

Mapping Suffering: Pain, Illness, and Happiness in the Christian Tradition

by

Sarah Conrad Sours

Program in Religion
Duke University

Date: _____

Approved:

Stanley Hauerwas, Supervisor

Richard B. Hays

Allen Verhey

Gerald McKenny

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Program in
Religion in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Respect for autonomy is the foundation of modern bioethics, even (or especially) where bioethics is attentive to the problem of suffering caused by the practice of medicine itself. It provides guidance in the midst of therapeutic and moral uncertainty, justification for morally problematic enterprises, and the promise of protection against self-serving or predatory medical personnel. Yet bioethical arguments that appeal to the injustice or the horror of suffering depend on an instinctual and uncomplicated association of suffering, especially imposed suffering, with evil. This uncomplicated association, this flattening of the complexities of the moral landscape, must lead to a diminished capacity to navigate the very difficulties that define the field of bioethics. This dissertation explores the relationship, particularly, of autonomy, suffering, and happiness in modern bioethics, as represented by three key theorists (James Childress, Tom Beauchamp, and H. Tristram Engelhardt). It then contrasts these findings with resources from the Christian tradition: Luke-Acts, the letters of Paul, and the theologians Thomas Aquinas, Catherine of Genoa, and Margaret Ebner. Their accounts of the meaning and experience of suffering within well-lived lives makes for a more robust account of the moral life, one in which suffering plays a formative part.

For Stephen, with gratitude and love.

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Introduction

The experience and meaning of pain and suffering are at the heart of legal, philosophical, and theological bioethics. Personal medical decisions, medical malpractice case law, public health policy, ethical position papers, sermons on medical-political issues, bioethics curricula for medical personnel—all depend in some way on an understanding of how suffering and illness, versus well-being and health, relate to a well-lived life. Yet while appeals to the *fact* of physical or psycho-social suffering may be explicit in any of these settings, the *meaning* of that suffering and its relationship to human wholeness is too often facile and unreflective (if it is articulated at all).

Take, for example, Judith Jarvis Thomson's infamous parable in support of abortion rights, in which an involuntary pregnancy is likened to being kidnapped and forced temporarily to provide one's own body as a life support system for a world-famous violinist.¹ *That* the woman so conscripted suffers in myriad ways provides the rhetorical force of the argument. She suffers a removal from her life projects, the physical pain inflicted by the medical apparatus, and the violation of her bodily integrity and self-determination. Yet it is the interpretation of the *meaning* of that suffering in the life of the woman and her society that is the point of the parable. All these inconveniences and pains would be acceptable if chosen, Thomson intends us to understand; it is the involuntariness of her suffering that makes it unjust, and the injustice that makes it incompatible with the well-being of the afflicted woman.² Thomson's readers are meant to recoil in horror at the thought of being so afflicted.

¹ Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 1 (1971).

² Indeed, for Thomson, the person who *chooses* to participate in the project of saving the violinist, even after having been so immorally conscripted thereto, is a Good Samaritan, perhaps a *Splendid Samaritan*—

By contrast, the relationship between injustice and well-being is exactly reversed in certain strands of the Christian tradition. In 1 Peter 4:12-19, for example, the author intimates that a life marked by that suffering which meets the criteria of retributive justice—punishment for the violation of societal expectations or laws—is incompatible with the life of Christian discipleship precisely because of the element of choice involved.³ The individual can choose not to violate societal norms (particularly where those norms are compatible with Christian discipleship); where he receives the punishment of society justly, therefore, he has chosen that which thwarts his own well-being. Where punishment or suffering is unjustly inflicted on him (that is, because of his alliance with Christ), on the other hand, both the injustice and the involuntariness are understood to transform the quality of that suffering such that it *is* ordered to his good. The reader is instructed not to recoil in horror, but to “give glory to God” in the face of such suffering.

The relationship between choice and suffering is more complicated, of course, than either of these brief sketches suggests. In the 1 Peter passage, for example, the righteous sufferer is instructed to “give glory to God” on account of the sufferings associated with following Christ. The sufferer thus assents to the persecution in a way that seems, at least superficially, similar to the way Thomson’s Splendid Samaritan assents to being used as a life support system. Thomson’s argument does not trace the function of consent with respect to the other ills suffered by her hypothetical victim: is it the cardinal ill, is it one among many ills, is it an intensification of those other ills, or

someone whose morality is so exceptional that it cannot be considered normative for those of us who are content to remain Minimally Decent Samaritans.

³ As this text does not address a particular issue of medical decision-making, it would not normally be considered a bioethical argument. Yet it intends to place the experience of physical and socio-political suffering in a particular theological context; as such it aims toward the same meaning-making that medical decisions propose or enact.

does it transform the character of the other ills suffered in some unidentified way? The difference between the two authors' conception of the well-lived life does not hinge simply on a differing conception of the moral weight of consent, as the relationship between consent and suffering is not a simple one.

In the face of those complexities, and thanks in part to the more spectacular examples of biomedical atrocities the past century and a half have offered us, bioethics turns inevitably to individual choice as its guiding star. Respect for autonomy is the foundation of modern bioethics, even (or especially) where bioethics is attentive to the problem of suffering caused by the practice of medicine itself. It provides guidance in the midst of therapeutic and moral uncertainty, justification for morally problematic enterprises, and the promise of protection against self-serving or predatory medical personnel. Yet bioethical arguments that appeal to the injustice or the horror of suffering depend on an instinctual and uncomplicated association of suffering, especially imposed suffering, with evil. This uncomplicated association, this flattening of the complexities of the moral landscape, must lead to a diminished capacity to navigate the very difficulties that define the field of bioethics. Such an approach to bioethics can only view suffering, especially avoidable suffering, as gratuitous, and its imposition as cruel.

In chapter one, I show how secular bioethics depends on autonomy for its navigation of the moral dilemmas arising from the practice of medicine. Where questions of suffering—particularly imposed suffering, or suffering that arises ineluctably from the practice of medicine—arise, autonomy is the key principle guiding the discussion. I focus on three important theorists: Tom Beauchamp and James Childress, who together wrote the influential *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, now in its seventh edition, and H. Tristram Engelhardt, whose second edition of *The Foundations of*

Bioethics is a thoroughgoing articulation of the limits of secular bioethics in a pluralistic state. Both works treat autonomy as the foundational principle of secular bioethics, though each in their different way. Engelhardt insists openly on the primacy of autonomy as an ethical commitment in conditions of pluralism; the intensely personal nature of medicine only intensifies the need for the protection of explicit permission. Beauchamp and Childress are unwilling to call autonomy their foundational principle; nonetheless, the chapter shows how their ethical principles and prescriptions are consistently offered in terms of a commitment to autonomy.

There are several difficulties with an autonomy-based bioethics. One crucial problem is its implied relationship between suffering and the good life. A bioethics that attends too assiduously to autonomy must treat suffering in general—and unchosen suffering in particular—as an evil in much the same way that Thomson does in her parable on reproductive choice. It must emphasize the elimination or palliation of all forms of suffering, save those specifically embraced or authorized by the patient. In spite of bioethics' increased attention to the various forms of suffering experienced by a patient (from physical and psychological to social and spiritual), an autonomy-based bioethics retains a rather simplistic appraisal of the appropriate responses to such suffering. It is to be treated—that is, lessened or eliminated—if possible; if treatments are dangerous or ineffective, the wishes of the patient are to be privileged. This emphasis on autonomy ignores important facets of the actual, lived experience of suffering. The meaning and even the experience of suffering are nuanced, constructed, and surprisingly plastic, and may include an embrace of suffering that has little to do with the uncoerced, well-informed decisions of an independent rational agent.

The next three chapters introduce some of the complexities of the constructed meaning and experience of suffering, particularly with reference to the moral life.

Chapter two offers a different way of framing the conflicts typically addressed in bioethics. Instead of the conflict between the principles of beneficence and autonomy, or of incompatible definitions of the good, Christian theology must navigate two competing sensibilities regarding suffering: its patent incompatibility with beatitude and its absolute necessity for producing beatitude. These competing sensibilities are most fittingly explored by comparing two New Testament authors: the author of Luke-Acts presses his reader to acknowledge an absolute obligation to relieve suffering, even at significant cost to oneself, while Paul instructs his readers in the obligation to endure, even embrace, suffering and to encourage others to do so as well. This tension, which is at the heart of the Christian tradition's diverse reflections on suffering, challenges the more simplistic approach to suffering detailed in the first chapter. *If suffering can be seen as morally productive, even required, the one who suffers must distinguish not between chosen and unchosen suffering, but between productive and destructive suffering.*

Thomas Aquinas's work offers a nuanced account of pain and suffering, based, in part, on just such a distinction. He considers pain and suffering both in themselves and in their relation to a well-lived life. A uniformly negative posture toward pain and suffering is impossible: pain and suffering are both necessary aspects of the soul's capacity to pursue what is good. His account likewise places agency and passivity in a more sophisticated relationship to the moral pursuits of the sufferer. Passivity—being acted on by another—is not always or necessarily an offense to autonomy, for all that it may involve a limitation of one's agency. Life as an embodied and ensouled being is experienced as a complex interaction of agency and passivity, such that complete autonomy or perfectly uncontested agency is neither possible nor desirable for humans (as such). He insists that the proper posture toward pain and suffering is not one of

strict opposition but of discernment: how does *this* instance or form of pain or sorrow comport with *this* person's pursuit of that divine end which constitutes happiness.

Chapter four explores two theologians whose works both confirm and challenge Thomas's systematic integration of pain, passivity, agency, and beatitude. Catherine of Genoa and Margaret Ebner are two medieval women mystic theologians whose contribution to the theological tradition is easily overlooked when they are considered *merely* in terms of their demographic labels. Both women lived lives marked by extensive pain and illness, as well as by what they (and some of their contemporaries) considered beatitude. Their theological reflections on their own lives confirm Thomas's insistence that beatitude and pain or sorrow are not incompatible. They also show how differently that relationship between pain and happiness might be theorized: Catherine's programmatic self-infliction of pain and suffering to conform her passions to her will makes use of Thomas's insights, even as it transgresses the boundaries he places around ascetic practices. Margaret's life, on the other hand, is characterized involuntary bodily experiences (including pain and illness) that retrain her will. Her body is a conduit of divine correction rather than a temptation away from the divine will.

Thomas's articulation of the systematic relation of suffering to the good life and Catherine's and Margaret's narratives of suffering and beatitude suggest that it might be possible to pick an alternative path through the landscape of bioethics. They offer ways of approaching the experience of pain, illness, injury, and sorrow with more discernment and wisdom than is characteristic of modern approaches to bioethics. In particular, a bioethics that attends to their wisdom may be able to articulate a commitment to the protection of patients that includes but is not limited to the protection of their autonomy. It may be able to advocate a practice of medicine that

respects the integrity of the suffering person (as, surely, modern bioethics attempts to do) without limiting itself to the patient's moral and intellectual capacities.

Chapter 1: Autonomy, Suffering, and Bioethics

Medicine is fundamentally oriented to the relief of suffering.¹ Medicine displays human mastery over nature, to be sure—the human body is a proving ground for the findings of biomedical science.² Medicine is also an economic industry; it marshals resources to restore or maintain the economic productivity of workers, and it is itself an economic system in which jobs and marketable goods and services are generated.³ For some, medicine is a spiritual or moral discipline, the ordering principle of their lives. The intentional cultivation of health (one’s own or one’s patients’) may give structure and purpose to any number of human activities—food production and consumption, discretionary spending and leisure pursuits, personal relationships, educational and vocational choices, public policy, social practice. At bottom, however, the practice of medicine derives its meaning from the interaction between patient and caregiver, between one who is suffering and one who has the tools to relieve that suffering. If human persons did not *suffer* disease—that is, if those physical processes by which death eventually comes to the human person were not in some way painful or disabling—there would be nothing to treat, no experiential distinction by which to know health from disease. If medical science produced no effectual treatment of pain and disability, there would be nothing to practice, no care to offer beyond that of friendship, and no

¹ This apparently banal statement is not so stunningly obvious that it has not required defense from time to time. Some of its most eloquent defenses have arisen when other pursuits have taken priority over this fundamental pursuit, or when it has not been adequately pursued. Eric Cassell, in *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine* (second edition [New York: Oxford University Press, 2004]), argues that physicians too often limit themselves to relieving pain—that is, bodily harms with known physical causes—while leaving their patients in grave suffering. He hopes that a more thorough definition and understanding of pain will encourage physicians to address the more complex sources of suffering in patients’ lives.

² This is the characteristic of medicine to which Joseph Fletcher often appeals: medicine is “our control of health,” and its evidence-based epistemology is a model for moral exploration. Joseph Fletcher, *Humanhood: Essays in Biomedical Ethics* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1979), 5, 79.

³ For a survey of the dangers of the monetization of the medical interaction, see William F. May, “Money and the Medical Profession,” *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 7 (March 1997): 1-13.

professional to offer it.⁴

To a lesser extent, medicine is also oriented to the cultivation of health, even in the absence of (apparent) disease or dysfunction.⁵ It may prescribe medications, vaccinations, or lifestyle changes that prevent disease or incapacity in individual patients. It may test through biomedical experimentation the recommendations of traditional and folk wisdom, correcting or replacing those that are inadequate, educating the general public about the new, scientific recommendations, and influencing public health policy according to its findings. In the former case, the clinical encounter—an interaction between a caregiver and her patient—is the primary means by which medicine cultivates health; the latter works through public channels and may involve the coercive function of the state, the didactic and persuasive structures of public education, or the more subtly influential role of professional (that is, “expert”) associations. In either case, preventative medicine is still oriented toward the relief of suffering: it intends the aversion of whatever suffering may arise from preventable illness and injury.

⁴ It seems prudent to attempt to offer some justification or system for the use of terms that are unavoidably multivalent. “Pain” and “suffering” are surprisingly resistant to exact definitions. The various philosophers, scholars, and thinkers that will be considered in this dissertation do not use these terms in the same way, even where they have attempted to use them more precisely and consistently. Thomas Aquinas, for example, generally uses “pain” to refer to the aversive response to bodily injury or illness and “suffering” to refer to the same aversive response when it arises from internal causes (memories, say, or disappointing news). Eric Cassell, on the other hand, uses “pain” similarly to Thomas, as the perception of bodily harm, but uses “suffering” quite differently—to refer to any grave threat to one’s personhood (including bodily integrity, life plans, relationships, or professional capacities). This definition of suffering is as expansive as possible—anything that negatively touches on the lived experience of a person may be called suffering—while gesturing toward a relative weighing of possible negative experiences—the threat must be “grave” (whatever that means) to be counted as suffering. Suffering is “severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of person.” (*The Nature of Suffering*, 32.) One could more simplistically distinguish the two by suggesting that “pain” refers to bodily harms while “suffering” refers to emotional or psychological ones. (This view is subtly, but crucially, different than either Thomas’s or Cassell’s.) One might suggest that “suffering” involves an intensity or extremity that goes beyond what “pain” involves. One could dismissively—but justifiably—suggest that they are merely synonyms. Any of these might be justified, and all of them have some foundation in both academic and popular usage. This dissertation can offer no concrete definitions or consistent usage of either term that will not seem arbitrary from some perspective. However, where it elucidates the views of a particular author, the terms will be used in concert with that author’s uses of them.

⁵ See, e.g., Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, fifth ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 173: “Promoting the welfare of patients—not merely avoiding harm—expresses medicine’s goal, rationale, and justification.”

Medicine may also seek to cultivate health through extending or enhancing natural capacities that would otherwise be considered normal or sufficient. It is not always clear whether this form of medicine is oriented toward the relief of suffering. Is the professional athlete who undergoes LASIK surgery to perform better “suffering” from normal vision? Is the sixty-year-old woman who wishes to have the experience of childbirth through IVF “suffering” from menopause? Is someone who wishes to achieve or produce biological biological extraordinariness “suffering” from normalcy? Certainly such a one would suffer the frustration of his desires should he be prevented from using medical technologies to achieve his goals, but it is not at all clear that medicine is (or should be) oriented toward the fulfillment of desires, particularly where those desires fall outside the range of what might be considered biologically normative.

The complicating case of enhancement therapies does not alter the fundamental orientation of medicine: the relief of suffering, actual, potential, and perhaps even imagined. Yet medical caregivers have long recognized that the practice of medicine is sometimes in conflict with its own goals: medicine may instead *cause* suffering. The practitioner may be incompetent or impaired, insufficient knowledge may frustrate the course of treatment, the scientific pursuit of knowledge may be in conflict with the bodily integrity of the patient (or research subject), and a treatment may risk or necessitate grave bodily harm, social isolation, or personal loss. The patient may misunderstand care instructions or be incapable of carrying them out correctly, or she may misunderstand her own bodily signals and give misleading self-reports to her caregiver. Moreover, it cannot be assumed that both the caregiver and the patient (or research subject) will always act in good faith. The patient may hide pertinent facts, disobey care instructions, or pursue some good other than (and in conflict with) the recovery of health. The caregiver may pursue some good other than the health of the

patient in front of him; he may use the knowledge, status, and power conferred by his medical training for personal gain at the expense of a patient, or he may positively intend harm to the patient. Finally, medicine's increasing range and potency have created and multiplied scenarios in which partial medical successes actually cause or exacerbate, rather than relieve, suffering. Artificial hydration and nutrition, extra-corporal blood filtration or oxygenation, and mechanical ventilation may lengthen the life of an otherwise terminally ill patient, but in conditions that seem untenable to the patient (or her loved ones). Daring medical experiments may cause tragic and unforeseeable side effects, even when the intended cure has been achieved. A known effective treatment may be unavailable to a particular patient, adding the distress of relief denied to the other effects of the disease. An acute condition may be rectified only to leave the patient with a chronic condition that cannot be.

The possibility of iatrogenic harm—harm that arises precisely from the application or pursuit of medical knowledge—has always existed, even if technological developments in the last century and a half have both heightened awareness of them and produced stranger or more gruesome cases of it. The same period of time has heightened awareness of iatrogenic harms that arise not from tragic misadventure but from blameworthy, even reprehensible, misconduct. The Tuskegee syphilis experiment, the actions of the North Carolina Board of Eugenics, the Supreme Court decision in *Buck v. Bell*, to say nothing of the more spectacularly horrific atrocities of Nazi regime, have highlighted the dangers of research and clinical medicine unconstrained by a robust commitment to the welfare of the patient or research subject. Reports of clandestine experiments performed and medical care given without permission or against the expressed wishes of the patient or subject, procedures that seem barbaric (even if only with the benefit of hindsight), physicians' participation in

torture or abuse, the medicalization of capital punishment, and incidents of appalling scientific hubris or medical paternalism that far outstrip the more mundane tragedies of accident, mistake, or carelessness all have confronted us with the horrific consequences of medical power and knowledge used to harm rather than heal, or used for the sake of some at the expense of others. Medicine is a tool, and like all tools, it may be used as a weapon.

These iatrogenic harms—suffering that arises precisely from the practice of clinical or research medicine—may become themselves the object of medical concern: that is, medical practitioners may attempt to identify sources of suffering caused by the practice of medicine and may attempt to address them. Particularly where these sources of suffering seem blameworthy, they become the concern of biomedical ethics. The question is often put in terms of the “necessity” of certain kinds of suffering: the practice of medicine cannot eliminate suffering entirely and cannot avoid causing it. How, then, may unnecessary suffering be avoided? The avoidance of “unnecessary” or undesirably suffering often focuses on iatrogenic suffering (because that is suffering that it is in the power of the caregiver to avoid or affect). In the most infamous and appalling cases of medical wrongdoing, the offense to autonomy is the most obvious offense to the patient. Thus medical ethics even more pointedly focuses on autonomy as the key element in preventing such suffering.

Bioethics Approaches: Beauchamp and Childress

One of the more thorough approaches to these questions is that of Tom Beauchamp and James Childress in their *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*. In successive editions, they have given increasing attention to describing approaches to questions of biomedical ethics, such that they not only address the differing solutions to the common quandaries of bioethics but also articulate the philosophical commitments that underlie

those differing solutions. Their approach is deliberately secular and pluralistic, recognizing the philosophic merits of many different approaches to bioethics. Thus they admit the different prioritizing of goods and values in, for example, utilitarian and deontological theories of ethics and decline to authorize any of the moral theories they examine as anything more than potentially illuminating.⁶ Nonetheless, they argue that something they call a “common morality” exists: ethical norms and presumptions that they believe enjoy the support of most “morally serious persons.”⁷

Whatever moral theories underlie one’s evaluation of moral quandaries, Beauchamp and Childress describe four moral principles to which the “common morality” attests: autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice. These principles are not moral absolutes but are instead the beginnings of moral reflection. Key to the entire project is the distinction between *prima facie* and actual obligations or norms:

W. D. Ross’s distinction between *prima facie* and *actual* obligations is basic for our analysis. A *prima facie* obligation must be fulfilled unless it conflicts on a particular occasion with an equal or stronger obligation. This type of obligation is always binding *unless* a competing moral obligation overrides or outweighs it in a particular circumstance. Some acts are at once *prima facie* wrong and *prima facie* right, because two or more norms conflict in the circumstances. Agents must then determine what they ought to do by finding an actual or overriding (in contrast to *prima facie*) obligation. That is, they must locate what Ross called “the greatest balance” of right over wrong. Agents can determine their *actual* obligations in such situations by examining the respective weights of the competing *prima facie* obligations (the relative weights of all competing *prima facie* norms). What agents ought to do is, in the end, determined by what they ought to do *all things considered*.⁸

This passage has been quoted at length because it encapsulates Beauchamp and Childress’s approach to ethical decision-making. The moral life is one of obligations and norms that guide actions and choices, norms that one follows to the best of one’s ability,

⁶ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 337-377. The “conclusion” of their discussion is admirably broad-minded, but decidedly inconclusive: “We stand to learn from all of these theories. Where one theory is weak in accounting for some part of the moral life, another is often strong. . . . We can therefore focus on acceptable features in the different theories without having to choose one over the others” (377).

⁷ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 3, and *passim*.

⁸ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 14-15.

recognizing that they will inevitably conflict. When such conflict occurs, one decides on the basis of one's considered weighting of the conflicting norms and obligations. All norms and obligations are thus potential, to be actualized in particular circumstances; the circumstances and the potential norms and obligations to be enacted in them require the "considered judgment" of "morally serious persons" (two phrases that are reiterated throughout the book). Moral decision-making is the sifting through and relative weighting of competing obligations. Within the realm of medical practice, quandaries arise not because new technologies or practices have created a new moral landscape for which these classic principles are insufficient guides; they arise instead for the same reasons that all moral quandaries arise—two or more of these principles are in conflict or would prompt incompatible courses of action.

In the course of their specification of the four principles that must be balanced, it becomes clear, despite their vehement protests to the contrary, that respect for autonomy is the weightiest of these *prima facie* obligations. Although they describe the principle of beneficence as "the primary goal and rationale of medicine and healthcare" (suggesting that it may be, in effect, the first and most important principle),⁹ their consideration of the four principles begins with the principle of autonomy. (Beneficence comes third, after autonomy and nonmaleficence.) Beauchamp and Childress "firmly deny" that this ordering of their discussion implies any prioritizing of the principle above the other four.¹⁰ Yet it is not so much the placement of the discussion of autonomy before the others that suggests its primacy in their model as the way the three other principles, described after the principle of autonomy, are described *in terms of* those concerns and definitions that are set down by the discussion of autonomy.

⁹ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 177.

¹⁰ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 57. They do not amplify this denial by claiming that all four principles are equally weighty, though they do reiterate throughout the text that they are "extremely cautious about axioms of priority" (115).

The definition of autonomy they offer is itself relatively uncontroversial:

Personal autonomy is, at a minimum, self-rule that is free from both controlling interference from others and from limitations, such as inadequate understanding, that prevent meaningful choice. The autonomous individual acts freely in accordance with a self-chosen plan, analogous to the way an independent government manages its territories and sets its policies.¹¹

Clinical medical practice demonstrates respect for autonomy by, for example, obtaining informed consent from patients,¹² persuading patients by appeal to reason (rather than emotion, especially fear), and refraining from coercion (in any of its subtle disguises).¹³ Recognizing that autonomy cannot always be maintained—the authors are rigorously true to their contention that all obligations are *prima facie* until brought to bear on particular situations—the authors nonetheless insist that it is a good to be pursued and honored unless absolutely necessary. The discussion of autonomy that occupies the rest of the chapter commends itself both for its meticulousness and its fairness, delineating structural approaches to maintaining respect for autonomy and evenhandedly explaining competing philosophical approaches to evaluating or describing it. Although the other three principles are mentioned on occasion, the chapter focuses on a thorough and impartial exploration of autonomy from both a theoretical and practical standpoint.

Not so the three chapters that deal with nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice. In each of these three chapters, the principles are considered primarily in terms of their conflict with the other principles, particularly the principle of autonomy.¹⁴ The chapter on nonmaleficence briefly treats the conceptual relationship between beneficence and nonmaleficence (the difference between the positive obligation to do good and the

¹¹ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 58.

¹² Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 77-88.

¹³ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 94-96.

¹⁴ To be fair, one could say that conflict dominates the chapter on autonomy as well, but the conflict is often implicit and is rarely explicitly related to the other three principles. Beauchamp and Childress discuss conflictual accounts of autonomy, as well as numerous natural and situational impediments to full autonomy (mental defect, social location, etc.). They also emphasize informed consent as an important protection for autonomy in the face of other competing interests, but for the most part those competing interests are either not specified in terms of the other three principles or not specified at all.

negative obligation to avoid harm) and then moves quickly to a consideration of the difficult terrain of end-of-life care, where the principle of nonmaleficence is frequently in conflict with either autonomy or beneficence (or both). In end-of-life care decisions, the wishes of the patient are a high priority for Beauchamp and Childress, and they stress the importance of soliciting and respecting advance care directives, of ascertaining a patients' competence to consent to or discontinue treatment, and of approaching end-of-life care with an eye toward enhancing patients' participation in their own care decisions. They recognize the validity of a terminal patient's request for positive assistance in ending her life, at least where strong indicators of full autonomy are present, though they are reluctant to equate respect for autonomy with a positive obligation to assist a patient in terminating her own life.¹⁵ In the absence of a clear understanding of the patient's autonomous choice (when, say, an incapacitated patient's wishes are not known or when the patient has never reached an age or a level of mental development where autonomous wishes could be stated), the authors stress beneficence—that is, the “best interests” standard—as the crucial constraint on end-of-life care decisions.¹⁶

The discussion on justice proceeds similarly. Questions of distributive justice are the primary questions under consideration here; the authors do not discount other forms of and impulses to justice, but allocation is the most obvious and frequently encountered problem in medical contexts. They also acknowledge the societal conditions that make distributive justice such a pressing concern: it is only “under conditions of scarcity and competition to obtain goods” that one must attend to the just distribution of those goods.¹⁷ (No one worries about the just distribution of breathable air until there is the

¹⁵ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles in Biomedical Ethics*, 146-152.

¹⁶ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 152-158.

¹⁷ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 226.

possibility that it will run out.) Under conditions of scarcity and competition, the justification for particular distributions or allocations of goods must appeal to some value or standard by which to judge the “fairness” or justice of it, and for Beauchamp and Childress, this standard is almost always described in terms of autonomy.

Allocation according to “justice of opportunity” (one that protects the distribution not of goods, but of the chance to pursue a “normal range” of opportunities) is most desirable, according to the authors, because it declines to allow “life’s lotteries”—those accidents of genetics and history over which the individual has no control—to justify an unequal distribution of the goods of society.¹⁸ To base allocation of any good presumed to be scarce on immutable or accidental characteristics over which individuals have no meaningful choice is “irrelevant and discriminatory.” Properties which cannot be altered or influenced by autonomous choice are properties “for which the affected individual is *not responsible*” and creates a disparity of distribution “which he or she *does not deserve*.”¹⁹ Desert is entirely predicated upon freely chosen moral projects, not factors which human volition cannot touch. Sexism, racism, ageism, etc., are unfair because they punish individuals for factors which are not and can not be in their power to change. Justice of opportunity insists instead that all people are given fair (that is, unrestricted by factors not under their control) access to that which is needed to pursue their own good. To restrict persons’ chance to live well, or at least to compete well for that which they need to live well, because of their genotype, their parents’ address, some two-centuries-past governmental policies, or the failure of scientists to discover pertinent facts in time to inform significant choices is manifestly (to the authors) unfair. It is only the informed, purposeful free choice to engage in clearly risky behavior, behavior which unambiguously leads to negative outcomes, that *may* warrant punitive

¹⁸ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 236.

¹⁹ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 235, emphasis added.

or detrimental distributions of access to health care or other scarce resources.²⁰ The authors are reluctant to authorize even that modest approach if the choice to engage in risky behavior is not fully autonomous: “If the risks are unknown at the time of action, individuals cannot justly be held responsible for them,” and even ignorance of otherwise widely known risks can mitigate responsibility for undertaking them.²¹

Moreover, a just society, one ruled by the distributive principle of equality of opportunity, will actively seek to flatten the distinctions caused by “life’s lotteries.”²² Where genetic inheritance, social misfortune, or the weight of history predetermines a negative outcome, a just society will not allow an individual to continue to suffer involuntarily. Judiciously unequal distribution that blunts the negative effects of non-voluntary characteristics and gives disadvantaged members of society the means to offset the unfair (that is, non-voluntary) disadvantage imposed upon them by biology, happenstance, or the destructive behavior of others is the best solution to the problem of the inequities of biological life. Nature may make certain forms of suffering “necessary,” by dint of biological inevitability, but society exists precisely to overcome such biological necessities. A society dedicated to equality of opportunity will enact policies that redress imbalances created by biology, chance, or the weight of history through preferential funding, education, hiring, and social and medical services. Beauchamp and Childress acknowledge that the material demands implied by such a description of justice are vast, and vastly different than those supplied by our current social structures: “At a minimum, our social system of distributing benefits and burdens

²⁰ The authors prefer disincentivizing such risky behavior through, for example, increased health care premiums or taxation to an outright denial of services. This would “deter risky conduct without disrespecting autonomy.” (Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 248.)

²¹ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 247.

²² Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 236.

would undergo massive revision if we were to accept this approach.”²³ “Massive revision” almost seems an understatement, even when qualified as the “minimum” impact of adopting their proposals.

It is the chapter on beneficence, however, that betrays the most thoroughgoing commitment to the priority of autonomy over the other three principles of bioethics. Briefly put, the principle of beneficence states that medical caregivers should do good to the patient. Medicine ought to be oriented toward the good of the patient; it should have the best interests of the patient always in view and it should act in a way that brings about what is good for the patient. The authors quickly assert, however, that the principle of autonomy imposes two key constraints on the exercise of this beneficent interest: the proscription of paternalistic care and the limitation of the obligation to extend care.

According to Beauchamp and Childress, the medical caregiver that acts for the physical good of the patient without due respect for or in contravention of his wishes (especially where those are already known to the caregiver) acts paternalistically.²⁴ Despite their care in differentiating between justifiable and unjustifiable paternalism, “strong” and “weak” paternalism, paternalism that violates autonomous (informed, uncoerced, substantive) choice and paternalism that overrides irrational or non-voluntary wishes—that is, despite their attempt to offer a neutral description of the conflict between autonomy and beneficence—the language of paternalism is already decidedly negative. It is a description that is only possible in light of a strong presumption against violating decisional integrity. Relationships that are properly and justly characterized by one person’s exercising legitimate and measured authority over the other are not described as paternalistic, even when they involve coercion. A father’s care for his

²³ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 237.

²⁴ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 177-194.

child's best interests is not paternalistic, even when it manifests itself in frustrating that child's attempts, say, to unbuckle her seatbelt in a moving vehicle or to put toxic substances into her mouth: it is parental. An employer's care for the safety of the workers in her charge is not paternalistic, even when it manifests itself in, say, strict regulation of the clothing, jewelry, and hairstyles of workers operating dangerous machinery: it is supervisory. These relationships only begin to be described as paternalistic when the supervisor or parent begins to overstep the degree of responsibility that is intrinsic to the relationship itself—when, for example, a parent continues to exercise control over an (independent, competent) adult child's finances, or when a supervisor attempts to regulate the apparel of workers after they've gone home for the night.

Indeed, Beauchamp and Childress's "neutral" definition of paternalism rather heightens than diminishes the sense that all offenses to autonomy must be accounted for: "Paternalism, then, is *the intentional overriding of one person's known preferences or actions by another person, where the person who overrides justifies the action by the goal of benefiting or avoiding harm to the person whose preferences or actions are overridden.*"²⁵ Any act which contravenes the self-determination of the other—whether or not that self-determination is recognizably and properly autonomous—trespasses on the other's autonomy and requires justification. Even where such paternalism is ultimately judged reasonable and possibly *obligatory* by the authors (on the balancing-of-goods method of discernment), it is to be considered under the rubric of paternalism. The authors use the example of a hospitalized patient in an altered mental state who attempts to leave the hospital in spite of an acute and life-threatening illness to show how "paternalistic"

²⁵ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 178, italics original.

behavior might be obligatory.²⁶ Detaining such a patient must be considered “paternalistic,” because it interferes with his desire to leave, even though his desire cannot be classed as an autonomous choice and even though such interference is so clearly in his best interests that it is all but morally required. While the authors intend this example to show how both autonomy *and* beneficence are crucial moral principles and to show how neither can be presumed to be absolute (indeed—the implied response to this scenario sets aside autonomy in favor of the obligation to beneficence), to consider the scenario under the rubric of paternalism, as a clash between autonomy and beneficence, just as surely shows how morally serious they take autonomy to be. Autonomy is so valued a human good that even its simulacra—the unwittingly self-destructive desires of a delirious patient—must be presumed significant, even if ultimately overridden.

This phrasing of the matter—that autonomy is a valued human good—already begins to go farther than Beauchamp and Childress explicitly state. Their chapter on autonomy covers what it is and how one goes about protecting it, but not why it deserves protection. More precisely, their discussion of autonomy never explores its relationship to happiness or the pursuit of a good life. They clearly take autonomy to be necessary for the pursuit of the good life, but the recognition that it is possible to do good to someone while violating her wishes suggests that it might not be strictly necessary. Imagine, for instance, that someone who had an interest in my happiness were to attempt to secure it through means I had declined: imagine that my friend purchased a lottery ticket for me after I had declined his offer to do so. Suppose this lottery ticket, which cost me nothing save the knowledge that it was purchased against my wishes, won a multi-million-dollar payout. By virtually all standards save the

²⁶ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 178.

principle of respect for autonomy, my friend would have acted for my good, in my interests. He would even have acted to enhance my autonomy: by adding so spectacularly to my purchasing power, he would have increased my ability to pursue whatever goods I chose and decreased my exposure to those things which limit autonomy—financial hardship, lack of social power, and the like. Even if it were my autonomous choice to live in poverty, the sudden acquisition of the power to live otherwise would lend a certain robustness to that choice. (Choosing to live in poverty when one has access to a forty-thousand-dollar-a-year income is one thing; choosing to live in poverty by refusing a forty-thousand-dollar-a-week income is something else entirely.) If I take voluntary poverty to be necessary for my happiness, winning the lottery would only enhance my happiness by making that poverty all the more emphatically voluntary. Even in their discussion of paternalism, Beauchamp and Childress do not adequately explain how an act so evidently in my interests as giving me a financial windfall becomes an injury to me simply because I did not wish it. They raise the possibility that doing violence to my wishes actually injures me, even when the result is profoundly good for me, yet they do no more than raise it. It seems clear that Beauchamp and Childress take autonomy to be a constitutive element of the good life, but they leave the how and why to other theorists. When they do make the relationship between the two plain, autonomy is described as a boundary marker around the good, rather than as a good itself. To complete the sentiment only partially cited above, “beneficence provides the primary goal and rationale of medicine and health care, whereas *respect for autonomy* (along with nonmaleficence and justice) *sets moral limits* on the professional’s actions in pursuit of this goal.”²⁷

The autonomy of the patient is one limiting factor to acts of beneficence, but the

²⁷ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 177, emphasis added.

autonomy of the caregiver, too, functions as a boundary to beneficence: it limits the obligation to act for the good of another. The first part of their chapter on beneficence is devoted to describing those limits of the obligation to act for the good of others. Not all of these limits depend entirely on the autonomy of the one who may be obliged to act, but they are described in terms of such autonomy. The parable of the Good Samaritan, for example, is said to describe “more an *ideal* than an *obligation*, because the Samaritan’s act seems to exceed ordinary morality.”²⁸ Common wisdom about what is morally obligatory is a check on the obligations of beneficence; where “ordinary morality” proposes or assumes some modest obligation to promote the welfare of others, exceeding it is voluntary. The individual *may* make self-sacrificial devotion to the welfare of others her moral project as an uncoerced moral agent, but the collective moral intuition that describes such devotion as extraordinary exerts a certain counter-pressure against undertaking such projects. By describing such projects as “extreme” or “severe,” even as they describe it as “ideal” and “voluntary,” the authors distance themselves from any description of the moral life that would encourage them. The source of an obligation to care for particular others, too, may serve as a limit to the obligation: role-based obligations of beneficence are often greater than the general obligation, but the boundaries around them are sharper. A parent may be obligated to a far greater degree of care for her children than for the general population, but the objects of such intensified care are limited to, precisely, *her* children. A physician may have a more pressing obligation to offer assistance at the scene of a medical emergency (a car accident, say) than an untrained bystander, but her role creates no such obligation to intervene in an in-progress robbery. Or, the existence of role-derived obligations may

²⁸ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 167. Obviously, the authors are taking scripture in this case as a record of the contribution of Jesus of Nazareth, or his followers, to moral philosophy rather than as a positive command or moral requirement incumbent on all who profess allegiance to him.

supersede and place boundaries on more general obligations of beneficence. A parent's obligation to provide such extensive care for her own children may create a limit to the beneficence she may extend others: she is not permitted to provide food for all the starving persons in her city if it means letting her children starve.

Despite Beauchamp and Childress's protestations to the contrary, however, the primary limit on the obligation of beneficence is the moral judgment of the individual. Even where the "common morality" imposes moral obligations, it is the autonomous moral choice of the individual that sketches the limits of those obligations. Their discussion of role-derived moral obligations typifies their approach. They allow that certain roles or professions may expand, rather than limit, the moral obligation to do good, whether in general or in certain circumstances. Mandated reporter statutes, for example, delineate those professions and types of employment which create a legal (following, one supposes, a moral) obligation to report evidence of child abuse. Similarly, Beauchamp and Childress venture that the medical professions create greater-than-usual obligations to act for the good of others, even of perfect strangers who cannot pay for the services they receive.²⁹ However, the justification of such role-derived moral obligations was already described in the chapter on autonomy in terms of voluntarism: freedom in accepting commitments authorizes whatever constraints to autonomy those commitments might involve.³⁰ Even though this justification is not repeated in the chapter on beneficence, the reader has already been prompted to place these moral "obligations" under the rubric of autonomy. Similarly, their discussion of "general beneficence"—that is, an individual's obligation to render assistance to another individual to whom he has no special relationship that would otherwise create particular obligations—makes the individual's evaluation of the risks or burdens of an

²⁹ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 173-176.

³⁰ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 60.

obligation the test of its obligatoriness. No individual is required to take on “significant risks, costs, or burdens” to help someone else—even if that someone is in dire need.³¹ This has already been established by the domestication of the parable of the Good Samaritan: the story portrays a moral ideal, not an actionable obligation. The actions of the Samaritan are not just ideal, but *idealized*; they are an exaggerated moral performance more appropriate to hagiography than to rational moral discourse. The authors further proclaim themselves reluctant to “specify” the degree of burden that justifies ignoring the needs of an unrelated individual. Indeed, the illustrative case they offer is an individual who refused to donate bone marrow to his cousin based on an inaccurate understanding of the medical risks to himself and an exaggerated expectation of the pain it would involve.³² Beauchamp and Childress are unable to call this anything but a “borderline” case; the exaggerated fears of an individual who could offer life-saving assistance are weighty enough, presumably thanks to the principle of respect for autonomy, to excuse that individual from the moral obligation to assist. Their rejection, in an earlier discussion, of a proposal by Peter Singer that offered a more stringent definition of the obligation to beneficence makes the connection with autonomy explicit: “The requirement that persons must seriously disrupt their life plans in order to benefit those who are sick, undereducated, or starving exceeds the limits built into common-morality obligations.”³³ Though they were willing to posit “massive revision” of social structures in the cause of distributive justice, the possibility that *individuals* might be required to undergo “massive revision” of their “life plans” for the sake of those in grave suffering is unpalatable to them. It is the “life plans,” the autonomously chosen personal projects of the individual, that take precedence over the need—even the abject

³¹ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 171.

³² Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 172.

³³ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 169.

need—of the person to whom beneficence may be extended. Beauchamp and Childress offer no scheme or guide for weighing the relative worth of *particular* life plans against abject needs. It is the autonomy of the individual making the plans that gives them their weight.

Beyond their discussion of the four foundational principles for bioethical reflection, the authors' other chapters betray this dependence on autonomy for the definition or elucidation of other important principles in health care ethics. The definition and justification of privacy that the authors seem to prefer, for example, is explicitly given in terms of autonomy. After offering several possible approaches to justifying privacy, the authors turn to one that is "based on the principle of respect for autonomy."³⁴ Autonomy cannot be meaningfully protected without "the right to decide as far as possible what will happen to one's person—to one's body, to information about one's life, to one's secrets, and the like."³⁵ Health care workers, then, protect privacy because to fail to do so would be to violate the patient's sovereignty over all aspects of her "person." The unwanted disclosure of medical information may interfere with a patient's life projects (as when, say, a genetic test discloses nonpaternity and threatens a desired family structure), and this justification of privacy rights is explicitly preferred over, say, Judith Thomson's justification by appeal to the right "not to be harmed, hurt, or tortured."³⁶ Thus it is the threat to autonomy, not the potential for harm, that defines the form of suffering caused by breaches of privacy. Violations of privacy are an offense to the will of the person, not to the body or reputation or economic stability of the person; that is to say, it is the patient's decision that protecting this or that piece of

³⁴ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 296.

³⁵ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 297.

³⁶ This is one of several justifications Beauchamp and Childress report; they seem to reject Thomson's project as a whole, not this particular justification. Whether or not their criticisms of Thomson's project as a whole are apt, it is important to note that this alternative explanation for the need for privacy—that is, the protection of a person from physical harm—is offered and rejected.

information is *necessary* to her bodily, social, or economic well-being that must be respected, not her bodily, social, or economic well-being apart from her understanding of it.

Whether or not the structure betrays a preference for autonomy as the primary or foundational principle of health care ethics, it does propose autonomy as the means of distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable iatrogenic harm (when such harm is foreseeable or controllable). Respect for the patient's autonomy guides the medical caregiver in the practice of both the technical and the personal elements of medicine. Which treatments, procedures, pharmaceuticals, interventions, or cessations of treatment should be pursued? Those which are in line with the autonomous pursuits of the patient. What level of knowledge should be conveyed to the patient? That which is sufficient for informed consent. Which risks should the patient undertake? Those which she fully understands and determines are in line with her life projects. When should the medical caregiver override the patient's wishes? Only when the patient is so clearly altered that her stated wishes cannot be reconciled with those expressed in an unaltered state. Where suffering is not curable or avoidable, the wishes of the patient must be consulted and respected as far as possible. Where forms of suffering (risks, burdens, impediments, frustrations, injuries) must be ranked, it is only the sufferer who can rank them and express the course of action which will best adhere to her own understanding of her good.

