeling homosexuality as sociopathic personality disturbance and DSM-II and III identifying homosexuality as a mental disorder and a sexual disorder, respectively), illegal “aliens” (one can barely conjure up “alien” thoughts without some reference to something extra-terrestrial and non-human), or non-human/non-person (which is the lynchpin of abortion protagonist). The primary goal of those who fight for liberation is that oppression be vanquished and *victims* of oppression deemed more fully human. When it comes to abortion, however, the term “victim” is quite ambiguous. Certainly the likelihood of any woman headed for an abortion with glee is highly atypical, and from the vantage point of the fetus (or gamete, blastocyst, zygote, or embryo), such that it is a living entity, the termination of its life through a quasi-involuntary euthanasia seems regrettable.<sup>294</sup>

I hesitate to use words like “oppressed” and “victim” with respect to abortion because the very terms would commit me to arguments that cannot be shown to be valid due to the insufficiency of the premises. How is a woman oppressed in abortion? I can see two immediate ways. If a woman lacks the freedom, yea, the autonomy to govern her own body, to say what can and cannot grow in her womb, I can see a glimmer of oppression here. Certainly her male counterpart cannot become pregnant, but he can do as he pleases with his body, so long as he isn’t hurting anyone else in the process. As a matter of fact, he even has the freedom to commit suicide if he so chooses. Others may grimace about such a decision, and they may even level epithets of cowardice or extreme selfish in his direction, but what does it really matter; he’s dead. Of course an anti-

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<sup>294</sup> Of course I am personifying here. I am not at all suggesting that the zygote has mental states, consciousness or is sentient. Linda Marin Alcoff has sufficiently documented the problems associated with personification such as this, but I mean it only as metaphor. See, Alcoff, Linda. “The Problem of Speaking for Others.” *Cultural Critique* 20 (Winter 1991-92): 5-32.

abortionist may want to counter saying, the key here is not that he killed himself, because a woman can do likewise, but the issue is that he didn't (physically as opposed to emotionally) hurt someone else. With respect to abortion, the termination of a pregnancy is the equivalent of ending a life; a living entity dies in the abortive act and is no longer. Abortion harms another life. The woman is not oppressed. She's the oppressor! She's not a victim. She's the victimizer.

A second, more plausible case could be made from Judith Jarvis Thomson's very clever and enduring violinist analogy. Imagine, says Thomson, that you awake one morning to discover that you have been kidnapped and shackled to a hospital bed by a band of violinist sympathizing music lovers. You soon come to know that your situation is far direr than you initially thought because they attached a world famous violinist with a blood and kidney disease to your circularly system. Apparently, you are the only person compatible enough to perform this function. If you detach from him he would most certainly die. His life is wholly contingent upon your life and your beneficence. Thomson asks, "Is it morally incumbent upon you to accede to this situation? No doubt it would be very nice of you if you did it, a great kindness. But to you have to accede to it?"<sup>295</sup>

Although this analogy seems quite germane to the myriad of particulars involved in the abortion debate, a closer look would reveal an affinity to only less than 1% of abortions, namely, rape cases. On Thomson's case, you are attached to another human (famed violinist or otherwise) independent of your choosing. You are in many ways divested of moral responsibility and can freely secede from such an oppression and victimization if being attached to a violinist or a fetus is not contingent on your will. Certainly morality is

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<sup>295</sup> Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion" in *Applied Ethics* ed. Peter Singer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 39.

demanding too much if it tries to impose supererogation as a moral obligation rather than a heroic act. It would be kind if the (raped) mother or the kidnapped kidney surrogate is willing to maintain the life of the other, but to do so because one is obligated to do so is demanding far too much of the victim.

Unfortunately, Thomson's analogy doesn't seem like a close fit to 21% the 1.2 million annual pregnancies that were terminated due to inadequate finances, 21% terminated because the mother said that she was not ready for the responsibility, 16% terminated because the woman's life would be changed too much, 11% terminated because the mother felt that she was too young and too immature, or the 8% of all American women having abortions who say that their children are grown and she's had enough. These are not women who were kidnapped or raped and thus a victim of circumstances. There's a greater chance that the pregnancy was the result of sexual irresponsibility. But regardless of how they arrived at this unpleasant juncture, it's atypical for it to be a time of glee.

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