Bioethics Approaches: Engelhardt

Like Beauchamp and Childress, Tristram Engelhardt makes autonomy the crucial test for acceptable versus unacceptable iatrogenic harm. However, his work evidences quite a different approach to the relationship between suffering and bioethics. Engelhardt contends in the second edition of his *Foundations of Bioethics* that the

challenge presented by religious and philosophical pluralism is graver and more thoroughgoing than an approach like Beauchamp and Childress's allows. Though he, like Beauchamp and Childress, wants to offer non-trivial and binding norms for bioethics, he insists that in the absence of agreement about substantive goods, secular society (and state) cannot move beyond the protection of the individual's right to pursue whatever is held to be a good. Bioethics, then, cannot *operate* in a moral landscape created by conditions of pluralism; it must *create* that landscape in order to function. Autonomy, or the principle of consent, is the necessary precondition for the sorts of cooperative agreements between moral strangers (that is, between those who otherwise cannot agree on substantive moral goods and projects) that allow for the creation of such moral spaces.

Engelhardt's project begins not with the elucidation of principles that contribute to moral reflection but with the elucidation of all the barriers to such reflection at the level of the nation-state. Nations are characterized by an "irremediable plurality": their size all but guarantees that they be comprised of "numerous peaceable moral communities" whose peaceableness allows them to coexist in spite of intractable moral differences, and the multiplicity of competing national paradigms of justice mitigates against any one nation's claim to be *the* paradigm for a unified national morality.³⁷ In the context of this moral pluralism—a context he accepts as an unalterable given—the large-scale state cannot justify the destruction, suppression, or frustration of cohesive moral communities that pursue goods according to whatever accounts of the good life are generated within the community, even for the sake of the good of the nation-state as a whole. All the means by which the state might have justified such coercive unifying projects are shown by the plurality of moral communities to be one possible rational

³⁷ H. Tristram Engelhardt, *The Foundations of Bioethics*, second ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 9.

option among many; none can be shown to be universally rationally persuasive. All attempts to justify any “content-full moral understanding” applicable across morally divergent communities have the fatal flaw that they presuppose what they purport to establish. The appeal to universal reason as a solution to the problems of moral plurality ignores the fact that reason itself is constructed in diverse ways: “Content-full moral controversies cannot be resolved by sound rational argument in the absence of common basic moral premises, rules of evidence and inference, and view of who is in moral authority.”³⁸ The appeal to common moral intuition works well when pre-rational and nonrational modes of thought have been formed in common such that moral precepts “appear self-evident” and capable of being intuited; moral friends will make similar moral leaps of imagination, as it were. Moral strangers, however, will and do intuit different moral values, procedures, and authorities.³⁹ Casuistry as a common moral undertaking can only be rationally persuasive where exemplary cases are recognized in common.⁴⁰ Consequentialist accounts of moral reason can only resolve moral disagreement where there is a prior agreement on the relative valuation of particular consequences. (As he notes rather amusingly, “liberty, equality, security, and prosperity consequences” are ranked and valued rather differently depending on whether one is “living in Texas, Massachusetts, Singapore, Japan, North Korea, or the Vatican.”)⁴¹ The appeal to natural law or “moral facts” requires a prior understanding of what will be called moral facts or natural laws.⁴² The appeal to “middle-level principles” (Engelhardt specifically addresses Beauchamp and Childress’s approach here) works among moral neighbors (those with “similar moral sentiments but different theoretical approaches”),

³⁸ Engelhardt, *Foundations of Bioethics*, 42.

³⁹ Engelhardt, *Foundations of Bioethics*, 42-44.

⁴⁰ Engelhardt, *Foundations of Bioethics*, 44.

⁴¹ Engelhardt, *Foundations of Bioethics*, 46. Politicians can, of course, dispense with such moral quandaries by declaring these alternative moral understandings irrational, evil, or disordered, but the philosopher must regard them as evidence of a plurality of competing rationalities.

⁴² Engelhardt, *Foundations of Bioethics*, 56-57.

but not among those with radically different theoretical constructions of reality.⁴³ All of these potential procedures for unifying morally diverse communities will succeed only among those who are already morally similar enough to practice similar versions of rationality. The perdurance of profound moral disagreement—or even moderate difference with profound consequences—is a sign that multiple defensible rationalities exist in spite of the effort to discover or impose a single unitive rational scheme. Reason itself is plural, not universal; bioethics, therefore, must be practiced in the context of competing and incompatible rationalities.

In the face of such an irremediable plurality of moral visions, autonomy is prized not because it is the highest or most universally defensible good, but because it alone can secure peaceful (that is, non-violent) cooperation among morally divergent communities. Peaceful cohabitation among communities with incompatible moral commitments requires nothing more than a commitment to explicit permission. If Beauchamp and Childress say that beneficence provides the goal of morality while autonomy describes its limits, Engelhardt says that, *in conditions of moral pluralism*, autonomy provides the precondition of morality while beneficence provides its content. Medicine, as an interaction between a people who may or may not agree on the goods of life and yet who propose to pursue some good together, requires the creation of explicit agreements to guide and norm the interaction. Intolerance, which he defines as “a disposition to use unconsented-to force against the secularly innocent,” is the “cardinal vice” of the nation-state.⁴⁴ Moral communities with radically disparate notions of the good can live together in relative peace and stability if they are willing to forgo coercion

⁴³ Engelhardt, *Foundations of Bioethics*, 58-59.

⁴⁴ Engelhardt, *Foundations of Bioethics*, 419. The “secularly innocent” here are those who have not, themselves, threatened peaceful co-existence through offenses to autonomy. One must note the careful balance between activity and emotional potentiality here: intolerance is a “disposition,” and thus an internal quality that *need not* eventuate in the actual use of force to be vicious with respect to the nation-state. However, because it is precisely a disposition to act with violence (or its analogues: deception, threats, manipulation, etc.) it is a disposition threatening to the peaceable secular order.

as a response to their moral incompatibility. This does not preclude *any other non-coercive response* to moral difference, including public condemnation, avoidance, proselytizing, or bribery.⁴⁵ It is only coercion that is “sinful,” from a secular perspective, because that is the only response that threatens the existence of the whole.⁴⁶

While Beauchamp and Childress imply that autonomy is itself one of the goods—and perhaps the highest or most basic good—of life, Engelhardt declines to make autonomy a foundational moral good in at least two ways. First, he stresses that autonomy is a procedural good only. Because people often choose to bind themselves for the sake of goods higher than (or simply other than) freedom, autonomy is demonstrably not a universally-held highest good.⁴⁷ He rejects the Kantian project of placing freedom as the most basic good, the good which allows the pursuit of all other goods, because it articulates “a particular ethic” rather than a universal one, as Kant

⁴⁵ It seems especially worth noting, given the way “tolerance” is sometimes freighted in popular-level discourse, that tolerance need not require civility; only non-coercion. Thus, nothing precludes “moral condemnation of those acts we find morally reprehensible,” and one is not guaranteed protection from the knowledge that one’s actions are morally repugnant to others. Engelhardt, *Foundations of Bioethics*, 16.

⁴⁶ One difficulty with Engelhardt’s proposal on this point is that it relies on a convenient fiction regarding participation in communities with substantive moral commitments (like churches, activist organizations, etc.). Membership in such communities is not so strictly voluntaristic as the secular state must assume, in order for Engelhardt’s project to work. Moral communities form, expand, and perpetuate their membership by any number of nonvoluntary means; many of these means may be justified within the moral vision of the community, but they do not pass the strict procedural test of autonomy, even when the boundaries of community membership are protected by a ritual of inclusion which requires explicit consent. Especially with regard to the generational perpetuation of moral communities—what elders do to children or dependents in the community—significant and unavoidable moral formation occurs before those rituals of inclusion. From the frequency and fervor of participation in religious catechism to the selection of dinner guests, guardians craft the moral possibilities from which a dependent may choose, even well after that dependent becomes independent. (See Alasdair McIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* [Chicago and LaSalle: Open Court, 1999], 81-98.)

One might argue that, as counterfactual assumptions go, this one is an improvement on those undergirding Beauchamp and Childress’s moral projects: that a “common morality” is discoverable and substantively different than a “tyranny of the majority,” that moral discourse is primarily a rational or intellectual endeavor, or that independent rational agency is desirable or even possible. It is certainly more forthright about the existence of substantive disagreements *between* communities with vigorous moral commitments; however, it ignores the range of nonvoluntary—from accidental to frankly manipulative—formative elements that are constitutive of the human life and that determine (or at least affect) human participation in moral communities.

⁴⁷ Engelhardt uses the extra-ordinary cases of “suicide or a term in the French Foreign Legion” (106), but one might reasonably point to the more mundane practice of marriage or childbearing as free choices to restrict one’s freedom for the sake of a good valued more highly than freedom.

claims.⁴⁸ In conditions of moral pluralism, however, a commitment to respect autonomy is *procedurally* foundational to all moral cooperation. Moral strangers, who do not otherwise articulate, rank, or pursue goods similarly, can agree to live peaceably and even to cooperate in substantive pursuits as long as each respects the autonomy of the other. Respect for autonomy clears a space in which good might be pursued, but it does not, itself, create or pursue the good. He contrasts the elucidation of actual goods—the attempts to specify beneficence or to provide content to the moral life—with this procedure for crafting moral agreement. Beneficence, he says, “identifies the content of the practice of morality” while permission “justifies the process for generating content.”⁴⁹ In this system, autonomy is not a good or a value, but a procedure by which one can avoid harm; thus it has in view the avoidance of maleficence rather than the performance of beneficence. If I wish to avoid doing harm to someone with whom I do not share a clear understanding of what constitutes harm, *his* definition of what constitutes harm must hold sway. Engelhardt’s project is to avoid maleficence, or the infliction of undue suffering, not to guide one’s way in the world in any substantive fashion.

Secondly, Engelhardt stresses that moral libertarianism—that is, the political or social system crafted by this commitment to autonomy—is likewise not morally good in itself. It is, in fact, morally monstrous from the perspective of communities with substantive accounts of the goods of human life. His discussion of abortion and infanticide is illustrative: the general secular morality cannot justify a prohibition of abortion or even infanticide, as fetuses and infants can neither give nor withhold consent. Because they are not (yet) independent rational agents, they can be killed without offense to their rational agency; they cannot, however, be seriously injured,

⁴⁸ Engelhardt, *Foundations of Bioethics*, 106.

⁴⁹ Engelhardt, *Foundations of Bioethics*, 108.

because the persons they will become (if not killed) will almost certainly object to whatever lingering ill effects of such an injury may be.⁵⁰ This is as far as secular morality can judge with respect to the not-yet-rational human: it cannot justify coercing greater respect or beneficence through punitive or prescriptive legislation. Moral communities with strong proscriptions against either abortion or infanticide will judge the secular morality as inadequate or even horrific. He ends his volume on secular bioethics with the frank acknowledgement that the moral system he has proposed is so problematic that it cannot serve as a guide to moral behavior: its morality is “not one by which one should live a life.”⁵¹

The offense to particular moral communities runs deeper than these specific moral conflicts, however. He begins what can only be called the companion volume to this work—*The Foundations of Christian Bioethics*—by showing that any attempt to make this procedural approach a foundational moral principle must conflict with the very existence of tradition-based moral communities. Tracing the genealogy of secular bioethics from what he calls “post-traditional Christianity,” he shows how the adoption of the secular morality as a content-full morality makes a key philosophical mistake.⁵² “Liberal cosmopolitanism”⁵³ actually violates the principle of permission by making autonomy the highest positive rather than procedural good. In the context of such an aesthetic, fidelity to traditional forms of morality—especially ones that do not share its hierarchy of values, with autonomy at the top—is seen as a vice rather than a virtue. Liberty from rather than fidelity to such traditions guides the moral sensibilities of the

⁵⁰ Engelhardt, *Foundations of Bioethics*, 253-258.

⁵¹ Engelhardt, *Foundations of Bioethics*, 421. I call this acknowledgement “frank” with some reservations. One might reasonably suspect Engelhardt of exaggerating the offensiveness or monstrosity of the secular morality he lays out precisely in order to highlight its vacuity in comparison with what he calls substantive moral communities.

⁵² Engelhardt, *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics* (Lisse: Swets and Zeitlinger, 2000), 40.

⁵³ The term is suggestive of a certain intellectual laziness: those who adopt it simply omit those with substantive and divergent moral commitments from their consideration, just as fashionable urbanites ignore the existence of rural arts and practices. Engelhardt, *Foundations of Bioethics*, 79.

liberal cosmopolitan. When backed by the political structures of the modern nation-state, such liberal cosmopolitanism actually opposes the freedom to bind oneself to moral communities that rank other goods above autonomy.⁵⁴

By using the language of moral communities with “substantive accounts of the good life,” rather than that of “freely chosen moral projects” or “life plans,” Engelhardt maps respect for autonomy differently than Beauchamp and Childress do, vis à vis the good life. For Beauchamp and Childress, autonomy is itself a good, and its violation an injury. The choices of the individual deserve respect because self-determination is itself a constitutive element of the good life; tyranny, violence, coercion, and deception are all offenses against autonomy. (They may be other things, too, but they are alike in their threat to self-determination.) Beauchamp and Childress’s “freely chosen moral projects” must be respected because to do otherwise would violate the freedom with which all moral projects ought to be chosen. “Substantive accounts of the good life,” however, allow for the possibility of their pursuit in the absence of freedom; they may even include narratives of coercion or involuntariness as constitutive elements of happiness. “The good life” may be constituted by any number of goods in any number of configurations: freedom may be absolutely necessary for the pursuit of the good life, or it may be provisionally or accidentally necessary, or it may be preferable to some goods but not others, or it may even be antithetical to the good life.

In the context of moral pluralism, one respects autonomy not because autonomy is morally preferable to all other goods, but because it is epistemologically preferable to all other procedures for avoiding violence and its analogues. If one wants to do good and avoid harm to others, one must know what those others take good and harm to be.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Engelhardt, *Foundations of Christian Bioethics*, 42-44.

⁵⁵ The avoidance of harm takes precedence over the performance of good, however: I *must* take the other person’s account of harm as normative, while I am under no such obligation to comply with his perception

Engelhardt thus makes explicit the unspoken foundation of Beauchamp and Childress’s programmatic commitment to autonomy: one cannot do good to another person while violating her wishes because her wishes express what she takes to be good for her. To revisit the example proposed above, that of someone who secures a financial windfall for his friend against her wishes, Engelhardt gives us the language to explain how such an act may be interpreted as an injury. Financial windfalls are not self-evidently good; they may be judged as good or evil according to the moral projects of the recipient. If I, as a United Methodist, learn from The United Methodist *Book of Discipline* that “gambling is a menace to society, deadly to the best interests of moral, social, economic, and spiritual life, and destructive of good government,”⁵⁶ I will not countenance participation in lotteries, even by proxy. My disinclination to authorize my friend’s participation in a lottery on my behalf is not (merely) a random exercise of undirected willfulness; it is, instead, the pursuit of a positive good—the betterment of society and of myself, in concert with a community to which I have pledged myself and in line with whose principles I have determined to act. Contravening my desire to avoid participating in something I take to be a grave evil is an injury to me not principally because I did not wish it to be done but because the doing of it positively impedes my *actual* pursuit of what I take to be good. My coerced participation in the lottery may have negative consequences that I cannot avoid even by giving the proceeds away as soon as I receive them: my reputation may be damaged, my standing in my church may be compromised, or I may even face professional sanctions for my wrongful

of the good. If his account of good differs from mine, I may have to gain assent before doing what I perceive to be good

⁵⁶ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville, Tenn.: United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), ¶163G.

participation in what my church calls “a menace to society.”⁵⁷ It is true that these injuries would not happen to me absent the violation of my refusal to participate in the lottery (so, preventing the insult to my autonomy would prevent the injury to my reputation and professional aspirations), but these injuries (even if they remain potential) are what make that violation morally blameworthy. Contrast the weightiness of those injuries with the “injury” of someone doing something I did not want; the latter is so mundane as to be almost unremarkable.

The principle of permission secures the good of the individual not by protecting her autonomy for its own sake but by acknowledging her testimony to how she experiences pleasure and pain, joy and suffering, good and ill. Permission is the means by which one can ensure that any imposed suffering, particularly, is compatible with the good of the individual on whom it is imposed. Permission does not *confer* that compatibility; permission merely assures the one who imposes suffering that the one on whom it is imposed has already deemed it compatible with her happiness. Paternalism (to return to Beauchamp and Childress’s language) is a procedural violation whose error is not that the object of the paternalistic impulse will protest the abrogation of his will but that the object of the paternalistic impulse will suffer in spite of the paternalistic pursuit of his ostensible good. The risk is that the paternalistic agent has misjudged what is good for the autonomous patient because he does not know what the patient considers good.

Engelhardt’s project has more than bioethics in view. The principle of permission can, he says, order society at every level and on every issue, from boundary disputes and taxation to environmental concerns and the moral status of property

⁵⁷ The reader may rightly feel here that the conversation has turned from the fanciful to the preposterous. The likelihood of The United Methodist Church mustering the political will and moral unity to act on its sharp words against gambling is probably more remote than that of my winning a multi-million-dollar lottery by proxy.

ownership. He rightly places the practice of medicine within a more far-reaching ethical project, one which he thinks can address the particular concerns of medicine in concert with the range of human activities with which it intersects. Nonetheless, the principle of permission, though the foundation of all moral cooperation, is of particular relevance in the area of health care: first, because the practice of medicine is ineluctably bound up with the theorizing and living of the moral life, and second, because the practice of medicine is ineluctably pluralistic.

Engelhardt demonstrates the extent to which medicine interacts with the living of life not by listing the areas of life which can be or often are medicalized—reproduction, nutrition, behavior, etc., involving an actual clinical encounter—but by noting the connection between medicine and language. Medicine is a grammar and a narrative; as such it imposes itself on all lived reality. He details “evaluative, descriptive, explanatory, and social labeling” interests that medical language serves, particularly in disease etiology.⁵⁸ Disease diagnosis creates, alters, or destroys social realities—social roles, prerogatives, responsibilities, and even legal claims are given, taken away, or altered on the basis of the language used to describe the disease phenomenon. Although medical diagnoses *tend* to remove moral blameworthiness for disease-associated phenomena, the language of diagnosis does not remove the patient from the moral realm: it instead creates a particular moral realm, with implicit or explicit “routinized . . . social expectations,” “stereotyped roles,” and a “therapeutic imperative.”⁵⁹ The patient is at a particular disadvantage in this context, both with respect to his own body and with respect to his caregiver. Bodily pains or inadequacies drive him to seek medical care, and in order to receive that care, he must cede authority to the caregiver. Medicine does not provide the only possible descriptive or explanatory

⁵⁸ Engelhardt, *Foundations of Bioethics*, 195.

⁵⁹ Engelhardt, *Foundations of Bioethics*, 217.

category: religious, legal, political, and historical accounts of a phenomenon may offer competing value judgments and explanatory paradigms.⁶⁰ Once one enters the domain of health care, however, the caregiver's account of reality and one's place within it dominates. The caregiver embodies the authority of his profession—the training, the specialized knowledge, the moral commitments he has undertaken in concert with his co-professionals—and the patient is usually anxious to cede authority to him, whether in deference to his credentials or because of the quasi-magical character of the healer's role.⁶¹ Engelhardt is careful to point out that this advantage of the practitioner over the patient does not begin with the clinical encounter: daily life is suffused with medical descriptions and explanations, and it is because of these that one seeks medical care when one is ill. (Indeed, it is because of these that one perceives oneself to be ill, rather than sinful or cursed or merely different than one's neighbors.) The practice of medicine is fraught with the potential for grave suffering, simply because the practice of medicine is so very all-encompassing.

The practice of medicine is also fraught with the potential for grave suffering because it is so irremediably pluralistic. The health care encounter is an interaction between a minimum of two people and as such raises the possibility of divergent and competing accounts of the good. More frequently, the health care encounter will not be between patient and physician, but patient and health care team. This team—or, as Engelhardt prefers, this “coterie of individuals”—comprises numerous agents, each with her own conception of the good that is to be pursued through the encounter, her own professional and personal commitments, and her own integrating narrative to order and evaluate the conflicting and overlapping responsibilities in which she is implicated.⁶²

⁶⁰ Engelhardt, *Foundations of Bioethics*, 223-224.

⁶¹ Engelhardt, *Foundations of Bioethics*, 291-295.

⁶² Engelhardt, *Foundations of Bioethics*, 355.

Engelhardt's program prescribes procedures of informed consent to govern these interactions—more explicit and more elaborate the more individuals are involved or the more moral distance presumed between participants. These procedures are seen both as necessary protection for patients from iatrogenic harm and as necessary protection for practitioners for their moral pursuits.

What undergirds Engelhardt's insistence on explicit consent is the recognition that individuals with substantive moral commitments may rationally evaluate suffering as a necessary or productive experience, for themselves or for others. They may participate in projects that require their own or another person's suffering. They may even *compel* the suffering of another, provided that the other has agreed to a relationship in which compulsion may be exercised. (If one is to be free, one must be free to restrict one's freedom; one can will the abrogation of one's will.) It would be nonsensical, according to Engelhardt, to suggest that the purpose of medicine is to relieve all suffering (even if it could). The existence of morally sophisticated communities that regard some suffering as productive or necessary positively requires that the practice of medicine in a secular state include some procedure for distinguishing between chosen and unchosen suffering. It is not the choice to suffer that makes the suffering meaningful—the sufferer's participation in a moral community with accounts of meaning and the role of suffering in the good life does that—but the secular state cannot decide questions of meaning. It can only regulate contracts.

The benefits of both these approaches to bioethics are numerous. Offenses either to the bodily or the volitional integrity of the patient or research subject are at the heart of many of the infamous cases of medical malfeasance. Where the clinical practice of medicine is overwhelmingly characterized by respect for an individual patient's

autonomy, where social and political custom frustrates attempts to use medical knowledge for the sake of harm rather than good and punishes those who act in bad faith, where medical training equips practitioners to enhance their patients' sense of participation in the healing process, where, in short, the wishes of the individual patient are taken with the utmost seriousness, there suffering will be minimized—specifically the suffering that is caused by violations of the patient's bodily or volitional integrity, whether intentional or unwitting. Although Beauchamp and Childress mention the Nuremberg Trials (and the biomedical atrocities they revealed) only briefly, it is clear that their project has taken the lessons learned from the trials to heart. Whatever medicine does, it must never again do *that*, or anything like it.

An emphasis on respect for autonomy, moreover, provides a form of protection that is both wide-reaching and tightly focused. By making consent the standard for medical intervention, autonomy-based bioethics provides protection in the widest possible range of situations while avoiding unnecessarily burdensome or overly specific regulations, procedures, and prohibitions. The principle of permission can be followed in virtually any medical encounter, and yet it is sufficiently flexible to allow for the particularities of *this or that* encounter, for the development of new technologies, and for the advent of new political and social realities. Moreover, by emphasizing the intellectual dimension of consent (it must be "informed" in order to be genuine), an emphasis on permission enhances the patient's opportunities to pursue whatever he takes to be good and the medical caregiver's opportunities to assist that pursuit of the good. The clinician or researcher must be skilled at communicating with the patient in order to secure his genuine (informed) consent; she must be able both to educate the patient by sharing the fruits of her education and experience and to interpret correctly the patient's expressions of his own desires, goals, and values. Permission or autonomy

thus serves as a spur to education (a general good), within the bounds of the clinical encounter (a contextually limited good).

Attention to decisional autonomy is also a significant attribute of palliative care. When the patient's illness involves pain that cannot be controlled and an interruption of life projects that cannot be overcome, supporting the exercise of autonomy in whatever matters can still be left to the patient is seen as a necessary enhancement to whatever other therapies are given. Beauchamp and Childress's work rightly highlights this need—the need for medical caregivers to expand their understanding of suffering, and thus the potential reach of their therapeutic concern, to include categories of embodied life that were formerly ignored or discounted by medical practitioners. Respect for autonomy is intended to express the boundaries of that expanded set of concerns: anything within the purview of the patient's embodied experiences, any sphere in which the patient expects to act as an autonomous bodily and moral agent, is within the purview of the clinician's therapeutic concern. Whatever is an offense against the free choices of an embodied being is a form of bodily suffering (and as we will learn from Thomas in chapter three, there is no other kind of suffering for embodied beings); it is thus amenable to the therapeutic effect of medical care.

Overwhelmingly, then, the protection of autonomy intends to preserve the patient from significant iatrogenic harm. It provides a means by which dangerous projects and procedures *may* be undertaken while protecting persons from predatory research or clinical practices. It provides a procedural starting point for difficult or controversial decisions, and a conversational starting point for clinical or research encounters that will involve risk or harm. If a researcher or clinician can elicit a subject's or patient's willing participation, then whatever harm subsequently befalls the participant can be considered compatible with that participant's considered decision of

what is best for herself. Autonomy-based bioethics—where it influences public policy and clinical practice effectively—genuinely does prevent the sort of suffering that arises from the intentional violation of decisional integrity, from dismissive or contemptuous evaluation of the patient, and even from diffuse societal ills (educational disparities, say, or racial prejudice) that may touch on the clinical encounter. Where respect for autonomy or the principle of permission represents a corrective to a prior faulty practice or an improved articulation of the obligations of medical practitioners, its emphasis is laudable. Where the practice of medicine or public health policy discounts the offense to autonomy as, itself, a form of suffering, an insistence on consent will reduce those offenses to autonomy and, therefore, reduce suffering. Where clinicians have been insufficiently attentive to the way the loss of self-direction exacerbates the aversive experience of illness, an emphasis on decisional integrity may improve palliative care, even where complete autonomy is precluded by the illness suffered. Where medical practitioners and researchers have lacked the philosophical resources to resist tyrannical abuses of the powers of biomedical science, the language of protecting the autonomy of the patient or research subject can keep medicine from being used to cause, rather than relieve, suffering. In short, wherever medicine has failed to respect the decisional integrity of the patient, respect for autonomy will help to correct that failure.

The Solution's Problem

It is not at all clear, however, that this is best or most effective approach to the relief and prevention of iatrogenic harms, or that a bioethics that rigorously protects patient autonomy and solicits declarations of informed consent has a necessarily higher claim to justice or moral praiseworthiness than a bioethics that uses some other approach to the protection of patients.

One problematic aspect of the emphasis on the protection of autonomy as the primary guarantor of patient happiness is its implied relationship between suffering, autonomy, and happiness. The overwhelming emphasis on the protection of autonomy as *the* safeguard against unjust or unwarranted iatrogenic harms operates most effectively in a moral universe in which the relief of suffering is presumed to be the only properly moral posture toward suffering. This is not unexpected, given the goods internal to the practice of medicine: the relief of suffering due to illness, the restoration of the patient to full health, and the mitigation of those pains and diseases which do not admit of complete cure. Medical ethics, conceived as moral inquiry into the practice of medicine, is and must be shaped by whatever medicine understands itself to be. If the relief of suffering is a constitutive practice of medicine, medical ethics may overwhelmingly concern itself with making moral evaluations *within* the space carved out by the intention to relieve suffering. Bioethics may rightly be preoccupied with questions of *how rightly* or *how best* to relieve suffering over the question of whether or not suffering ought to be relieved. And yet precisely as *moral* inquiry, bioethics can and must probe the adequacy of medicine's account of its own relationship to the good life, the moral life. The bioethicist cannot abandon the question of whether or not suffering ought (always) to be relieved. Bioethics must probe the relationship of suffering (and its relief) to the moral life as a whole, and this is precisely what standard bioethics fails to do. If, that is, suffering can be related to the moral life other than in exclusively negative terms, if the good life has some use for or need for suffering—even imposed suffering—a bioethics that allows medicine to retain its presumption that all pain and suffering is opposed to wellbeing is a bioethics that has at least partly failed in its task.

Another unexplored problematic in the dominant account of bioethics—that is, the one that relies on the protection of autonomy for the prevention of undue harm—is

that it substitutes one *test* of the patient's good for the good itself. It protects the patient by protecting the patient's *wishes*, because the patient's wishes are supposed to be the most perfect, indeed the only possible, expression of the relationship between suffering and happiness *for him*. Only the patient can decide which forms of suffering are compatible with his happiness; only the patient can weight the relative benefits and burdens of particular therapies, procedures, or research projects appropriately with respect to his own understanding of the goods and purposes of life. In such a view, medicine is (rightly) seen as being in the service of goods beyond itself; medicine does not exist to produce or restore health for its own sake but for the sake of whatever moral projects for the pursuit of which the patient requires health. The problem lies in the perversely small horizon against which those greater goods are seen and judged: the patient's views of his own good, the worthiness of his moral projects, the relative merits and drawbacks to any proposed course of action, are the only views that matter. The moral evaluation of any medical interaction is limited to the patient's intellectual capacities and moral sensitivities.

To take just one of the above-cited discussions as an example, Beauchamp and Childress's discussion of the right to privacy gives an overly broad reach to the human person, and thus to the sphere of concern of the medical caregiver: "The principle of respect for autonomy, therefore, includes the right to decide as far as possible what will happen to one's person—to one's body, to information about one's life, to one's secrets, and the like."⁶³ Thanks to the principle of autonomy, medical caregivers can see the full range of potential harms to the human person and can avoid, treat, or palliate all of them. This full range can include *anything* the patient might want to call his own: his body, his activities, his reputation, his secrets, his employment possibilities, his financial

⁶³ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 297.

successes, his family structure, and so on. This “region of sovereignty”⁶⁴ is both impossibly broad and absurdly narrow. Indeed, the language of “sovereignty” betrays the limitations of the moral vision: to make the patient supreme ruler of all that is his own is to make him the supreme ruler of an all but non-existent region. A patient’s activities, reputation, secrets, etc., are exercised in isolation precisely nowhere. Virtually everything over which the patient might wish to extend his sovereignty intersects with the concerns—actual and imagined—of others. While such expansive descriptions of the extent of persons’ concerns are meant to caution the medical caregiver—whose education and experience give her a great deal of power over others’ bodies, choices, lives—against discounting or ignoring the complex web of concerns within which patients’ bodies are involved, the degree and extent of control they articulate as normative is implausibly high.

Moreover, by insisting on autonomy as the principal guarantor against unnecessary or meaningless suffering, bioethics risks making all illness (and, more broadly, all experiences of impotence, passivity, or imperfect agency) incompatible with happiness or a well-lived life. The theorists considered above do not make the sloppy mistake of forgetting that illness is, itself, an offense to autonomy.⁶⁵ Still, the emphasis on autonomy as that which prevents unnecessary or meaningless suffering presumes (or creates) a characterization of necessary or meaningful suffering that is inextricably linked to autonomy. Suffering is necessary when it is entirely outside the realm of human control; suffering is meaningful when it is avoidable but freely chosen as compatible with the other freely chosen life projects of the sufferer; suffering is

⁶⁴ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 296.

⁶⁵ Eric Cassell’s is probably the most thorough and thoughtful exploration of this dynamic. Chapters three and four in *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine* detail both the constructed meaning and experience of suffering and the various ways illness, especially chronic illness, interact with that construction. (*The Nature of Suffering*, 31-64.)

unnecessary and meaningless when it could be avoided and is not, in spite of the wishes of the sufferer. These categories do not fit so neatly with the lived experience of illness and pain. The construction of meaning and the acknowledgment of one's susceptibility to illness and injury is more multivalent. Grave injuries are experienced differently than minor ones, acute illnesses differently than chronic ones, degenerative illnesses differently than rapidly terminal ones, mentally disabling illnesses and injuries differently than physically disabling ones. A particular experience of pain or illness may so dominate a life that it is impossible not to narrate one's life entirely through the lens of that one experience; sometimes that experience is narrated positively, sometimes negatively. It is difficult to attend to all these factors with autonomy as the controlling concern, precisely because illness and injury are themselves offenses to autonomy.

Even within the relatively (and, perhaps, appropriately) limited project of preventing unacceptable iatrogenic harm, a bioethics that concerns itself principally with the protection of autonomy doesn't entirely solve the problem it purports to solve, and it creates its own set of problems. Autonomy becomes the principal—indeed, the only—lens through which suffering *may* be viewed as part of a blessed or happy life. Chosen suffering is seen as meaningful (if still painful), while imposed or necessary suffering is and must be meaningless and destructive. The patient who consents to a course of treatment or a research project says, in effect, that whatever pains he is likely to suffer or risks he undertakes are compatible with what he takes to be his own good. Because he is the one that suffers those pains, he is the best, indeed the only, arbiter of the relationship between those pains and his good. But if the distinction just made above holds—if there may be a difference between violating patients' wishes and violating patients—then the

protection of autonomy, rather than of patients, settles for a proximate good.⁶⁶

As Engelhardt acknowledges, particular traditions may offer accounts of human good and its relationship to suffering that do not depend so firmly on respect for autonomy. The following chapters will attempt to offer such an account (or, perhaps, a range of such accounts) from within the Christian tradition. While such an account cannot solve, in and of itself, the more puzzling quandaries of biomedical ethics, it may enable a more sophisticated and nuanced discussion of the relevant issues.

⁶⁶ Engelhardt, in fact, is largely in agreement with just such a statement. Acknowledging that the “general secular morality” he articulates in *Foundations* is “morally repugnant” (*Foundations of Bioethics*, 421) with respect to robust descriptions of the good, he nonetheless advocates it as the closest thing a pluralistic society can come to a genuinely worthy moral project. In the absence of a common pursuit of clearly agreed-upon goods, noncoercive cooperation is a worthwhile proximate good.

Chapter 2: Suffering in Luke and Paul

The Christian tradition has a particular contribution to make because of its complex reflections on the nature of suffering. In brief, Christian tradition cannot be content with so monochromatic a picture of suffering as the one sketched in the previous chapter. Its foundational documents paint a rather different picture of suffering—indeed, several different pictures. To survey the diversity of canonical witnesses to the meaning and experience of suffering cannot be the project of a single dissertation, much less a single chapter in a dissertation focused, ultimately, elsewhere, but any discussion of Christian approaches to suffering must begin by recognizing this diversity.

If this chapter cannot cover the biblical views of suffering exhaustively, it can indicate the range and complexity of these views by considering the tension between the understanding of suffering expressed by two different authors: the apostle Paul and the writer of Luke-Acts. This chapter will compare Luke-Acts to the undisputed letters of the Pauline corpus in order to articulate the fundamental tension between them. In brief, Luke-Acts offers little in the way of a positive evaluation of suffering, detailing various instances of it only to demonstrate the power or goodness of the one who overcomes it. Paul, on the other hand, describes his own vocation, especially, as well as the vocation of Christians more generally, in terms that require the embrace of experiences of unrelieved suffering, if not the pursuit of them.

Prolegomena

The primary difficulty with comparing these two sets of texts is that they differ so completely in genre, purpose, structure, and content. Luke-Acts is a story, and the author's communication of whatever he or she intends to communicate is thoroughly

shaped by the constraints of good story-telling.¹ Unlike the author of the gospel of John, for example, who routinely uses direct address to interpret the narrative, Luke relies almost entirely on the narrative format to communicate meaning. Taking his meaning, then, requires interpretive strategies that understand and respect its narrativity. To explain what he knows or believes about suffering, Luke tells stories about people who suffer, in which people suffer (that is, the plots of which are driven by suffering and, usually, its relief), and which offer descriptions of suffering. Thus the reader must be attentive not only to how suffering is explicitly treated (the descriptions of suffering) but also to implicit treatments of suffering through characterization and plot (the people who suffer, the course of their suffering in the narrative, and the broader pattern created by stories dealing with suffering). Some of our understanding of how narrativity shapes interpretation is intuitive and largely unlearned (or unconsciously learned through repeated exposure to similar kinds of stories): we know, for example, that a description or pronouncement placed on the lips of the villain of a piece is less to be trusted than a speech placed on the lips of the hero. We know that explanations offered before the climax of a story are provisional, and may prove to be false, while those offered during the denouement are often intended to be definitive. More sophisticated stories, however, require correspondingly more of the reader: even villains tell the truth, or a kind of truth, in Shakespeare, and dystopias like *Brave New World* or *The Handmaid's Tale* or *Nineteen Eighty-Four* exploit the tension between how things turn out and how one wishes for them to turn out. Interpreting Luke-Acts thus requires a certain set of tools, those designed for working with relatively sophisticated narratives.

The letters of Paul, on the other hand, require other tools. Epistolary literature

¹ The author of Luke-Acts does not identify himself (or herself), and though references late in Acts seem to make the narrator one of Paul's companions, there is no certainty that the narrator (in those sections) is the same as the final author of Luke-Acts. For convenience, I will hereafter defer to tradition and refer to the author as Luke.

adopts and adapts different conventions than narrative literature, and the careful interpreter must be aware of those conventions. In Paul's case, the careful interpreter must reckon with the conventions of Greco-Roman rhetoric and philosophy as well as of rabbinic scriptural interpretation. Even where Paul speaks straightforwardly (and he does not always), the reader must be attentive to the idiosyncrasies of personality and situation that comprise the interaction between Paul and his (original) intended readers. As letters, they are entirely composed of direct address. Paul intends to speak authoritatively and clearly to his readers, and he clearly intends them to take his words normatively. That is not at all to say that Paul's language is uniformly more didactic, literal, or straightforward than Luke's. To the contrary, Paul uses, *inter alia*, figurative language, irony, allegory, indirect discourse, poetry, and even narrative. At times, he appears to quote an argument from his opponents, only to turn the argument on its head a few verses later. He makes explicit reference to shared experiences (that is, shared with the original recipients of the letters) that he does not describe or elaborate; one can only imagine how many more such references there are than are apparent to the modern reader. His words are direct address, and his intention is thus plainer than Luke's, but there is no less need of interpretive care.

In addition to these significant differences between these two sets of texts, we must also acknowledge another difficulty: the primary concern of this project—to articulate the place of suffering in the well-lived life, especially with reference to the concerns of bioethics—is not identical to the primary concern of either author. Paul and Luke address suffering, to be sure—otherwise there would be no profit in consulting either of them. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that this project demands of the texts answers to questions that are alien to them, or at least tangential to them. In some cases, Paul writes to his congregations to place their unexpected suffering in theological

context, and in others, he writes to give theological context to his *own* suffering, lest it discredit his message. Even these concerns are less broad than those this chapter concerns itself with; Paul offers theological interpretations of *their* suffering or *his* suffering—that is, particular kinds and instances of suffering—rather than of suffering itself. Luke, too, seems to have as at least one of his purposes explaining the rejection of the gospel and persecution of its adherents. Again, this is a putting in perspective of a particular kind or instance of suffering rather than a systematic engagement with the meaning and experience of suffering. The analytical and constructive work of this chapter must be acknowledged, then, as a creative engagement with texts that do not directly address its central question.

A final problem, earlier alluded to, must be admitted: though the texts under consideration here comprise fully half of the New Testament canon, they do not comprise the entirety of New Testament teaching on suffering (much less that of the entire biblical canon). This chapter omits texts of considerable importance for understanding New Testament perspectives on suffering. A thorough and systematic study of suffering in the New Testament would have to add to this chapter's work a serious engagement with Jesus's startling words in John 9, the troubling counsel of "Peter" in 1 Peter 2, and the Christological puzzle of Hebrews 5 and 11, in addition to the more manageable and pervasive themes of pedagogical suffering (in, e.g., James 1 and 5) and eschatological reversal (in, e.g., Revelation). The requisite apology ("it goes beyond the scope of this paper . . .") does not suffice to excuse the incompleteness of this study. The best that can be said in its defense is that the tension that will be developed here represents not a thorough documentation of New Testament perspectives on suffering but a consideration of the source of Christian theology's most fruitful reflections on suffering. Christian scriptures describe and depict suffering in many

ways, and the two that will be explored here are the most apparently incompatible; it is in the attempt to navigate that apparent incompatibility that Christian theology has been able to articulate a richer, more satisfying description of suffering than was presented in the previous chapter. Luke and Paul do not say all there is to say about suffering, but reflecting on what they do say allows, or perhaps forces, the theologian to say something worthwhile.

Luke-Acts and the Healing of All Harms

Some recent scholars have offered readings of Luke-Acts that emphasize the role of suffering in the narrative, reacting at least in part to Hans Conzelmann's reading of the text as confidently asserting God's salvific action within history.² Because of the scenes of martyrdom and persecution that dominate especially its second half, Acts receives more attention in this regard. Beverly Gaventa, sagely reminding us that Luke's two-volume work is not "a theological argument somehow encased—even imprisoned—in a narrative," highlights the importance of persecution in the narrative of the latter part of Acts.³ Rather than "a story of consistent progress from glory unto glory," the story of the early church is one of "the growth of the community *together with* the growth of hostility to that community."⁴ David Moessner similarly discerns a Deuteronomistic pattern underlying Luke's characterization of Jesus and his followers, according to which the rejection and persecution of God's prophets by Israel is of primary importance. "Israel's continued disobedience" (that is, rejection of both the message and the messengers of God) is not only a prevalent theme in Acts but is, indeed, "the linchpin of cohesion" in the characterization of Jesus, Peter, Paul, and

² Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, trans. G. Buswell (London: Faber and Faber, 1960).

³ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "Toward a Theology of Acts," *Interpretation* 42 (1988), 149.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 154, 157.

Stephen.⁵ Rejection by God's people is likewise highlighted in Norman Petersen's analysis of the structure of Luke-Acts: confrontation followed by rejection, leading to the extension both of the action and of God's plan, is the pattern that underlies and unites both volumes.⁶ C. K. Barrett argues that a *theologia crucis*, though not elaborated or articulated by Luke, is not incompatible with his portrayal of Christian discipleship.⁷ He sees in Luke 9:23, 14:27, and 22:28 strong indications that Luke sees Christian discipleship in terms of a life-long willingness to bear the (negative) consequences of following Jesus. Scott Cunningham traces the theme of persecution and rejection through both volumes of the work, emphasizing especially its overlooked presence in the gospel. He shows, for example, the increased (compared to its Markan source) frequency with which Luke's Jesus refers to his impending crucifixion and resurrection, as well as the reiteration of the necessity of the Messiah's suffering and death in Luke's three resurrection stories.⁸

This work on Luke's attention to suffering, particularly to persecution and rejection, is only necessary and profitable, however, because those themes that have contributed to a "triumphalist" reading of Luke-Acts are so glaringly evident. The overall pattern of the work, along with the narrative and dialogic details of the text, emphasize the sovereignty of God, the completeness of the healing and salvation Jesus brings, and the certain fulfillment of God's plan, in spite of opposition and through the power of the Spirit. Suffering has its place in such a narrative pattern, but its presence does not negate—indeed, it positively accentuates—the affirmation of God's certain triumph *over* suffering.

⁵ David Moessner, "The Christ Must Suffer: New Light on the Jesus—Peter, Stephen, Paul Parallels in Luke-Acts," *Novum Testamentum* 28 (1986), 227.

⁶ Norman Petersen, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

⁷ C. K. Barrett, "Theologia Crucis—in Acts?" in *Theologia Crucis—signum Crucis: Festschrift für Erich Dinkler*, ed. Carl Andresen and Gunter Klein (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1979), pp. 73-84.

⁸ Scott Cunningham, *Through Many Tribulations: The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 80-81, 176-178.

The first three significant moments in the text, for example, are the poetic prophecies of Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon. Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) is the paradigmatic statement of the (thoroughly Jewish) notion of God's just and effective judgment setting things aright. God is "my Savior," "the Mighty One," and God's actions are described both as good and as powerful. God shows "mercy" by "[looking] with favor on the lowliness of his servant" (1:48), "[lifting] up the lowly" (1:52), "[filling] the hungry with good things" (1:53), and by acting "according to the promise he made to our ancestors" (1:55). The "proud" (1:51), the "powerful" on "their thrones" (1:52), and the "rich" (1:53) are no match for the "strength [of] his arm" (1:51). Her song echoes the triumphant song of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10) most strongly, but one hears, as well, echoes of the prophetic songs of Isaiah (Is 49, 55, 61) announcing the restoration of Israel, and the jubilant songs of Deborah (Judges 5) and Moses and Miriam (Ex 15) celebrating the defeat of Israel's enemies by the mighty arm of the Lord. As a prophetic announcement from a trustworthy witness, this poem tells us what sort of narrative it is that will follow.⁹ This will be a narrative of God's triumph over all that frustrates God's will—everything that is good will be established at the hands of the Mighty One of Israel.

Zechariah's prophecy, too, trumpets both the power and the goodness of God in restoring Israel. God "has raised up a mighty savior" (1:69), has "remembered his holy covenant" and "shown the mercy promised to our ancestors" (1:72). Salvation will come

⁹ Robert Tannehill gives a helpful categorization of four kinds of material that he considers of special importance in Luke-Acts: "previews and reviews" (called elsewhere prolepses and analepses), scriptural references (both direct quotations and general allusions), "commission statements" for significant figures, and "interpretive statements by reliable characters." (*The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, vol. 1 [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986], 21-23.) Mary's prophecy is of the fourth kind, a disclosure by a reliable witness—Gabriel has, in a sense, vouched for her earlier in the chapter. In addition, the close association with Hebrew Scriptures (especially Hannah's song, as mentioned above) may gesture toward the second type, that of scripture quotations. Though the OT scripture is not cited or quoted exactly, Mary's song is an appropriation of a particular and recognizable passage, where, for example, Zechariah's and Simeon's words are more generally scriptural.

through “the tender mercy of our God” (1:78), and it will eventuate in “the way of peace” (1:79) so that God’s people “might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him” (1:74-75). Again, this is a prophecy that clues the reader in to the kind of story she will be reading: one of God’s successful establishment of a people living in righteousness and peace.

The triumph of God is given an even greater purview in the prophecy of Simeon; now the reader is led to understand that God’s purposes include those outside of Israel. God’s salvation will be “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (2:32). His further words display the completeness of God’s salvation: the light that would enlighten the Gentiles and glorify Israel would also reveal “the inner thoughts of many” (2:35) and would be established as “a sign that will be opposed” (2:34). Though it is possible to read these words as introducing a somber note into the narrative—there will be “falling” as well as “rising” in Israel and Mary would suffer the piercing of her soul (2:34-35)—they are more properly understood in terms of the just and complete judgment of God, a judgment that had already been featured in both Mary’s and Zechariah’s words. God’s salvation is a thorough setting-aright, which includes both the establishment of good and punishment of evil. The “proud” must be “scattered,” the “powerful” must be dethroned, the reign of Israel’s “enemies” and “all who hate us” (1:71) must be ended. This requires the “piercing” of everyone’s “soul” to bring to light its “inner thoughts” (2:35). Not even the mother of the savior would be spared this conclusive, probing judgment. God’s victory will be thorough, decisive, and complete.¹⁰

¹⁰ Some commentators take the “sword” that “will pierce [Mary’s] own soul” as a reference to the suffering Mary would experience on account of her son’s rejection and crucifixion. (So, e.g., Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. F. F. Bruce [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 120-121; François Bovon, *L’Évangile Selon Saint Luc (1,1-9,50)*, Commentaire Du Nouveau Testament, vol. IIIa [Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1991], 145-146; and I. Howard Marshall, *The*

This victory—this penetrating, all-encompassing salvation—is a prevalent theme throughout Luke. Each story in the unfolding narrative develops an ever richer picture of the completeness of the salvation being wrought in the world. The descriptions of suffering that accompany these stories of salvation are not incidental; they are an integral part of demonstrating the fullness of beatitude that will pertain to the Kingdom of God. In this sense, Luke’s gospel explores a crucial dimension of suffering: its pervasiveness. The assortment of people who are said to suffer, the varieties of suffering to which they are subject, and the range of life situations touched by some kind of suffering are all-encompassing.

The salvation that Jesus of Nazareth brings must, then, be similarly all-encompassing. The first clue in the narrative that this will be so is in the sermon at Nazareth, the inauguration of Jesus’s public ministry (4:14-37). This programmatic pericope announces several of the themes that will be important in Luke’s narrative: blessing and condemnation, belief and rejection, continuity with Hebrew Scripture, danger and providential care are all carefully and harmoniously blended into the narrative. For our purposes here the most significant theme, however, is the association of Jesus’s mission with the relief of suffering. Jesus reads from Isaiah 61 and announces its immediate fulfillment, presumably in his own person. The “year of the Lord’s favor” (4:19, quoting Is 61:2) that has arrived is distinctive in its scope: it concerns “the poor,” that is, “the captives,” “the blind,” and “the oppressed”—all of whom are offered the

Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text, New International Greek Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], 123.) Raymond Brown (*The Birth of the Messiah*, new updated edition [New York: Doubleday, 1977, 461-466], dismisses such interpretations as importing non-Lucan presumptions and material (such as Mary’s purported presence at the crucifixion) into the text. Like Brown, Luke Timothy Johnson (*The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina vol. 3 [Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991], 56-57) emphasizes rather the element of decisive and divisive judgment. Alan Culpepper tries to split the difference: “she will share in the pain of the rejection of Jesus and the division of Israel” (“The Gospel of Luke,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander Keck, et al, Vol. 9 [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995], 72).

healing appropriate to their needs. The captives are to be released, the blind to receive sight, and the oppressed to be set free (4:18).

The theme of healing continues to sound through the rest of the pericope, even as the tenor of Jesus's preaching changes. In the second half of the pericope, healing functions to highlight the dynamic of disbelief and rejection that will plague the rest of the narrative. Jesus first accuses his (previously approving) listeners of challenging the salvation and healing he has offered: "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!'" (4:23). Jesus's purpose in turning the conversation to rejection in the face of the crowd's apparent delight in his message is the subject of tremendous debate, but of interest here is the epistemological weight given to the relief of suffering. The proverbial admonition to "cure oneself" is offered as a potentially valid response to the offer of salvation; if Jesus has just claimed, in his person, the arrival of the curative, restorative, liberative "year of the Lord's favor," the crowds are right to demand proof in the form of some kind of demonstration of this curative power. The crowds might be expected to demand, "'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum'" (4:23), precisely because that is the kind of salvation being offered. If Jesus has come bearing the fulfillment of God's promise to cure infirmity and relieve oppression, infirmity should be cured, and oppression should be relieved.

Jesus turns this weapon—the demand for proof of the presence of God's salvation—against the crowd even before the crowd appears to level it at him. Turning to Israel's own scriptures, he shows the sovereignty—even the capriciousness—of God's offer of salvation: "There were many widows in Israel . . . yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel . . . and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian" (4:25-27). God's salvation is inseparable from God's judgment; though it brings with it demonstrable relief from

suffering (in this case, from hunger and from disease), it also brings with it the possibility of judgment and condemnation. The probative value of the relief of suffering cuts both ways; Jesus suggests that the absence of healing narratives within Israel during the reigns of Ahab and Ahaziah and the ministries of Elijah and Elisha demonstrates the disfavor into which Israel had fallen, just as surely as the gift of healing for the widow at Zarephath and for Naaman demonstrates the presence of God's favor. If "the year of the Lord's favor" is at hand, it will be a year of discernment, of condemnation as well as salvation. Again, however, what is important for our purposes is the role played by the relief of suffering: it is identified almost exactly with the presence of God's salvation, its absence with the absence of God's salvation.

Luke moves immediately after this pericope into the kinds of demonstrations that Jesus's words alluded to. Jesus exorcises demons, cures "various kinds of diseases," and "rebukes" Simon's mother-in-law's fever so that it leaves her. Following his source narrative (Mark), Luke narrates these stories tersely, and they bear little resemblance to the more developed stories of healing and restoration that follow. Yet their inclusion here seems to serve as the confirmation of Jesus's stunning announcement that the reader might have expected in the preceding pericope. Though Jesus responds to the crowds at Nazareth with evidence of God's judgment of Israel (prompting or anticipating their rejection of him), his public ministry elsewhere is immediately characterized by the sorts of healing and salvation that were to be evidence of the "year of the Lord's favor." The first of several of Luke's characteristic summaries appears in this context (4:40-41), stating that Jesus cured (*therapeuō*) "various kinds of diseases" and rebuked and exorcised demons. Similar summaries occur in 5:15, 6:18-19, 7:21, and

9:11.¹¹ The reader is thus to understand that such healings were characteristic of Jesus's public ministry.

Those healing stories that are narrated more fully are often told in the context of controversy. While these controversy stories serve many purposes—emphasizing the authority of Jesus, answering theological challenges to early Christian practice, or providing dramatic interest—of primary significance for this chapter is the way in which these stories cultivate a sense of the obligation to offer healing (or relief from suffering more broadly), even at the expense of other religious obligations. It is thus suggested that the relief of human suffering is both at the highest level of religious obligation and at the highest level of divine manifestations.¹²

Those healing narratives that are associated with Sabbath controversies are especially pointed. In one of the earliest such stories, Jesus, while teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath, cures a man with a withered hand despite the hostile intentions of his opponents (6:6-11); a companion story appears later in the narrative (13:10-17) with almost identical setting (Jesus teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath) and conflict (the offense to religious sensibilities concerning the Sabbath). In the earlier story, Jesus's opponents, "the scribes and the Pharisees," are watchful for exactly this sort of offense: they "watched him to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him" (6:7). The later story presents the opposition

¹¹ It is implied that Jesus's followers share this habit of healing and curing, though this appears only indirectly in the narrative of the gospel (9:1-2, 10:17-19). Luke 8:2-3 also names several women who had been healed, presumably by Jesus, but this is, again, more indirect than the summaries noted above.

¹² Interestingly, Luke omits one controversy story that at first glance seems congenial to his purposes. Jesus's criticism of the religious authorities in Mark 7:9-13, that the Pharisees and scribes permit a voluntary religious act (dedication of property as an offering) to supersede an obligatory one (respect and care for one's parents), does perform a comparison similar to the ones described in the following paragraphs and insist on the primacy of the obligation to care for one's (presumably needy) parents. In Mark's story (which Matthew substantially follows), obedience to Torah is the lens through which this issue is explored, however, and the neediness of the hypothetical parents receives no attention. Jesus cites the fourth commandment and Leviticus 20:9, which levies the death penalty against those who speak ill of their parents, as the laws being broken or ignored in favor of the Pharisees' and scribes' "tradition." Neither of these laws shows the concern evidenced elsewhere in the Holiness Code and in the prophetic tradition for care for the needy, and the argument is thus less to Luke's purpose than it might otherwise seem.

as a response to Jesus's actions—the synagogue leader is “indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath” and turns to discourage the crowds' (apparent) attempts to seek healing from Jesus, saying, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day” (13:14). A third story (14:1-6) mimics the first: Jesus heals a man with dropsy in front of the watchful and challenging eyes of his opponents (possibly the Pharisees, to one of whose home he is on his way for a meal).

In the first two stories, Jesus's response to the conflict highlights the particular fitness of healing on the Sabbath. In the first story, in response to the scribes' and Pharisees' antagonistic vigilance, Jesus asks, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?” (6:9) Restricting the moral evaluation of action to its narrowest and simplest scope, Luke's Jesus denies the possibility that any act of beneficence can be in conflict with the requirements of the law. The options are limited and stark: to do good *or* to do harm, to heal *or* to kill. He also forces an association between failing to cure and doing harm or destroying life. Where Sabbath law *might* recognize essentially good or neutral acts that are nonetheless proscribed (under the category of work), Luke's Jesus suggests that the act of healing or curing cannot fall under that category. Instead, the assumed obligation to heal is so absolute that it makes a failure to do so morally equivalent to the intentional commission of harm.¹³

The middle story does not put the moral obligation quite so pointedly—curing

¹³ Tannehill mutes the general obligation implicit in this story by emphasizing the vocational implications of Jesus's words: “As ‘lord of the Sabbath’ Jesus is authorized to fulfill *his* mission in spite of Sabbath restrictions. Jesus was sent by God to bring release to the captives. If *he* failed to help these people, *he* would ‘do evil’ or ‘destroy’ rather than carrying out *his* saving mission.” (*Narrative Unity*, 175, emphasis added.) This interpretation is not without merit, but emphasizing the particularity of Jesus's mission in this way blunts the force of Jesus's critique of his opponents. The construction of these stories seems rather intended to highlight Jesus's opponents' ludicrousness in challenging a patent good—healing, restoration to wholeness—for the sake of something intended to point to that wholeness—Sabbath observance. They are faulted for their failure to value the relief of suffering over the performance of individual piety, as well as for their failure to recognize Messiah and to approve of his mission.

on the Sabbath is compared to other activities that are permitted on the Sabbath. If basic care for one's animals is permitted on the Sabbath ("Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?" 13:15), Luke's Jesus suggests, how much more should care for a human be permitted? Though curing is not here presented as a moral obligation, it is presented as especially appropriate to the meaning of the Sabbath: "Ought not this woman, *a daughter of Abraham* whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage *on the Sabbath day?*" (13:16). Not in spite of her being a daughter of Abraham and in spite of the Sabbath, but precisely *because* she is a daughter of Abraham and *because* it is the Sabbath should this woman be "set free from this bondage." Access to healing and restoration are here equated to familial descent and Sabbath observance as Jewish identity markers. Care for the children of Abraham, especially through release from captivity (to demonic spirits and/or to physical ailment), is the goal of the law; it cannot be in conflict with the law.

The final story strips away all but the barest details of the conflict, and it is clear that, by this third repetition of the pattern, the conflict has become the dominant concern. The man with dropsy appears simply and flatly, neither his illness nor his cure receiving any elaboration. Jesus's question to his opponents is similarly flat, but here the lack of detail serves rather to sharpen the challenge than to soften it: "Is it lawful to cure people (*therapeusai*) on the Sabbath, or not?" The "lawyers and Pharisees" do not answer, even after Jesus offers a clue to what their answer should be—"If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a Sabbath day?" (14:5)—and their inability to affirm the basic fitness of Sabbath healing proves to be the first of several moral failings Jesus will observe and comment on in the scene.

Even where the relief of suffering is not so urgent or spectacular as the healings in the previous stories, Luke's Jesus is insistent that it take precedence over Sabbath observance. In the story immediately prior to the healing of the man with the withered hand (the incident which, narratively speaking, explains the scribes' and Pharisees' subsequent antagonistic anticipation of a sabbath-day healing), Jesus has already engaged in controversy with "some of the Pharisees" over sabbath observance (6:1-5). Jesus's disciples are pictured as engaging in a disputable activity—they "plucked some heads of grain" and "rubbed them in their hands" (6:1). Jesus's answer to the Pharisees' challenge suggests that religious observance must give way to charity when human health is at stake. He appeals to a story of David's emergency appropriation of "the bread of the Presence" in 1 Sam 21:1-6 to suggest that satisfying hunger is a sufficient reason to excuse what would otherwise be improper. Even when the need is not so urgent as physical illness and pain, the basic activity of relieving even one's own hunger is not in conflict with the Sabbath.¹⁴

This story thus serves to broaden the scope of salvation indicated by the Nazareth sermon. The story of Jesus's sermon at Nazareth programmatically identifies Jesus's ministry with the healing of grave harms—physical, economic, and political. The story of the disciple's plucking grain suggests that even moderate physical need is of concern in the Kingdom of God. There is no suggestion of extreme hunger in this passage; though the disciples have, earlier in the narrative, left gainful occupations in order to follow Jesus, there is no textual indication that abject poverty or destitution

¹⁴ It may be argued that Jesus is less concerned with the disciples' and David's hunger than he is with the claim that ends the passage: "The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath." The appeal to David's actions may be read as an implicit appeal to messianic authority: that is, the emphasis may be on *David*, as the one authorized to make such exceptions to religious law, rather than on the human need that prompts the exception. To claim David's actions as precedent may suggest a claim to have the authority of David. Because the text moves immediately from a report of David's actions to a claim to authority, it is reasonable to adopt this reading. Even if the controversy over authority dominates the passage, however, the implied evaluation of human hunger stands. Jesus is not pictured as asserting his authority for the sake of privilege ("I'm in charge, and my friends and I can skirt the law if we want"), but for the sake of his disciples' needs.

followed that choice.¹⁵ But one need not be destitute to receive aid. The hungry are to be fed in the Kingdom of God, an assertion which Jesus later confirms both in teaching (6:21) and in action (9:10-17).

Robert Tannehill argues an especially sophisticated version of this point with respect to Peter's recognition of Jesus as "the Messiah of God" in 9:20. Contrasting this confession with the disciples' wondering confusion in 8:25 ("Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?"), Tannehill notes that the most significant intervening incident between these two stories is the miraculous feeding of the multitude. This feeding is redolent with eschatological and missional overtones: the filling of the hungry promised in 6:21 is thematically linked to the parables of the faithful slaves who are served by their master at his return (12:37) and of the forgiven son whose return is elaborately fêted (15:22-24), to the repeated image of the Kingdom of God as a meal (13:29, 14:15 and the parable of the Great Dinner which follows, 22:16, 18), and to the image of feeding as an act of faithful stewardship (12:42). Like the disciples who begin to recognize the risen Jesus when he gives them bread (24:30-31), Peter recognizes Jesus as Messiah precisely because he has given bread to those who are hungry.¹⁶ The relief of hunger—not of starvation, of chronic malnutrition, of potentially fatal deprivation, but of the quotidian need for regular modest nourishment—makes Jesus's identity plain in a way that even the mastery of wind and waves cannot.

In fact, all manner of basic human comfort turns out to be of concern to Luke's Jesus. While excoriating those who concern themselves with their own comfort at the expense of others (6:24-26; 11:39-44; 12:42-46; 16:10-15, 19-31), Jesus reassures his

¹⁵ Pace Tannehill, who reads voluntary poverty as an absolute requirement of followers of Jesus: "Thus when Jesus tells the rich ruler to sell and give all, he is simply repeating a requirement which applies to all his followers who have possessions." *Narrative Unity*, 121. Cp. 9:57-58.

¹⁶ Tannehill, *Narrative Unity*, 217-218.

followers that their material needs are known by God and that God is the sort of God who attends to such needs. There are, of course, several overlapping themes in Jesus's instructions to his disciples not to worry (12:22-34)—the character of God, the contrast between freedom and strife, and the simplicity of basic human needs. This last is the most important facet for our purposes here: Jesus speaks of the Father's attention to the humblest of needs, and his intention to provide them for his children. (Significantly, here it is "your Father," rather than "my Father.") Jesus's words focus on rudimentary needs—food, drink, clothing—and on creation's testimony to God's readiness to supply them. God feeds ravens and decorates field grass—"how much more" will God's care extend to humans? God's openhandedness is offered as both reassurance and pattern. Because "your Father knows that you need" all these things and because, moreover, "it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom," the disciples can eschew the life of striving and worrying and acquiring that characterized the rich fool in the preceding parable.¹⁷ The disciples are also instructed to mimic God's extravagance toward others: "Sell your possession, and give alms." This will not endanger the disciples' own bodily needs—God intends to provide for them—and will instead *increase* the disciples' holdings (so to speak) "in heaven," where their treasure is secure. The

¹⁷ Although the placement of the "do not worry" pericope differs in Matthew and Luke, in both gospels, these sayings appear in the context of a warning against acquisitiveness. Of the two warnings, however, Luke's is by far the sharper. Matthew warns that one "cannot serve God and wealth" (6:24), and that dedication to the latter means opposition to God; moreover, this section of the Sermon on the Mount is shot through with references to reward (6:1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 16, 18, as well as references to forgiveness in 14, 15, and "treasures in heaven" in 20). There is an implicit connection, then, between one's eschatological condition and one's attitude toward wealth. Luke makes that connection more explicit in the parables that surround Jesus's instruction not to worry. The preceding parable (Lk 12:13-21) portrays a prosperous man who can think of nothing to do with the abundant produce of his land except to hoard it and consume it. God appears to the man to denounce his folly, in light of his imminent death, and to suggest that what the man sought to avoid—the dispersal of "my grain and my goods"—was precisely what would happen. The suggestion of eschatological punishment remains implicit, but is made explicit in the parables that *follow* Jesus's instructions not to worry. There, Jesus contrasts faithful, attentive servants and householders with inattentive or abusive ones; the latter are promised punishment: the inattentive householder will "let his house be broken into," while the bad servants are "cut in pieces and put . . . with the unfaithful" (12:46) or "receive a severe beating" (12:47). Luke thus restricts the options and heightens the gravity of the choice. One is either money-hungry and inattentive to divine things (including the people and work that are divine responsibilities) or one is inattentive to money and dedicated to the divine things.

security of their heavenly treasure is a deliberate contrast to the material treasure of the rich fool, the dispersal of whose possessions after his death is intended to make a mockery of his life of hoarding.

Within healing stories, too, Luke highlights—or at least gestures towards—elements of suffering that are not strictly medical or physical. In 7:13, Jesus is said to have compassion on a woman mourning her dead son; it is for *her* sake that Jesus raises the son. It is *her* suffering—her bereavement—that is relieved. Moreover, with the note that the man “was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow,” Luke calls attention (if only implicitly) to the woman’s economic vulnerability.¹⁸ The son is a *neaniske*, a “young man” rather than a boy, possibly already capable of providing for his mother, and his loss represents an economic as well as personal loss. Similarly, Luke attends to the financial deprivation of the woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years: “though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her” (8:43).¹⁹ The blind man Jesus heals on the road outside Jericho is identified as a beggar at the beginning of the scene, continuing Luke’s pattern of attention to economic neediness. Illness is even more explicitly associated with economic suffering in Acts 3:1-10, where Peter responds to a lame man begging for alms by healing his “feet and ankles.” Unlike in the story of the blind beggar in Luke, who asks Jesus precisely for healing, the beggar in this story asks Peter and John for economic relief (a kind of relief to which the early church was readily attentive at least within the community, according to, e.g., Acts 2:45 and 4:32-35). Peter responds with a more permanent and definitive kind of relief: the

¹⁸ The echo of Elijah’s raising of the widow’s son at Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8-24), for which the reader was primed by reference to it in 4:25-26, strengthens the association of this story with economic need. Elijah first becomes associated with the widow by providing food for her and her son in the midst of poverty and famine; the loss of her son is an economic “calamity.”

¹⁹ A well-attested textual variant eliminates this detail; moreover, Luke uncharacteristically softens the pathos evident in his source narrative—Mark 5:26 is much more eloquent on the subject of the woman’s suffering: “She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse.”

restoration of his physical capacity to participate in the economy (or rather, the granting of it, for the story specifies that he had been “lame from birth”).²⁰

Throughout the narrative, Luke’s language regarding Jesus’s ministry of the relief of suffering reflects this interest in the entire range of human needs.²¹ His use of the word *sōzō* and its cognates (*sōteria*, *sōterion*, *sōter*) in conjunction with the more strictly medical *therapeuō* and *iaomai* helps to highlight the breadth of suffering to which Jesus is attentive, as well as the relationship between that relief of suffering and the more eschatological or spiritual sense of the *sōzō* word group.²² Luke uses all three verbs to describe Jesus’s actions with respect to diseases and “unclean spirits.” *Therapeuō* refers to healing diseases in 4:40, 5:15, 6:7, 7:21, 8:2, 8:43, 13:14, and 14:3; in 6:18 and 7:21, the verb is used in conjunction with “unclean” or “evil spirits.” *iaomai* is similarly used in 5:17, 6:18, 6:19, 7:7, 8:47, 14:4, 17:15, and 22:51 (of diseases) and 9:42 (of a violent spirit). These two verbs are all but interchangeable. The use of *sōzō* is notoriously more complex: it may refer to healing (as in 6:9), to exorcism (as in 8:36), to rescue (that is, being saved from danger or peril, as in Acts 27:20, 31), or to salvation in its most theological sense (being saved from sin for relationship with God, as in 8:12). Several uses of *sōzō* play with one or more of these meanings: in 9:24, Jesus says that whoever wishes to save his life (that is, preserve himself from death) will lose it (that is, fail to be

²⁰ Illness and poverty are often associated in Luke’s narrative. Both the Nazareth sermon (4:16-21) and Jesus’s response to John’s disciples (7:22-23)—drawing on the same language from Isaiah—include the poor and the ill together as recipients of attention in God’s kingdom. Similarly, the parable of the Great Dinner (14:15-24) lumps the poor and the infirm in the same category as replacement guests, and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31) describes Lazarus as both poor and afflicted with disease.

²¹ Tannehill also reminds us that Luke’s language tends to heighten the pathos of the story, especially in comparison with his source narratives: Luke “uses pathetic touches to increase sympathy for those whom Jesus heals. The sense of need is increased by indicating that the problem was of long duration (8:43: twelve years; 13:11: eighteen years), by vivid description of a demoniac’s wild behavior (8:27, 29), and by specifying that the *right* hand of a man was withered (6:6; dif. Matthew, Mark). The love of parent for child adds pathos to three different scenes, and in all three cases pathos is heightened by specifying that the child is an *only* son or daughter (7:12: a scene unique to Luke; 8:42, dif. Matthew, Mark; 9:38, dif. Matthew, Mark).” *Narrative Unity*, 92. The example discussed earlier (n 20) notwithstanding, Luke is clearly aware of the particularities that may exacerbate one or another form of suffering.

²² That is, salvation from the coming judgment and the sorts of punishments described or suggested in, e.g., Luke 3:7-9, 3:17, 12:5, 13:1-5, and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (on which see more below).

saved theologically). Similarly, Jesus closes several encounters with the assurance that “your faith has saved you” (7:50, 8:48, 17:19, 18:42). In all but the first of these (which will be discussed more fully below), Jesus is speaking to someone he has healed from illness, creating an ambiguity (no doubt deliberate) of meaning—this is both a healing *and* a salvation. The connection is made most strongly in the story of the hemorrhaging woman, in which all three healing verbs are used: she was not able *therapeuthēnai* (to be cured, 8:43), she declared publically how she *iathē* (had been healed, 8:47), and Jesus tells her that her faith has *sesōken* (saved/healed 4:48) her. Thus, salvation in its theological sense is highly connected to the activity of healing or rescuing, as it has been since Jesus’s public announcement of his mission in 4:16-21.

The first of Jesus’s statements that “your faith has saved you” is the most complex. Jesus’s anointing in 7:36-50 (radically reconfigured in Luke’s narrative compared to his Markan source) uses the language of salvation to describe what has happened to the woman who anoints him. An unnamed woman, known “in the city” as “a sinner,” interrupts a meal at Simon the Pharisee’s home to express her “great love”—she anoints Jesus’s feet with her tears and with (presumably expensive) “ointment” from an “alabaster jar.” Jesus addresses the unspoken objection of his host both in parable and in direct form: the woman is said to love Jesus extravagantly because of the extravagant debt (of sin) forgiven her. *After* answering Simon’s unspoken criticism of both himself and the woman, Jesus turns to the woman, pronounces her sins forgiven, and further elaborates, “Your faith has saved you.” Does Jesus assure the woman of what she already knows? Or is the extravagant gesture meant to be identified as a demonstration of saving faith? In either case, it is clear that what the woman has been saved *from* is her own sin; the language of salvation applies to physical healing, to be sure, but it does not apply *only* to physical healing. Yet Jesus’s action in the story does

more than confirm the woman's restoration to God. Jesus's words to his host and the other guests enact a restoration to the community. The woman's status as a sinner is a matter of public reputation as well as private faith. It appears that she has already accepted the forgiveness that Jesus offers—hence her extravagant devotion. Jesus's absolution and benediction were public pronouncements of restoration to the community of God's people as well as to God.

Jesus also uses the language of salvation to describe what is effected by his visit to Zacchaeus's house (19:1-10). Although it is clear from the final verse that salvation in its spiritual sense—that is, membership in the Kingdom of God—is of primary concern here, the story is careful to highlight the problem of his membership in the Jewish community. The language is redolent of ethnic identity markers. Zacchaeus is “a chief tax collector” and therefore “rich,” but he is also beset by numerous little humiliations—his will is thwarted by the crowd (perhaps intentionally), he must submit to the indignity of tree-climbing, and Jesus's interest in him provokes public criticism.²³ All these petty mortifications are summed up in the crowd's rejection of him as “one who is a sinner”—that is, one who does not follow Torah, who is outside the covenant. Whether it is Jesus's acceptance or the crowd's rejection that causes it, Zacchaeus repents in a manner that demonstrates his willingness to be subject to the law and the prophets.²⁴ Zacchaeus publicly declares his intention to act in accordance with Levitical

²³ On the crowd's intentional frustration of Zacchaeus's desire to see Jesus, see Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 670.

²⁴ Most commentators take the present tense *didōmi* and *apodidōmi* as expressing resolve: from now on, I give, I repay. (So Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 697-698; John Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 35c [Dallas: Word Books, 1993], 906; Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 470, 472; M.-J. Lagrange, *Évangile Selon Sain Luc*, eighth edition [Paris: J. Gabalda et Cie., 1948], 489.) There is some suggestion (by, e.g., Frédéric Godet, *Commentaire sur L'Évangile de Saint Luc*, fourth edition, vol. 2 [Neuchâtel: L.-A. Monnier, 1969], 336-337; Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (x-xxiv): Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Bible 28A [New York: Doubleday, 1985], 1221, 1225; Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 671-672) that the present tense verbs Zacchaeus uses in 19:8 suggest a protestation of innocence rather than public confession and reparation. While this interpretation is possible, and coheres nicely with Jesus's words in 19:9 (Zacchaeus “is,” rather than “has become,” a son of Abraham), it makes

norms of reparation, and to take on the responsibility of caring for the poor as commanded in both Torah and in the prophetic tradition.²⁵ Jesus's response to Zacchaeus's repentance effectively "repatriates" Zacchaeus, forcing his opponents to recognize his membership in the community of Israel: "Today salvation has come to this house, because *he too is a son of Abraham*" (19:9). Certainly salvation (*sōteria*) here refers to Zacchaeus's redemption and his membership in the Kingdom of God, but his membership in the (non-eschatological) people of Israel is no less at issue. (Note that the pronouncement is even more explicitly linked to membership in the community than the similar story in 7:36ff.) Though Luke has frequently used the verb *sōzō* in the narrative, the noun form (*sōteria*) has not been used since Zechariah's and Simeon's prophetic announcements (save for a quotation from Isaiah regarding John the Baptist in 3:6). The attentive reader will, perhaps, remember the emphasis on *Israel's* salvation in those two canticles and hear an echo of the concern for the redemption of Israel in Jesus's concern for the redemption of Zacchaeus. To be a tax collector who abides by Torah (who cares for the poor) is to be a son of Abraham; to be recognized as a child of Abraham is to be made whole, to be restored to one's community. Zacchaeus is saved by being restored to the People of God, but the People of God, too, are being saved by Zacchaeus' restoration.

Thus Luke's understanding of healing is not limited to the restoration of bodily integrity. The Kingdom of God, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, brings about a

somewhat less sense of Jesus's words in 19:10, that "the Son of Man" intentionally "seek[s] out" those who are "lost."

²⁵ Zacchaeus's affirmation may be understood either to intend extravagant over-reparation (if Lev. 6:1-7, which sets the amount to be repaid at 120% of the defrauded amount, is in view) or the just reparation levied against a thief (if the provisions of Ex. 22:1, 4—variously set at twice, four times, and five times the stolen value, depending on the circumstances of discovery—are in view). Since the latter text seems to indicate retributive legal penalties while the former indicates voluntary restoration, the best reading is probably that Zacchaeus, like the woman who is a sinner in chapter 7, is moved by Jesus's forgiveness to act with extravagant devotion.

salvation which cures all ills, or, better, which restores to wholeness those who suffer any kind of ill. Salvation encompasses the restoration of the relationship with God—that is, forgiveness of sins—the restoration of one’s place in the community and the restoration of the community that had suffered the loss of one of its members, the restoration of one’s capacity to participate in the society and its economy, and basic (albeit temporary) protection from nature and one’s enemies. The language of healing and of salvation are natural partners, because to be healed is to be saved, in some sense, and salvation is a kind of healing, a restoration to a wholeness that mere bodily integrity does not fully encompass.

Interestingly enough, there are a few stories of unmet needs in Luke, but these stories usually serve to call attention not to the distress of the sufferer but to his moral failings. In 12:13-14, for example, Jesus refuses to settle a financial dispute between brothers (“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me”) and immediately turns to warn “them” (the crowd from whom the interlocutor speaks? the disciples to whom he had previously been speaking?) against “all kinds of greed” (12:15). The subsequent parable of the foolish rich man (12:16-21) repeats the warning against acquisitiveness and confirms the implied judgment: the man who had asked Jesus to settle the dispute was not suffering financial hardship but was instead greedy. His request evidenced not a material lack but a deficiency in moral judgment. Jesus addressed not his ostensible financial need but his more significant spiritual deficit. Thus this story is not one of unrelieved suffering but of *mistaken* suffering. The supplicant has perceived his need wrongly and has asked Jesus for the wrong remedy. Jesus’s refusal to address his wrongly-perceived need does not introduce the problem of unrelieved suffering; it instead introduces the possibility that moral failings can impede the salvation that Jesus offers.

The only (rather problematic) exception to this tendency is in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. Lazarus is afflicted with abject poverty and illness, and these are described with a maximum of pathos. Lazarus's sufferings go unrelieved in his lifetime, although the parable quickly assures the reader that Lazarus is "comforted" at "Abraham's bosom" as a result the "evil things" he had suffered. Two things must be observed regarding the role Lazarus's sufferings play in the logic of the narrative. First, Lazarus's sufferings, for all that the narrator draws attention to them, are the theater for another drama—they are a test of his wealthy neighbor's adherence to the Mosaic law (a test the neighbor fails). The rich man is the subject of the story; Lazarus and his sufferings are a plot device. Second, and more important for our purposes here, the *presence* of unrelieved suffering in the narrative demonstrates the *absence* of the Kingdom. The rich man's failure to relieve Lazarus's sufferings—a failure that is shown to be as abject as Lazarus's suffering—is contrary to the words of "Moses and the prophets," to whom the heavenly Abraham appeals as sufficient communication of God's purposes for human justice and society. This moral failure is thus a failure to *enact* the (earthly) Kingdom of God, and it results in the exclusion of the unnamed man from the (heavenly) Kingdom. Thus the association between the Kingdom and the relief of suffering holds, even in this apparent counter-example: where the poor, diseased man is left to suffer, the Kingdom is not yet present, and the eschatological or heavenly Kingdom will not be present to those who refused to participate in it on earth.

This parable thus highlights the only significant type of unrelieved suffering in the gospel narrative—that is, the eschatological suffering that attends the rejection of God. The after-death sufferings of the rich man are not described with the detail or the pathos of Lazarus's (he is "being tormented," and "in agony in these flames," and he longs for a drop of water, but his sufferings are otherwise unspecified, in contrast to the

gruesome sores and desperate hunger of Lazarus), but a much greater portion of the parable concerns itself with them. The conversation between the rich man and Abraham underscores the decisiveness and finality of judgment—the rich man’s agony is just and irreversible. Their discussion of the probability that his brothers will be subject to a similarly just and irreversible punishment occupies fully a third of the parable; the rich man’s eternal punishment has produced enough regret to prompt his concern for his brothers’ sufferings (although not enough to reorient his attitude toward Lazarus), but this concern proves impotent. Father Abraham will not concern himself with those who ignore God’s word. The refusal to live out one’s membership in the People of God by observing the law and the prophets, by listening to Moses, necessitates a removal from the People of God.²⁶

Thus far, Luke’s view of suffering seems here rather straightforward. Suffering is that which should be relieved, and which *shall* be relieved wherever and whenever God’s purpose is enacted. God’s purpose is recognized, in fact, in the relief of suffering. Jesus ministry is characterized by restoration of all stripes—by the healing of ills, the mending of fractured communities, and the loosing of spiritual, political, and psychological bonds. Certainly there is more to the story, and more to Jesus’s ministry—Luke has many goals besides the depiction of Jesus as the one who relieves all manner of suffering—but the connection between the relief of suffering and God’s presence is just as certainly one of the major preoccupations of the text. Wherever “the Kingdom of God is at hand,” so also is the relief of suffering.

In Acts, the accent shifts both in terms of salvation and of suffering. Luke is

²⁶ The passage, like the story of Zacchaeus, is redolent with ethnic identity markers—Lazarus’s indicators of uncleanness, the emphasis on Abraham as Father, the repetition of “Moses and the prophets” as the proper guides to life. These are not, one gathers, the sort of “local color” an artistic writer adds in order to make his story plausible. They are a testament to Luke’s understanding of salvation as membership in the People of God. He describes the afterlife in terms of membership in Israel because participation in Israel has been the point. It is not just that the rich man has failed to do good in his lifetime; it is that he has failed to do Torah.

concerned less to show the kind and breadth of salvation offered than to show the extent and strength of its reach. There are healing stories in Acts, to be sure (3:1-10, 5:12-16, 8:4-8, 9:17-19, 32-42, 14:8-18, 16:16-18, 19:11-12, 20:7-12) as well as stories of other kinds of restoration or salvation (12:6-19, 16:19-40, and perhaps 8:9-24), but these are decidedly underemphasized, in comparison with stories of the spread of the gospel through dramatic witness and preaching (2:14-42, 3:11-4:4, 7:2-60, 9:19-22, 13:13-43, 17:16-34, 18:24-28, 22:1-21), through divinely-aided conversions (5:26-40, 8:26-40, 9:1-19, 10:1-48, 16:6-15, 25-34; many of the healing stories belong in this category as well), and in spite of opposition and persecution (4:5-31, 5:17-42, 9:23-30, 11:19-26, 12:1-25, 13:4-12, 13:44-14:7, 14:19-23, 17:1-15, 18:5-11, 19:8-10, 21:10-14, and perhaps 8:1-4 and 19:23-41).²⁷ Of these three primary themes, the last is the most important for our purposes here, because it is the one that best demonstrates Luke's approach to suffering in the second volume of his narrative. If, in the gospel, the stories of human suffering were primarily stories of salvation from that suffering, in the narrative of the early church, the stories of human suffering are primarily stories of human triumph (or rather, human participation in God's triumph) in spite of or over those sufferings. The accent seems to be on the success of the mission and the spread of the gospel in spite of all obstacles rather than on the beatitude or consolation of those who are suffering persecution, rejection, or opposition.

Luke's narrative accounts of suffering in Acts would seem, at first, to belie any triumphalist accounts of the early church. Indeed, Acts may be supposed to add a certain complexity to Luke's portrait of suffering, as Paul, the main character in the second half of the narrative, encounters difficulty after difficulty, and is said almost from his introduction in the narrative to be intended for a life of suffering (9:16). Yet the first

²⁷ There are stories, too, where the attribution to supernatural guidance is missing, though the unfolding of the story supports a general sense of divine providence, such as 28:1-6.

thing that ought to be noted about Paul's suffering is that descriptions of it are deployed rather conventionally as a demonstration of Paul's heroism and dedication. The apostles' letter to the Antiochene churches provides the key to Luke's understanding of the meaning of Paul's suffering: the apostles commend "our beloved Barnabas and Paul," the bearers of the letter, as men who "have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul is a fit ambassador for the fledgling church because he has proved his devotion by remaining steadfast in the face of danger. At the risk of minimizing this kind of suffering (Paul has already, in the narrative, been stoned and left for dead, 14:19-20), one must note the relatively minor role the suffering itself plays in the logic of the passage. Even if suffering has probative value, it remains that suffering is the negative against which the purity or zeal of one's faith is shown. (One might demonstrate the same, or almost the same, commitment by enduring in one's faith a long time, as it is implied Anna and Simeon do in Luke 2, or by withstanding less violent opposition, as Peter and John do in Acts 4.) Physical suffering is in no sense necessary or good here; it is of accidental value only.

Most of Luke's references to Paul's suffering, however, fit the third theme described above—that of showing the spread of the gospel in spite of virulent opposition. Opposition springs almost entirely from Jewish quarters—specifically, from small groups of determined opponents who successfully persuade the wider Jewish communities to reject Paul. They plot to kill him (9:23-24, 29-30; 20:3; 23:12-22), commit violence against him (14:19-20; 21:27-32), instigate mobs to expel him (13:44-51; 17:5-8, 13-14), accuse him in Roman courts (18:12-17; 24:1-9; 25:7), and even conspire with Gentiles to oppose, persecute, and kill him (14:2, 4-7). In all these cases, Paul is protected by other disciples or by his own clever manipulation of the situation. Violence threatens at Ephesus (19:23-29), but Paul is saved by the timely intervention of the

disciples and other friends (19:30-31) and by the sensible words of an Ephesian official (19:35-41).²⁸ Once Paul begins his journey to Rome, danger threatens from all sides—from shipwreck (27:14-44), from the foolish plans of others (27:11, 30-31), from overzealous soldiers (27:42), and even from a deadly snake (28:3). Here again, Paul is saved by allies, by his own craftiness, or by apparent divine intervention. Indeed, Paul credits his preservation to God, insisting that he has been given assurance of his own and his companions' safe passage to Rome (27:23-25). The manner of Paul's salvation—always implicitly understood as divine intervention, even where no divine agent is mentioned—is less important, though, than the fact of it. No matter what danger or violence threatens or occurs, Paul is always spared death and never suffers any lingering ill effects from his experiences.

The crucial element to all of these descriptions of persecution and opposition is that no experience of suffering has any enduring effect on Paul. Opposition leads to a change in plans, but not to the frustration of the mission. The powers and authorities can imprison, but that only makes of the prison a mission field; it does not thwart the fearless evangelist. Violence threatens but rarely occurs, and when it does, it is deflected or its harms quickly healed. In many cases, the escape or recovery or successful change in mission follows so quickly on the threat of violence (or its accomplishment) that one scarcely has any sense that Paul has suffered at all. One case of attempted murder and

²⁸ David Adams, who argues a similar line throughout his study of Luke's portrayal of Paul's suffering ("The Suffering of Paul and the Dynamics of Luke-Acts" [PhD Diss, Yale University, 1979]), makes the argument that the Ephesus episode in particular demonstrates Luke's relative disinterest in Paul's ongoing suffering. In contrast to Paul's own account of his activities in Ephesus, in which he "fought with wild beasts" (1 Cor 15:32), Acts 19 portrays Paul as preserved from any contact with a rioting crowd. Even if these passages refer to different historical events, and even if Paul's "wild beasts" are metaphorical or exaggerated, Adams is perhaps right to see here a "tempering of adversity," a "minimizing of the tribulation itself" ("The Suffering of Paul," 83.) Even more strongly, he argues that nothing in Acts approaches the anguish of 2 Cor 1:8-10: "What seems, then, to have been constant, prolonged, and possibly even accelerating adversity in the province of Asia is reduced by Luke to two episodes—one brief, the other so skewed as to present Paul fearless and unscathed, and both so situated that the chill of tribulation is chased by the warm afterglow of success" (ibid., 86).

its aftermath is described in exactly three sentences (four in certain English translations): “But Jews came there [Lystra] from Antioch and Iconium and won over the crowds. Then they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But when the disciples surrounded him, he got up and went into the city. The next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe.” (14:19-20) Not only does Paul recover from an act of violence that left him near death in a single day, not only does he travel on to the next town that next day, but he returns *in the very next verse* to the scene of his brush with death and continues his mission: “And after they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch” (14:21), the very places where his Jewish opponents had been so apparently successful in arousing violence against him.²⁹ The Paul of Luke’s narrative suffers little, even from a violent attack on his life; that is to say, even in the midst of suffering near-constant danger, persecution, and injury, the reader is given almost no indication of Paul’s *experience* of suffering. These are not, to use Eric Cassell’s description of suffering (as distinct from pain or illness), threats to Paul’s “intactness *as a person*” in any significant sense.³⁰

Even where there is a sense of foreboding regarding Paul’s ultimate fate, the shape of the narrative controls this sense of danger, rendering it all but powerless. These passages of foreboding make much of Paul’s *willingness* to die, but he is never called upon to do so. Unlike Stephen, whose martyrdom is narrated in conscious imitation of Jesus’s death, Paul survives his many acrimonious and even violent confrontations. The narrative ends with him in Rome, alive and continuing his ministry

²⁹ I am indebted for this observation to Adams’s appropriately humorous summary of the passage: “And in what is surely some sort of record for resilience, he pops up from the stoning, re-enters Lystra, pushes on to Derbe to resume the campaign and threads his way back through the towns of the Lycaonian valley—all in just a verse and a half” (“The Suffering of Paul,” 63).

³⁰ Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 98.

of unabashed and unimpeded proclamation of the gospel (28:30-31). Gaventa appropriately cautions that this ending is both triumphant and sober, intending to portray “both the persistence of the Word of God (‘preaching . . . and teaching’) and the persistence of opposition to that Word in the form of Paul’s continued imprisonment.”³¹ Nevertheless, in light of the overwhelming sense of foreboding and imminent martyrdom expressed in the chapters leading up to this ending, as described below, Paul’s house arrest may read as a particularly impotent form of opposition. He is under house arrest, yes, but even his imprisonment is no barrier to his bold and effective witness.

This ending is of particular importance with references to those passages of foreboding that might otherwise be read as an implicit reminder of Paul’s martyrdom (assuming the tradition of Paul’s eventual martyrdom in Rome to be historically accurate). The passages of foreboding have Jerusalem as their focus. Paul does declare his intention to continue on from Jerusalem to Rome (19:21), but in those texts where the danger to his life is at issue, only Jerusalem is mentioned. Paul’s farewell speech to the Ephesian elders (20:17-38) locates the danger to Paul’s life in Jerusalem, and it is in reference to his expectation of martyrdom *there* that the text displays his courage. “I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there,” Paul says to the Ephesian elders (21:22). Whatever it is, it will involve “imprisonment and persecutions” (21:23). Despite this Spirit-granted foreknowledge, Paul declares himself willing to risk death for the sake of faithfulness to his mission: “I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God’s grace” (21:24). Further on, disciples in Tyre warn Paul “not to go on to Jerusalem” (21:4). This warning is all the more interesting in

³¹ Gaventa, “Toward a Theology of Acts,” 156.

that it is said to come from the Holy Spirit—the reader is left to wonder whether it is Paul or the disciples in Tyre who read the Spirit correctly. But the correct interpretation of this warning is almost certainly to be understood from the story which immediately follows: a prophet comes from Judea to Caesarea and enacts his divine message: “He came to us and took Paul’s belt, bound his own feet and hands with it, and said, ‘Thus says the Holy Spirit, “This is the way the Jews in Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles”’” (21:11). (So, the earlier disciples’ plea that Paul avoid Jerusalem is best understood as this kind of warning: the disciples know, through the Spirit, that Paul’s fate in Jerusalem is a negative one.) Again, Paul declares his willingness to suffer for the sake of the gospel: “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (21:13). Jerusalem is portrayed, in these three pericopes, as the terminus of Paul’s destiny and the epicenter of his friends’ anxieties for him. Though it had been earlier mentioned by Paul, Rome is conspicuously absent from these crucial pericopes.

Wherever the narrative highlights the danger to Paul’s life, then, the danger is centered in Jerusalem.³² Rome is not portrayed as a place of danger for Paul, but rather as a place of refuge: Paul intentionally orchestrates his transfer there, apparently under the impression that his life is less urgently threatened at the hands of the Romans than at

³² Commentators who have (correctly) noted that the narrative of Paul’s journey to Jerusalem to be martyred is almost certain to have been consciously crafted in imitation of Jesus’s journey to Jerusalem to be crucified have unfortunately made little of the stark difference in the ending of these two journeys. Petersen, for example, sees an almost exact structural parallel between Luke and Acts, in which Paul’s journey to Jerusalem maps exactly onto Jesus’s journey to Jerusalem. (Petersen, *Literary Criticism*, 84-85.) Paul’s journey to Rome, itself a narratively significant event, is all but collapsed into Paul’s trials in Jerusalem and in Rome, which are paralleled to Jesus’s trials in the Passion narrative. Petersen’s analysis thus has the strange effect of implying that Paul is glorified like Jesus (in his words, both actors experience “God’s reaffirmation of him and of his own [God’s?] plan”) without actually having to suffer martyrdom like Jesus. Petersen’s interest is in the literary rather than theological purpose of suffering/rejection in the narrative (as mentioned above, he shows it to be a major structuring principle by which the action and the message are moved forward); still, as a treatment of the narrative structure of Luke-Acts, it seems an inadequate treatment of Paul’s role in the story.

the hands of the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem (cf. 22:25-29, 25:7-12). Thus the stories of Paul's arrest and imprisonment in Caesarea and his hazardous journey to Rome must be read, at least in part, as stories of Paul's *escape* from whatever fate ostensibly awaited him in Jerusalem. Indeed, intermingled with these passages of foreboding are passages of preservation—Paul is constantly assured that he will receive divine protection so that he might witness boldly to the gospel. In Corinth (before the reader has had a hint of what awaits Paul in Jerusalem), Paul is urged to brave the opposition he faces there and proclaim the gospel boldly: “The Lord said to Paul in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people’” (18:10-11). Paul is here specifically promised physical protection for the sake of witness. Similarly, Paul receives visions both in Jerusalem and on his way to Rome assuring him that his life will be preserved so that he might bear witness in Rome (23:11, 27:23-24). In his speech to King Agrippa, he relates the story of his own conversion with the addition of a divine promise of protection: “I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles” *so that* Paul might spread the gospel. Though the narrative highlights Paul's own ingenuity—he escapes danger through manipulation (23:6-10) and legal sophistication (22:25-29, 23:3-5)—it also stresses providential care and purpose. God's purpose in using Paul to spread the gospel is the driving force behind the story, and the many dangers Paul faces—even those that involve bodily suffering—serve little else but to underscore the certainty of that purpose.

Narratively, then, the descriptions of Paul's suffering and danger serve not to highlight the ongoing role of suffering in the Christian life but to highlight the triumphant spread of the gospel in spite of many obstacles, as well as the providential care lavished on Paul as the primary agent through which the gospel is borne. It would

be unwise to claim, of course, that Luke thought little of Paul's sufferings or otherwise to ignore the ongoing role of rejection and persecution in the narrative. Yet it must be recognized that the narrative presses other themes more urgently. Suffering is, in the great story of Jesus and of his followers, the foil against which the light of God's salvation shines ever brighter. The People of God suffer in a range of ways—illness, incapacity, poverty, disgrace, social discord—but Jesus has come to heal all of them. The message of God's salvation provokes misunderstanding, rejection, and persecution, but these do not prevent the spread of that message, belief in which carries the power of that salvation.³³ Luke's readers are implicitly urged to share in God's salvation by relieving suffering wherever and however they can. Yet they are also implicitly urged to endure patiently, even joyfully, the sort of suffering that attends rejection of the gospel because such suffering is not eschatologically meaningful—it will be relieved at the culmination of God's purposes and it will not frustrate those purposes.

Paul: Productive Suffering

When we turn to Paul's letters, we will find nothing that gainsays those two fundamental moral postures toward suffering. For Paul, too, followers of Christ are to be about the business of relieving the suffering of others, and his certainty that the glorious culmination of God's purposes will surpass and effectively obscure the prior human experience of temporal suffering is no less resolute than Luke's. Insofar as those two themes are concerned, we will find no explicit disagreement between the two authors. What Paul offers his readers that is absent in Luke-Acts, however, are rich and varied reflections on sufferings *not* healed, or deliberately undertaken because of their fitness to the gospel and in spite of the possibility of avoiding them. Most of these

³³ While the intersection of divine judgment and divine sovereignty is not the concern of this dissertation, it must be noted that this confidence in God's provision includes an appreciation of the frustration and even punishment of those who oppose the mission.

descriptions are of his own suffering—thus, they are not intended as systematic reflections on suffering-in-general, but as a theological explanation of the meaning of his own experiences of pain, loss, and persecution.³⁴ Yet he also speaks vividly about the suffering of others, particularly the suffering of the members of his own congregations. In both cases, we find in Paul a vigorous defense of the necessity and productivity of suffering.

First of all, some of his references to his own suffering are quite conventional and share a common outlook with the author of Luke-Acts. Like the author of Luke-Acts, Paul believes that his willingness to suffer demonstrates the purity of his motives. In Galatians, Paul contrasts his own willingness to endure persecution for the sake of the gospel (Gal. 5:11) with his opponents' desire for merely temporal success and safety: "It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that trying to compel you to be circumcised—only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ" (6:12). The Galatian Christians *should* recognize his trustworthiness by the suffering and persecution he faithfully undergoes "for the cross of Christ;" his opponents' refusal to endanger themselves shows them to be unfaithful and untrustworthy. A similar contrast appears in 1 Thessalonians, again in close proximity to references to Paul's opponents (1 Thess 2:14-16). Paul reminds the Thessalonians of his conduct among them, citing his perseverance in the face of persecution along with his gentleness and self-reliance as demonstrative of the purity of his motives. "Though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition" (2:2)—thus,

³⁴ That many of them have a rhetorical and pragmatic purpose—namely, convincing his readers that his life of suffering does not refute his message—does not negate the theological purpose. Precisely the opposite is the case—the political challenge calls for a theologically sufficient answer.

Paul's bravery in the face of opposition benefited the Thessalonians directly. More than that, though, it showed his motives to be pure: "For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, . . . even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts" (2:3, 4). Unlike those trained rhetoricians who speak "with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed" (2:5), Paul and his companions shared the message of the gospel in spite of the grave physical danger it entailed.

Both authors emphasize, too, Paul's experience of near-constant physical danger and suffering. What Luke displays narratively, Paul states tersely, sometimes tinged with anger or sarcasm. To the Corinthians, he twice lists the injuries he has suffered and the threats to his life. In 2 Corinthians, he catalogues his (and his companions') trials at length and insists that these trials and his gracious persistence in the face of them are the means by which he has "commended" himself and his ministry (2 Cor 6:3-10). His earlier letter speaks more sharply to its recipients, contemptuously contrasting his congregants' expectation or pursuit of comfort and satisfaction to his own experiences of hardship (1 Cor 4:8-13). This hardship is apparently so unrelenting and ever-present that he later reminds them, in the midst of a discussion of the resurrection of the dead, "I die every day!" (1 Cor 15:31). Similarly, Paul reminds the Galatians of his near-constant persecution to refute mistaken claims about his message—if he were "still preaching circumcision," he would not be "being persecuted" (Gal 5:11). These passages show that their difference in the literary form describing this ever-present suffering is not the only difference between Luke and Paul on the matter of Paul's suffering. Luke deploys this motif primarily to show Paul's heroism and dedication; Paul describes his own suffering for many different purposes. Still, they are both clear that Paul did suffer, and that this suffering is an integral part of Paul's life and teaching.

Paul makes explicit, too, an understanding of suffering that could only be

expressed through narrative in Luke: that the context of suffering, the context of all human experience, is the eschatological hope of resurrection and communion with God. He confidently proclaims that “all things work together for good for those who love God” (Rom 8:28) and declares himself and his fellow believers “more than conquerors” (8:37) even in the face of “hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword” (8:35). Indeed, God’s love (8:39) and glory (8:18) are so magnificent and so certain that Paul sweeps aside those hardships, the “sufferings of this present time,” as not even “worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us” (8:18). He similarly assures his congregants in Corinth that the eschatological hope is “an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure,” in comparison with which “what can be seen” is seen to be as nothing (2 Cor 4:17, 18). Indeed, the litany of griefs he suffered “for your sake” (that is, the Corinthians’ sake; 4:8-10, 15) is just a few verses later waved away as “this slight momentary affliction” (4:17).³⁵ If we would call Luke’s narrative triumphalist, we could hardly call Paul’s implied narrative anything less.

Yet Paul’s expression here of what Luke demonstrated narratively differs in one crucial respect, and it is in this respect that we begin to see a vital difference between the two treatments of suffering. In both these passages—Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians 4—where Paul asserts that temporal suffering is of no account compared with eschatological glory, he also asserts that temporal suffering is *productive of* that same eschatological glory. To the Corinthians, Paul writes not only that “this momentary affliction” comes *before* “an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure,” but that the affliction “*is preparing us for*” that glory (2 Cor 4:17). Having just affirmed that “all of us . . . are being transformed” into an “image” of “the glory of the Lord,” (2 Cor 3:18), Paul goes on to affirm that this transformation will be effected not merely *in spite of* the many

³⁵ Perhaps this is a man who could recover from a near-death experience in a day, and return to the scene of his attempted murder to resume his perilous mission not long after!

tribulations he and his colleagues bear (again, he says, for the Corinthians' sake), but *by means of* those tribulations. In the Romans passage, Paul more pointedly names suffering as a *necessary* preparation for the Christian's glorification: "If [we are] children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom 8:17). It is not only that he and his colleagues, experiencing almost daily persecution as they do, somehow find that persecution meaningfully productive of their own spiritual well-being; he insists that suffering is a necessary precondition of the glorification for which all Christians hope. Yet these passages give only tantalizing hints as to how Paul believes this can be said to be so. Even to explicate these passages requires a fuller description of how Paul deals with suffering across his entire corpus.

Working through Paul's dense logic concerning his own suffering and the suffering of his fellow believers requires making some provisional distinctions that are not intrinsic to or necessarily evident in his writings. The following distinctions are meant to suggest no typology or systemization inherent in Paul's theological project; they are instead convenient vantage points from which to view a complex, evocative, and often compactly-stated set of ideas. Though Paul appears to intend his theological reflections on suffering to apply both to his and to his congregants' sufferings, his thoughts are worked out primarily with reference to his own continuing bodily suffering, both the physical pains and discomforts he experiences and his self-conscious renunciation of status and the privileges associated with it. These we will consider first. His account of what others suffer is less thorough and in many cases depends on how he has already described his own suffering; these we will consider in light of Paul's discussion of his own sufferings.

Paul's references to his own bodily weakness lead some scholars to speculate

that he suffered from a permanent physical defect or disabling condition. William Wrede, taking his cue from Paul's linkage of his ecstatic vision with his "thorn in the flesh" in 2 Cor 12, supposes him to have epilepsy, which, he says, commonly induces such visions.³⁶ A. E. Harvey finds in 2 Cor 1:8-9 a reference to some sort of near-death experience that resulted in an extended period of physical weakness.³⁷ James D. G. Dunn follows some earlier commentators in seeing a veiled reference to ongoing eye problems in Galatians 4.³⁸ J. Paul Sampley, on the other hand, finds the supposition of permanent physical weakness a problematic one, given Paul's extensive travel and the difficulties he claims to have endured.³⁹ (How, indeed, could someone inclined to medical frailty survive no fewer than eight severe corporal punishments, to say nothing of the other calamities listed in 2 Cor 11:23ff.?) Goddard and Cummins, similarly, reject the translation of *astheneia* in Galatians 4:13 as some unspecified "illness" (or, indeed, as any physical ailment) and prefer to understand Paul's reference to the "weakness of the flesh" that characterized his ministry among the Galatians as an oblique reference to the conflict and persecution that characterized his ministry more generally.⁴⁰

Whatever the speculative reconstructions of Paul's medical biography, it is clear that he considered his body somehow permanently marked by his association with Jesus. He speaks in Gal 6:17 of the "marks of Jesus" on his body. These marks, possibly scars or disfigurements resulting from the persecution he had endured, are held to authorize his mission: "Let no one cause me any more trouble" (6:17), especially not

³⁶ William Wrede, *Paul*, tr. Edward Lummis (London: Philip Green, 1907), 22-23.

³⁷ A. E. Harvey, *Renewal Through Suffering: A Study of 2 Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 19-26.

³⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: A&C Black, 1993), 236. The chain of associations required to make this leap is long, though not impossibly so. He reads *exepusate* in 4:14 as the sort of spitting one does to ward off the evil eye, to which he sees *baskainō* in 3:1 as a reference; Paul's assertion in 3:15 that the Galatians "would have torn out your eyes and given them to me" thus makes the supposition that his medical condition really involved his eyes an "obvious implication."

³⁹ J. Paul Sampley, "The Second Letter to the Corinthians," *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 11 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 164.

⁴⁰ A. J. Goddard and S. A. Cummins, "Ill or Ill-Treated? Conflict and Persecution as the Context of Paul's Original Ministry in Galatia (Galatians 4.12-20)," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 52 (1993), 99.

those who “want to make a good showing in the flesh” in order to “avoid being persecuted for the cross of Jesus” (6:12)—that is, who want to avoid the very persecution that announces itself in his body. He also highlights physical maladies that may or may not be connected to the persecution he receives for his association with Christ. In both 1 Cor 2:3 and Gal 4:13-14, Paul describes his initial encounter with both the Corinthians and the Galatians as overshadowed by his personal “weakness” (*astheneia*). While the Corinthians reference may suggest either bodily or rhetorical weakness, the Galatians reference is almost certainly to a physical malady or handicap. Paul makes much of the social disruption caused by this “weakness.” It was “a trial” to the Galatians, one to which they might be expected to react “with scorn or contempt.” He makes further reference in 2 Cor 12:7 to a “thorn in [his] flesh” that “torments” him and that God refuses to take away despite Paul’s persistent plea that God do so. All of these references together suggest that physical pain and incapacity, be they associated with illness or injury, were ongoing realities in Paul’s life, realities with which the congregations he planted were familiar.

Dale Martin elaborates on the social and religious stigma associated with such physical imperfection in the ancient world: “Paul speaks of his personal presence in terms of such shame (Gal 4:13-14) that it is clear that he regarded it as an embarrassment and a potential hindrance to rhetorical success.” Even in the Corinthian correspondence, where Paul is not as explicit about the social consequences of physical imperfection as he is in the Galatians passage just mentioned, Martin finds clear signals that the Corinthians are susceptible to Greco-Roman paradigms for understanding the relationship between physical perfection and reliability. Physical perfection is so firmly associated with moral and socio-political standing that the “bodily disfigurement” to which he refers in 2 Cor 12:7 is most likely “an indication of low status, one for which he

must be content to let God's power compensate."⁴¹ Albert Harrill presses the point even more sharply, arguing that the criticisms apparently leveled against Paul (reported in 2 Cor 10:10) were implicit attacks against his capacity for leadership: "In Greco-Roman invective, to accuse a person of a weak bodily presence and deficient speech is to call him a slavish man unfit for public office or otherwise to dominate others."⁴²

In contrast to this Hellenistic construction of the meaning of suffering, Paul incorporates his experiences of suffering into a wide range of narrative and argumentative projects, virtually always giving his sufferings a positive valence. One of the most direct examples of this is the aforementioned passage in Galatians, mentioning the "weakness" (*astheneia*) in which he first came to them (4:13-16). The Galatians' welcoming and generous response to Paul in spite of his infirmity is meant, in this passage, to contrast with the jealousy and backbiting caused by "those who are troubling you." Their friendship (Paul's and the Galatians') was formerly marked by self-sacrificing love, theirs for him in spite of his weakness (4:13-14) and his for them in laboring to bring them to Christ (4:19). The circumcision-preaching faction has by contrast introduced manipulative flattery (4:17) and self-serving coerciveness (6:12-13) into the Galatian churches. Possibly prompted by his opponents' using his physical imperfection as evidence of his theological inadequacy, Paul includes his ongoing physical suffering in a story of beatitude, a story the force of which is to demonstrate the blessedness of the interaction. The Galatians can trust that what he wrought among them was good because it provoked in them a response of generosity and charity, the sort of burden-bearing that truly "fulfills the law of Christ" (6:2). Physical weakness or

⁴¹ Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 54.

⁴² J. Albert Harrill, "Invective Against Paul (2 Cor 10:10), the Physiognomy of the Ancient Slave Body, and the Greco-Roman Rhetoric of Manhood," in *Antiquity and Humanity: Essays on Ancient Religion and Philosophy Presented to Hans Dieter Betz on His 70th Birthday*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins and Margaret Mitchell (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 204.

illness is here an occasion for the practice of Christian compassion, and as such is celebrated as evidence of the presence of God, quite apart from the possibility of healing. The Galatians' willingness to "tear out [their] eyes and give them" to Paul could not remedy his "weakness," whatever it was, but Paul nonetheless names the interaction as somehow revelatory of Christ's presence in their midst. In the prevailing wisdom of their shared cultural context, a story that began "in weakness" should have ended in rejection, or at least suspicion; a story in which the weak one is "welcomed" as "an angel of God, as Christ Jesus" (4:14) is not a story of blessedness but of trickery, idiocy, or chaos. Instead, Paul makes of it a vivid and counter-cultural (that is, counter to the Hellenistic culture elucidated by Martin and Harrill) example of "living by the Spirit" (Gal 5:16, 25).

Even further, he speaks of his physical suffering in terms that elide his bodily pains with Christ's passion. In Galatians, he offers what is intended to be insurmountable evidence of his teaching authority (over and against his opponents, whom he accuses of being unwilling to suffer for Christ): "From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body" (Gal 6:17). Almost certainly, Paul refers here to the physical remnants of his encounters with violent persecution and danger (2 Cor 6:4-5, 11:23-25).⁴³ The deliberate ambiguity in his designation for these scars—"the marks of Jesus"—suggests both correspondence and ownership. These *stigmata* are marks that proclaim Jesus's ownership over him—he is branded as Jesus's slave.⁴⁴ Not only his fidelity in the face of persecution, but his very body identifies him as belonging to Christ. The "marks of Jesus," and the pain and suffering to which they bear witness, are not alienating disfigurements that cut him off

⁴³ So J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 33A (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 568; Martinus C. de Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 409; Dunn, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 347.

⁴⁴ So F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 275-276; de Boer, *Galatians*, 409.

from better society but are instead marks of membership. Given the context of the Galatian conflict, these bodily marks that confirm ownership and membership are surely meant to be compared to the bodily marks of circumcision. “I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body”: that is, “I bear in my body physical testimony more compelling, more authoritative, more conclusive than the marks my opponents want to place on your body.” When one views Paul’s (scarred) body, one can see Christ’s (crucified) body as well.

Yet they are also marks that are like, or *are*, Jesus’s *stigmata*; they proclaim him to be like Christ, they proclaim his sufferings to be like Christ’s sufferings.⁴⁵ To the Galatians, he proclaims himself “crucified with Christ” (*synestaurōmai*), with the effect that his current life somehow demonstrates or enacts the very presence of Christ: “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:19-20). Most likely an implicit reference to baptism, which Paul equates with death or crucifixion (see, e.g., Rom 6:3 and, probably, Gal 3:27), and an explicit reference to the effects of “[coming] to believe in Christ Jesus” (Gal 2:15), this passage nonetheless echoes his words to the Corinthians, that he is “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus” (2 Cor 3:10). In that passage, he is unambiguously referring to his experience of continual persecution and difficulty. He is “afflicted,” “persecuted,” and “struck down,” enacting the “death of Jesus” in his own body. He is “crucified with Christ” in part because through baptism he has put on the crucified body of Jesus, but he is also crucified with Christ in that his physical body has been made the object of persecution by those who reject him just as they rejected Christ. He reminds the Philippians, too, that his imprisonment and the other pains he has endured ensure that “Christ will be exalted now as always in [his]

⁴⁵ So Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 324-325; Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 313-314. Dunn, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 346-347, highlights both senses.

body" (Phil 1:20). His physical sufferings are like the physical sufferings of Christ and are therefore an apt witness *to* Christ.

Similarly, in 2 Corinthians, the persecutions and discomforts he has endured proclaim his superiority to other leaders in the church: "Are they ministers of Christ? . . . I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death" (2 Cor 11:23). The litany of physical complaints that follows—a litany that could, in their shared Hellenistic context, be read as evidence of his unfitness to lead them—is instead offered as evidence of his authority as a "minister of Christ." In part, this appeals to the principle discussed above, the understanding shared with the author of Luke-Acts that Paul's sufferings demonstrate his dedication to the gospel. Compared to other potential leaders, he is "a better one" because he has suffered more than they have and has therefore more emphatically proven himself committed than they have. His sufferings are a testimony on his behalf, work that he has done to prove his allegiance to the cause. But they also proclaim him a minister, specifically, *of Christ*. His life of suffering is something to "boast of" because, as those who have learned to speak "as a fool" know, a suffering life is a holy life, a life that is most like the life of the one whom such "fools" follow (2 Cor 11:21). One judges one's fidelity to the cause by a willingness to suffer for the cause not because (or not only because) such suffering is a mark of manly, heroic endurance but because the cause is, precisely, the cause of the Crucified One. By identifying himself with Christ through his bodily suffering, Paul enacts the fundamental posture of the one who follows Christ. To suffer as Christ suffered is to minister as he ministered and to minister as Christ ministered is to suffer as he suffered.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ The same logic is also operative in 2 Corinthians 1:5, where Paul calls attention to his "abundant" sufferings as "the sufferings of Christ" (*ta pathēmata tou christou*). His abundant sufferings are "the

This identification through suffering is so strong that Paul seems willing to suggest that his sufferings perform a work like the work Christ's sufferings perform.⁴⁷ He insists, to the Corinthians, that his constant danger is to their benefit: "So death is at work in us, but life in you" and "Yes, everything is for your sake" (2 Cor 4:12, 15). Similarly, Paul's references to his bodily suffering in Philippians 1 (most explicitly referring to his imprisonment, but surely encompassing the range of physical persecutions he has suffered) are clustered around references to his association with Christ and the benefits he has won for his congregants in Philippi. His "speaking with all boldness" exalts Christ "in my body." By continuing to preach Christ in the face of persecution, a persecution which is "for Christ" (1:13), his living "is Christ" (1:21)—that is, it conforms to Christ's life and enacts and extends the presence of Christ. That he "remain in the flesh" rather than "depart and be with Christ" is "more necessary for you" (his congregants in Philippi); their "progress and joy in the faith" is the "fruitful labor" which his continued physical suffering allows (1:22, 25).⁴⁸

Thus, according to Paul, his physical danger and mistreatment at the hands of his enemies produces benefits for the members of his congregations—their spiritual upbuilding, their continued encouragement in the faith, their coming to know Christ. Yet even more explicit is Paul's insistence that his physical suffering—particularly his "thorn in the flesh"—is conducive of his own good; pain and illness produce benefits—blessings, even—for himself. The progression of the story that Paul tells in 2 Corinthians

sufferings of Christ" because they are like Christ's sufferings and because they proclaim his allegiance with Christ.

⁴⁷ The most significant passage on this topic is Colossians 1:24, in which Paul claims that his sufferings are "filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" and that his actions are, somehow, "for the sake of his body, that is, the church." Because of Colossians' disputed authorship, I have omitted it from consideration here. Jerry Sumney, "I Fill Up What Is Lacking in the Afflictions of Christ': Paul's Vicarious Suffering in Colossians" (*Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68 [2006]: 664-680) is a useful summary of the relevant issues.

⁴⁸ L. Ann Jervis, *At the Heart of the Gospel: Suffering in the Earliest Christian Message* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 47.

12 suggests that the first and clearest benefit to his ongoing physical suffering is a pedagogical one. This is an encounter through which God *taught* Paul something—God corrected Paul’s interpretation and understanding of his own physical pain.⁴⁹ Paul, experiencing this pain as incompatible with his own well-being, “appealed to the Lord” three times to remove the source of his suffering (2 Cor 12:8). He receives as an answer both an implied refusal to take away the “thorn” and a correction of his understanding of the function of that “thorn” in his life. The “weakness” caused by the “thorn” is not an impediment to his life; his happiness, his blessedness, even his ministry do not require that it be removed. “My grace is sufficient,” even in the face of continued suffering. Weakness is not antithetical to the power of the gospel—instead, “power is made perfect in weakness” (12:9).

What Paul has been taught in this encounter is more than a proposition about Christian truth or a principle according to which he can live, however. He has also been taught—that is to say, *trained in* rather than instructed in—the virtue of humility. Paul comes to understand God’s purpose in “giving” the thorn to Paul to be one of moral as well as intellectual correction: it was “to keep me from being too elated” (12:7). The thinly disguised account of his own ecstatic visions that immediately precedes these

⁴⁹ As indicated before, I am inclined to take Paul’s symbolic language here to refer to physical suffering of some kind. Both the language he uses about the “thorn” and its argumentative context suggest that it is something he suffers bodily. It is “given [him] in the flesh,” and it “torments” him. The immediate context of the reference, both preceding and following, is Paul’s constant experience of hardship and danger in the course of his ministry and mission. He “boasts of” all the dangers and injuries he suffers for the sake of Christ, gestures toward something he *could* boast of—the ecstatic visions both that could have given him status (“so that no one may think better of me”) and that “elated” him because of the “exceptional character of the revelations”—and then insists that his “thorn in the flesh” has instead taught him to boast only “of my weaknesses.” He then goes on to emphasize his own contentment with “weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities,” because of the divine power he experiences through them. The context thus identifies this thorn as a “weakness,” and Paul’s catalogue of such weaknesses focuses on the physical and emotional suffering he has endured. Although the topic of persecutions *could* suggest that Paul is referring to his opponents and persecutors, rather than to the experience of persecution itself, as his thorn (so Goddard and Cummings), the litany of harms in the preceding chapter focuses on himself as one who experiences suffering rather than on those from whom he suffers. Many items in the list imply or mention a source of his suffering (“from the Jews,” “from bandits,” “from my own people,” etc.) but several do not (“shipwrecked,” “often without food, cold, and naked,” “my anxiety for all the churches,” etc.). In the face of this range of sources of his suffering, not all of them personal, it is more preferable to read Paul’s “thorn” as the physical suffering itself.

verses suggests that an elevated status and a temptation to pride might accompany such evidence of divine favor. (Indeed, his previous letter to the same congregants attests to the status problem such ecstatic experiences have already created in the Corinthian churches.)⁵⁰ In the face of that opportunity for pride and self-aggrandizement, the “thorn” functions as a kind of a kind of unchosen asceticism, purifying him of his pretensions to greatness or importance. Despite the privilege and gift of being “caught up to the third heaven,” whether or not it was “in the body,” Paul’s bodily suffering trains him in a manner of living that is in accord with the Christian virtue of humility. Life in the Spirit is characterized by power, to be sure (cf., e.g., Rom 15:19, 1 Cor 2:4, Gal 3:2, and 1 Thess 1:5), but it is not characterized by the kind of power that is recognizable as such in his (and the Corinthians’) Hellenistic context. It is not characterized by the manly physical prowess, commanding rhetoric, and beautiful appearance that were understood to mark those born to roles of social and political power. Paul insists quite to the contrary that to live by such standards, to strive for them, is incompatible with the life of a disciple of the Crucified One. The life of the Christian disciple is instead characterized by human weakness through which divine power is made manifest. That very weakness becomes something to “boast all the more gladly of” as something that is conducive to “the power of Christ” (2 Cor 12:9). What might be a mark of divine disfavor is instead a virtue, a pattern of life toward which one strives and by which one lives.

This is the same logic that is operative in Paul’s sarcastic chastisement of status-seeking Corinthians in his earlier letter to them. In contrast to those who would use

⁵⁰ See Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 96-101, for the hierarchical relationship of rationality and ecstatic experience in Hellenistic culture. To put it as succinctly as possible, for Paul, as for many of the ancients, “the pneuma is the agent of higher status and authority and the nous the lower member of the dichotomy” (Martin, 101). To be marked by ecstatic visions or insensible utterances is to be elevated in status even above those who are marked by reason, education, and rhetorical power.

their association with one or another leader to become “puffed up” (1 Cor 4:6), Paul and his companions are “weak . . . in disrepute . . . hungry and thirsty . . . poorly clothed and beaten and homeless . . . weary from the work of our own hands . . . reviled . . . persecuted” and so on (1 Cor 4:10-13). The Corinthians’ “jealousy and quarrelling” proves that they are “still of the flesh,” “infants,” “merely human” (1 Cor 3:1-4). The physical hardships and deprivations Paul endures, by contrast, are evidence of his spiritual maturity, of his freedom from the “merely human” impulse to seek status at the expense of others. Yet they are also hardships that *produce* spiritual maturity. Paul is not passively stripped of his pretensions to status and thereby rendered incapable of attaining to it; he is practiced in the art of suffering well such that he exercises those virtues that will prevent him from attaining a wrongly-ordered status: “When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly” (1 Cor 4:12-13). When suffering presents itself, Paul and his companions respond appropriately and according to the gospel they are in the process of proclaiming. Even in such deprivation and hardship as marks them “the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things,” they are moral agents. By responding to violent opposition with blessing, perseverance, and kindness, they cultivate virtues that are not only necessary and useful in the circumstances in which they happen to find themselves but also intrinsic to the gospel they preach.

This logic is again repeated in 2 Cor 6, where Paul makes an explicit connection between his virtue and constancy in the face of adversity and his qualifications as a “minister of God.” His (and his companions’) “great endurance” in the face of “afflictions, hardships, calamities,” etc., is the means by which “we have commended ourselves in every way” (2 Cor 6:3-4). The afflictions provide the occasion for exercising “purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech,

and the power of God" (6:6-7). Some of the antitheses that follow are in a simply paradoxical relationship ("we are treated . . . as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; . . . as having nothing, and yet possessing everything"), but others echo the theme of Christ-like response to suffering and persecution: "We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; . . . as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich" (6:8, 10). To remain "true," to be "always rejoicing," to enrich others even in the face of accusations to the contrary is to cultivate, actively, the virtues of suffering persecution well. Paul's afflictions are not merely the occasion for the display of virtues he already possesses (though they are that); they are also the occasion for the development of those virtues.

But Paul's interpretation of his own physical suffering goes beyond an argument from pedagogical utility. The permanence of his disfigurement and the perdurance of his weakness (thorn) are somehow revelatory of God's own being. The sufficiency of God's grace (2 Cor 12:9) is revealed through, not in spite of, continued human weakness. Human fragility and weakness—the "clay jars" in which the "glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" is borne—do not diminish the power of the gospel (2 Cor 4:6, 7). Instead, they proclaim it. God's "extraordinary power" can only be made manifest in the absence of expressions of (or pretensions to) human power. Paul's life of suffering, then, is more than an occasion for the display of his robust commitment to the cause, more than an occasion for the cultivation of virtues that cohere with the message he proclaims, more than an occasion for the correction of a theological mistake. It is a precondition for the proclamation of the identity of God—the one whose power is most fitly displayed in the context of weakness.

Although the same could be said of Luke-Acts, it is worth noting the crucial difference between the two conceptions of divine power in the context of human

suffering. In Luke's gospel human brokenness of every sort is the occasion for the display of divine power: indeed, Luke takes up the saying from his Markan source, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Lk 5:31-32).⁵¹ It is for those who are in need of salvation that he has come. Their need, their weakness, their powerlessness prompts the saving work of God, work that is shown to be all the more potent and glorious by the impotence and frailty of the human condition. Yet in Luke's gospel, for the most part, divine power is shown most thoroughly by the *cessation* of human suffering, especially illness and other bodily suffering; Paul's claim here is that divine power is shown most thoroughly in the *continued presence* of his own physical suffering.

The importance of this reassurance will be all the more felt as it is noted how crucial an epistemological category "power" is in Paul's understanding of the Christian life. Paul refers to experiences or demonstrations of power as vital tests of the validity of his message (Gal 3:2, 1 Thess 1:5), of the genuineness of his apostolic calling (2 Cor 12:12), or of his congregants' faith (1 Cor 4:19-20, 2 Cor 13:3). The idea that such demonstrations of power are entirely compatible with experiences of weakness, illness, impotence, or suffering, or, indeed, are even "perfected in" such experiences, reorients Paul with respect to his own bodily incapacity. Instead of an impediment to ministry, his continuing bodily ailment is a further demonstration of God's salvific action. It is evidence of the *presence*, rather than the absence, of God's power.

Even when Paul discusses less obviously physical forms of suffering, his theological rationale remains consistent. Most significantly, he uses similar language about his own self-conscious renunciation of status and privilege as he uses about his continued illness and physical suffering. That voluntary renunciation of status might be

⁵¹ Luke adds "to repentance" to Mark's starker "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Mk 2:17), perhaps in order to make the analogy to healing more plain.

classed as a form of suffering is not self-evident. Except among teenagers and the chronically over-indulged, modest self-denial is a simple, quotidian reality that produces little pain or mental anguish. And as status is not itself a physical entity, one is hard-pressed to describe its renunciation or deprivation as a physical loss. Yet even in its mildest forms, the renunciation of social benefits, physical comforts, or other good and pleasant things in life is rightly understood as a kind of asceticism. The choice of physical labor over physical ease, of (relative) poverty over (relative) financial comfort, of social derision and rejection over social companionship and acceptance—these are choices to have a more difficult life than one could have. Moreover, they are choices that do not make sense except in the context of a benefit to be won thereby. Physical ease, financial stability, friendship, and physical safety—these things are all goods in themselves. Where renouncing status is equivalent to renouncing the concrete physical goods that attend it, it is a choice to be less well off than one might be.

Most of Paul's explicit references to status renunciation focus on his willingness to work as a manual laborer in order to preach the gospel free of charge. In 1 Thessalonians, he emphasizes how his self-sufficiency was both taxing for him and done for the good of his congregants: his "labor and toil" continued "night and day, so that we might not burden any of you" (1 Thess 2:9). To the Corinthians, for whom this lowered status was perhaps a stumbling block, Paul writes even more pointedly that he has renounced a definite right to their financial support (1 Cor 9:1-14) for the sake of the free proclamation of the gospel: "What is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel" (9:17). He repeats these "boasts" in 2 Cor 11:7-11 (here mentioning as well his financial support to "brothers who came from Macedonia"), adding to them an ironic "confession" that his self-sufficiency proved him "too weak" to mistreat the Corinthians

through domineering self-exaltation (11:20-21). He specifically uses the language of deliberate self-humbling here, as well: “Did I commit a sin by humbling myself so that you might be exalted?” (11:7). As Martin rightly notes, the dynamic of self-humbling is both acutely felt and tactically deployed: “Paul speaks of his manual labor as demeaning and humiliating; he portrays it as something he took on as part of an intentional strategy of social self-lowering.”⁵²

Paul’s strategic self-abasement does not consist only in manual labor, of course: in 1 Cor 4, Paul includes his willingness to work as a manual laborer in a list of several instances of social and physical humiliation. Paul here contrasts his own (and his companion’s) constant difficulties with the Corinthians’ pursuit of or boasts of status and ease: “We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong,” etc. (4:10). His weakness and foolishness consist in, particularly, status-lowering activities and experiences: being deprived, rejected, and persecuted, as well as growing “weary from the work of our own hands” (4:11-13). Despite his protestations to the contrary, the comparison between their own status-seeking behavior and his intentional status renunciation seems intended to shame them. Moreover, his list of sufferings here includes not only what he has suffered but how he has responded to those sufferings. Where his proclamation of the gospel has prompted others to “revile,” “persecute,” and “slander” him and his companions, they have responded by “blessing,” “enduring,” and “speaking kindly” (4:12-13). The implication is both that *he* could have done differently and that the Corinthians *are* doing differently. Many of his experiences of physical and social suffering, then, are experiences that he could have

⁵² Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 51. Ronald Hock concurs: “For Paul working at a trade had meant demeaning himself, taking on the lowly status of a common laborer. Therefore, in both 1 Cor 9:19 and 2 Cor 11: 7 Paul’s choice of language to refer to his work reflects not the attitude of the typical artisan, . . . but rather the snobbish and scornful attitude so typical of upper class Greeks and Romans.” (“Paul’s Tentmaking and the Problem of His Social Class,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 [1978]: 562.)

avoided or mitigated.

Thus his status renunciation is not merely strategic, for the sake of the spread of the gospel—if it were, the Corinthians (and any other group of believers) could easily charge him, the one set apart for the work of mission and church planting, with the task of lowering himself for the sake of his mission while they enjoy their ease.⁵³ Or, Paul could describe his life of difficulty as a temporary one or optional one, one that he might lay down when he has completed a particular task or when he has decided to pursue other strategies for mission. Instead, Paul calls those who “have become arrogant” (4:18) to “become imitators” of him (4:16) in his life of deliberate status renunciation. This life of chosen hardship is not (only) a tactical decision by a particularly effective salesman; it is also a theological statement about the kind of life inaugurated by belief in the Crucified One. This theological statement is multifaceted. It is not only prudent but *fitting* that Paul offers the “free gift” of salvation (Rom 5:15) freely, by declining support that was his, by rights, to demand. Paul’s economic practices are ones that comport with his understanding of the economy of salvation. Martin finds in Paul’s association with the lower classes (through his willing adoption of the life of a manual laborer) a statement about the kind of people who may become associated with the Crucified one: “He gave up certain prerogatives to demonstrate by example that the Christian life could be lived by manual laborers as manual laborers.”⁵⁴ Scott Hafemann, considering the constellation of references to suffering and Paul’s own authority in 1 Corinthians 1 and 4 and 2 Corinthians 2 and 4, emphasizes the relationship between Paul’s suffering and his fitness for leadership. In 1 Corinthians 4, especially, willingness to suffer is a qualification of leadership that is an authentic representation of the gospel (manifesting

⁵³ I am finding it hard to resist the urge to comment on the way some churches view their pastors in a similar light—as the professional ministers in whose sole province the obligation to sacrifice for the sake of the work of the church rests.

⁵⁴ Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 80.

both the offense of the cross and the power of God).⁵⁵ Gorman, too, sees Paul as deliberately choosing a pattern of leadership that is consonant with the gospel. This pattern of leadership includes his willingness to suffer on their behalf, of course, but it even extends to the manner in which he addresses their ethical concerns: “He steadfastly refuses, on profound theological grounds, to control the expression of cultural differences about food and calendar in order artificially to unite a divided community (Romans 14-15).”⁵⁶ Paul’s choice to renounce status and the physical ease and benefits associated with it, then, is no mere pragmatic missional strategy. His willing embrace of suffering—suffering he could easily end or temper by asking to be paid for his work—is instead intrinsic to his proclamation of the gospel.

When Paul turns his attention to the suffering of others, his outlook does not radically change. The theological perspective he brings to his own suffering is one that, he believes, applies to the suffering of others as well. As Ann Jervis notes, however, when Paul describes the suffering of others, he recognizes two very distinct categories of “others”: those who suffer because of their rejection of Jesus, and those who suffer because of their alliance with him.⁵⁷ To the latter, Paul applies all the insights and observations through which he had made theological sense of his own suffering. The suffering of the former does not fit into such meaning-making. To put it another way, Paul seems to see suffering as characteristic of lived human existence, but the experience of suffering for believers is radically different than that of unbelievers.

Romans 1:24-32 describes vividly the suffering that comes from living life apart from God. This life is wracked by suffering in two senses: the unbeliever herself suffers

⁵⁵ Scott J. Hafemann, *Suffering and Ministry in the Spirit: Paul’s Defense of His Ministry in II Corinthians 2:14-3:3* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 77.

⁵⁶ Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 297.

⁵⁷ Jervis uses different language than is used here; she speaks of those who suffer “apart from Christ,” and those who suffer “in” and “with Christ.” Jervis, *At the Heart of the Gospel*, *passim*.

increasing moral confusion and personal disintegration, and she perpetuates suffering in the world through acts of moral depravity. Paul's language here plays with the dialectic of freedom and compulsion. Three times, God is said to "give them [willful unbelievers] up" (*paradidōmi*) to their own desires. Though *paradidōmi* sometimes has a neutral or even positive connotation (so 1 Cor 11:2, 23a, 15:3), it may also connote the transfer of authority over an object in a way that dooms that object. So Jesus was said to be "handed over" (1 Cor 11:23b, or possibly "betrayed") to his death, and Paul makes reference to the "handing over" of one's body either for punishment (1 Cor 5:5) or in an act of self-sacrifice (1 Cor 13:3).⁵⁸ By "handing over" the willful unbeliever to his own immoral actions, to his own passions, to his own "debased mind," God simultaneously frees and enslaves; the unbeliever is given his desires and is at the same time *surrendered to* them. Unrestrained freedom to do what one desires is paradoxically equated with captivity to those desires: the one who succumbs to desire lacks control over his own body.⁵⁹ (Paul makes this association explicit in 1 Thess 4:4-5, attributing this condition of life to "the Gentiles who do not know God.") Their passions are "degrading" (*atimias*, Rom 1:26), causing them to "burn" or "be consumed" (*ekkaiomai*, 1:27). Paul in a later chapter contrasts the Roman converts' life of faith with their prior state of enslavement to escalating sin: "you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity" (Rom 6:19). So too here, participation in idolatry and depravity leads to ever-increasing moral incoherence. Those who practice sexual depravity are unable to recognize the "due penalty" this invokes "*in their own person*" (1:27). Moreover, they provoke others to moral outrage; they "applaud others" in every kind of

⁵⁸ 1 Corinthians 13:3. The textual variant in this verse (*kauchēsōmai* vs. *kauthēsōmai*) makes it difficult to establish the exact scenario pictured, but either choice suggests an act that surrenders the goods of the body for the sake of religious devotion: either Paul (hypothetically) hands over his body "that I may be burned" (as a martyr) or "that I may boast" (in his feats of heroic religious performance).

⁵⁹ This dynamic of compulsion present in the description of desires as *passions* (that is, as realities one *suffers*) will be explored more fully in the next chapter.

moral evil (1:32). The idolater cannot choose to do what is good for himself, and he perpetuates moral confusion in the community.⁶⁰

He perpetuates more than moral confusion: the acts which are attributed to him are acts which perpetuate physical and emotional suffering as well. Those who are characterized by “evil, covetousness, malice, . . . envy, murder strife, deceit, craftiness,” who are “gossips, slanderers, . . . inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (Rom 1:29-31) multiply conditions of suffering for those who surround them. Paul pictures here a kind of anti-community, in which the common bond is the enslavement to wrong-doing: idolaters are unable to escape their own performance of evil and they are unable to escape the suffering that others cause. Thus the idolater is not only guilty but unhappy—he is caught in a cycle of increasing suffering and moral degradation.⁶¹

Paul neither commends this kind of suffering nor praises its continuation or inevitability. In fact, his logic is here rather like Luke’s: apart from the presence of the Kingdom, there is grave suffering, suffering from which one *ought* to be saved by embracing the Kingdom in the person of the Crucified One. Outside of the Kingdom, one may suffer the sin of others or the just effects of one’s own sin (so Rom 1:18-32, 5:12-14; cp. Luke 6:39, 11:37-52, possibly 11:24-26), and one risks suffering the coming wrath of God (so 1 Thess 1:10, Rom 2:5, 8; cp. Luke 3:7, 13:28, 16:19-31, 19:27). Jesus is the one who *saves* humans from this wrath (Rom 5:9), and the Spirit gives humans the power to resist sin (Rom 8:9-11, 13-14, Gal 5:16-18, 22-23; perhaps Gal 5:5) and to relieve the suffering of others (Gal 5:13-14, 22-26, 6:2; Rom 14:17-19). Indeed, the Spirit “helps us in

⁶⁰ It is worth noting that the intentions and beliefs of Paul *may* be a step removed from his declarations in Romans 1:18-32. Paul’s rhetorical purpose here is to set the reader up for the surprising condemnation of those who “judge others” in 2:1. The extent to which this rhetorical purpose distances Paul from his own words is debatable. Some commentators take chapter 2 as a veritable repudiation of 1:18-32, while others take Paul to give a kind of guarded assent to its proclamations.

⁶¹ Cf. Ann Jervis, to whom I am indebted for this observation: “Such people are perpetrators *and* victims of murder, gossip, heartlessness, and so on.” *At the Heart of the Gospel*, 94, emphasis added.

our weakness," "[interceding] for the saints" when "we do not know how to pray as we ought" (Rom 8:26-27), while we "groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (8:23). Suffering and death are an inevitable part of the human condition apart from Christ, and Christ brings relief and rescue from both.

Thus far, Luke and Paul are in accord. What Paul continues to insist, however, is that suffering is an inevitable and even necessary reality *with* Christ, on this side of the eschaton. Not only can he narrate his own sufferings in terms of the beatitude they conferred on him, he can insist that his congregants, too, will find themselves participating most fully in the eschatological project of God when they suffer. They will not be saved *in spite of* their sufferings, but *through* them. They do not know themselves to be allied with Christ *in spite of* their sufferings, but *because* of them. Suffering is as much an ineluctable reality for believers as for unbelievers, but for the former, suffering is rather a vocation than a tragic condition of the cosmos.

Paul sees suffering as the vocation of believers in at least two senses. First, just as he had seen his own sufferings—particularly his voluntary renunciation of rights and status—as befitting his mission to spread the gospel, he associates his congregants' willingness to suffer with their faithful proclamation of the gospel. Paul's encouragement to take on or welcome suffering is often precisely directed toward the relief of others' suffering; thus, it proclaims the self-sacrificial and other-directed love of Christ. Martin's careful reading of 1 Corinthians traces how Paul's response to whatever conflict or question posed by the Corinthians is to insist that those who were wealthy, high-status, or regarded as "Strong" should defer to or give up their rights with respect to those who were regarded as "Weak," low-status, or poor.⁶² Those who are not

⁶² Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 78: "Throughout 1 Cor 1-4 and in regard to both food offered to idols and the Lord's Supper, Paul directs his comments above all to the Strong and proposes solutions that necessitate a change in their behavior to meet the needs of those lower down the social scale."

suffering (or who are suffering less) have a responsibility to attend to those who are suffering (or who are suffering more), whether by sharing material resources or by refraining from exercising whatever rights society confers. Even, or perhaps especially, where society gives the powerful permission to use their status to augment their power at the expense of those with less power, the powerful are urged instead to renounce such “rights” as incompatible with the gospel. Even where such self-restraint involves submitting to genuine injustice, Paul says it is preferable to causing injustice or to displaying disagreements within the church to the unbelieving public: “Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?” (1 Cor 6:7). To submit willingly to injustice or dishonesty is to proclaim the gospel. To the Galatians, Paul insists that membership in Christ is most fittingly expressed in mutual love and burden-bearing (Gal 5:13-14, 6:2). Though he uses the language of law and freedom rather than of public testimony, it is clear that he considers such expressions of mutual love and forbearance intrinsic to the faithful declaration of the gospel. A life that includes these expressions of mutual love is one that announces itself to have been transformed by its allegiance to the cross. Voluntary suffering here manifests a concern for the other, a concern to relieve the suffering of the other.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, just as he had found in his own suffering certain pedagogical and moral benefits, Paul encourages his congregants to view their own suffering as productive of God’s salvific work in and through them. In many cases, he makes the connection between his own suffering and theirs, between the meaning he found in his suffering and the meaning they ought to find in theirs, explicit. Pointing to his own willingness to forgo every advantage he had “in the flesh” (Philippians 3:4) so that he might “gain Christ” (3:8), Paul encourages the Philippians to endure opposition just as he had, because such endurance “is evidence . . . of your

salvation" (1:28). Just as his own "thorn" was, in some sense, from God, he attributes the Philippians' suffering to God: "for [God] has granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well—since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have" (1:28-30). Paul here links their suffering (their "struggle" against unspecified opposition) with his struggle (the violent opposition and imprisonment he mentions at the beginning of the letter). His struggle and theirs are both explicitly connected with the sufferings of Christ. In the passage just quoted, their sufferings are "for" Christ. He, too, has suffered and continues to suffer for Christ: he has "suffered the loss of all things," not incidentally but necessarily—he suffered their loss "in order that I may gain Christ" (3:8). Gaining Christ positively requires that he "know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings" (3:10-11). Those who decline to be open to such suffering, because "their minds are set on earthly things" (3:19), are living "as an enemy of the cross of Christ" (3:18, cp. Gal 6:12-13).⁶³

In the light of this study, the admittedly terse passages in 2 Corinthians 4 and Romans 8 can be interpreted with more confidence. With respect both to autobiographical and experiential faith claims and to more systematic theological claims, Paul declares that physical and emotional suffering is compatible with and even necessary for the sort of life that one might call good—a life that proclaims the truth of the gospel, that enacts the meaning of the gospel, and that enjoys the beatitude that is promised in the gospel. He puts his own bodily sufferings in the context of an eschatological project which is the end (in both senses of the word) of those very sufferings: it is the point at which his sufferings will cease and it is the goal and product

⁶³ The same move is made most compactly in 1 Corinthians 11:1; cp. also 1 Thessalonians 1:6. Paul exhorts his readers to imitate him (without an explicit reference to his own imitation of Christ) in 1 Corinthians 4:16 and Galatians 4:12.

of those same sufferings. His hope for the future (that which is “eternal” and “cannot be seen”) tempers his experience of pain, anxiety, and opposition so much that he can gather all such experiences under the trivializing label “this slight momentary affliction” (4:17-18). Even further, he assures the Corinthians that despite appearances (his “outer man” which is “wasting away”), his own life, wracked by suffering as it is, is one that he experiences as blessed and empowered by God (his “inner man” is “renewed day by day,” 2 Cor 4:16). Even in his sufferings, *especially* in his sufferings, he is beginning to experience the eschatological reality that will end all his sufferings. Gorman calls 2 Corinthians 4 Paul’s most explicit statement that “in the midst of suffering and cruciformity, transformation into the image of the glorified Christ is taking place.”⁶⁴ Gorman’s observation subtly highlights the unexpected nature of the association Paul is making between suffering and beatitude: it is not (only) that, in suffering, we become more like the crucified Christ. We also become more like the *glorified* Christ.

Paul’s language here is ambiguously related to his readers: the first person plural used throughout these passages sometimes clearly refers to himself and his companions over against his readers (3:1-2, 4:5, 5:12, 6:1ff., 6:11-13, e.g.), but other times hints at or gestures towards a more inclusive “we” (e.g., 4:6, 5:1-5). What he hints at or gestures toward in 2 Corinthians 4-6, he states outright in Romans 8. Here the first person plural is inclusive throughout. Paul gestures toward the cosmic scope of eschatological suffering: not only do Paul and his companions suffer as they await the eschaton—“the whole creation,” as well, is “groaning in labor pains” (8:22). For the most part, however, his comments apply to “we . . . who have the first fruits of the Spirit” (8:23)—that is, all believers. “The sufferings of this present time” (8:18) are not only the sufferings of Paul and his companions on their missionary journeys but are also the sufferings of all who

⁶⁴ Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 35.

“are in Christ Jesus” (8:1). The theological insight through which he interpreted his own sufferings, then, applies more broadly—precisely, to all who bear the name of Christ.

It is not clear from the passage exactly the kind of suffering to which Paul refers here. Paul has been working out the complex relationship between law, sin, compulsion, freedom, flesh, and spirit, and he turns, in chapter eight, both to encouragement and exhortation: encouragement that the Spirit of God frees one to live apart from the reign of sin, and exhortation to resist the “things of the flesh” that pull one back into a life of slavery to sin. Just prior, then, to insisting that the follower of Christ must “suffer with him,” Paul charges his readers not to “live according to the flesh,” but instead to “put to death the deeds of the body” (Rom 8:12, 13). This seems to suggest a certain asceticism with regard to bodily needs and desires. It may also include the sort of deliberate status renunciation he advocated in 1 Corinthians and will turn to in Romans 14 and 15, since Paul elsewhere pointedly names community-fracturing behavior as belonging to the category of “flesh.”⁶⁵ The preceding focus on literal flesh (*sarx*) and bodies (*sōma*) also suggests that these sufferings may be physical (or may, at least, include physical pains). Paul speaks of “bondage to decay” and the hoped-for “redemption of our bodies” (8:21, 23), gesturing toward the vulnerability to illness and death that characterizes all of humanity and that was most supremely on display in the cross. Thus whatever “suffering with him” entails, it seems to include both chosen and unchosen suffering, both physical and nonphysical suffering.⁶⁶ Whenever the Romans give up status and its attendant claims to material goods and ease, whenever they deny bodily desires or material goods that are incompatible with “life in the Spirit,” whenever

⁶⁵ 1 Corinthians 3:3, Galatians 5:19-21.

⁶⁶ Gorman points to 2 Corinthians 1:5 and Philippians 3:10-11 as evidence that, for Paul, the pattern of life for disciples is one that expressly includes physical suffering: “The metaphor of dying with Christ is not merely meant to refer to self-giving love, or the termination of selfish desires. It includes—especially when the word suffer/suffering appears—a variety of concrete, physical pains suffered for the sake of the gospel of the crucified Christ.” (Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 288).

they brave opposition to the gospel, and, indeed, whenever they endure their own bodies' continuing corruptibility and mortality, they are (at least potentially) "suffering with" Christ and thereby participating in his project of redeeming and perfecting all of creation.

Paul makes use here in Romans 8:17-25 of childbirth imagery, a recognized trope in the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible (and, later, in apocalyptic and gospel literature), to sketch the relationship between suffering and eschatological peace. Labor pains are both a temporary state indicative of the arrival of a child, *and* a necessary component of its arrival.⁶⁷ Thus when the "children of God" experience suffering—whether that suffering is a result of their "bondage to decay," a bondage they share with all creation, or of their fidelity to the crucified one—they may count it as the sort of "suffering with" Christ that both heralds and produces their glorification. Those who are "groaning in labor pains" with all of creation are participating in the purposes of God; "suffering with" Christ, whatever that means, is eschatologically productive suffering. One must note the dual nature of this analogy, however: suffering is *both* temporary *and* necessary. Yes, just as the laboring woman may mitigate the painful aspects of labor by focusing on the imminent arrival of the child, so Paul and his readers may minimize their "suffering with Christ" as "not worth comparing" with the eschatological glory it produces.⁶⁸ Yet, just as the laboring woman *must* endure the pains of labor (certain modern medical practices notwithstanding) in order to bring forth the child, so also must the follower of Christ expect to endure suffering in order to "be glorified with him." Openness to all these forms of suffering that mimic, replicate, proclaim, or otherwise cohere with Christ's sufferings is spoken of in such language as

⁶⁷ This is not the only use to which Paul puts the imagery of childbirth. The imagery is also used to point to the unpredictability of the eschaton (1 Thessalonians 5:1-3) and to the productive but difficult work of preaching the gospel effectively (Galatians 4:19).

⁶⁸ This is the logic operative in John 16:21, as well.

makes it a positive requirement for claims to Christian faith.

Suffering Canonically?

It is tempting to try to synthesize these two accounts of the relationship between suffering and salvation in concert with the modern appeal to autonomy: that is, by saying that *chosen* suffering, and only chosen suffering, is productive or meaningful. Paul's insight regarding the moral and spiritual value of suffering is one that other individuals may embrace; one might incorporate suffering into one's own moral or spiritual projects (à la Beauchamp and Childress) without negating Luke's emphasis on the restorative power of the Kingdom. But while the autonomous moral agent may find his own projects compatible with suffering, he may never make that determination on behalf of another autonomous moral agent. Thus, in concert with Luke's insight about the fundamental interrelationship between the presence of the Kingdom and the relief of suffering, one ought always take a negative posture toward the suffering of others. One ought especially not to compel the suffering of others when one has the means to relieve it. Through the lens of autonomy, one might even read Luke's expansive concern with many forms of suffering (social, economic, medical, etc.) as a warrant to define suffering as Beauchamp and Childress do—as anything that imposes on the freely chosen projects of the autonomous moral agent. Paul's insistence on mutual burden-bearing and self-sacrificial concern for others fits neatly into this reading (one *chooses* to suffer in order to relieve the unchosen suffering of the other). Even his encouragement to endure suffering faithfully may be shoehorned into such a reading: by *encouraging* their embrace of suffering rather than *causing*, himself, their suffering, he honored the boundaries autonomy places around the individual.

The language of autonomy as such, however, is foreign to the project of either author. Paul's understanding of the vocational dimension of suffering is not entirely

compatible with the idea of *chosen* suffering. Indeed, the language of obligation he uses with reference to self-renunciation for the sake of the community, as well as to the relationship between suffering and glory, must frustrate the project of anyone who would seek to make autonomy or self-direction a test of meaningful suffering. As was already indicated earlier in this chapter, Paul clearly takes autonomy, particularly in pursuit of one's desires, to be, itself, a form of suffering. Autonomy is precisely the problem, even a *punishment*, in Romans 1. As Gorman says, "Paul believes that humans outside Christ are enslaved to themselves, living a life improperly oriented toward themselves rather than toward God and others."⁶⁹ Autonomy is *enslavement* to oneself, not freedom to direct oneself. Enslavement to God, in Christ, is the solution to the problem of autonomy (Romans 6), not vice versa. Self-renunciation for the sake of the community is voluntary in the sense that it is non-coerced, but it is not the voluntariness of such suffering that gives it meaning, for Paul. One relieves the suffering of others while taking on suffering for oneself not because only autonomously chosen suffering can be meaningful, but because self-giving love is the pattern of life inaugurated in the cross. It is not that the free choice to suffer makes that suffering meaningful; it is instead the free choice to suffer that makes one's *claims to Christian faith* meaningful. Those who intentionally cause the suffering of others are, to be sure, condemned as faithless and godless (so Romans 1:18-32, Gal 5:19-21). Yet those who fail to accept the suffering that comes with following Jesus, those who fail to encourage others to do the same, are also condemned as faithless and godless (so Gal 6:12, Philippians 3:18-19). Paul's willingness to suffer for the gospel both proves his devotion and makes possible God's work in him through that suffering. It is a prerequisite for the effectiveness of that suffering in God's salvific work, but it is not a prerequisite for the meaningfulness or goodness of that

⁶⁹ Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 106.

suffering. Suffering is not legitimated by its compatibility with the un-coerced life projects of the free moral agent; the free participation of the believer in God's project, the patent good of which is its own justification, allows the believer to narrate his life as one of beatitude even and perhaps especially in the presence of bodily suffering.

It is more difficult to speculate on the relationship between autonomy and suffering in Luke's thought, since he conveys nothing by way of propositional or systematic statements. Autonomy does not seem to be meaningfully connected with suffering or its relief at any point in the narrative, however. None of the healings or restorations Jesus effects in the gospel can be read as restorations to independent moral agency without doing some violence to the text, and, indeed, the many depictions of restoration to the People of God seem to accent membership in community (not freedom from dependence on it) as a significant dimension of health and wholeness. The story of Ananias and Sapphira makes passing reference to the voluntariness of the early disciples' communitarian economic activities (Acts 5:4), but even this reference serves rather to emphasize the depravity of their free choice to misrepresent their charity than to expound the importance of voluntariness with respect to suffering or self-denial. It is a story of the abuse of autonomy, perhaps, but it does not offer any grounds to suppose that autonomy is a crucial dimension of human well-being for Luke.

The modern notion, then, that suffering can only derive its meaningfulness from the sufferer's voluntary acceptance of it is not one that finds a ready analogue in either of the biblical authors under discussion here. It provides an intellectually satisfying resolution to the dilemma only when posed in the abstract—to wit, how may the possible moral and spiritual utility of suffering be coherently related to a moral obligation to relieve suffering? Immediately one attempts to give scriptural content to either term—productive suffering or morally obligatory relief of suffering—the

resolution proves less than satisfying.⁷⁰ When the dilemma is posed as it has been in this chapter (that is, how does one pursue a theological understanding of suffering in view of the dissonances evident in the canonical witness?), the turn to autonomy makes even less sense.

Still, although this chapter has sought to emphasize the differences between Paul and the author of Luke-Acts, the similarity we find between the two authors is not inconsequential. The fundamental posture of both authors toward unrelieved suffering is one of endurance, an endurance that expresses the Christian's confidence in God's ultimate salvation of his people. Endurance is, in both authors' work, placed in a context of certainty with regard to the outcome of the story of which it is a part: the Christian endures temporal suffering knowing that such suffering will end at the culmination of God's intention for humanity. It is only in this context, the context of substantive agreement about the ends toward which humanity strives, that this dissonance exists, and it is only in that context that productive exploration of this dissonance can take place. In other words, Luke enjoins his readers to endure what suffering they cannot avoid because suffering is incidental to God's ultimate triumph; Paul enjoins his readers to endure suffering because the endurance of suffering is intrinsic to God's ultimate triumph. God's ultimate triumph will erase suffering because such suffering is antithetical to the salvific purposes of God, for both Luke and Paul, but for Paul, human suffering until then *participates* in the salvific purposes of God. It is the mode of life that most fittingly proclaims the gospel, that enacts and trains one in the values of the Kingdom, and that display one's fidelity to Crucified One. However the theologian-ethicist attempts to understand the place of physical suffering in the kind of

⁷⁰ As Engelhardt aptly pointed out, the presumption of moral difference is the implicit third term that makes the turn to autonomy necessary. It is only when moral strangers wish to construct a common resolution to this dilemma that autonomy, rather than a thick description of the goods of life, must become the ground of their agreement.

life that may be called good, and however she attempts to construct such an understanding in light of the canonical witness, she must take seriously the eschatological narrative in which such questions are placed.

Chapter 3: Thomas Aquinas and Suffering the Passions

Whether the problem raised in chapter two is posed in the abstract (What is the relationship between one's obligation to relieve suffering and one's obligation to embrace suffering for the sake of its spiritual and moral benefits?) or more concretely (How does one respond to instances of suffering as a faithful Christian, in view of the divergent witnesses of Paul and Luke?), it cannot be addressed without recourse to a systematic understanding of the role pain and suffering in the human life. Moreover, the tension between the Pauline approach to suffering and the modern approach detailed in chapter one makes further demands on the theologian-ethicist. Is it possible to craft an approach to suffering that takes seriously the modern (and Lucan) insight that suffering calls forth a moral obligation without negating Paul's insistence on the Christian vocation of suffering? This question, likewise, requires a more thorough account of suffering and beatitude than either scripture or modern bioethics can supply.

Thomas Aquinas's Treatise on the Passions (*Summa Theologica* I-II.22-48) is the most useful focal point for inquiry, both because it includes an extended discussion on pain, and because Thomas here systematizes and specifies what usually remains implicit and indefinite in our language about pain and suffering. In the Treatise on the Passions, we begin to see the conceptual framework that, however little we know it, orders our discourse about suffering. This conceptual framework is more evident in Thomas's language than in the one I am writing in: where he uses "*passio*," I may use "suffering," "emotion," or "passivity."¹ Not merely an interesting challenge for the translator or interpreter of Thomas's work, this multivalence sketches the contours of the discursive

¹ *Pati*, the verbal form of *passio*, may similarly be expressed in English as "to suffer," "to feel emotion," or "to be acted upon."

field in which any of these terms (or their cognates and synonyms) are used. To suffer, to feel emotion, and to be subject to another's agency are all fundamentally related.²

Suffering Passivity

These are not indistinguishable phenomena, even for Thomas, who uses the same word for all three. His first step in the *Treatise on the Passions* is to begin to sort through all the traditional uses of the term. Most broadly, *pati* means to be subject to the effects of another's agency, irrespective of the relative goodness or malice of those effects. One *suffers*, that is, the agency of another being. Thus suffering, according to its broadest definition, is intrinsic to all of creation, in that any potentiality requires some form of agency to be activated. While Thomas notes that this potentiality and passibility are defects, of a sort,³ he seems to have no interest in constructing a rigid dualism between agency, reason, and goodness on the one hand and passivity, embodiment, and malice or evil on the other. Passibility is a defect in comparison with act and agency, but it is not necessarily a defect with any moral weight. Passibility and potentiality are defects only (or at least principally) in the sense in which all creation is "defective": it is not God. To God alone belong all perfections, including perfect activity. Though any part of creation must stand on the not-God side of the God/not-God distinction, created being is nonetheless a good which the suffering of passivity does not diminish.

To sort out how and when a human being might be said to suffer (in this broadest sense) is difficult: for Thomas, the human composite is a complex mixture of agency and passivity. Agency is principally associated with the rational soul, but the

² It is not necessary that we speak Thomas's language in order for us to locate ourselves in the same—or very nearly the same—discursive field. Insofar as our language and culture has been and continues to be shaped by Greco-Roman philosophy and the Roman ecclesial tradition, our habits of speech will have some continuity with Thomas's.

³ He often quotes, for example, Augustine's maxim that "the agent is nobler than the patient." (E.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.Q82.A4.O1 and III.Q8.A5.)

correspondence is not exact.⁴ The precise source of movement for human activity is the will, the rational appetite: “It belongs to the will to move the other powers, by reason of the end which is the will’s object.”⁵ Moreover, because it is the will which causes the act, it is in the will that goodness and malice, merit and demerit, and praiseworthiness and blameworthiness are located.⁶ Thomas does not allow for any evaluation of human action that is not centered on the will: whether an act arising from ignorance is good or evil, for example, depends on whether the ignorance is voluntary (and thus culpable) or involuntary (and thus excusable).⁷

The will does not function as an unmoved mover, however. The will is itself moved by many things: by the intellect, the sensitive appetite, a sensible object, and (non-competitively) by God as “Universal Mover.”⁸ Supremely, the will is moved in response to an object proposed to it by the intellect. Derivatively, a sensible object or an inclination in the sensitive appetite may incline the will, when presented to the will as a good by the intellect. The will is also moved by its own prior acts: habits are the collective weight, so to speak, of repeated acts of will which incline the will to similar acts. The intellect, in its turn, is both moved and mover. The agent intellect extracts universals from sensible particulars, while the passive intellect perceives the universals presented to it by the agent intellect.⁹ The agent intellect itself is passive in that it is always in potential to those universals it does not yet know, but active when it does, in fact, extract them.¹⁰ Moreover, the intellect must be moved by the will to study and

⁴ Thus another dualism that cannot be attributed to Thomas is that between agency and the rational soul on the one hand and passivity and the body on the other.

⁵ ST I-II.Q9.A3.

⁶ ST I-II.Q19, 20, 21.

⁷ ST I-II.Q19.A6.

⁸ ST I-II.Q9. Fortunately, Q9.A5 assures us, we can dispense with astrology: the heavenly bodies move the will only incidentally, as all sensible objects may move the will through the operation of the sensitive appetite.

⁹ ST I.Q79.

¹⁰ ST I.Q79.A2.

contemplate its proper object.¹¹

To these layers of agency and passivity within the rational soul are added all the complexities of life as a composite (bodily *and* spiritual) being. The vegetative soul directs bodily functions (generation, digestion, etc.) without input from the rational soul.¹² The rational soul, however, depends on the sensitive soul and the body for the collection of sensible particulars.¹³ Thus, the health of the body—its proper and stable functioning—is indispensable to the health of the reason.

The sensitive soul is associated principally with passivity: it receives the sensible particulars and is inclined toward or against them.¹⁴ This in turn moves the composite toward or away from the sensible particulars, and thus has an aspect of agency. Yet unlike the animals, in whom the sensitive soul is supreme, humans are not moved solely, or even principally, by their sensitive appetite but by their rational appetite (the will):

To the will also is the sensitive appetite subject in execution, which is accomplished by the motive power. For in other animals movement follows at once the concupiscible and irascible appetites: for instance, the sheep, fearing the wolf, flees at once, because it has no superior counteracting appetite. On the contrary, man is not moved at once, according to the irascible and concupiscible appetites: but he awaits the command of the will, which is the superior appetite.¹⁵

Activity is voluntary, then, in that it is the will which must enact what the human intends. It is in this context, however, that Thomas appeals to Aristotle's affirmation that the will's command over the appetite is not "despotic" but "by a politic and royal power": the appetite can and does "resist the commands of reason," unlike the body which has no choice but to obey (save concerning the aforementioned nutritive

¹¹ ST I.Q82.A4.

¹² ST I.Q78.A2.

¹³ ST I.Q79.A3.

¹⁴ ST I.80.2, I.81.1

¹⁵ ST I.81.3

powers).¹⁶

Passivity, then, is not alien but intrinsic to the human experience. It is important to note how Thomas's construction of the human experience differs from some of the claims about consent (and its relationship to both happiness and justice) adduced in the first chapter. By these accounts, autonomy is all but required for human well-being. Passivity of any kind is perceived as a departure from the experience of free agency on which happiness is presumed to depend. To be subject to the agency of someone other than oneself is to be subjugated by that other, while autonomous individuality is a prerequisite for the highest and best forms of life. To live a life that is altered from what one has chosen—whether altered by subjection to a stronger agent, to a controlling historical event, or to the malfunction of some material good (including one's own body) on which that life is presumed to depend—is to live a lesser life than the life one had wished for. The connection between suffering and passivity is not merely linguistic (and vestigial at that), but experiential. To receive the effects of another's agency is necessarily to suffer—either to suffer the harm of those effects when they are negative, or to suffer the affront to one's agency irrespective of the character of the effects. Even beneficial effects can register as suffering, according to such a view of autonomy. An action may be read as "paternalistic," "infantilizing," or "patronizing" when benefits are conferred without adequate appeal to the agency or consent of the recipient. Beauchamp and Childress's concerns about medical paternalism make no sense apart from their commitment to autonomy as the principal condition of a good life.

By contrast, Thomas takes this form of suffering as an evil only in the most mitigated sense. Passibility is an imperfection in comparison with God's perfect activity, God's perfect agency, but it is a defect which all creation shares—and thus, in respect of

¹⁶ ST I.81.3.RO2.

creation, it is not a defect at all. For Thomas, human agency cannot be strictly opposed to passivity, because the human composite never experiences unmixed agency.

The Passions Properly So Called

This broadest sense of suffering is not, however, the primary sense in which Thomas uses *passio* in the Treatise on the Passions: the Treatise is a study in what we would call emotions.¹⁷ How it is that the universal human experience of emotion can be categorized as suffering is not immediately obvious; indeed, Thomas includes love, hope, and delight among the passions. Nonetheless, for Thomas, the passions are “suffered” in several senses.

First, the passions are an experience of human passivity. As his first article on the subject makes clear, “the passions” properly so called are movements of the sensitive appetite, toward or away from a perceived good or evil, accompanied by a bodily change.¹⁸ One must immediately note the double layer of passivity in this more precise definition of *passio*; one is doubly moved when moved by a passion. First, the appetite is moved by a sensible object external to itself: “the appetible object gives the appetite, first a certain adaptation to itself, which consists in complacency in that object; and from this follows movement toward the appetible object.”¹⁹ Second, the body is moved by that same external agent, rather than by the will (the accompanying bodily transmutation being integral to the definition of a passion properly so called). This second movement

¹⁷ The choice to render *passiones* as “emotions” in the Blackfriars edition is not entirely infelicitous, as it captures Thomas’s emphasis on passivity—one is “moved” when one experiences an emotion. It also emphasizes the breadth of the phenomenon Thomas is discussing; “passion” is, in modern parlance, a more limited concept. Current popular understandings of emotion, however, tend to be highly internalized; the implicit source of motion is one’s own personality. Insofar as it plays into such an understanding of the human person, “emotions” is less to be preferred than “passions.”

¹⁸ ST I-II.Q22. Thomas describes the bodily movement as, for example, a warming or melting of the heart (I-II.Q28.5), a warming of the blood around the heart (I-II.Q48.A2), or the movement of heat from the outer to the inner members (I-II.Q44.A3).

¹⁹ ST I-II.Q26.A2. “Object” in this case includes intangible as well as tangible existing things: memories, events, ideas, or proposed courses of action may function as the precipitating object.

heightens the sense of passivity, for it seems less “natural” than the first: the appetite, by its nature, is moved by appetible objects (things that are capable of moving the appetite), but the body is more properly moved by the will. When the body is moved by something other than the will, one’s perception of volition (voluntariness, agency, control) suffers loss.

Second, the passions are “suffered” because they are generally recognized by their corruptive action on the body. Thomas’s point here is not that the passions are themselves necessarily destructive—in fact, he is at pains to note that the movement of the passions may be toward good *or* evil—but that the passions are more commonly recognized *as* passions when they alter the body in a noticeably harmful way. Love, for example, is an attraction toward and adaptation to something perceived as good; if the perception of goodness in the object is correct, “love of a suitable good perfects and betters the lover” (for all that the process is an involuntary one).²⁰ Yet the physical change accompanying the passion of love may be experienced as an evil rather than a good: “But in respect of the material element in the passion of love, i.e., a certain bodily change, it happens that love is hurtful, by reason of this change being excessive.”²¹ When the accompanying bodily movement is clearly “for the worse,” Thomas writes, “it has more of the nature of a passion than when it is for the better: hence sorrow is more properly a passion than joy.”²²

Most importantly for Thomas, though, the passions are suffered in that their movements are, for the most part, external to the exercise of reason, on which happiness and moral fitness depend. For Thomas, any act—whether an external act or the act of the will in choosing how and whether to act—is judged by the conformity of its object to

²⁰ ST I-II.Q28.A5.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² ST I-II.Q22.A1.

reason. An article on the necessity of prudence succinctly details Thomas's chain of reasoning:

Prudence is a virtue most necessary for human life. For a good life consists in good deeds. Now in order to do good deeds, it matters not only what a man does, but also how he does it; to wit, that he do it from right choice and not merely from impulse or passion. And, since choice is about things in reference to the end, rectitude of choice requires two things; namely, the due end, and something suitably ordained to that due end. Now man is suitably directed to his due end by a virtue which perfects the soul in the appetitive part, the object of which is the good and the end. . . . Consequently an intellectual virtue is needed in the reason, to perfect the reason, and make it suitably affected towards things ordained to the end; and this virtue is prudence.²³

According to Thomas, then, happiness or the good life requires a habitual inclination to what is truly good, rightly pursued by the reason. Reason, perfected by the virtue of prudence, will correctly judge appropriate ends (and this is always, for Thomas, with reference to man's final, supernatural, end—the presence of God), and will move the will to chose suitable and effective actions ordered to that end.

The passions are problematic in that they have a coercive tendency which may frustrate the proper functioning of reason and the will. A passion may move the will or the reason coercively by way of distraction as well as by interference. The physical change accompanying the passion necessarily interferes with the proper functioning of the body, and thus, by extension, of reason, which depends on the health of the body for its own function.²⁴ Or, the movement of the sense appetite may fix the soul's attention on its sensory powers, to the detriment of its rational powers.²⁵ More seriously, the movement of the passion—its inclination toward a perceived good—may be so strong that the intellect is led to approve that perceived good, such that the will adopts it as an

²³ ST I-II.Q

²⁴ ST I-II.Q33.A3.RO3. Thomas mentions this problem in conjunction with most of the passions he enumerates: in I-II.28.5, in conjunction with love; in conjunction with fear in I-II.Q44.A4, e.g. It also appears in his discussion of sin in I-II.77 as a mitigating factor in judgments of merit. The bodily transmutation accompanying anger is the most violent, and thus particularly detrimental to reason in I-II.48.3.

²⁵ ST I-II.Q33.A3.

end.²⁶

Even where the good which moves the passion is appropriately pursued, the act cannot be said to be virtuous, because the reason has not been able to grasp the good as it should; it has not performed its characteristic work of discerning the universal good or relating the perceived good to divine law. Where the passions precede the judgment of the will, they diminish agency by inhibiting or preventing reason and will from performing their proper functions. Diminished agency reduces culpability:

“Accordingly, if we take passion as preceding the sinful act, it must needs diminish the sin: because the act is a sin in so far as it is voluntary, and under our control.”²⁷ A sin prompted by passion rather than by malice is less grievous (less culpable), because the passion is an extrinsic mover of the will, while malice is itself a movement of the will.²⁸

Such a sin might even, depending on the strength of the passion and the patient’s ability to exercise control over it, be entirely non-culpable: “if anyone through sickness or some such cause”—that is, an involuntary cause—“fall into such a passion as deprives him of the use of reason, his act is rendered wholly involuntary, and he is entirely excused from sin.”²⁹ Even the merit of an act rightly deserving of merit can be diminished if preceded by a passion: “For it is more praiseworthy to do a work of charity from the judgment of reason than from the mere passion of pity.”³⁰

To understand how this might be the case—how a rationally chosen act might be more meritorious than an emotionally prompted one—it is helpful to look where

²⁶ I-II.77.1.

²⁷ I-II.77.6.

²⁸ I-II.78.4.

²⁹ I-II.77.7. It is hard to imagine what sort of passion Thomas might mean by this. At bottom, he is interested in causation and culpability—if the chain of causality is non-voluntary and irresistible at every point, then the moral agent has not been in any sense an agent, and praise or blame cannot be assigned. Modern medicine might point to genetically-influenced addictions, for example, or severe affective and behavioral disorders with organic or genetic causes; it is not clear, however, what illnesses or non-voluntary causes the pre-modern Thomas imagines can prompt blameless passions that in turn lead to sin.

³⁰ I-II.24.3.RO1.

Thomas probes the difference between a passion and its apparently analogous virtue. Daring, for example, mimics courage, in that both attempt to repel or resist a present evil. Yet while daring may inspire an immediate fervor and a ready effort, courage takes a reasoned account of the situation. The movement of daring may be apt, but, springing from the sensitive appetite rather than the will, it is susceptible to being diverted whenever new sensible objects are presented.

Daring, being a movement of the sensitive appetite, follows an apprehension of the sensitive faculty. But the sensitive faculty cannot make comparisons, nor can it inquire into circumstances; its judgment is instantaneous. Now it happens sometimes that it is impossible for a man to take note in an instant of all the difficulties of a certain situation: hence there arises the movement of daring to face the danger; so that when he comes to experience the danger, he feels the difficulty to be greater than he expected, and so gives way.³¹

Courage, on the other hand, moves the will by way of the rational intellect. Having rationally assessed both the moral weight of the situation and the best course of action, a person may choose the same act daring might have inspired. Yet the involvement of the reason changes the nature of the act: courage prompts greater determination and efficacy.

Consequently men of fortitude who face danger according to the judgment of reason, at first seem slack, because they face the danger not from passion but with due deliberation. Yet when they are in the midst of danger, they experience nothing unforeseen, but sometimes the difficulty turns out to be less than they anticipated; wherefore they are more persevering. Moreover, it [their perseverance] may be because they face the danger on account of the good of virtue which is the abiding object of their will, however great the danger may prove.³²

An act inspired by courage is morally weighty precisely because of the involvement of the rational will. Absent this engagement of the rational intellect and will, an act does not contribute to the moral well-being of the agent, even when it is, absolutely speaking, an act that is consonant with good.

One suffers the passions, then, because the best human life, the life least marked

³¹ I-II.45.4.

³² I-II.45.4.

by evil or sin or misfortune, is a life in accordance with reason. Whether or not a particular passion tends toward a good (pleasant, useful, or meritorious) thing, the passions themselves are movements which diminish the exercise of reason—that by which a good life is measured and attained. A life comprised of impassioned but unreasoned acts, no matter how well-ordered those acts are, absolutely speaking, is a lesser life than the life of virtue. The agent suffers not absolutely, but in comparison to the good which she would have obtained had she acted with moral intentionality. This is a subtle form of suffering indeed, but it is important for understanding how Thomas locates pain within the good life.

Equally important, however, is the point that Thomas is careful to distance himself from any strict association of the passions with evil or detriment. In fact, the moral status of the passions—their relationship to judgments of goodness and malice, merit and demerit—is a central preoccupation within Thomas’s treatise on the passions. He rejects, first of all, the Stoic notion that the passions are themselves evil and diminish the merit of any good act. According to Thomas, the Stoics failed to recognize the location of moral praiseworthiness and blameworthiness—that is, the will and its conformity with reason—and thus failed to distinguish between passions that were consonant with a right judgment of will and those that were “not controlled by reason.”³³ The presence of a passion that is in accord with reason does not diminish the merit of an act, since accordance with reason is the sole measure of goodness and malice.³⁴ Acts need not be passionless to be meritorious.

Thomas similarly rejects a second rationale for expunging passions from the

³³ I-II 24.2 and 24.3.

³⁴ Thomas has already clarified in I-II.21.1 that human reason is “the proximate rule” by which goodness and evil are judged, while the Eternal Law or the Divine Law is “the supreme rule.” Since ignorance of the Eternal Law is a culpable ignorance (I-II.6.8), one presumes that the relative conformity of the individual’s reason to the Eternal Law defines, at least in part, the conformity of a particular act with reason.

morally praiseworthy life: that God and the intellectual beings (angels) are said to be passionless. The impassibility of God is, of course, part of a larger metaphysical argument concerning what may properly be predicated of God. Successive perception of time, change, potentiality, pain (physical or psychological), emotions, and the agency of a more powerful being are all things that humans may be said to suffer; God, the only being of whom aseity may be predicated, does not suffer these things, nor does he suffer at all. God is pure act, immutable, immovable, simple, and perfect.³⁵ It does not belong to God to be moved by anything; God is the final and ultimate agent. Passion, in its broadest sense (suffering the agency of another), can not be predicated of God.

But Thomas's argument here hinges on a rather prosaic distinction: God and the intellectual beings do not have bodies. His most precise definition of a passion—a movement of the sense appetite in response to a sensible object accompanied by a characteristic bodily change—cannot be predicated of one who has no body. Hence moral fitness in the intellectual beings does not attend to the right ordering of the body and its movements, while moral fitness in composite beings must.³⁶ He says earlier that emotions like love and joy are predicated of God and the angels analogously to how they are predicated of us. They are “simple acts of the will having like effects, but without passion,” which (quoting Augustine) “bear a certain resemblance to ours.”³⁷ In what that “certain resemblance” consists is not entirely clear, but the more general argument is consistent with Thomas's project as a whole. The moral weight of a human's actions must be judged in accordance with humanity's nature—that of a composite being. The moral fitness of an angel's actions is judged differently, although both are ultimately judged in accordance with the Eternal Law.

³⁵ I.9.1

³⁶ I-II.24.3.RO2.

³⁷ I-II.22.3.RO3.

If moral perfection does not require the elimination of the passions—neither because they are inherently evil nor because they do not conform to non-bodily beings’ moral perfection—then how are moral fitness and the passions related? Judgments of moral goodness and malice, praiseworthiness and blameworthiness, depend on reason. For Thomas, any act—whether the external act or the act of the will in choosing how and whether to act—is judged by the conformity of its object to reason. Merit, being entirely determined by volition and conformity to reason, is attached to the passions only secondarily:

We may consider the passions of the soul in two ways: first, in themselves; secondly, as being subject to the command of the reason and will. If then the passions be considered in themselves, to wit, as movements of the irrational appetite, thus there is no moral good or evil in them, since this depends on the reason, as stated above. If, however, they be considered as subject to the command of the reason and will, then moral good and evil are in them.³⁸

Insofar as they conform to and confirm the judgment of reason, then, they can be objects of moral praise.

Conforming to the judgment of reason can mean several things, for Thomas. A passion may conform to reason in that it does not interfere with the proper exercise of reason: if desire for food does not induce the will to ignore the command of reason and over-indulge, say, or sorrow for the laborious work of planting does not induce the will to refrain from growing needed food. Thomas answers the charge that the will is irresistibly moved by the sensitive appetite by acknowledging that it *can* happen, but it need not: “Sometimes, however, the reason is not entirely engrossed by the passion, so that the judgment of reason retains, to a certain extent, its freedom: and thus the movement of the will remains in a certain degree.”³⁹

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly for Thomas, the passions may conform

³⁸ I-II.24.1.

³⁹ I-II.10.3.

to reason in that they add an emotional affirmation, as it were, to a virtuous act:

Nevertheless, joy results from the act of justice; . . . And if this joy be increased through the perfection of justice, it will overflow into the sensitive appetite; in so far as the lower powers follow the movement of the higher, as stated above. Wherefore by reason of this kind of overflow, the more perfect a virtue is, the more does it cause passion.⁴⁰

Perfect justice, then, will include not only an intellectual affirmation—joy—of the fitness of a particular just act, but also a bodily affirmation—delight, the apprehension of well-being and its corresponding bodily movement. The passion that follows a reasonable or praiseworthy act confirms, as he says elsewhere, “the intensity of the will, and so indicates greater moral goodness.”⁴¹ Or, put another way, if what a passion inclines toward as good *has already* been judged truly good by the intellect, the passion approves what reason and the divine law approve and thus is itself good.⁴²

But the passions may conform to reason in a third way for Thomas, one that seems to go against the very definition of the passions which he has offered. The passions may conform to reason by *obeying the command of the will*. A passion may be voluntary—that is, one may consent to enter into the state of anger or pain or desire, or even command the sensitive appetite to be moved in the manner of a passion. The passions have moral weight when they are “voluntary, either from being commanded by the will, or from not being checked by the will.”⁴³ They are morally praiseworthy when the virtuous man “*chooses to be affected by a passion* in order to work more promptly with the co-operation of the sensitive appetite,”⁴⁴ and morally blameworthy when a vicious man chooses to allow passion to follow his sinful act.⁴⁵

Such a conception of the passions is not entirely alien to modern understandings

⁴⁰ I-II.59.5.

⁴¹ I-II.24.3.RO1.

⁴² I-II.24.4.RO2.

⁴³ I-II.24.1.

⁴⁴ I-II.24.3.RO1, emphasis added.

⁴⁵ I-II.24.3.RO3: choosing a corresponding passion subsequent to an evil act “aggravates the sin, or else is a sign of its being more grievous.”

of the emotions. Behavior therapy, for example, works by training a patient to recognize irrational, emotional responses to stimuli and to replace those responses with trained responses of the patient's (rational) choosing. The success of the therapies (and they are among the more successful of psychiatric therapies) depends on recognizing emotion as a controllable process, and successively extending one's range of control. Psychological and emotional wholeness and healing are the goal of the process, and they are marked by control over emotional responses. Thomas's examples are noteworthy, however, in that control over the passions does not seem to extend only to the virtuous man. It is not simply that control over one's passions is the mark of a morally or emotionally mature individual. It is rather the case that the passions have an inherent susceptibility to human volition, and exercising that control is, broadly speaking, one of the capacities of the human agent. Even the emotionally immature person is exercising some level of will—he chooses to be affected by the passions. Passion and will are in, it seems, a complex relation, one that does not admit of easy distinction between agency and passivity. What is clear, however, is that Thomas intends us to understand the passions as elements of the human life that are as prone to disorder and defect as all the other elements of the human life. Yet they are equally subject and amenable to the same graces—natural and supernatural—that perfect all the other elements of the human life.

The passions are movements either of attraction or aversion—attraction to a perceived good or aversion to a perceived evil—and categorized according to their movement. Love, desire, pleasure, hope, and joy all pursue an absent good or enjoy a present one. Hatred, pain, fear, daring, and despair all flee or repulse an evil.⁴⁶ The passions moreover involve apprehension as well as appetite: "Just as two things are

⁴⁶ Anger is an intriguing exception: it is simultaneously an aversion to a perceived injustice and an attraction to the perceived good of vengeance. It is also unique in requiring a prior act of reason (that is, the inference by which one judges what is due one, against which judgment the perceived injustice is measured). ST I-II.Q46.A2, A4.

requisite for pleasure; namely, conjunction with some evil (which is in so far evil as it deprives one of some good), and perception of this conjunction."⁴⁷ Thus Thomas is insistent that the passions are both in the body and the soul: the effects of the perceived good or evil may be felt in the body, but the primary movement of the passion is in the soul. It belongs to the soul to respond to an external object as good or evil by moving the person toward or away from it.

This response is, as noted above, pre-rational, and thus it would be wrong to associate the passions with judgment properly so called (the comparison and evaluation of truths performed by the intellectual faculties). Nonetheless, the passions function as a *kind* of judgment on the nature of the object to which they are a response. The movement of the passions will be according to the perception of the object as a good or an evil, and Thomas recognizes that this perception may be apt or disordered. Thus, "Just as a thing may be apprehended as good, when it is not truly good, so a thing may be apprehended as evil, whereas it is not truly evil. Hence it happens sometimes that neither hatred of evil nor love of good is good."⁴⁸ Where this pre-rational movement is in accord with a reasoned judgment of the good or evil of the object, the passion will be well-ordered.

Thus Thomas's structure of the passions distinguishes between the movement of hatred versus love (that is, aversion versus attraction) without attaching moral praise or blame to that difference. That is to say, hatred, fear, or sadness are not less appropriate or more irrational passions than love or joy; when they are well-ordered—when they are the proper movements in respect of their object—the human person will be rightly

⁴⁷ ST I-II.Q35.A1.

⁴⁸ ST I-II.Q29.A1.RO2. See also I-II.Q29.A4: "For it happens sometimes that what is desired as good in some particular respect, is simply evil; and in this way, a man accidentally wills evil to himself; and thus hates himself."

moved.⁴⁹ Aversion to a genuine evil is as appropriate as attraction to a genuine good. By the same token, love can be as disordered as hatred: where the lover is attracted to an evil (perceived wrongly as a good) or attracted immoderately to a good, the appetitive faculty is functioning wrongly. *All* of the passions, then, are suffered, but all are compatible with human happiness and the goodness of God's creation.

Suffering pain and sorrow

It is in this context that we can begin to understand how pain and sorrow function in Thomas's understanding of the good life, and, indeed, what he understands them to be. The first part of the definition of pain is that it is one of the passions. Thus one must begin by speaking of pain as we have been speaking of the passions generally. It is an aversive movement in response to an object perceived as an evil; it is an experience of passivity; it is morally indifferent, yet where its experience is in accord with reason, it is well-ordered; it is under the partial control of reason, yet it may also sway reason if it be strong enough; it is in the soul, yet it is accompanied by characteristic bodily responses; the good life does not require its elimination but its perfection. All these things must be said of pain insofar as it is one of the passions.

Already we find ourselves in a different moral landscape than the one modern bioethical theorists inhabit. To say that the good life does not require the elimination but the *perfection* of pain is all but nonsensical with respect to the implicit and explicit understandings of pain adduced in the first chapter. Pain is, for Beauchamp and Childress, that which inhibits autonomous personhood, which impedes or frustrates the life that the individual has chosen. Engelhardt suggests that this is an insufficient

⁴⁹ As noted above, Thomas declines to attach moral import to the passions in any case, restricting judgments of morality to that which belongs to the rational appetite rather than the sensible appetite. However, Thomas does speak of the fitness or appropriateness of the passions, and that is the sort of judgment that is in view in the present discussion.

understanding of suffering or the good life, but he would deny that the secular state (and therefore, that secular bioethics) can entertain any more sophisticated view of pain or suffering. Secular medicine has no language with which to discuss a moral obligation of medical practitioners to train patients in the perfection of their sufferings.

When Thomas attends to how these general characteristics of the passions apply particularly to pain, his consonances and differences with modern understandings of pain become more acute. The first and perhaps most notable distinctiveness is his insistence that pain is in the soul rather than (or more properly than) in the body. For such a counter-intuitive proposition, Thomas's discussion of it is maddeningly brief: he quotes Augustine's maxim that "the body cannot feel pain unless the soul feel it," and affirms that while the *cause* of pain is in the body (that is, with respect to physical pain) the *movement* of pain belongs in the soul.⁵⁰ In a second reply to an objection, he similarly affirms that sensation is required for physical pain, but pain itself is located in the appetite rather than in the sensitive capacity.⁵¹ Pain is not so much the *sensation*, then, of an injury, but the soul's recognition of that injury as an evil. The injury may arise from maladaptive physical causes, whence the pain is properly called pain, or from an internal object—a memory, an insult, awareness of one's sin—in which case the pain is properly called sorrow.⁵² However, in neither case does the experience of pain belong exclusively to the body.

Pain is also like the other passions in that its activity may detract from other human activities, particularly where its movement is not consonant with those other activities. So, pain "depresses the soul," impeding the pursuit of any good.⁵³ If the movement toward a good is strong enough, and the pain weak enough, however, the

⁵⁰ ST I-II.Q35.A2.RO1.

⁵¹ ST I-II.Q35.A2.RO2.

⁵² ST I-II.Q35.A2.

⁵³ ST I-II.Q37.A3.

movement toward the good may not be unduly hindered. (Thomas gives special attention to whether and how pain and sorrow impedes scholarly pursuits—assuring his students that one may learn new things even when weighed down by pain or sorrow, provided that one's love for learning is sufficiently strong.)⁵⁴ Here his understanding is perfectly consonant with more modern understandings of the workings of the human psyche: suffering is well understood as a detriment or an obstacle to one's life plans. Yet it is not an insurmountable obstacle, and medical caregivers understand the importance of managing pain at least enough to allow for some pleasurable activities, which themselves palliate the experience of suffering. In the same spirit, Thomas takes care to enumerate the various means by which pain and sorrow may be relieved, describing the pathways which this relief takes. According to Thomas, *any* pleasure remedies pain, either by distraction (attracting the soul towards a suitable good lessens the soul's attention to the repulsive evil) or by removing some part of the cause of the sorrow. Grievous pain is increased by keeping it "shut up"—thus, tears and the consolation of friendship relieve that part of the pain that is caused by its being unexpressed. Baths may restore a certain kind of order in the body and thereby relieve at least that part of pain caused by whatever bodily disorders are typically remedied by baths. Even those pleasures which do not remove particular causes of suffering are effective in relieving pain and sorrow, however, by moving the soul in a direction that is opposed to the movement of suffering. So, even if one's particular suffering does not include among its causes a physical malady normally remedied by bathing, still bathing may lessen pain simply by being, itself, a positive pleasure in which one might take delight. Even if one's pain does not have solitude as one of its partial causes, the consolation of friends is still a

⁵⁴ ST I-II.Q37.A1.

relief in that it is a genuine pleasure.⁵⁵ The soul is easily susceptible to the passions, yet that very susceptibility can be a means by which the will exerts itself against a particular passion: by intentionally seeking out an activity with a predictable effect on one's passions, one subjects even the passions to the control of reason.

Thomas does assert, however, that pain and sorrow are, of all the passions, "most harmful to the body," because their movement is so profoundly aversive. While desire or pleasure may be harmful by tending one towards a lesser good than one *ought* to be pursuing, the movement of pain or sorrow is a movement that is directly opposed to the pursuit of *any* good. Quite apart from the mundane observation that physical pain, at least, generally involves an affront to bodily integrity which *must* hinder its activity (while the other passions need not involve physical contact with the precipitating attractive or aversive object), the movement of pain *within the soul* hinders the proper functioning of the body more than any other passion. It is not so much that the precipitating injury causes bodily harm (in the case of physical pain), but that pain and sorrow involve a movement within the soul that interferes with self-determination more certainly and more forcefully than the other passions. The control of the will over the body is more strongly attenuated because the force of the distraction within the soul is stronger than with other passions. Yet this difference is a matter of degree rather than kind: the agency of pain and sorrow over the patient is especially strong, but it is of the same species as the other passions.

Nonetheless, some pains may be so strong in their effect on the soul—or the precipitating injury so devastating to the body—that the normal assortment of human pleasures are insufficient to counter the depressive tendency of pain. Though Thomas seems unwilling to acknowledge that some pains are so severe they may not rightly be

⁵⁵ ST I-II.Q38.

categorized according to the same scheme as the other passions, he does name one pleasure that is outside the pattern of opposites into which pains and pleasures generally fall. Contemplation is the highest human activity, and in the principal activity in which human happiness, even the imperfect measure of human happiness which may be won in this life, may consist.⁵⁶ The delight one takes in the contemplation of divine things is unlike any other delight, in that there is no sorrow which can be opposed to it. It is also unique in that there can be no precipitating evil whose relief causes the pleasure one takes in contemplation: "Thus, a man takes pleasure in drinking through being troubled with thirst, but when the thirst is quite driven out, the pleasure of drinking ceases also. [But] the pleasure of contemplation is not caused by one's being quit of an annoyance, but by the fact that contemplation is pleasant in itself."⁵⁷ Yet though there is no particular evil to which the activity of contemplation is a remedy, its power is so great that the pleasure one takes in it is greater than any pain or sorrow. Thomas is particular to name even bodily torture as subject to the distraction of pleasure in contemplation: "and, what is more, even in the midst of bodily tortures this joy is found; as the martyr Tiburtius, when he was walking barefoot on the burning coals, said: Methinks, I walk on roses, in the name of Jesus Christ."⁵⁸ This is neither fanciful exaggeration nor speculation, as far as Thomas is concerned. He relies on a liturgical tradition replete with stories of the saints and martyrs bearing all things for the sake of the gospel and receiving the consolation of some measure of divine self-revelation.

Most importantly, pain and sorrow are, like all passions, judged fit or unfit with reference to reason. Both pain and sorrow are, in themselves, morally neutral but

⁵⁶ ST I-II.Q3.A5.

⁵⁷ ST I-II.Q35.A5.

⁵⁸ ST I-II.Q38.A4.

inconvenient, in that either one “hinders the repose of the appetite in good.”⁵⁹ Within the context of a particular event, however, an experience of pain or sorrow is morally praiseworthy if it be in response to an evil rightly judged to be so:

Accordingly, supposing the presence of something saddening or painful, it is a sign of goodness if a man is in sorrow or pain on account of this present evil. For if he were not to be in sorrow or pain, this could only be either because he feels it not, or because he does not reckon it as something unbecoming, both of which are manifest evils.⁶⁰

To be insensible of evil is itself an evil, evidence of a defective sensitive appetite—which *ought* to shun an evil object—or of a defect in the sensible apparatus itself. Either the body or the soul must be malfunctioning, and gravely so, if a person does not respond to an injury with pain or sorrow. Thus the experience of pain or sorrow, far from being an unqualified evil, is evidence of the proper functioning of one’s capacity to know evil as an evil, even in the pre-critical sense in which the passions function. As regards sorrow, the involvement of reason may be more obvious, as the recognition of an evil other than by the sense of touch generally involves the intellect. This detail explains Thomas’s curious observation that tears relieve pain because they are *proper* to an individual in pain: the activity of weeping is natural to the experience of pain because both are a rejection of the unsuitability of the aversive object. It may not be *unsuitable* to be suffering and yet refrain from weeping (in the way that it is unsuitable not to feel pain when one has been injured), yet because it is *suitable* to weep when one is in pain, the weeping itself asserts some control over the pain.

Necessary Pain?

To appreciate fully the point Thomas is making here, one must recognize the argument that he is *not* making. Thomas is not here appealing to the pedagogical value

⁵⁹ ST I-II.Q39.A1.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

of suffering, although he certainly does that elsewhere—recognizing, for example, that punishment may be ordered to the good of an errant person. Nor is he arguing from the necessity of pain and suffering consequent to the Fall; pain is here narrated neither as punishment nor as dysfunction. Precisely the opposite is true, in fact: pain is evidence of the proper functioning of both body and soul. While there is an implicit recognition of the existence of evil, sin, and death in the world—there must be a present evil in order to prompt a response of pain or sorrow in the well-functioning body and soul—Thomas does not here systematize the relationship between suffering and the Fall. At least on the face of it, the operation of the passions may even be consonant with the original peace of the created order, since the existence of a particular evil (that which is evil *to me*) does not necessitate the existence of universal or general evil (that which is evil in itself).⁶¹

The consequences of this aspect of Thomas's thought—to make pain, as one of the passions, somehow natural or proper to the human—may perhaps best be probed by comparing his theorizing of pain with that of Elaine Scarry, perhaps the most insightful modern theorist of pain, who likewise theorizes that pain is necessary and proper to human good. Drawing on Marx's theorizing of labor and its products, Scarry elucidates the relationship of pain to world-making. According to Scarry, in the normal course of events, the human being suffers—cold, injury, loneliness—and is moved to relieve her suffering. She creates an artifact—a coat, surgery, a knitting club—which both projects her body into the world and relieves the suffering her body experiences in the world. Pain is the ground of civilization, then, because all making, whether of material, social,

⁶¹ Thomas even suggests that in the absence of rational capacity, the passions function to lead one towards appropriate goods and away from unsuitable evils: "The fact that children and dumb animals seek pleasures, does not prove that all pleasures are evil: because they have from God their natural appetite, which is moved to that which is naturally suitable to them." (ST I-II. Q.34.RO2.) The passions seem to participate, then, in a rightly-ordered creation, at least where they are not in conflict with the rational faculty.

or linguistic artifacts, is in response to a perception of pain and a recognition of its aversiveness.

Pain stands in a unique relationship to other embodied human experiences for Scarry. She marks a qualitative difference between pain and other sensory events in several ways. First, pain is unlike other sensory experiences in that it is without an object: "desire is desire of *x*, fear is fear of *y*, hunger is hunger for *z*; but pain is not 'of' or 'for' anything—it is itself alone."⁶² Pain is characterized by this "objectlessness" and by the "absence of referential content." It is uniquely suffered—"in isolation, pain 'intends' nothing; it is wholly passive; it is 'suffered' rather than willed or directed"—until it is placed in relationship with the imagination such that it can be modified or overcome.⁶³ Apart from the act of imagination whereby it might be subverted, pain is an experience of pure aversiveness.

Its sheer aversiveness is another marker of the uniqueness of pain among other human sensory experiences: "Pain is a pure physical experience of negation, an immediate sensory rendering of 'against,' of something being against one, and of something one must be against."⁶⁴ Unlike other physical sensations, which are experienced within the tapestry of everyday life, and which the individual may integrate, to greater and lesser degrees, into its conscious understanding of its own identity, pain is outside of the experience of life. It is *anti-life*: "While other sensations have content that may be positive, neutral, or negative, the very content of pain is itself negation."⁶⁵ It robs one of language not by its sublimity or its transcendence, but by its monolithic tyranny: "Before destroying language, it first monopolizes language, becomes

⁶² Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 161-162.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

its only subject." And in destroying language, it destroys "the contents of consciousness," the inner language by which we are able to name what we see (and thus, by which we are able to see at all).⁶⁶

Pain is differentiated from pleasure, in particular, in that it calls attention to human embodiment in a way that pleasure does not. When subject to a physical injury, one's attention is drawn to the body as the site of sensation: "Thus, if a thorn cuts through the skin of the woman's finger, she feels not the thorn but her body hurting her."⁶⁷ Scarry finds that pleasure, on the other hand, is experienced precisely as *disembodiment*. Those sensations which give rise to pleasure call attention to the object experienced through touch, not to the body which experiences. Soft fabric, a beautiful vista, a harmonious melody, a lover's embrace—these all call the recipient's attention to themselves, not to the organ that relays their existence to the her. Indeed, the recipient "in each of these moments experiences the sensation of 'touch' not as bodily sensations but as self-displacing, self-transforming objectification; . . . if they are named as bodily occurrences at all, they will be called 'pleasure,' a word reserved either for moments of overt disembodiment or, as here, moments when acute bodily sensations are experienced as something other than one's own body."⁶⁸

This assertion is counter-intuitive, to say the least. It seems strange to say that the knife calls no attention to itself as it slices through flesh, or that the lover is not acutely aware of her neck as it is being caressed by her beloved. Scarry's theoretical constructs are here guided less, perhaps, by any sociological or psychological investigation into human perception than by her own probing insight into the interior structure of torture. Torture is an activity that is parasitic on the more quotidian activity

⁶⁶ Ibid., 54.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 166.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

of world-making. In torture, the human impulse to create in response to pain is exploited in service of a particular, deforming artifact: the torturer wishes to impose a fictive political construction on the victim, to provoke the victim to accept the narrative of his regime's complete political control over the victim and the victim's community.⁶⁹ Pain serves to make the torturer a figure of disembodied, all-encompassing power, while the victim is reduced to powerless, voiceless, irrational physical experience: "The pain is hugely present to the prisoner and absent to the torturer; . . . for the prisoner, the body and its pain are overwhelmingly present and voice, world, and self are absent; for the torturer, voice, world, and self are overwhelmingly present and the body and pain are absent."⁷⁰ Pain marks one extremity of a pole the other end of which is imagination—the creation of worlds and artifacts to populate them, which are always in response to the experience of pain. The gamut which human sensory experience runs is not between pain and pleasure, then, but between pain and imagination—or, perhaps better, intentionality. The less one experiences one's own embodiment, the farther away from pain one is. This is certainly the duality that is constructed in the torture chamber, but how readily mundane experience can be said to participate in this duality is less clear.

Perhaps, too, Scarry's assertion is less evident when it references the objects of the sense of touch, rather than sight or hearing. The body's mediation of sensation is virtually imperceptible in the case of sight and hearing; Scarry rightly notes that attention to the eyes as sense organs generally accompanies an aversive, rather than a pleasurable, visual stimulus.⁷¹ Only, she says, when the sensation is powerful or forceful enough to be injurious to the sense organ—excessive sunlight, say, or an air horn too close to the ears—does one become aware of the organ. Apart from this experience of

⁶⁹ Ibid., 52-59, e.g.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 46.

⁷¹ Ibid., 165.

painful sensation, one notices the vista, not one's eyes taking it in, and the body's mediation of the senses all but disappears from consciousness. Yet this seems less applicable to the senses of touch, taste, and smell. The action of the body in collecting sensation is more evident, as is the participation of the will in these events. One inhales, ingests, or stretches out one's hand with more deliberation and more gross motor involvement than is used (or at least perceived) with vision or hearing.⁷² Again, Scarry's duality seems less broadly applicable than in the few cases where it provides genuine insight.

Pain is unique among human bodily experience most importantly, perhaps, in that it alone can serve as the goad to humanity's creative activity. The human activity of making, whether of physical or mental objects, always arises out of need, for all that some particular objects appear to have been manufactured gratuitously. Scarry attributes any appearance of gratuity in the making of human artifacts to the success of prior acts of need-prompted making. Taking coat-making as an example, she traces how the act of making a single object which relieves a need involves the controlled application of discomfort known as work. This controlled discomfort produces an object which relieves discomfort far in excess of the work required to make it—the coat which took several hours of work to make will relieve the maker from cold for several years. This excess may be multiplied several times over if the maker loans out her coat when she does not need it, or if she makes many coats.⁷³ Civilization names the effect of many

⁷² Indeed, for Thomas, the senses differ greatly in their manner of reception of sensible objects: sight is uniquely distinguished from the other senses by the (apparent) absence of "natural immutation" associated with it. Where touch and taste plainly unite the body to the perceived object—"for the hand that touches something hot becomes hot, while the tongue is moistened by the humidity of the flavored morsel"—sight is "the most spiritual, the most perfect, and the most universal of all the sense," because it receives sense data without uniting the body to the sensible object. (ST I.Q78.A3.) While the biological descriptions of these processes may no longer be acceptable, their fidelity to *the lived experience* of sensation seems to commend itself over Scarry's—one knows oneself to be joined to the glove warming one's hand rather than to the glove delighting one's eyes from the display case.

⁷³ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 315-317.

such efforts at relieving discomfort, multiplied by several orders of magnitude according to the success both of particular artifacts and of the co-operative effort of artifact-making at relieving whatever discomforts are present in the environment. If that success is marked, members of a given civilization may engage in the act of artifact-making simply for its own sake, but those apparently gratuitous acts of making are predicated upon the abundance conferred by non-gratuitous acts of making. Scarry uses the example of a pastry that takes three *patissiers* twelve hours to make: its nutritive benefits are so marginal compared to the work it took to produce that it appears an act of wanton creativity, an act of sheer delight. It is rather, she claims, an act of making whose intended product is not the relief of hunger but the projection of that civilization's success at making artifacts. It is a *political*, rather than an aesthetic, creation, substantiating "one's very distance and immunity from the realm of fear, death, and failure."⁷⁴

Thus Scarry explicitly denies any experiential warrant for creation that does not arise from pain. The possibility of non-sensory warrants for creativity or imagination is left unaddressed, but within the realm of the sensory,⁷⁵ pain and imagination are "the 'framing events' within whose boundaries *all other* perceptual, somatic, and emotional events occur; thus, between the two extremes can be mapped *the whole terrain of the human psyche*."⁷⁶ Within Scarry's work, however, it becomes clear that imagination and creativity are the quintessential instantiations of human agency. Imagination is the imposition of human will on the givenness of material being—whether that occur strictly within the human psyche or result in material artifacts. Physical pain is, at the other extremity of the pole, the quintessential instantiation of human passivity. One's

⁷⁴ Ibid., 320.

⁷⁵ Perhaps it is, rather, the idea of any *realm* other than the sensory that is left unaddressed.

⁷⁶ Scarry, 165, emphasis added.

inability to overcome a particular pain may amplify the subjective experience of its painfulness; one's sense of agency is correspondingly diminished when one is in the midst of intractable pain. The more control one can exercise over a situation—even if that control does not extend to the removal of the cause of one's pain—the less one senses oneself to be suffering. If a pain is chosen—as when Scarry's hypothetical coatmaker willingly submits to backache and eyestrain in the course of her work as a seamstress—then it is experienced less as pain than as *work*. Conversely, the more intensely involuntary a situation, the more it will be narrated or experienced as painful. Thus, again, pain is not set as the polar opposite of *pleasure*, but of *agency*. The attraction of pleasure, its non-aversiveness, derives from its association with the unmixed agency of creation or imagination; the extreme involuntariness of pain *is exactly equated with* its aversiveness. Pain is aversive, pain is *painful*, in precisely the degree that it is passive. It is an insult to human agency and a proclamation of the human's subjection to the agency of something outside itself.

The nexus of passivity and pain is the precise location of Thomas's difference with Scarry. Pain is not, for Thomas, uniquely associated with passivity, while pleasure is associated with agency. Nor can human creativity or imagination be so sanguinely associated with agency and will. For Thomas, human experience is a much more complex mixture of passivity and agency, as discussed above. Pain, like pleasure and delight and anger and hope, is a moment of more extreme and more obvious passivity than other human experiences, yet it, like the other passions, admits of a certain degree of susceptibility to the human will. Similarly, willed human actions take place within an intricate web of agency and passivity, woven out of the strands of sensation, reason, sociality, appetite, habit, and grace, among other things.

For Thomas, moreover, pain is one species of a genus, not a unique (nor even a

uniquely revelatory) phenomenon. It is a movement of the soul in the same way that pleasure, desire, fear, despair, and all the other passions are, and its effects on the body are of the same sort as the other aversive passions. Thomas arranges the passions in contrary pairs, where possible, according to the character of the sensible object that prompts the passion (whether it be an evil or a good), the mode of presence of the sensible object (physically present, present in memory, present in imagination), and the basic movement the object prompts (attraction or aversion). The two fundamental passions are love and hatred, which also describe the basic movements by which the soul responds to sensible objects. If the object is suitable, or perceived to be suitable, it will exert an attractive force over the soul, and the soul will respond by pursuing or enjoying the object. If the object is unsuitable, it will exert an aversive force over the soul, and the soul will respond by fleeing, resisting, or suffering the object. Desire and aversion are paired as opposite movements, toward a good, on the one hand, and away from an evil, on the other. Similarly, pleasure and pain are the soul's response to a present object to which it is joined. One is rest in a present good, the other, a sort of unrest in an evil to which the soul is unwillingly joined. As the sensible objects may be congenial to a particular human's well-being or antithetical to it, so that human responds. If there is a duality in which pain participates, it is this one—the description of motion with which the soul and body respond to sensible objects—rather than the duality which Scarry constructs.

So, too, is pain one of the passions in the sense that it is embodied and ensouled; likewise are all the *other* passions embodied and ensouled. Pleasure in sensible objects does not distance one from one's body, for Thomas. Indeed, pleasure and pain are alike (and alike to all the other passions) in that they attract the soul's attention to the body and its goods inappropriately or disproportionately: "Both pleasure and pain, in so far

as they draw upon themselves the soul's intention, hinder the reason from the act of consideration, wherefore it is stated in *Ethic* vii. 11 that in the moment of sexual pleasure, a man cannot understand anything."⁷⁷ So far from being an experience of embodiment, to which the disembodiment of pleasure is opposed, pain is paired with pleasure as twin distractions of the soul away from its proper objects—learning, contemplation, acts of virtue—towards a less appropriate or an inappropriate object. Thomas says in I-II.Q33.A3 that bodily pleasures impede rational thought both by distraction ("because, as we have just observed, we attend much to that which pleases us") and by "fettering the reason: in so far as bodily pleasure is followed by a certain alteration in the body."⁷⁸ Thus the movements of the body that are caused by the passions (strengthening or enervating, warming or cooling, depressing or stimulating) may become objects of attention themselves, such that the attention of the soul is drawn both to the object which precipitated the passion *and* to the body's disruption. It cannot be the case, for Thomas, that one passion is experienced in the body, while another is experienced in the soul, for they are both defined entirely by their twin actions on both soul and body.

Like Scarry, Thomas recognizes that pain can be incidentally ordered to the sufferer's good. For Scarry, an experience of pain can be the efficient cause of world-making, the benefits of which hopefully redound to the maker. Thomas similarly enumerates chains of causality in which pain or sorrow might be said to play a positive role: moderate pain or sorrow may "conduce accidentally" to an activity by lessening the distraction of pleasure, for example.⁷⁹ Or, the soul may be prompted by its own remorse for its sin that it pursue God more faithfully: "That uplifting of the soul ensues from the

⁷⁷ ST I-II.Q37.A1.RO2.

⁷⁸ ST I-II.Q33.A3.

⁷⁹ ST I-II.Q37.A1.RO2.

sorrow which is according to God, because it brings with it the hope of the forgiveness of sin."⁸⁰ The experience of pain or sorrow is "useful," in that it adds an appetitive rejection to that which might also be rationally rejected.

Moreover, sorrow for that which ought to be avoided is always useful, since it adds another motive for avoiding it. Because the very evil is in itself a thing to be avoided: while everyone avoids sorrow for its own sake, just as everyone seeks the good, and pleasure in the good. Therefore just as pleasure in the good makes one seek the good more earnestly, so sorrow for evil makes one avoid evil more eagerly.⁸¹

When the passions are rightly ordered, pain and sorrow will move the sufferer to avoid that which one *ought* to avoid. Their experience is, thus, useful to the moral agent.

Thomas goes rather farther than Scarry in asserting that pain can be a kind of good relative not to a good outcome, but relative to reason's evaluation of good and evil. Pain can, like pleasure and desire and hope and fear, be *rightly ordered*, not because of its participation in a chain of events the outcome of which is good, but because it is experienced rightly, in line with Reason's evaluation of the precipitating cause.

Most importantly, pain is not, for Thomas, the ground of civilization, nor the (singular) cause of work or activity. Bodily pleasures, to be sure, may have pain as their cause, and this is part of the reason they may be felt more keenly than intellectual pleasures: ". . . bodily pleasures are sought as remedies for bodily defects or troubles, whence various griefs arise. Wherefore bodily pleasures, by reason of their succeeding griefs of this kind, are felt the more, and consequently are welcomed more than spiritual pleasures, which have no contrary griefs."⁸² But the intellectual pleasures generally, and pure contemplation most particularly, are not sought for the sake of anything other than themselves. It must be noted here that Thomas is not comparing bodily goods to rational goods; of course, intellectual goods are superior to physical ones, for Thomas,

⁸⁰ ST I-II.Q37.A2.RO1.

⁸¹ ST I-II.Q39.A3.

⁸² ST I-II.Q31.A5.

and so contemplation of an intelligible object must be higher and better than the appetitive response to a sensible object. But Thomas is here speaking of pleasure in the act of contemplation—that is, the passion that arises in the soul as a response to the activity of contemplation itself. This is a real, positive pleasure, an act of creativity which has no pain as its goal. Those who are so fortunate as to be called to the contemplative life take an affective as well as an intellectual pleasure in their calling: "Wherefore Gregory makes the contemplative life to consist in the love of God, inasmuch as through loving God we are aflame to gaze on His beauty. And since everyone delights when he obtains what he loves, it follows that the contemplative life terminates in delight, which is seated in the affective power, the result being that love also becomes more intense."⁸³ The highest and best form of contemplation, the contemplation of the highest intellectual truth (that is, God's own self), is the highest form of beatitude, the most delightful activity. Love of God, or, as Thomas calls it, *friendship* with God,⁸⁴ then, and not the aversive nature of physical existence, is the foundation of human activity. Even in the more limited sphere of the human passions, love is the ground and instigator of aversion, and not the other way around: "Wherefore all the passions, the object of which is good, are naturally before those, the object of which is evil,—that is to say, each precedes its contrary passion; because the quest of a good is the reason for shunning the opposite evil."⁸⁵

Indeed, Thomas goes even farther to deny that pain or aversion is the absolute cause of anything at all. A love of oneself, wishing good to oneself, precedes all aversion and is absolute: "Properly speaking, it is impossible for a man to hate himself. For everything naturally desires good, nor can anyone desire anything for himself, save

⁸³ ST II-II.Q180.A1.

⁸⁴ ST II-II.Q23.A1: "Charity is friendship with God."

⁸⁵ ST I-II.Q25.A2.

under the aspect of good."⁸⁶ This attraction to the good is prior to any aversion to an evil; aversion is always in service of and dependent on the more primary attraction:

Now we should consider in each thing, what agrees with it, before that which disagrees: since a thing disagrees with another, through destroying or hindering that which agrees with it. Consequently love must needs precede hatred; and nothing is hated, save through being contrary to a suitable thing which is loved. And hence it is that every hatred is caused by love.⁸⁷

The universe is not ordered according to Scarry's claim—that all acts of creation are caused by pain. Thomas acknowledges the role pain may play either in activity or in (passive) emotivity; it may be that pain prompts particular actions, especially those that relieve pain. But the prior and primary orientation is toward the good. Pains of whatever kind are a deprivation of acknowledged goods, and the acknowledgement and pursuit of those goods is the necessary foundation to the experience of pain. For Scarry, gratuitous creative work is a proclamation of one's success in having mastered the hostile environment in which humans find themselves—an assertion of one's freedom from the given order, which is one of suffering. Scarry's agent pursues a kind of autonomous stasis, not a positive good. For Thomas, instead, the gratuity of divine creation precedes and grounds all human activity. As such, the pleasure one takes in contemplation is prior to and more substantive than any pain which might distract from its pursuit. The economy of delight in God is prior to the economy of pain and its relief.

Pain and sorrow fit into this economy of delight, then, neither as its progenitor nor as a necessary precondition of its accomplishment. They are, instead, a witness to its existence and its ontological priority. To suffer pain and sorrow—indeed, to suffer *any* of the passions—is to recognize the difference between good and evil: "Pleasure and sorrow have two good points in common: namely, a true judgment concerning good and

⁸⁶ ST I-II.Q29.A4.

⁸⁷ ST I-II.Q29.A2.

evil; and the right order of the will in approving of good and rejecting evil."⁸⁸ Even though the experience of bodily suffering may be more acutely depressing than any other passion, on account of its movement being so directly opposed to the activity of happiness, Thomas does not agree that pain or sorrow is sheer aversion or anti-life in the way that Scarry does. It always contains within it an affirmation of the good which the sufferer knows to be preferable to the pain he is currently experiencing. Even when the sufferer's passions are *not* rightly ordered, and the sufferer is so disordered as to sorrow over something that *ought* to be delighted in, Thomas reminds us that it would be still worse not to be joined to a good (or the good) at all: "Again, sorrow or pain, for that which is apparently evil, but really good, cannot be the greatest evil, for it would be worse to be altogether separated from that which is truly good."⁸⁹

This places pain in a different relation to consent than in Scarry's work (or in Beauchamp and Childress's, or Engelhardt's). For Thomas, consenting to pain means taking an evil for a good, but this may be meant in several ways. As noted above, a person might undertake to suffer a particular evil because of its practical utility. This pattern of consenting to pain may or may not lessen the severity of the experience of it, but it testifies to the greater context in which any experience of pain or suffering occurs. A particular pain may be consented to, in the sense that its experience is judged warranted by the goods it will presumably secure. In that case, the suffered pain does not lose its character of evil, but the overall evil of the experience is mitigated by the (presumably) more substantive goods which its patient would win. Thomas would certainly commend Scarry's coat-maker, for example, for her reasonable decision to suffer the modest discomforts a seamstress must suffer for the sake of the benefits of coat-wearing, coat-sharing, and coat-selling. The discomforts she undertakes are not

⁸⁸ ST I-II.Q39.A4.RO1.

⁸⁹ ST I-II.Q39.A4.

necessarily lessened by her willingness to submit to them (her two-Advil-backache may not suddenly become a one-Advil-backache upon her realization of the practical benefits of seamstressing, nor do her eyes become more resistant to strain), but they will be integrated into an experiential narrative the full force of which is congenial to her good rather than antithetical to it. The pains are thus taken as *contingently* good, though suffered as evils. In the same vein, Thomas describes the memory of an absent loved one causing both pleasure and pain—pleasure at the love for the beloved, pain at his absence. The pain of the loved one's absence is accepted in service of the (stronger? more significant?) pleasure associated with maintaining his memory.⁹⁰

In quite a different sense is evil *mis-taken* as a good. In all actions which are not consonant with a good—whether a provisional good like wheat-growing or house-building or coat-making, or the ultimate good which is humanity's union with God—the unsuitable or harmful or vicious action is undertaken because of the person's (mistaken) judgment that the activity is good. Thomas makes the intriguing distinction between a mistaken judgment concerning the external object—the probable success of a proposed action, perhaps, or the healthfulness of a particular diet—and a mistaken judgment concerning the nature of the human herself. If she mistakes the composite nature of her soul, she may wish a good only to a part of herself, thus "hating," in a sense, her own true nature: "Wherefore they love themselves according to what they take themselves to be, while they hate that which they really are, by desiring what is contrary to reason."⁹¹ In either such sense, pain or sorrow may be consented to *mistakenly*—under a misapprehension of a good that will result, or under a misguided conviction of what should be mourned as unsuitable, or under an irrational evaluation of particular goods and evils relative to ultimate goods and evils. (Thomas gives the example of a suicide

⁹⁰ ST I-II.Q35.A3.RO2.

⁹¹ ST I-II.Q29.A4.

inappropriately judging the good of ending a particular sorrow to be greater than the sorrow of ending life itself.⁹²)

To consent to that which genuinely gives one sorrow under the false impression of its being necessary, prudent, or meritorious is, however, categorically different than the final and most evil sense in which pain may be consented to. The sufferer of pain or sorrow may be so deformed or disordered by a particularly unrelenting evil that she ceases to perceive that object as an evil at all; she may, instead, receive pleasure from being acted upon by (joined with) the evil. This is different from the former case, in that the sufferer is not taking on what she knows to be a pain in the service of something else she mistakes as a good. Instead, she is incapable of sensing the evil to which she has been joined. Pain or sorrow is felt only when one is *unwillingly* joined to an evil (that one both knows to be evil and knows oneself to be joined to); thus pain entails some measure of resistance, even if one elects to undergo it for some reason or other. What is far worse, for Thomas, is the possibility that the conjoined evil be so effective, so strong in its action, that the will is overpowered and the evil received as if it were something suitable: "if the stronger power goes so far as to transform the contrary inclination into its own inclination, there will be no longer repugnance or violence."⁹³ This is "consenting" of a different sort entirely, one that is entirely evil.

Thus for Thomas, it is far better to suffer a pain and know it as a pain than to be so overcome by the pain that it is taken as a good. Thomas appears to conceive of this primarily in terms of *sorrow*, rather than pain, but one can imagine situations in which this might hold true even for bodily pain.⁹⁴ Someone might choose, for example, to

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ ST I-II.Q36.A4.

⁹⁴ Indeed, the maxim of Augustine's that Thomas cites includes both pain and sorrow in its formulation: "Sorrow in the soul is caused by the will resisting a stronger power: while pain in the body is caused by sense resisting a stronger body." Ibid.

accept the pangs of hunger for the purpose of cultivating health (by losing weight, say, or to facilitate a certain drug regimen); yet it is also possible for a provisional acceptance of those pains to spill over into an irrational or unmeasured embrace of those pains, such that one becomes enamored of the feeling of hunger. Torture and abuse victims, as well, are subject to this sort of psychopathology.

The character of resistance, then, is the determinative factor in the experience of pain or sorrow: "for were it [the will] not to resist, but to yield by consenting, the result would be not sorrow but pleasure."⁹⁵ This resistance does not require, as it does in Scarry's construction, any sort of imaginative or constructive activity to overcome or subvert the pain—the sufferer need not push away the arm wielding the knife or wish for a warmer coat or lobby for a more just law. The *experience itself* contains the aspect of resistance and thus *in itself* performs the rejection of the present evil and affirmation of the good which would be preferable to it. Pain and sorrow maybe a mark of moral maturity in many ways—if they are undergone for a more substantive good, if their experience is confirmed or approved by reason, if they do not overmaster one's capacity to will the good—but even more basic than all of these ways is the fact of their simple, pre-rational affirmation of good and rejection of evil. The capacity to suffer that which is genuinely a departure from the good is itself an enduring testimony to that good. It must, for Thomas, always be counted as evidence that one is not yet so overmastered by evil as not to know it, nor so lost to divine grace as to be removed utterly and completely from the good.

Suffering Rationally

If the passions can be the subject of virtue, if the controlled experience of the passions is one mark of moral maturity, and if pain is an affirmation of life that may

⁹⁵ Ibid.

prove useful in cultivating that moral maturity, what prevents one from indulging in a systematic program of suffering? Thomas's description of the ascetic practices enjoins a certain caution here. Ascetic practices are a kind of training in virtue: one fasts in order not to be ruled by one's desire for food, one gives alms in order to decrease one's attachment to markers of social status, one dresses modestly in order to curb one's pride in external appearance. In order to fulfill their purpose, ascetic practices must contain some measure of discomfort; thus, when fasting, one takes only a single small meal, at a time later than customarily, so that one might feel the discomfort of hunger. Thomas commends the practice of taking this meal at "the ninth hour" so that "those who fast may feel some pain in satisfaction for their sins," and because it honors the hour of Christ's death—"because those who fast by punishing their flesh, are conformed to the Passion of Christ."⁹⁶ The two marks of the ascetic disciplines, then, are their participation in Christ's salvific suffering and their intentional exploitation of suffering (especially but not exclusively physical pain) for the purpose of mastering the appetite. These pains are chosen for the spiritual benefits they confer—or, rather, for the spiritual goods whose pursuit requires the experience of temporary and minor suffering.

The discomfort one accepts must, however, be *measured*. Pain, like the other passions, may be suffered well or ill, and the measure of its propriety is reason. It is possible for pain to be usefully or even salvifically suffered, but Thomas does not allow there to be any benefit—spiritual or otherwise—to be gained by choosing immoderate suffering.⁹⁷ As regards the virtue of abstinence and its correlative practice, fasting, Thomas says, for example, that the virtue of self-denial with regards to food is measured by reason. Reason determines the extent to which fasting might be practically or

⁹⁶ ST II-II.Q147.A7.

⁹⁷ As his assertion noted above suggests, excessive suffering is positively deformative—not only does it tend to distract, enervate, and depress (ST I-II.Q37), but it may overpower the patient sufficiently to conform her to itself (ST I-II.Q36.A4). Indulging in immoderate suffering courts disaster.

spiritually beneficial—conducing to a necessary weight loss, say, or for the purpose of extended and undistracted prayer. Fasting ought not lead to negative (vicious or imprudent) outcomes, because reason steers the faster towards an appropriate end, with appropriate means. Reason "does not retrench so much as to refuse nature its necessary support," so that a faster will never endanger his health for the sake of the spiritual goods attendant on fasting; nor does it retrench so much "as to render him incapable of fulfilling his duty," so that a man will not risk his capacity to pursue goods by pursuing the good of abstinence immoderately.⁹⁸ Fasting of this sort may be likened to drunkenness, which Thomas accounts a mortal sin. It is to be so strongly disapproved because "a man willingly and knowingly deprives himself of the use of reason, whereby he performs virtuous deeds and avoids sin, and thus he sins mortally by running the risk of falling into sin."⁹⁹ Deliberately choosing to stunt the operation of reason is, for Thomas, inexcusable.

While it appears that Thomas's view of the relative importance of bodily versus spiritual goods might allow, or even require, that one sacrifice the former for the sake of the latter, Thomas argues otherwise. Spiritual health is not in conflict with bodily health; in fact, it demands it. Bodily integrity may never be sacrificed to virtue, and not merely because virtue all but requires bodily integrity. To cite a somewhat absurd example, "therapeutic" castration for the sake of continence is forbidden, because it is never the only means of spiritual health: "it is always possible to further one's spiritual welfare other than by cutting off a member, because sin is always subject to the will: and consequently in no case is it allowable to maim oneself."¹⁰⁰ Even the good of expiation

⁹⁸ ST II-II.Q147.A1.RO2. Thomas's assertion that reason requires bodily health for its ideal functioning (I-II.Q4.A5-6) helps put these comments in perspective: one's body may become so disabled by hunger that it is not able to provide the intellect with the phantasms it needs for rational thought.

⁹⁹ ST II-II.Q150.A2.

¹⁰⁰ ST II-II.Q65.A1.RO3.

for sin, which Thomas readily attributes to the ascetic disciplines,¹⁰¹ is not sufficient warrant for damaging bodily health. Indeed, Thomas draws on Jerome's image of excessive fasting as a kind of theft: "to afflict the body immoderately, whether by excessive lack of nourishment, or by eating or sleeping too little, is to offer a sacrifice of stolen goods."¹⁰² One *owes* one's body its upkeep, and to deny the body its due for the sake of the soul is to commit an injustice towards one's body; spiritual health cannot be purchased with this coin. Reason insists, it seems, on the goods of the body being honored.¹⁰³

Human reason is the "proximate rule" by which goodness and evil are judged, but the "supreme rule is the Eternal Law." Thus reason is judged according to its conformity with Eternal Law.¹⁰⁴ That is to say, human reason is not self-authenticating, but it is instead measured by Divine Reason. The supremacy of reason as the measure of bodily and spiritual health is *not*, therefore, a covert attempt to order the goods of human life according to the rational *in opposition to* the bodily; this does not resemble a Cartesian stripping away of the bodily for the sake of the good function of reason. Nor, for that matter, does it admit of anything like the Kantian assertion of the *impartially and universally* rational as opposed to the conditionally rational; Thomas does not argue that human reason is measured or perfected by its relative freedom from particular

¹⁰¹ See, for example, ST II-II.Q147.A1, where the satisfaction of sins is listed among the benefits of fasting, along with the control of desires and facility in contemplation.

¹⁰² ST II-II.Q147.A1.RO2.

¹⁰³ Caroline Bynum locates Thomas within a stream of 12th and 13th century writers (like Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter the Chanter) who stressed the importance of moderation, reasonableness, and proper interiority with regard to abstinence. Her reading of Thomas particularly highlights his concern for the order of the social body—his description of the relationship between the priests' and the laity's fasting and partaking seeming, to her, to signal a hierarchical understanding of food and spirituality—whose increasingly rigid hierarchical structure was mirrored in its insistence on rationality as the determining factor of proper spirituality. Whatever the socio-political implications of this trend, it seems worth noting that Thomas's stress on moderation in asceticism and the paradoxical *increase* in a kind of heroic asceticism in some quarters are part of a larger argument over the significance and practice of ascetic disciplines in the period. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 43-47.

¹⁰⁴ ST I-II.Q21.A1.

commitments to nation or religion. Instead, its harmony with the Eternal Law, and ultimately with the human's accession to the divine presence, judges every human activity.

To say that reason must take into account humanity's final end likewise stresses an attention to the place of humanity in God's good ordering of all things. Spiritual health does not require the elimination of the body, for example, because human beings are, inherently and unavoidably, composite beings. Our perfection is not the same perfection as that of the angels, who are spiritual beings.¹⁰⁵ Thus even though Thomas attributes happiness—*perfect* happiness—to those spirits who enjoy the Beatific Vision prior to the reunion of their bodies with their souls, it is a happiness which will enjoy its fullest extent only when that reunion occurs and the corruptible body is replaced with the "spiritual body."

In the end, reason is the measure of both bodily and spiritual health. Reason names, for Thomas, the human capacity to order itself according to ends, whether those ends be provisional or ultimate. Thus to say that the cultivation of spiritual and bodily health must be in line with reason is to say that their cultivation must be ordered to suitable ends. While there may be many provisional and natural ends (building a house, raising children, mastery of a successful surgical technique, a well-crafted paper, a productive orchard), all ends are ordered to the final end of humanity, which is God. All human activities are *ultimately* judged according to their conformity with this supernatural, perfect end, while the impermanent goods of this life are measured according to the natural, imperfect happiness which humanity may attain in this life.¹⁰⁶

Thus happiness, or spiritual and bodily health, *is* compatible with the experience

¹⁰⁵ ST I-II.Q4.A5 and 6.

¹⁰⁶ ST I-II.Q1-3.

of pain or sorrow, according to Thomas. Such suffering may even be considered a marker of spiritual and physical health, whether by evidencing the fortitude necessary to endure temporary or minor suffering for the sake of more important goods, by evidencing one's good moral and spiritual judgment, and, even when nothing else is possible, by evidencing one's inarticulate knowledge of good and evil. Certainly Thomas is attentive to all the ways pain and sorrow (with the other passions) may frustrate or impede happiness or virtue. Nonetheless, by locating them within the moral and experiential landscape of the passions, Thomas articulates a moral framework for pain and sorrow that readily allow them to be narrated as part of a good life. The sufferer of pain may know herself to be in pursuit of the goods of human life even in the midst of irremediable pain. She continues to be a moral agent, even when some aspects of her bodily life do not submit to her agency. She continues to be a participant in created order, a creation which is *ultimately*, although not always *particularly*, ordered to her good. It is not only in *overcoming* or *being healed of* pain or sorrow that she may participate in the good; overcoming suffering may, indeed, contribute to her good, but it is not absolutely required for full flourishing. To the contrary, it would be impossible to conceive of full human flourishing *without* some measure of pain and sorrow.

Chapter 4: Suffering Lives of Beatitude

Thomas's view of bodily suffering as one of many human passions is already an improvement on the modern view discussed in the first chapter. His description is attractively complex and proposes means by which humans may develop a character such that they can suffer well. Not only that, he suggests that a life marked by suffering may still be called a good life. Reason directs the human person to evaluate particular forms or instances of suffering according to the person's proximate and ultimate goods, such that one might choose or endure suffering—even great physical suffering—for the sake of a worthy or significant end. The reasonableness of that choice to endure would depend on many things—the relative weight of the evil suffered in comparison to the good to be won, the suitability and merit of the hoped-for end (whether natural or supernatural)—and Thomas surely expects that the most extreme forms of voluntary suffering must have an equally extreme end in view: that is, perfect beatitude. Even involuntary suffering (illness, injury, injustice) does not destroy the possibility of happiness; the patient is not left without consolations and mitigations, and her pursuit of weighty goods is hampered, but not obviated, by her pain. She may be able to relate even the most severe forms of suffering to those final goods in such a way that those forms of suffering can be narrated as beneficial. She can in a very real sense *take pleasure* in her suffering, relative to the goods it produces or allows.

One may justly wonder, however, whether this conception of the suffering life is not rather tidy. Certainly, it is not as simplistic as the modern view described in Chapter One, but it would be legitimate to ask whether Thomas's portrait of the reasonable sufferer does not brush lightly over a few details. One might, for example, miss in Thomas's account something of the devastating *irrationality* of bodily pain. The sufferer's capacity for rational control may be threatened by particularly intense or

chronic pain, as both Thomas and Scarry recognize. Thomas acknowledges—with perhaps less intensity than Scarry—the different ways this may happen: the sufferer may become so accustomed to the pain that she ceases to reject it as unfitting to her good, or she may come to misunderstand her own nature in such a deformed way that she cannot judge her own good properly. Or, the pain itself may resist incorporation into the narrative of experiences by which one reasons—if it is unaccountably immune to medical intervention, say, or if it arises from an inexplicably barbarous human action or a wildly improbable stroke of misfortune.¹ Or, even if the sufferer believes herself to be suffering appropriately, her willingness to undergo a particular kind or degree of suffering, or to undergo it for a particular reason, may appear to others to be excessive. How is one to know whether the suffering to which one assents is the sort to which one *ought* to assent?

If Thomas's contribution—the assertion that pain and sorrow are compatible with happiness, that it is possible to live lives marked simultaneously by suffering and beatitude—is apt, then we should expect to see such lives. We should expect to see, indeed, a variety of such lives—if the only stories of beatitude in spite of pain were those of the martyrs, we would begin to suspect that such beatitude was only the special consolation of an exceptionally holy life (or, rather, death). Thomas's systematic appraisal of the dynamic of attraction and aversion as the unexceptional interplay of the soul's rational and pre-rational, passive and active engagements with the world must show itself forth narratively, in actual lives.

Margaret Ebner and Catherine of Genoa tell the stories of their own lives in concert with Thomas's ideas. Their lives force the reader to consider the question of the

¹ Thomas does not seem to deal with this kind of irrationality in the way Scarry does; for Scarry, part of the pain of torture is the inhumanity of the torturer—his actions are incomprehensibly evil and thus intensify the pain.

goodness of the suffering life rather more urgently than does the conceptual exploration of suffering found in Thomas's work. By integrating their experiences of bodily suffering and illness into a narrative of a spiritually "healthy" life, Catherine and Margaret at once enact and challenge Thomas's systematic framework. On the one hand, they seem to exemplify Thomas's assertion that the pleasures of divine contemplation assuage even the worst bodily pains (cf. the quote from Tiburtius: "Methinks I walk on roses," etc.).² On the other hand, the excessiveness of their ascetic practices, the abjectness of their acceptance of affliction, the disruptive exuberance of their devotion to Christ's Passion surely would offend Thomas's notions of the *orderliness* of rightly-ordered suffering.

To take just one example of how their lives transgress the boundaries of rational suffering, consider Thomas's cautions regarding fasting. He enumerates those things of which one must take account in measuring one's abstinence against reason thusly: "in abstaining from food a man should act with due regard for those among whom he lives, for his own person, and for the requirements of health."³ As was noted in the previous chapter, Thomas insists that spiritual goods cannot be bought at the expense of bodily integrity or moral capacity ("for his own person" here seems to refer to the proper functioning of reason, such that a person may recognize and pursue temporal and eternal goods).⁴ He adds to this a concern for the well-being of one's neighbors: fasting that is so severe as to disrupt or offend or trouble one's community falls outside the bounds of reason and thus cannot be conducive to spiritual health. The modern reader cannot help but suspect that Margaret and Catherine would fail these tests. Both women would likely be diagnosed, today, with some sort of eating disorder, and both

² ST I-II.Q38.A4.

³ ST II-II.Q146.A1.

⁴ ST II-II.Q147.A1.RO2.

women allude to discord among their respective communities as a result of their unusual experiences and practices.

Yet if there are strong theological conflicts between Thomas and either woman, there is no less conflict between the two women themselves. To continue to take their ascetic practices as an example, if the fact of Catherine's and Margaret's extreme fasting would have brought them into disagreement with Thomas, the *meaning* each woman ascribes to her fasting brings them into disagreement with each other. The difference in their understanding of their own ascetic practices bespeaks an even deeper difference in their understanding of how the body and its goods are related to the well-lived life. Similarly, the religious imagery through which they interpret their lives of suffering is radically different; they thus place themselves into different theological narratives.

These theological differences are often masked in well-meaning attempts to systematize the theological contributions of "mystic theologians" (as a category) or "women mystics" (as a category), or to interpret their political and social meaning (as members of overlapping and even competing categories) in the context of "late medieval Catholicism" or "patriarchal Europe" or some such. Laurie Finke, for example, reads spectacular penitential practices as women's ways of wresting control over their bodies from misogynistic men, "stealing" the authority to speak.⁵ The mystic woman's self-abnegation "grants her the authority to speak and be heard, to have followers, to act as a spiritual advisor, to heal the sick, and to found convents and hospitals," she reasons, activities unavailable to the conventionally pious laywoman.⁶ Kate Greenspan similarly takes virtually all of the commonalities of medieval women's literature—asceticism, humility, and visionary language, to name a few—as more or less disingenuous ways to

⁵ Laurie Finke, "Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision," in *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 28-44.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

authorize their own readings.⁷ A visionary like Hildegard of Bingen could claim an obligation to publicize ecstatic visions where she could not as easily claim authority to write theological treatises. Joanne MacNamara, in tracing the laws regarding women's control over their finances, saw medieval monasticism as one way women subverted the greed and oppression of men, especially on behalf of others. First, women joined convents, donating their dowries; when men began formulating laws to avoid this (bankrupting many monastic communities in the process), women tried to follow holy poverty like men; when they were denied, they took to self-mortification and prayers for the souls in Purgatory as a spiritual means of giving.⁸ Caroline Bynum's meticulously researched work on the intersection of religion and food shows female ascetics to be simultaneously adopting and destabilizing patriarchal modes of religion and social organization. Their extreme asceticism troubled the theological current (of which Thomas Aquinas is a part) that stressed order in the individual, social, and ecclesial body through the felicitous use of a category of life that was both already under their control (the only such category in a rigorously stratified society) and theologically multivalent.⁹

⁷ Kate Greenspan, "Autohagiography and Medieval Women's Spiritual Autobiography" in *Gender and Text in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Jane Chance (Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 1996), 216-236.

⁸ Joanne MacNamara, "The Need to Give: Suffering and Female Sanctity in the Middle Ages," in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 199-221.

⁹ Caroline Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). It seems worth noting that these more recent studies do not suffer from the ruthlessly universalizing designs of, for example, William James (*The Varieties of Religious Experience* [New York: Penguin Books, 1982]) or Friederich von Hügel (*The Mystical Element of Religion*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. [New York: E.P Dutton, 1923]). James restricts his interest to extraordinary manifestations of religiously-motivated asceticism in order to probe their psychopathic causes and tendencies, and thus collapses any theological or practical differences among those whom he labels mystics. Excessive fasting is the same symptom in whomever the patient, and the only use of such patients is to point more rational folk toward an appreciation for a more robust exercise of their (rational) religion and philosophy. Even though von Hügel focuses on a single mystic, Catherine of Genoa, and claims to be attentive to her biographical and theological particularities, the prescriptive superstructure of his work is a three-fold typology of religious expression into which he generalizes whole nations, genders, religious movements, and historical periods. Catherine's life is little more than illustrative material for this typology; recovering her distinctive voice as a theologian—and not merely as a "mystic"—is simply not his project.

It is counterintuitive, to say the least, to suggest that two women who seem to belong to the same theological and sociological trend could be so wildly different. That is to say, if I am choosing “medieval women mystical theologians” as the category from which to draw two writers, am I not bound to find the sort of similarities that first earned the writers the label? In fact, the category is a bit misleading, for it covers women diverse in every demographic category but gender. The two theologians on whom this chapter will focus differ by place of origin (Catherine is Genovese, Margaret Swabian) and language; they are separated by over a century (Margaret lived in the first half of the fourteenth century, Catherine in the last half of the fifteenth), as well as by marital status and order (Margaret was a Dominican nun, Catherine the widow of a Franciscan tertiary). In addition, their writings are entirely different types of work. Margaret’s is spiritual autobiography, written at the direction of her confessor, Henry of Nördlingen.¹⁰ As such the events of her own life provide the only apparent structure. On the other hand, Catherine’s two works, the *Spiritual Dialogue* and *Purgation and Purgatory*, bear almost no resemblance to Margaret’s—one is a visionary theological treatise, the other an allegorical morality play, and both evidence such a complicated textual history that any identification of Catherine’s own voice is rendered problematic. One almost has to ask the opposite question: what could possibly justify associating two such dissimilar texts?¹¹

¹⁰ Although the word “autobiography” (and, occasionally, “autohagiography”) appears in the scholarly literature describing such accounts, the sorts of accounts we are dealing with are not easily shoehorned into the conventions of autobiography, particularly in its modern iterations. One might sidestep some of those problems by adding the adjective “Spiritual” to the category, but that creates almost as many problems.

¹¹ Some scholars take thematic and demographic differences into account when constructing typologies of religious women. Caroline Bynum, for example, explains: “women saints in the north of Europe were more aristocratic and contemplative, more likely to be nuns or recluses and to find a basis for their sanctity in withdrawal and prayer. Female saints in the south of Europe, particularly Italy . . . tended to be urban, middle class, and more active in works of charity. Recluses were more common in England; mystical communities in which many nuns experienced the same or similar visions were more common in the Rhineland . . . ; charitable service, particularly care of the poor and sick, was especially common among Italian women affiliated with the Dominican and Franciscan orders” (Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 26).

Certain thematic similarities are supposed to unite these women—in common with other women and men who might fall into the category of mystic theologians—yet it is precisely in these supposedly common themes that we find sharp divergences between them. Both Catherine and Margaret explore the meaning of physical suffering and illness, yes. But the way they theorize, experience, and cultivate their own bodily suffering is wildly different. Both Catherine and Margaret are interested in purgatory, yes. But their understanding of the condition of the souls in purgatory and the meaning of prayers for them is wildly different. To observe these thematic consonances is not enough. One must ask more probing questions to see whether these superficial similarities hold more deeply, or whether they mask profound theological differences. In order to render these voices more faithfully than is often done, this chapter will offer a close reading of each woman's work before turning to synthetic and constructive appraisals.

Catherine: Suffering as Purgation

Catherine's two extant works are *The Spiritual Dialogue* and *The Treatise on Purgatory*.¹² As the former provides a helpful context for interpreting the latter, we will

The greater nuance or sophistication of such typologies does not relieve them of the tendency to read the typology rather forcefully into an individual theologian's text.

¹² The question of the authorship of these texts is not easily settled. Von Hügel finds the Dialogue to be the least original, constructed almost entirely from the *Vita* and intended as a theological interpretation of the Saint's inner life; its most probably author is, according to him, Battistina Vernazza, the daughter of Catherine's "spiritual son," Ettore Vernazza, who is himself the author of the *Vita* and the Treatise. He finds the Treatise to be a pastiche of Catherine's sayings recorded with relative faithfulness and stitched together with copious "theological glosses" by Vernazza (*The Mystical Element of Religion*, Vol 1, 91). Umile Bonzi da Genova ("L'Opus Catharinianum et ses auteurs: Étude critique sur la biographie et les écrits de sainte Catherine de Gênes," *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique* 16 [1935], 351-380) rejects entirely the ascription of the Dialogue to Battistina (370-374) and the identification of Vernazza as Catherine's "spiritual son" (376-377). He finds it most likely that Catherine's confessor, Catteneo Marabotto, wrote the *Vita* and composed the Treatise from Catherine's teaching, and he suggests that the first section of the Dialogue is likely from Catherine's own hand, while the second and third sections are later compositions (378). Bonzi's evaluation has the merit of being based on better textual evidence, and is on the whole accepted by later readers; resistance to the idea of Catherine's having put pen to paper nonetheless persists. Serge Hughes (notes to *Purgation and Purgatory; The Spiritual Dialogue*, by Catherine of Genoa [New York: Paulist Press, 1979])

begin there. In it, the opening parable-style dialogue shows Body and Soul as partners on a pilgrimage of sorts, each accompanying the other as she tries to discover the joy appropriate to herself. Gradually, and with impeccable logic and argumentation, Body seduces Soul away from her proper work and joy. Both are thereby left incapable of finding the happiness for which they are made, and Body and Soul together live in a state of perpetual discontent. God rescues Soul from this pit of despair by illuminating Soul, who responds in contrition and dependence. Pleased with Soul's response, God cleanses Soul, and draws her toward himself as her right and true desire.

It is only at this point, the point of Soul's despair and God's intervention, that the reader realizes (or knows with certainty) that the preceding dialogue is in fact a fall and redemption narrative. The dialogic technique of giving relatively equal weight to the words of Body and Soul has disguised, albeit thinly, the fact that mutuality between Body and Soul is precisely the problem. Yet once the reader (and the Soul) reaches this point, she can reflect on the foregoing narrative, tracing the path of gradual corruption.

believes that both Treatise and Dialogue faithfully represent the teaching of Catherine, though Catherine herself, while literate and well-educated, actually wrote nothing. He rightly discerns several layers of authorship to the Dialogue, although some of his conclusions depend rather heavily on such subjective judgments as "tone," "literary skill," and "sense of humor" (58). (The final section, which details Catherine's death and the apparently miraculous preservation of her body, requires no such leaps of judgment: it is clearly written by a follower, and probably is or is based on an eyewitness account.) Donald Nugent takes a rather harsher view of the matter, claiming that the works attributed to her are, at best, "an archaic and repetitious mosaic of her sayings, with biographical additions and theological accretions and development of her immediate and contemporary disciples," which are nonetheless "considered faithful" in some limited sense ("Saint Catherine of Genoa: Mystic of Pure Love," in *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987], 71). While the question is sufficiently unsettled that one would not want, for example, to attempt a medical or psychoanalytic diagnosis of Catherine from "her" writings, the judgment that these are "faithful" to Catherine's teaching seems warranted, even for the most cautious reader of the texts. Moreover, the clear historical evidence of her literacy and intellectual skill (e.g., her having run a charity hospital in a plague-devastated city for six years) puts the composition of these documents well within her capacities. While other medieval women may have been dependent on others to write for them, Catherine *could have* written her own works herself; the presumption against her having written anything at all thus seems unwarranted. This chapter will privilege the Treatise and the first half of the Dialogue as most representative of Catherine's thought; the description of her death at the close of the dialogue is clearly derivative. The hagiographical purpose of the *Vita* controls the text in a way that obscures Catherine's theological insights and commitments, even where it purports to record her own words. It will thus be little considered in this chapter.

Soul has, apparently, always understood intuitively that her end, her happiness, her capacities are different than and superior to Body's. It is Soul who extends the opening invitation to Body to begin their journey: "I should like, then, to start out on a voyage to discover what I am drawn to. Come willingly with me, for you too will share my joy."¹³ Their opening forays into seeking their own "food"—that is, the happiness for which they were created—emphasize even more the divergence between the two substances' created ends. Soul spends an entire week in contemplation, virtually ignoring Body and her needs, while Body spends its week celebrating the goods of the material world and sharing them with Soul. Soul claims a quasi-divine status for her proper activity, while Body can claim only that her activity is not inherently sinful, having been created expressly for Body's enjoyment.¹⁴ Nervous about caring for Body's physical requirements, Soul suggests that Body's mode of life—created and inoffensive to God though it may be—is nonetheless inferior to Soul's intended mode of life. "I am afraid that I, too, will begin to find delight in them [Body's needs] and, unaware of the danger, will settle for them. . . . I sense that I too will become earthbound."¹⁵

Though sensing the need to distance herself from Body's pursuits, Soul allows herself to be constrained both by their composite nature and by the arguments of Body, buttressed by Self-Love, who arrives on the scene to act as arbiter for the journey. "Bound each to each," Soul proclaims, "we shall never again be separated in this world or the next, but be together in good and evil," even to the extent that Soul will cede authority to Body, should Body convince Soul to offer offense to God.¹⁶ Body and Self-Love mount impressive and reasonable arguments against Soul's projects; Soul senses

¹³ Catherine of Genoa, "The Spiritual Dialogue," in *Purgation and Purgatory; The Spiritual Dialogue*, trans. and notes by Serge Hughes (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 91.

¹⁴ Catherine of Genoa, "The Spiritual Dialogue," 94-95.

¹⁵ Catherine of Genoa, "The Spiritual Dialogue," 97.

¹⁶ Catherine of Genoa, "The Spiritual Dialogue," 93.

both the reasonableness of their claims and the danger of following them. Even before Body begins her program of actively opposing Soul's desires, Soul fears that Body's modest claims for material needs—"my needs are food, drink, sleep, and dress. . . . so that, in turn, I can serve you"—will lead to Soul's unhappiness.¹⁷

Beginning with Body's small and apparently appropriate desires, the pull of materiality eventually entraps the Soul, so that she attempts to seek her (immaterial) end through material means. "The beauty and goodness and joy of created things/ are means for knowing and enjoying things divine," Soul feebly offers in defense of her pursuit. But this is a "listing with the wind," the poor excuse of a Soul who knows she has lost the ability to pursue her proper happiness.¹⁸ Interestingly, neither Soul nor Body is able to pursue happiness in the state in which they arrive. Soul's "capacity for the infinite" chafed at being confined to and fed with finite things, and Body was dismayed both at Soul's unhappiness and at the finitude of her own (apparent) goods.¹⁹

Lest this begin to sound like a clumsy diatribe against the body and its goods, it is worth noting the subtlety of Catherine's theological position here, evidenced particularly in the character of Self-Love. It would be easy to mistake the name of this character as an indication of her sinfulness or untrustworthiness: Self-Love might be synonymous with selfishness, pride, greed, or egocentrism. Not so in Catherine's narrative. The language used by Self-Love in this morality play is instead conspicuously *reasonable*. Self-Love attempts throughout her short appearance in the narrative to negotiate a balanced and rational interchange between the needs and capacities of Body

¹⁷ Catherine of Genoa, "The Spiritual Dialogue," 98. This is one of the places where caution is required in determining whether Catherine intends a general or an autobiographical meaning. Is it the case that for *all* souls, attention to what could only be called basic life necessities must lead to the distraction or temptation of the Soul? Or is it the case that Catherine felt herself unable to resist the pull of these normally well-ordered desires? In other words, should all of us "bind ourselves to tightly to Pure Love that our Human Frailty has barely room enough to breath" (127, alt.), or was this an activity proper to Catherine's special calling?

¹⁸ Catherine of Genoa, "The Spiritual Dialogue," 102.

¹⁹ Catherine of Genoa, "The Spiritual Dialogue," 103.

and those of Soul. Her arguments are temperate, responsible, winning. Her first speech makes explicit appeal to what is reasonable and moderate: “In charity, though, each of you has gone outside the limits of the reasonable.”²⁰ She acts as mediator, turning first to Soul and admonishing her for immoderate unconcern for Body’s needs, and next cautioning Body against indulging superfluous desires.²¹ She claims to be attentive to the needs of friends as well as of herself.²² She seems to demand of Soul precisely what Thomas advises: care for the body, attention to the needs of others—in short, a rational evaluation of all that is not God so that the pull of contemplation might not lead one to neglect God’s good creation. To read Catherine’s personages as, for example, Umile Bonzi da Genova does—he sees Self-Love as “tout attachement désordonné à soi-même, à tout désir de satisfaction, sans le rapporter à Dieu” and Spirit as “la partie supérieure de l’homme guidée par la raison, illuminée par la foi et renforcée par la divine grâce”—is to miss Catherine’s subtle critique of reason itself. The pull of materiality may so confuse the operation of reason and (legitimate) self-interest that the Soul is not able to pursue that for which it is truly created and for which it is ultimately destined.

It is only at the moment of Soul’s despairing confession that the inadequacy of Self-Love’s guidance becomes clear. Soul’s despairing speech names both the condition in which she finds herself and her own culpability for being there. She is in a state of separation from her created end: “We left heaven, where my food is found, very far behind. . . . God closed those doors to us, leaving us at the mercy of our appetites.”²³ It was not a mark of reason but instead a *fault* to allow Body license to pursue Body’s desires, even the most modest desires:

²⁰ Catherine of Genoa, “The Spiritual Dialogue,” 96.

²¹ Catherine of Genoa, “The Spiritual Dialogue,” 96-97.

²² Catherine of Genoa, “The Spiritual Dialogue,” 105.

²³ Catherine of Genoa, “The Spiritual Dialogue,” 105.

In acceding to the desires of the Body, under the guise of necessity—a notion that led straightaway to that of the necessity of the superfluous—in a very short time I became enmeshed in sin. I became arid and heavy, a thing of the earth. . . . and you, Self-Love, had so tightly bound yourself to me and the Body that I almost suffocated.²⁴

Her language echoes that of certain strands of Neoplatonism, in which the material body is a distraction to the contemplative soul, weighing it down and impeding its ascent to the Good. Souls who attend too much to the body and its needs risk becoming earthy—weighty, dirty, heavy—and the body is but a prison the soul hopes to escape.²⁵ Most importantly, Soul says, she is distanced from exactly her *created* end, the only thing in which she can find happiness—“the instinct for God, that was mine by nature”—and that she is powerless to return herself to God.²⁶ God intervenes at just this point, a point marked by contrition and dependence. God’s illumination allows Soul to turn and trust God. Drawn, finally, back to her proper end and desire, Soul can live anew.

Not incidentally, this is the point at which the narrator emphasizes the particular nature of what follows: God restores souls to their created innocence “in diverse ways, as He sees fit. *In this instance*, we will speak of how He does so with Pure Love.”²⁷ This is also the point at which the narrator finally reveals that Soul *is* Catherine. Prior to the Soul’s illumination by God, the subject is a but a collection of parts—the Soul, the Body, and Self-Love are individual entities, never referred to by any collective noun or pronoun. Only at the moment of the Soul’s illumination and conversion does the narrator begin to acknowledge the conjoint nature of the human person: the subject becomes “the creature,” she, Catherine. She will later recount how she “waged resolute war” on her lower self, but it would be misleading to identify the beginning of her

²⁴ Catherine of Genoa, “The Spiritual Dialogue,” 106.

²⁵ It is likely this language that prompts von Hügel to name Pseudo-Dionysius as a literary and theological source for Catherine (*The Mystical Element*, vol 2, 90-99). While the thematic consonances are strong, there is little evidence of direct borrowing; it is thus difficult to say with certainty how influential the Pseudo-Dionysius was for Catherine.

²⁶ Catherine of Genoa, “The Spiritual Dialogue,” 106.

²⁷ Catherine of Genoa, “The Spiritual Dialogue,” 107, emphasis added.

program of asceticism with the beginning of that war. Soul, Body, and Self-Love have never been at peace with one another. The creature has been fractured, disintegrated, and plagued by instability from the beginning.

This delay in identifying the characters of the dialogue with a particular human presents another problem for the reader: it all but precludes the most mundane and simplistic supposition, that the dialogue can be mapped with relative ease onto Catherine's life. Certainly what follows must be read as Catherine's theological engagement with her own history, and the ease with which her disciples append to it their account of her holy death suggests that they believe her history to have been the main point all along. Yet the deliberate effacement of any reference to her own history prior to this point suggests rather the opposite: until the Soul is drawn into a journey toward God, she could be *any* human. Her identity is irrelevant precisely because she had no capacity for an identity.

Once God has cleansed Catherine's soul and shown her "that love which has no need of us and which sustains us even though many of us . . . may rightly be considered his enemies," she responds in contrition and despair.²⁸ She resolves to live a life commensurate with God's love toward her, a resolve that prompts a "ray of God" that "so united her to Him that from this time on no force or passion could separate them."²⁹ Although this union gives Soul the strength to turn away from the temptations and reasons of Body and Self-Love, she yet notes the sinfulness of these, her "lower self." So, Soul is plunged once again into despair—an internal suffering arising from a profound knowledge of her own sinfulness and God's great condescension in granting her illumination. She says, for example, "Lord, why did you illumine a soul so rank, an enemy that constantly flees from you, an obstinate, sensual soul?" and "What am I to do

²⁸ Catherine of Genoa, "The Spiritual Dialogue," 108.

²⁹ Catherine of Genoa, "The Spiritual Dialogue," 110.

with this filthy robe I wear?"³⁰ Notice that in the first of these statements, her "rankness," her sinfulness is related to the will—her obstinacy and her willingness to follow sensual desires. In the second, on the other hand, the "robe" seems to be her "lower self." Here, embodiment itself is a barrier between her and God.

God answers this period of despair with a vision of Christ's crucified body. This vision is meant to signal both the profound love of God for her soul and the profound evil of sin. She characterizes the love of God as unceasing and pure—a love so overwhelming that she is able to turn away from all the simulacra of joy she had pursued with Body.³¹ From this point on, in fact, she counts Body and Self-Love (renamed Human Frailty) as enemies to the life to which she has been called, and the remainder of the dialogue (now mostly in the form of a *vita*) recounts the process of annihilating the body and its desires.

First, she offers God herself, "this evil being," asking God in turn to "annihilate me and busy me so much with you that I will have no time or place for anything else."³² In response, God's love purifies her soul, taking away, apparently, its susceptibility to the desires of the body. The ray of love that accomplishes this is said to be "so burning and deep that it was an agony to sustain."³³ Here, suffering comes not from contrition, but from the purification process itself, from a union (albeit an incomplete one) with God.

In the strength of that purification and love, she "waged resolute war on the self-love that survived within her."³⁴ She speaks of the alienation from her body in strong

³⁰ Catherine of Genoa, "The Spiritual Dialogue," 116, 117.

³¹ Catherine of Genoa, "The Spiritual Dialogue," 118.

³² Catherine of Genoa, "The Spiritual Dialogue," 119.

³³ The language regarding her purification is also strong: "That love, wounding the soul, stripped it of all other loves, appetites, delights, and selfishness. The soul cried out, sighed deeply, and in its transformation was taken out of itself," *ibid.*

³⁴ Catherine of Genoa, "The Spiritual Dialogue," 118-119.

terms. She calls herself “we” to emphasize that war within herself.³⁵ She “binds herself so tightly to [Pure Love] that Human Frailty had barely enough room to breathe,” thus inverting their earlier relationship, when Self-Love had suffocated Soul with its desires. Her commitment to “God pure and naked” is accompanied by a distrust of materiality so strong that at one point, she asks God to take away the spiritual joy she receives from Eucharist.³⁶ Apparently, the refreshment provided by Christ’s Body and Blood are so pleasurable that they too admit of idolatry. Like the pleasures of the sensual body, spiritual pleasure sustains Human Frailty, and Catherine intends to pursue Human Frailty’s annihilation. When Human Frailty protests even this denial, Catherine answers that anything pleasurable might distract one from the true pleasure that is in God. “Pure Love,” she argues, “does not attach itself to pleasure or feeling, bodily or spiritual. . . . A spiritual attachment that seems good is dangerous: it can mislead the Soul into attaching itself not to God but to those pleasurable sentiments.” Human Frailty’s only consolation can be, Catherine says, that once this purification is finished, she too can find joy.³⁷

How can the annihilation of Human Frailty lead to its ultimate joy? Catherine’s point seems to be that the body must be retrained to its created order—one of subservience to the soul. The passions’ natural function to judge what is fitting and unfitting is not, ultimately, trustworthy; the sensations of the body and the instinctual responses they provoke must be suppressed where they are not consonant with what is ultimately fitting or unfitting. Catherine uses her work in a Genovese charity hospital as one example of this emphasis. When the delicacy of Human Frailty balks at lice and the smell of leprosy, she smears the pus under her nose and eats handfuls of lice in order to

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Catherine of Genoa, “The Spiritual Dialogue,” 122-123.

³⁷ Catherine of Genoa, “The Spiritual Dialogue,” 124.

conquer her natural aversion.³⁸ It is worth comparing this scene to a similar scene in Angela of Foligno's "Memorial" so that it not be misunderstood. Angela completes one day of service in a hospital for the poor by drinking the water in which she had washed leprous bodies. The scene is intentionally Eucharistic (indeed, a "scale" from one leper's sores serves as the bread/body to the contaminated water's wine/blood), and her emphasis is on the sweetness of the experience—that is, that in the imitation of Christ's sufferings, however that may be accomplished, the pious soul can find pleasure.³⁹ By contrast, Catherine is supremely uninterested in mystical union with Christ through this particular act of suffering. It is strictly an act of teaching the body to follow the will of the soul. The soul wills to serve bodies marked by their grotesqueness, and the body's natural inclination to shun the grotesque must be overcome. The point is not merely (or perhaps not at all) the humiliation of the body, but of the training of it. Catherine's divinely ordained work is the care of the sick; when the body resists the soul's commands, something is out of order. Physical correction, self-denial, or suffering can be part of the putting-back-in-order of the body-soul composite. Angela's piety—both the act of willed suffering and the act of charity that was its theater—is spontaneous and unorganized. Catherine's act is instead programmatic and deliberative, oriented to an equally programmatic commitment to a particular ministry of charity.

It is not until near the end of the dialogue—near the end of Catherine's life—that we are assured that Human Frailty will be made happy by this. Earlier in the dialogue, at the point of her initial experience of God's Pure Love, she had specified that the creature's ultimate good—"the return, *body and soul*, of the creature to his celestial home"—did indeed include the body, but immediately and consistently thereafter,

³⁸ Catherine of Genoa, "The Spiritual Dialogue," 131.

³⁹ Angela of Foligno, *Complete Works*, trans. by Paul LaChance (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 163.

Human Frailty is a casualty of Soul's intense concentration on her own projects.⁴⁰

Towards the end of her life, however, Catherine sees a vision in which the soul and body are flying up toward heaven together. The body yearns to stay on earth and resists the upward motion of the soul; yet once the body lost sight of the earth, "it began to taste and enjoy heaven."⁴¹ The vision and its interpretation are maddeningly brief, but the suggestion that one's "human part" (by this Catherine presumably refers to her character Human Frailty) may have a share in the enjoyment of heaven casts her aspiration to "annihilate" Human Frailty in a different light. Somehow, finally, the annihilation of the body turns out to have been less about destroying the body than about retraining it for a previously hidden capacity for the infinite, the divine.

Catherine seems to see purgatory as a last, integral step in this process of retraining. For her, however, purgatory began before her death. In fact, she begins the "Purgation and Purgatory" with just such an observation:

While still in the flesh this blessed soul [Catherine] experienced the fiery love of God, a love that consumed her, cleansing and purifying all, so that once quitted this life she could appear forthwith in God's presence. As she dwelt on this love, the condition of the souls of the faithful in purgatory, where they are cleansed of the remaining rust and stain of sin, became clear to her. She rejoiced in her union with God in this loving purgatory, and so did the souls in purgatory, she realized, who have no choice but to be there, and this because of God's just decree.⁴²

This passage is worth an extended quotation because it neatly contains virtually the whole of the poetic teaching that follows, and it helps us better interpret the Dialogue. It urges us to read Catherine's life (as narrated in the dialogue) as analogous to the process that most souls will undergo only after their life, in purgatory. The crucial facet, however, of both their purification and hers is that it is accomplished by and identical with the love of God. Just as it is a "ray of God" or a "ray of love" that burns on and in

⁴⁰ Catherine of Genoa, "Spiritual Dialogue," 108, emphasis added.

⁴¹ Catherine of Genoa, "The Spiritual Dialogue," 138.

⁴² Catherine of Genoa, "Purgation and Purgatory," 71.

and through Catherine in life, in purgatory, the love of God will be a purifying fire for those who already have lived the life of faith.

Like Catherine, those who are in purgatory suffer joyfully, because contrition has opened their wills to being cleansed by God: “They grieved for their sins and were determined to sin no more. It is this sorrow over their sins that makes God forgive them.”⁴³ At the point of their deaths, these souls’ wills are fixed, such that they never have to worry about being led by their desires away to something other than their proper end. Thus they suffer the fire of God’s love willingly and joyfully—they know that it is their due, and they are content with God’s will. Like Catherine, they have been “radically transformed by the will of God,” so that they “attend to all that God gives them in joy and suffering,” without any concern for “the lesser self.”⁴⁴

To an even greater degree than in the Dialogue, “Purgation” emphasizes the love of God in the process of purgation. Her opening paragraph identifies God’s love as the fire that burns and cleanses her, and that love is her link with the souls in purgatory. In the Dialogue, it is Pure Love that seduces her away from the disordered desires of the body. Here too, it is love that keeps the souls in purgatory from turning away to other things—including those who perform works on their behalf: “And if the living were to offer alms for the benefit of the souls in purgatory, to shorten the assigned time of their purgation, still those souls could not turn with affection to watch.”⁴⁵ God’s love is so compelling, so sufficient that other things no longer have the power to attract.

It is this sufficiency of God’s love that provides the context of Catherine’s “suffocation” of her “human frailty.” *In comparison with* the experience of God’s love, material and spiritual goods are a distraction, and thus an impediment to that

⁴³ Catherine of Genoa, “Purgation and Purgatory,” 75-76.

⁴⁴ Catherine of Genoa, “Purgation and Purgatory,” 82-83.

⁴⁵ Catherine of Genoa, “Purgation and Purgatory,” 82.

experience. At the close of the Treatise, she makes explicit the comparison with her life of self-denial: "So vehement is the soul's instinct to rid itself of all that impedes its own perfection that it would endure hell itself to reach that end. For that reason the soul tenaciously sets about casting aside all those things that could give the inner self specious comfort."⁴⁶ Like the souls in purgatory, whose increasing experience of God's love painfully yet joyfully burns away the "rust of sin," Catherine interprets her life of suffering, voluntary and involuntary, as a process by which the soul relieves itself of dependence on all that is not God. The comfort of such goods is genuine, and thus a real temptation; it is "specious" only in comparison to the perfection which belongs to the soul's final union with God.

Margaret: Suffering Openness to God

The structure of Margaret's narrative differs quite radically from that of Catherine's two pieces. *Revelations* is more strictly and more clearly autobiographical, an account of Margaret's extraordinary and involuntary bodily experiences, interspersed with sporadic attempts to interpret these experiences.⁴⁷ These interpretive moments come rarely, but when they do, they describe the theological context within which Margaret seems to make sense of her own life. Their brevity and infrequency should not obscure their significance in Margaret's purposes. Most prominent is Margaret's emphasis on her will—the retraining of her will so that she desires what God desires.

This retraining comes in many ways. First and foremost, her involuntary bodily experiences and her experiences of physical and psychological suffering teach her, she says, to conform her will to God's. God is said to be the instigator of these experiences of illness and involuntary bodily actions. A common way for her to describe an event is

⁴⁶ Catherine of Genoa, "Purgation and Purgatory," 85.

⁴⁷ Margaret Ebner, *Revelations*, in *Major Works*, trans. and ed. Leonard P. Hindsley, intr. Margot Schmidt and Leonard P. Hindsley (New York: Paulist Press, 1993).

that “I cannot stop [whatever it is] until it is God’s will.”⁴⁸ She names the illness which precipitated her life of devotion—before which she “had not been attentive” to herself—as a call to “give myself over to God completely.”⁴⁹ Her subsequent life of “frequent severe illness” was a merciful assistance from God in training her will—“I was determined, as far as possible, always to live according to the will of God from then on. In His mercy He helped me to do that by frequent severe illness since He was preparing me then for Himself.”⁵⁰ On occasions when she resisted whatever was happening to her body, she experienced greater suffering. Of her initial response to her sudden illness, she says, “In that first year I endured the greatest internal and external suffering because I had not yet given myself over to God completely, for I still wanted to be healthy.”⁵¹ Later, she says that until she accepted that “I could not direct myself,” she would be overcome with sorrow “because I did not give my will over to God.”⁵² When she experienced an inexplicably great sorrow over the petty annoyances that characterize communal life (“when someone rejoiced over the bad fortune of another or other such things”), she took this “as a gift sent to me by God so that I would recognize that I myself did not yet live according to peace, truth, and love as I should.”

Sometimes these experiences and sufferings seem (to the reader, though perhaps not to Margaret) to be rather capricious. In one instance, a priest was delayed in coming to give the sisters at Margaret’s convent Eucharist, and she “began to weep from true distress and the thought that perhaps I myself was to blame.” Immediately, she receives divine word that it was “because I desired your tears,” after which the priest arrives and

⁴⁸ See, for just a few examples, *Revelations* 102, 103, and 112.

⁴⁹ Ebner, *Revelations*, 85.

⁵⁰ Ebner, *Revelations*, 89.

⁵¹ Ebner, *Revelations*, 85.

⁵² Ebner, *Revelations*, 90.

offers Mass.⁵³ As soon as she reconciled herself to God's will concerning her initial illness, God "restored me to health both in body and in soul."⁵⁴ If Margaret senses the apparent mischievousness of God's will, she does not offer that criticism. In fact, she struggles to learn equanimity—even joy—in the face of God's unpredictable will for her: "sometimes I am inwardly closed and bound just as I am outwardly. But I can give God my willing obedience."⁵⁵

Just as her response to physical malady and lack of control is being trained, so too are her sensual desires being reformed. She lost or refused her desire for sensible goods, sometimes voluntarily and sometimes, remarkably, without any sort of intentionality or consent. An involuntary aversion to meat prompts her to realize that God was thereby directing her to give up meat.⁵⁶ Later, the "sad condition of Christianity," and the refusal of Eucharist to some, provokes her to honor God by subsisting on bread and water. Between these two types of occurrences—voluntary and involuntary abstinence—Margaret gradually attains to a life of utter simplicity, forgoing baths, wine, meat, fruit, and pillows. Yet she is clear that what gives rise to her ability to forsake these things is an attraction to the things of God. That is, delight in God replaces delight in sensible things: "what has drawn me away from delight in eating and drinking is the great delight and sweetness that I feel from God."

Coinciding with her gradual attainment of a life of simplicity is an increasing devotion to the suffering of Christ. Some times during her initial illness, meditation on the stations of the cross ease her illness or suffering.⁵⁷ She prayed for and received the

⁵³ Ebner, *Revelations*, 167.

⁵⁴ Ebner, *Revelations*, 86.

⁵⁵ Ebner, *Revelations*, 117. The text is replete with similar assertions. When her ability to pray the Pater Noster is taken away, she answers "I submit myself in willing obedience to all that He works in me according to his dearest will," 121; on another occasion, "My Lord Jesus Christ knows well that I yearn for the dearest will of God all my life long. Whatever he gives me, I gladly accept," 111.

⁵⁶ Ebner, *Revelations* 109.

⁵⁷ Ebner, *Revelations*, 94.

stigmata, albeit temporarily and invisibly.⁵⁸ Her experience of involuntary Speaking sometimes “compelled and pressed” her “into the suffering of my dearly Beloved Jesus Christ.” This participation in Christ’s suffering brings her a powerful experience of God’s presence, such that she feels “the presence of God could be as little take from me there [in hell] as in heaven.”⁵⁹ She counts as gift her inability to hear words about or participate in liturgical remembrances of Christ’s Passion—it calls forth an answering suffering in her own body, so that “nothing in the world seemed more desirable and delightful to me than to die in the love and in the pain of my Lord’s sufferings.”⁶⁰

This retraining seems to have some practical benefits. Margaret seems to feel that God wants to use her to pray for certain, particular souls, and the ease with which she accepts her inability or compulsion to do something allows God, apparently, to tailor her prayers as God needs:

When I wish to pray for the Poor Souls, I can pray with greater desire for one than for others. Sometimes I cannot pray for a soul at first, but later I can begin to pray for it. I understood this is the following way: those for whom I could pray easily had led innocent lives; those for whom I could not pray at first, I believe this was due to the depths into which they had sunk. I could not help them with my petitions until the mercy of God and common prayer had purified them.⁶¹

Though Margaret’s mission is to pray some Poor Souls out of purgatory, she is not able to do so until they are in a position to benefit from her prayers. Similarly, when she desires to pray for a “lawless” soul, she is only able to utter, “Lord have mercy on all sinners.”⁶² This constraint on ineffective prayers extends beyond the Poor Souls, however. At one point, Margaret is unable to pray for or bless a “noble friend” who was living in a state of mortal sin. She could only pray for him under the banner of “those in mortal sin.” Later, however, she experienced a profound desire to pray for him, which

⁵⁸ Ebner, *Revelations*, 95.

⁵⁹ Ebner, *Revelations*, 108.

⁶⁰ Ebner, *Revelations* 113.

⁶¹ Ebner, *Revelations* 105.

⁶² Ebner, *Revelations* 143.

she interpreted as permission to pray freely for him.⁶³ When one woman offered an extreme insult to an unconsecrated host, Margaret found herself unable to pray for this woman at all.⁶⁴ God had granted her a special efficacy in prayer, yet her willingness to submit to God's will *as expressed through her body*, and even apart from her intellect or will, is precisely what allows God to entrust her with this gift.

Her openness to God's will plays out in other arenas as well. When the monastery is pressed by political wranglings, Margaret opens herself to God's desire for her within those struggles. She asked whether she should take Eucharist when the monastery was only partially bound by an interdict; she takes the "immeasurable sweetness" she tastes in Eucharist as God's answer. God confirms this answer verbally as well: "Whoever desires me in true love, I will never renounce out of true love."⁶⁵ Margaret sought God's will later on the same issue, and God answered similarly—that those who abstained and those who partook were right as long as they abstained and partook out of love.⁶⁶ Margaret's unconventional experiences seem to lead her into greater insight into God's will, and this is enacted precisely in her bodily sensations, abilities, and involuntary movements.

Lest this picture seem too rosy, however, Margaret's account hints at the profound disruption caused by these experiences. Her initial illness caused her sisters to shun her with the (perhaps disingenuous) excuse that "they could not bear to see me suffer so." There is rather a sad note to Margaret's acceptance of their withdrawal: "Then I understood that God alone remains faithful."⁶⁷ She is often rendered unable to participate in the liturgical life of the monastery (though at times her involuntary bodily

⁶³ Ebner, *Revelations* 138.

⁶⁴ Ebner, *Revelations* 148-149.

⁶⁵ Ebner, *Revelations* 104.

⁶⁶ Ebner, *Revelations* 141.

⁶⁷ Ebner, *Revelations* 86.

experiences conversely enact and embody the liturgy in unexpected ways). During her initial illness, she could not observe weekly and occasional fasts, and her permission to forgo them sits ill with her. This even sows discord between her and another sister.⁶⁸ Her “outcries” are sometimes “so loud that it could be heard everywhere in the monastery and in the court.”⁶⁹ At one point, her Speaking provokes members of her community to break open her locked door, so that the chaplain could come and give her the Eucharist. When she says “I am often talked about,”⁷⁰ one senses the deliberate ambiguity: some of her sisters no doubt marvel at the work of God in her, while others gossip and complain about her.⁷¹

If the retraining of Margaret’s will is one pervasive idea in her spiritual autobiography, so too is a profound engagement with love. Christ’s love for humans is (unsurprisingly) a particular theme. The Crucifixion stands as testament to Christ’s love for humanity—his wounds are the wounds of love, the signs of love, the works of love. Margaret particularly meditates on the entirety of Christ’s life and work, and how it was motivated by love for us: “how love for us moved Him to die on the cross and to perform all His works of love . . . the love in which He has worked and continues to bring about His goodness, love, and mercy. . . .”⁷² God the Father is characterized by

⁶⁸ “I was especially sad because I had been compelled to eat by my superiors. Frequently I annoyed my sister because I feared she was to blame for it.” Ebner, *Revelations*, 87.

⁶⁹ Ebner, *Revelations*, 150.

⁷⁰ Ebner, *Revelations*, 100.

⁷¹ Ebner, *Revelations*, 124. These incidents, among other things, lead me to question the too-facile dichotomy between authorized/patriarchal and heretical/liberative theologies, such as Anke Passenier offers in “The Suffering Body and the Freedom of the Soul: Medieval Women’s Ways of Union with God” (in *Begin with the Body: Corporeality, Religion, and Gender* [Leuven: Peeters, 1998], 264-287). She confidently asserts that Margaret Ebner’s “spirituality” was authorized and promulgated because it supported a safe version of female religious experience, while Marguerite Porete’s writings were banned because they were potentially subversive. In point of fact, I cannot imagine why the Church would authorize and promulgate Margaret’s spirituality, if it were (as Passenier suggests) solely interested in compliant, domesticated women. Margaret’s presence in her monastery was difficult and disruptive, and if she learned to experience God in her suffering, so her sisters had to learn to experience God in the disruptions she caused.

⁷² Ebner, *Revelations*, 129.

love as well. In love, he wishes to set free those who are in purgatory.⁷³ Because of his love for her, God offers Margaret experiences of his presence, or special efficacy in prayer.

Yet humans are characterized and judged by love in her world as well. Margaret's humility and love for God please God, and he in turn loves her.⁷⁴ Similarly, God allows Margaret to pray for, especially, her "noble friend" and her "True Friend" (Louis IV and Henry of Nördlingen, respectively) because of their humility and love.⁷⁵ On several occasions, when Margaret inquires whether God will do something for her fellow nuns that he has done for her, God answers, in effect, that they do not love God enough.⁷⁶ Love is the only criterion by which to judge whether one's reception of Eucharist or obedience to the interdiction was right: refraining out of love and obedience was as right as receiving with love and trust.⁷⁷ Love is such an important standard for judging a human that Mary Magdalene and Peter are said to wear the crown of virgins (!) because of their great love for God.⁷⁸

Most extraordinary of all, Margaret holds God to be bound in some way by his love for humans, whether in general or in particular. God reveals to Margaret that her love for God draws him to her: "Your love compels me to let myself be found so that your soul is satisfied . . . Your sweet delight finds me, your inner desire compels me, your burning love binds me, your pure truth holds me, your fiery love keeps me near."⁷⁹ Henry's humility similarly binds God: "I desire this for him because of his great humility. And, in pure truth I am found, with burning love I am bound, with fervent

⁷³ Margaret's initial devotion to the Poor Souls begins when she is told "You should pray for them, whom God in his justice holds captive and whom he would gladly set free out of love." Ebner, *Revelations*, 88.

⁷⁴ Ebner, *Revelations*, 88.

⁷⁵ Ebner, *Revelations*, 126, 165, 167, e.g.

⁷⁶ Ebner, *Revelations*, 94, 95, 171, e.g.

⁷⁷ Ebner, *Revelations* 141.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Ebner, *Revelations* 122.

desire I am compelled, in true purity I am held.”⁸⁰ During one of her own experiences of binding, God offers her this revelation: “Suffer me for the sake of my love, because I cannot do without your acceptance of it. . . . Compelled by my very great love, I have chosen you for myself.”⁸¹ These are extraordinary claims. Margaret sees in God’s love no offense to divine sovereignty, no need for clarifying that God is moved impassibly when God is moved by human prayer. Instead, she sees in her own experiences of binding a reflection of the Creator’s relationship with an obedient creature: her loving response to God’s revelation, her obedience to the divine will, her humble acceptance of illness and pain and involuntary spiritual experiences somehow moves God, enabling a relationship in which God may choose to be bound, impelled, or obligated by God’s creation.

Within this relationship to God, we find a very different view of the body than we found in Catherine’s work. Margaret’s body is a trustworthy conduit or medium for her relationship to God. Both her involuntary bodily experiences and her bodily senses bring her knowledge of God’s will for her, give her a joyful sense of God’s presence, and allow her to participate in the life of faith. Perhaps most emblematic of Margaret’s understanding of the body is the vision (repeated twice) in which God calms Margaret’s fear of her senses being overwhelmed, proclaiming, “I am not the robber of the senses; I am the enlightener of the senses.”⁸² This proves true in a number of ways. Twice, after a profound experience of God’s presence, she finds herself more rational, more able to understand the biblical or theological commentary being read.⁸³ Further, toward the end of the narrative, she receives as a gift the experience of *not* perceiving the accidents of

⁸⁰ Ebner, *Revelations* 126.

⁸¹ Ebner, *Revelations* 161.

⁸² Ebner, *Revelations* 100, 126.

⁸³ Ebner, *Revelations*, 100, 108.

the bread in the Eucharist.⁸⁴ Her senses have been enlightened, it seems, such that she no longer senses what is only accidentally true of the bread. In its essence, it *is no longer* bread, and her enlightened senses can perceive that.

If body is not the recalcitrant temptation that it is for Catherine, what is the role of bodily suffering for Margaret? Suffering is still part of the cleansing process; she desires to receive suffering joyfully as part of her gradual cleansing of the will. In this manner she is able to speak of it as a gift—a painful, disruptive gift, but a gift nonetheless. This is an interpretation she offers from the very beginning of the narrative: her pain was “a true gift from God with which he wanted to prepare me for himself.”⁸⁵ Her “frequent severe illnesses” are evidence of God’s “mercy,” since they “helped” her along her path of sanctification.⁸⁶ She interprets her sorrow at any difficulty within the monastery (financial problems, discord within the community, etc.) as “a gift sent to me by God,” because it alerted her to imperfection in her own life.⁸⁷ It is a “special gift from God” that she experience intense physical pain whenever she reads of Christ’s Passion,⁸⁸ and she prays for and receives the gift of physical imitation of the pain of Christ’s Passion during Lent and Holy Week one year.⁸⁹

Yet she is equally likely to speak of *relief* from suffering or illness as a gift. It is a gift of grace when God strengthens her after an illness;⁹⁰ sometimes God gives her the gift of “transforming” her sorrow “into a joy;”⁹¹ and though it had been a gift to receive pain in imitation of Christ’s passion, it was a gift that the pain be “lifted from [her] with

⁸⁴ Ebner, *Revelations*, 142.

⁸⁵ Ebner, *Revelations*, 92.

⁸⁶ Ebner, *Revelations*, 89.

⁸⁷ Ebner, *Revelations*, 94.

⁸⁸ Ebner, *Revelations*, 110.

⁸⁹ Ebner, *Revelations*, 95.

⁹⁰ Ebner, *Revelations*, 91.

⁹¹ Ebner, *Revelations*, 92, similarly in 121.

great grace and immeasurable sweetness.”⁹² There is both a divine and a human aspect to her claims here. She seems anxious to attribute *everything* in her life to God: God is the source both of her healing and of the illness from which she learned she needed to be healed. God is the source both of reconciliation and peace within her monastery and of those moments of discord or difficulty that teach her to shun discord or to rely more firmly on God. Thus she narrates her own life through the lens of divine sovereignty: nothing that exists apart from God’s will. At the same time, she also narrates each event with reference to *her own good*. She sees both periods of suffering and periods of relief as oriented towards her own blessedness—that is, as instrumental moments in a narrative that will ultimately end with her attaining to the presence of God.

Suffering is also, for Margaret, part of the economy of salvation, in terms of the satisfaction of God’s justice. Purgatory operates according to this principle: God’s justice requires that Margaret not pray souls out of purgatory until their sins have been sufficiently expiated.⁹³ Even the souls who are in purgatory experience it as the justice of God: the soul of one of her sisters at the monastery visits her to thank her for her prayers and reports that she is “not able to perceive mercy in the face of justice.”⁹⁴ The political difficulties Louis IV suffers (and this is the word she applies—“he was in great suffering”) are specifically attributed to God’s intention to punish him: “the degree of his punishment will not deprive him of eternal life for much longer.”⁹⁵ Yet even in this quote, punishment and purification seem to be held together; suffering is a required penalty for sin as well as a process by which one attains to God.

⁹² Ebner, *Revelations*, 95.

⁹³ This difference between Catherine and Margaret shows once again the difficulty with making facile connections between very different theologians. Yes, both women connect their spirituality to purgatory, but Margaret does not apply her joy in a suffering life to those in purgatory. They are eager to leave, and grateful for her assistance. Catherine’s souls are too firmly fixed on their vision of the divine life to take note of those who pray them out.

⁹⁴ Ebner, *Revelations*, 106. This contrasts severely with Catherine’s assertion that the souls in purgatory perceive God’s punishing justice precisely *as his love*.

⁹⁵ Ebner, *Revelation*, 171.

These are the two most prevalent themes around which Margaret's discussion of suffering can be organized, but there are others. Like Catherine, Margaret recognizes that suffering can arise from the recognition of imperfection or disorder in the world. She is grieved to consider her own sinfulness, for example, and is disturbed even to hear of misconduct or discord within her community.⁹⁶ She responds with empathy to the suffering of others—although she is less likely to be moved if the suffering is the just result of their sin.⁹⁷ Though specific acts of charity have not the prevalence in Margaret's narrative that they do in Catherine's, she is certainly motivated to relieve suffering where she can, principally through her prayers but also through other acts of service. At least some kinds of suffering, then, warrant relief, and the failure to offer that relief would, in some sense, be culpable.⁹⁸

Most importantly, however, suffering is seen as the given around which Margaret attempts to organize her understanding of God and of herself. Early in the narrative, she recounts a vision that serves to define her vocation. During what appears

⁹⁶ Ebner, *Revelations* 85-86 and passim.

⁹⁷ Ebner, *Revelations* 90, e.g., reports Margaret's inability to bear any evidence of another's suffering: "When I heard that someone was angry with our serving girls and had said to them, 'You are not worthy to serve us,' heartfelt sorrow overcame me so that I cried and thought, 'God has never said that I was unworthy to serve Him.' I could not bear the slaughtering of the cattle and when I saw that they were being slaughtered I began to cry and thought that God had never slaughtered me because of my misdeeds. I had compassion for all things and true compassion for everyone whom I saw suffering, no matter what kind of suffering it was. With God's help I have avoided afflicting anyone or being harsh with anyone, and also I myself was never afflicted by anyone." This contrasts starkly with the disturbing story on 148-149, in which Margaret is violently distressed that a woman stole unconsecrated hosts and attempted to sell them to "the Jews," while being resolutely unmoved at the violence of her gruesome punishment. The offending woman was pregnant, and her child was forcibly cut out of her, baptized, and burned along with her. "I could not endure it if anyone felt sorry for her, because I thought that anyone who had dishonored a dear friend could not expect mercy from the one who had been dishonored. Often I tried to pray for her diligently, but I have been unable even to desire to pray to God for her as yet." (Ebner, *Revelations*, 149.) The constellation of crucifixion imagery in this story is fascinating—the false Madonna turned Judas, the Jews, the broken bread that should be available to become Jesus' broken body. In Margaret's eyes, the suffering of her execution—and the execution of her unborn child—was a necessary punishment for the offense of having failed to honor the suffering Christ endured at his execution.

⁹⁸ In one of the few incidents in which Margaret seems to triumph, however mildly, at a divine rebuke of one of her opponents, a lay sister who criticizes Margaret's concern for the Poor Souls receives a vision in which the Poor Souls chastise her: "Since you will not pray for us, at least do not begrudge us the prayers of others." (Ebner, *Revelations*, 88.) The primary focus of this story is the Poor Souls' gratitude for Margaret's help, and their assistance in removing a source of discomfort for her, but the unspoken condemnation of the critical sister still holds. She is wrong to impede Margaret's efforts to relieve their suffering.

to be a terminal illness, she hears a voice reassuring her that she would not yet die, that she would live a life of suffering, and that this suffering would suffice for her purification: “When you die, you will go to heaven without delay.”⁹⁹ Her illnesses, involuntary physical outbursts, and other strange symptoms are thereafter received willingly, although rarely with any direct reference to this earlier vision. At the same time, however, Margaret courts other forms of suffering, so that she is both agent and recipient of her own suffering. After the death of a particularly beloved companion, for example, she resolves “to live in greater suffering from then on,” deciding to rely for her bodily needs on the unasked charity of others and to take only enough food to keep herself from extreme hunger.¹⁰⁰ If suffering is to be her vocation, she must both receive it and pursue it. Yet it is only to be her vocation because it is ordered to her eventual beatitude; it is the means by which God “was preparing me then for Himself.”¹⁰¹

Lives of Beatitude and Suffering

Though the interests of the academy have tended to mask important theological differences between Margaret and Catherine, their convergences are both significant and potentially useful to our broader inquiry about suffering. The first thing worth noting is, indeed, their agreement on the first thing worth noting. For both Catherine and Margaret, one’s own history only becomes of interest when one’s attentive, intentional journey toward God begins. The divergences in their narrative structure may obscure this commonality—Catherine does describe her own early life, in a way, while Margaret describes almost nothing of her life before the illness which precipitated her life of

⁹⁹ Ebner, *Revelations*, 90.

¹⁰⁰ Ebner, *Revelations*, 91. She seems to refer the quantity of food she will eat to the needs of others, “so that I would have no gnawing pangs of conscience about breaking off too much bread for myself.” There may be an implied reference here to the financial difficulties of her monastery—her own portion must be carefully measured both to allow her the sensation of hunger without overcoming her health and to refrain from consuming food needed by her sisters.

¹⁰¹ Ebner, *Revelations*, 89.

devotional suffering. In Margaret's case, it is silence that covers over her early history—of her first twenty years, she can only say that, in the year before her suffering, she began to feel “inner exhortations to direct my whole life according to His will.” Aside from those preparatory stirrings of conscience, “I cannot describe because I had not been attentive to myself.”¹⁰² Catherine, as was noted earlier, occludes her own early history with an allegorical morality play intended rather to describe the human condition than to recount the trivial details of a life lived other than in the light of God's Pure Love. Differences in structure aside, this common silence testifies clearly to a common project. Arguments from silence are always dangerous, but it is useful here to compare Catherine's and Margaret's disinclination to address their earlier lives with the absence of biographical details in, for example, Hildegard of Bingen's *Scivias* or Julian of Norwich's *Showings*. The latter women were engaged in projects of systematic and constructive theology; they seemed to have little interest in discussing their own lives aside from the ecstatic visions that authorized their theological projects. Their (relatively few) autobiographical references are rather like the apostle Paul's: defending their own authority to speak through the miraculous and ecstatic visions in which God commanded them to speak. To begin with the authorizing vision is to begin a theological topic as all theological topics must be begun—by revelation. Catherine and Margaret were, by contrast, interested in narrating their own lives theologically and in doing theology through the story they had to tell about their own lives. Their own lives *were* the point. To begin with their first ecstatic or mystical experience of God is to claim that their lives *as theological lives* began then. Julian's childhood is not relevant because she is not talking about herself; Margaret's childhood is not relevant because she was not yet paying attention. There is nothing of interest in a life lived inattentively.

¹⁰² Ebner, *Revelations*, 85.

Hildegard's vision of the crucified Christ, his cross set upon the Eucharistic table and his wounds bleeding into the Eucharistic chalice, structures her (rather conventional) description of the second person of the Trinity. Catherine's vision of the crucified Christ makes her a *person*, integrating the previously scattered elements of herself so that she is able to order them and begin a theological life.¹⁰³

Catherine and Margaret likewise share the beginning of their lives in dis-ease. That is, their lives properly begin with an experience of deep suffering, in and through which they experience direction, vocation, and redemption. Margaret's struggle to align her will with God's begins with a three-year-long near-fatal illness, during which she is in blinding pain, sometimes paralyzed, sometimes unable to speak, and, at least initially, greatly distressed over her illness. For Catherine, the beginning of life is shrouded in the nomadic disintegration of a life lived apart from God's will. This disintegration must lead to profound despair, and it is in that condition of despair that God "illuminates" the Soul, allowing Catherine to begin her life *as Catherine*. Like Margaret, Catherine names this experience of depression as a kind of gift from God that prepared her to receive the transforming reality of God's love.

A third important convergence is the most difficult to relate adequately, in part because it expressed precisely in their divergence from each other. Margaret and Catherine share a certain dissimilarity to other medieval women mystics—or, at least, to a way of reading them that has become current in the academy—in the way they relate their narratives of suffering to their own will. As was shown in the first chapter, modern sensibilities are exquisitely attuned to the intersection of autonomy and suffering. This sensitivity has given rise to several recent treatments of medieval female spirituality that have helpfully identified how lives dominated by ascetic practices and

¹⁰³ Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), and Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998).

the imagery of Christ's suffering humanity were engaged in a struggle for religious autonomy. More nuanced than the somewhat monochromatic claims of Finke or Greenspan noted above—that these were calculated or intentional acts of straightforward resistance to plainly misogynistic religious and social structures—these studies take seriously the more complex interrelationship between power, submission, and resistance.

Rudolph Bell, for example, takes his cue from current psychiatric evaluations and treatments of anorexia nervosa: anorectic behavior comes about in response to an intricate yet convoluted web of signals a modern girl (anorexia generally arises in females and during adolescence) receives in regard to her appearance. Thinness (and physical beauty more broadly) is one of a few traits consistently approved and rewarded in young females, yet the steps that a girl might take to achieve those rewards may prompt correction, disapproval, or intervention from parents or such other authorities as educators or medical caregivers. The twin incentives of societal approval and parental opposition feed the anorexic girl's choice to control her own body through self-starvation—all the more so as her successes in weight loss and self-assertion mount. Analogously, a medieval woman has fewer avenues of expressing or embodying holiness than are available to men, and the ascetic practices which might identify a woman as holy could likewise be viewed as evidence of heresy or demon possession. The "holy anorexic" is confirmed in her path of self-starvation both by the ascription of holiness conferred on account of her suffering and by the suspicion aroused by her extreme practices of asceticism, especially where that suspicion is allayed or countered through divine intervention.¹⁰⁴

The struggle for autonomy looms large in Bell's renarration of these saints' *vitae*.

¹⁰⁴ Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

While his efforts to offer a psychoanalytic reading of these women are unimpressive—particularly in the absence of any serious or consistent engagement with the problem of collaborative authorship present in virtually all of these texts—his identification of the persistence of themes of self-assertion in the face of parental, religious, or social conflict is helpful. When one is obliged to suffer the removal of one’s autonomy—whether in the form of a forced marriage, opposition to taking religious orders, or physical or sexual abuse—*choosing* another form of suffering—starvation, disfigurement, isolation—functions as a reassertion of one’s autonomy. The relationship between suffering and consent is inverted, transforming utterly the meaning and experience of them both. In the first case, the injury is all but identical with the removal of choice; in the second, the retrieval of autonomy is identical with the (chosen) injury. That the chosen suffering is further rewarded by its association with otherworldliness, whether of the divine or demonic sort, only amplifies the sense of transformation.

Caroline Bynum similarly probes the relationship between typically female expressions of piety in the medieval period and the social boundaries within which they were pursued. She sees food as the one realm over which women had relative control in the medieval period; women thus naturally gravitated toward food-related piety—hunger relief for the poor, extraordinary fasting, attention to and production of food-related iconography, and intense devotion to the Eucharistic host.¹⁰⁵ The suffering Christ was, moreover, of signal importance to medieval holy women, both because of his association with the Eucharistic meal and his inversion of the categories of suffering and triumph that might otherwise have dominated their lives. As women, they were always

¹⁰⁵ Bynum, *Holy Feast, passim*, but see, e.g., 93, 119, 129. David Aers and Lynn Staley challenge the notion that women had anything but provisional and mitigated authority over food in medieval England. Even if the preparation of meals in a household might be said to be under the authority of a woman within that household, such authority all but recedes from view when the broader realities of food production, commoditization, and distribution are considered. David Aers and Lynn Staley, *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 32.

subject to someone else's authority, always passive in the face of another's agency; to choose acts of piety and self-abnegation that consciously appropriated Christ's suffering body as their own was both to perform the same inversion of autonomy and suffering noted in Bell's work *and* to appropriate the salvific import of Christ's suffering. Their low social status already gave them an advantageous proximity to the suffering Christ. Conscious acts of literal, physical imitation of his sufferings enacted an immediate identification with Christ that bypassed the hierarchal intermediaries of the church.¹⁰⁶

Imitatio Christi is likewise a focal point of Sarah Beckwith's study of the intersection of asceticism, power, and gender.¹⁰⁷ With decidedly less confidence than Bynum's that the imitation of Christ's passion represented or enacted any effective resistance to hierarchalized gender roles in the late medieval period, Beckwith calls attention to the importance of Christ's body in disputes over identity and authority. Christ's body is "ostensibly an image of the unity of Christian society," especially when deployed by those who imagine themselves "as its head, or indeed, acting for, or else in some privileged relation to, that head." It is "highly hierarchalized," intended to reinforce "the exclusive rights of the church . . . to administer that body" (through clerical control of the Eucharist).¹⁰⁸ At the same time, however, the use among ascetics of the imagery of Christ's body is destabilizing, "for his body is also the focus for the democratizing, lay tendencies of late medieval piety."¹⁰⁹ The hybridity of Christ's body makes it thus "a fundamentally unstable image, a site of conflict where the clerical and the lay meet and fight it out, borrowing from each other's discourses."¹¹⁰ Asceticism in this context functions as a kind of "apprenticeship in suffering," joining the pious ascetic

¹⁰⁶ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 76-77, 85.

¹⁰⁷ Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁰⁸ Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, 26, 28, 31.

¹⁰⁹ Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, 32.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

to Christ through the self-inflicted pain.¹¹¹ In the case of Margery Kempe, *imitatio Christi* authorizes a particularly transgressive form of piety in which Margery, a married woman moving about freely in secular society, claims the social and religious status reserved for cloistered virgins.¹¹²

These three studies are important because they highlight the deep significance of autonomy and self-assertion in (some) medieval spiritual autobiographies. Yet what is most striking about these studies is how ill either Margaret or Catherine sits within the categories any of them construct. Catherine, for example, pays little attention to the imagery of Christ's passion.¹¹³ Aside from a vision of the bleeding, crucified Christ early in her period of transformation, vivid passion or crucifixion imagery is nowhere evident either in the Dialogue or in the Treatise. In that vision, Christ's self-sacrifice is associated with love ("it has been shed for your love, to atone for your sins"), but with *Catherine's* love, not God's (or Christ's). The soul responds to this vision in love, and the vision is directly followed by another, "more striking yet." In the next vision, God "showed her the love with which he had suffered out of love for her," and compared that love to the sinfulness of humanity.¹¹⁴ It is this second vision that is the controlling vision for the life that follows (as well as for the Treatise): the intensity and power of God's love and its comparison to the rankness and offense of human sinfulness are what drives Catherine's spiritual projects, including any of her ascetic disciplines that might, in other medieval women, be categorized as disciplines of *imitatio Christi*.

One would think that autonomy (or, in perhaps less anachronistic language, self-

¹¹¹ Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, 80.

¹¹² Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, 85, 101. Margery is particularly vilified for wearing white to Eucharist. (Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. Barry Windeatt [New York: Penguin Books, 1994], 142, e.g.)

¹¹³ I am indebted to Kenneth Jorgenson for alerting me to this dearth of Passion imagery in Catherine's work. Kenneth Jorgenson, "'Love Conquers All': The Conversion, Asceticism, and Altruism of St. Caterina of Genoa," in *Renaissance Society and Culture*, ed. John Monfasani and Ronald G. Musto (New York: Italica Press, 1991), 92.

¹¹⁴ Catherine of Genoa, "The Spiritual Dialogue," 118.

determination or self-direction), too, would be a key theme in Catherine's work, since her biography suggests her to be uncommonly independent and capable, yet the absence of such themes is as extraordinary as her self-sufficiency. She offers no hint of the unhappiness of her marriage, no stories of struggle against ecclesial or social authorities, no narratives of familial disapproval or abandonment, despite her many biographers' fascination with those themes. The absence of a confessor for most of her life—an extraordinary occurrence, especially for a woman granted permission for daily Eucharist—is never highlighted, though it surely occasioned comment. She does describe her programmatic refusal of the comforts of human society, but this, like all her other acts of piety, are narrated as the struggle for authority *over her own recalcitrant body*, not over against any competing ecclesial or social authority. She also, like Margery Kempe, won the concession of a celibate marriage from her husband, but her narration has none of the drama or angst of Margery's triumph, nor does she detail her horror at the marriage act. Catherine's struggle against her body is not identical with her struggle against social norms—her penitential asceticism largely ends before her vocation begins, and she seems to have little difficulty navigating her way through her public vocation. Her struggle against her body, in its practical dimensions, continues long after her vocation is fulfilled.¹¹⁵

Margaret, for her part, minimizes and obscures struggles for authority within her text. Certain incidents suggest that her perceived vocation did indeed call forth opposition from others within her family and community. As noted before, she acknowledges the discord caused by her disruptive presence in the monastic community. She also suggests that her family—to whom she returns, for a period, when political and financial troubles disrupt her monastery—opposes at least some of her

¹¹⁵ Margery, by contrast, largely gives up heroic abstinence after her husband accedes to a celibate marriage.

behavior: “There in the world I was even more withdrawn than in the monastery so that my mother and my brothers and sisters were angry with me.”¹¹⁶ Yet even where conflicts with her superiors or family are narrated, they are narrated with an emphasis on her pleasure at the resolution of the conflict, whether or not she has been proved right.¹¹⁷ One strange story near the end of her narrative tells of a conflict not with an authority figure, but with competing authorities. When members of her monastery disobeyed a bishop’s orders not to bury a lay woman on their grounds, she found herself unable to “utter any word nor receive our Lord” in the sanctuary. After three weeks, her sisters appealed to a visiting superior to command Margaret to pray and to receive Eucharist in the sanctuary. Her response is one of utter compliance: “Now my Lord Jesus Christ knows well that when the command was given I felt a release from great heaviness and received great joy and a feeling of lightness. Immediately, I went into choir and could pray as I liked just as before.” Not only that, she emphasizes the sense of union and harmony with her superiors: “And my Lord Jesus Christ knows well that I have felt more affectionate respect for my superiors ever since and greater reverence for their commands than before.”¹¹⁸ In the face of competing and conflicting authorities, Margaret responds to any resolution of the conflict with gratitude, even when that resolution requires the cessation or frustration of her own projects. Margaret is supremely uninterested in heroic virtue for its own sake, nor in concessions to her religious independence. Instead, she remains attentive to and a part of her community (including the communion of saints and the Poor Souls) and laments the disruptiveness that she knows she causes. Far from being a struggle for autonomy, Margaret’s is a

¹¹⁶ Ebner, *Revelations*, 88.

¹¹⁷ Margery Kempe, again, provides a useful counterpoint here. Her narrative is replete with stories of conflict—with her countrymen, with her husband, with church leaders—and the vast majority end in her eventual triumph, either through divine confirmation or intervention, the intercession of a sympathetic ecclesial figure, or, simply, Margery’s assertion that she *will* be proved right someday.

¹¹⁸ Ebner, *Revelations*, 168.

struggle for *obedience*.

For neither woman, then, was voluntary suffering the hard-won alternative to involuntary suffering or to the loss of autonomy. Their narratives are not so much about empowerment as about self-integration. Neither woman expressed her conflict in terms of political or social disenfranchisement but in terms of illness, depression, and alienation from her own self. The recalcitrance of their bodies, the disintegration of their bodies and wills, required a theological renarration of their lives—particularly as their lives were so marked by physical suffering. Catherine is the heroine of her own story, perhaps, but the antagonist is not any external authority—it is her own depression and self-interest. If Margaret struggles with autonomy, it is only in the sense that she struggles *against* her natural inclination for self-direction. Her emphasis is rather on accepting the divine will for herself than on navigating the world through her own free choice. Choice (or consent) and suffering are in a complex relationship for both women.

Equally complex is the relationship between normative and extraordinary (or idiosyncratic) expressions of spirituality or theology. The lines of heterodoxy and transgressive praxis are more easily traced in a Hildegard of Bingen or a Margery Kempe than in Margaret or Catherine. A careful comparison with Thomas Aquinas's systematic treatment of the topics we find in Margaret's or Catherine's narrative is necessary to show the intricacy of their consonances and dissonances.¹¹⁹

The three theologians differ subtly, but significantly, in their understanding of the function of the passions in human reasoning. As was noted in the previous chapter, for Thomas, bodily sensations are a means of knowing, and felt pain and pleasure means of evaluating, objects in creation. Aversion names the sensitive soul's rejection of

¹¹⁹ Thomas's is, of course, the most clearly "authorized" (and authorizing) voice in the Catholic theological tradition, yet both Margaret and Catherine share a measure of recognition as "authorized" theologians. Catherine has been canonized, and her biographers are quick to note her continuing influence in Catholic and Protestant spirituality. Margaret was beatified by Pope John Paul II.

particular objects as unfitting, while desire names the sensitive soul's acceptance of and attraction toward objects it judges to be fitting. Though the sensitive soul's judgments must be further evaluated by the rational soul—that is, they must be compared to the ultimate end of happiness (whether natural or supernatural)—the sensitive soul is at least provisionally reliable. It is the beginning of a rightly ordered process of knowing, discerning, and acting well.

Catherine discounts or rejects this role for bodily sensation almost entirely. Her body's attractions and aversions are obstacles to be overcome, not reliable (or even relevant) guides to behavior. The body's innate aversion to pus and lice is not, for Catherine, an instinctual protection against contamination and infection; it is a barrier to her effective work caring for those who are suffering.¹²⁰ Still less are the body's evaluations of pain and pleasure reliable guides to the divine will. Soul's early assertion that "the beauty and goodness and joy of created things are means for knowing and enjoying things divine" is explicitly rejected by Catherine after she is cleansed by God's love, such that she is suspicious *even of spiritual pleasures* that too closely resemble bodily pleasures.¹²¹ Her rational will must wrest control of her body away from the body itself; the rational will is a despotic, not a political, ruler over the sensitive will. Her Soul, the seat of her will, has been enlightened by God's love, and it is rightly fixed on God. Where her body, her passions, her natural inclinations, do not conform to that spiritually enlightened will, they must be retrained or rejected altogether.¹²²

For Margaret, this role is exactly inverted. The inclinations of her rational will—

¹²⁰ Catherine of Genoa, "The Spiritual Dialogue," 131.

¹²¹ Catherine of Genoa, "The Spiritual Dialogue," 102, 124.

¹²² One ought to note that the language Thomas uses to describe the various actors within the body-soul composite and their respective capacities and actions, is more precise and analytical than Catherine's. "Soul," "Body," "Self-Love," and "Human Frailty" must stand in for Thomas's more systematic categories of rational and sensitive will, intellectible and sensible particulars, intellectual joy and sensible delight, and so on. In order to compare the two, one must map Thomas's and Catherine's categories on to each other's in ways that stretch, perhaps, their intended use, but not, one hopes, in unfitting ways.

to pray for a certain person, to participate in a certain moment of the liturgy, to fast, not to fast—are scarcely guides to the divine will at all. She is best able to discern the divine will when she experiences her body as patient to some other will than her own. Rather than conforming her body's actions and reactions to her retrained will, she struggles to give rational consent to her body's involuntary participation in God's will for her. The grave illness which precipitates her life of attentive devotion is paradigmatic for the rest of her life: she resolves the discord between her will and her body not by retraining and overcoming her body but by discovering in its disruptiveness the enactment of God's higher will. This, too, bears little resemblance to Thomas's measured confidence in the body.

Yet though it has been the project of this chapter to present Catherine and Margaret as voices in some tension with Thomas, one would not want to press the differences between Margaret and Catherine, on the one hand, and Thomas, on the other, too sharply. There are important continuities between and among the theologians. Catherine takes up the notion of the body's and the passions' susceptibility to the control of the will, programmatically retraining her body and her passions more perfectly to carry out her spiritually-defined projects. In this sense, she is rather more a disciple of Thomas than less: she does not accept her experiences of aversion and attraction as givens, but instead harnesses the plasticity of the sensible soul through the direction of the will. The ruthlessness of her program of training her passions to her will may have offended Thomas's sense of order, but her understanding of the *mechanism* of human sensation and evaluation is remarkably similar.

Likewise, the three theologians share an emphasis on divine love as the motivation and power of human happiness. The language of love is more conspicuous in Catherine's and Margaret's work, but Thomas is no less attentive to the dynamic of

attraction in spiritual and physical well-being. Love is the indispensable ground and goal of human activity for all three theologians. For Catherine, the only relief for the despair she felt at her soul's unworthiness in comparison to God's love was the embrace of that love as purgative; this was the understanding of love that informed her subsequent life of asceticism. Margaret's narrative is suffused with divine and human love—learning to receive illness and suffering and involuntary spiritual experiences as divine gifts, serving her community and the Poor Souls through her prayers, expressing her devotion to Christ's Passion (his works of love), and, most extraordinarily, being assured of God's willingness to be bound to her in love. The role of love in human activity is more easily overlooked in Thomas—masked, perhaps, by the precision and balance of the language of attraction and aversion, desire and fear—but it is nonetheless omnipresent. Even the basest of human activities depend on rudimentary and instinctual movements of attraction and aversion; the highest activity, the contemplation of God, relies on the innate attractiveness of God and the human capacity to respond to that attractiveness. For all three theologians, then, the entirety of life, *including suffering life*, is only properly understood with reference to both divine and human love.

Most importantly, however, the three theologians share an understanding of suffering that allows for its compatibility with happiness. As was noted in the previous chapter, Thomas's systematic exploration of the passions articulated the relationship between the human experience of both pleasure and pain such that neither was absolutely or unproblematically related to beatitude. Pleasure and pain, delight and suffering are part of an intricate system of perception and reason whereby one can pursue that which leads to God, a system which could not function without aversion, given the presence of that which is evil and injurious in the world. The scholarly rigor and harmonious balance of Thomas's treatise may obscure the experiential meaning of

this claim; Catherine's and Margaret's narratives, on the other hand, make this claim almost entirely by means of their lived experience of suffering as beatitude. What Thomas explains systematically, Catherine and Margaret demonstrate narratively.

Thomas gestures towards the necessity of suffering by describing human flourishing in terms of paired opposites—attraction and aversion, pleasure and pain, love and hate, desire and fear, hope and despair. Removing pain or suffering would unbalance the equation, crippling the human capacity to understand, evaluate, and act within creation. Margaret demonstrates the necessity of suffering by beginning her life with it; whatever the systematic or metaphysical role of suffering within creation, *her* life of devotion would not have been possible without it. Suffering is necessary for Catherine, too, although in a different sense than for Margaret. The “stain” of sin—its culpability, its corruptive effects, its infectiousness—makes the full experience of God's love painful. Catherine embraces pain not because it is good, but because it is evidence of the goodness of God purging from her whatever is incompatible with itself.

Similarly, Catherine and Margaret embody in their very lives Thomas's suggestion that moral agency continues even in the midst of great suffering or great compulsion. Where modern sensibilities tend to equate moral agency with the capacity for free choice, Thomas describes the moral life in such a way that passivity is its handmaiden rather than its enemy. The moral agent is acted upon by external objects, by habit, and by divine sovereignty, yet remains a moral agent. The capacity to suffer rightly is a mark of moral maturity. Margaret's and Catherine's narratives show how this might be so—they become moral agents in spite of, through, and because of their suffering. The allegorical description of Catherine's early life suggests that a life oriented exclusively toward even modest comfort and ease *creates moral peril* rather than enables moral stability. Margaret details her struggles for emotional and spiritual

obedience when physical distress made bodily obedience impossible. Her description of her involuntary spiritual experiences, moreover, challenges the notion that volition is a crucial component of moral responsibility at all.

Finally, through their insistence on the particularity of their vocations, Catherine and Margaret exemplify the necessity of prudence and discernment that is evident in Thomas's description of the moral life. For Thomas, the moral life is extended in time rather than punctiliar; it is relational rather than discrete. Each act, each incident, each decision must be evaluated both absolutely *and* with reference to the infinitely complex web of interrelatedness that is God's creation. One cannot say whether suffering is bad or good; one must say whether *this* pain is bad or good—the pain of *this* knife wound. *This* pain can only be evaluated in terms of its object—whether a knife is genuinely unfitting and aversive. But the absolute aversiveness of *that* object is of little importance compared to *this* human's pursuit of her natural and supernatural ends; so the knife that cuts away diseased flesh is entirely different than the knife wielded by a crazed attacker. And so on it goes—each aspect of human life can only be fully evaluated in terms of the entirety of that human life, including the life which is beyond this life. Thus, Catherine judges even the spiritual joy attending Eucharist as potentially dangerous to *her* pursuit of God, and Margaret names her painful illnesses as God's marvelous provision for her. Catherine ruthlessly eschews any comfort that might compete with or distract from the pleasure of her experience of "Love Pure and Naked," even while working tirelessly for the comfort of others who are sick and in pain. Margaret's joy at learning to sense divine guidance in her usual afflictions is tempered by her distress at the notoriety and discord those afflictions cause; she does not consider her own joy apart from its relationship to her community. Even where their actions are troubling or their theological assertions problematic, Margaret's and Catherine's willingness to undertake

the difficult task of narrating their lives theologically is compelling.

Epilogue

The forgoing accounts of suffering are important not because they solve the problem of suffering and its relationship to the moral life in one compellingly uniform way, but because precisely in their different ways of narrating and systematizing suffering, they give us a rich vocabulary for talking about suffering in a manner that illuminates its contribution to the well-lived life. This understanding of suffering pushes against the almost strictly negative account of suffering that often underlies arguments about moral actions, especially those that are advanced in the context of bioethics disputes. If, as these accounts suggest, suffering is conducive or even necessary to moral development, then arguments that presume the absolute obligation to relieve suffering or refrain from causing it are insufficiently attentive to this dynamic of life-affirming suffering. Moreover, medical practices which fail to equip patients (whether presently healthy or ill) to accustom themselves to productive and well-ordered suffering are failing in a crucial task. To care for the health of an individual involves, among many other tasks, training the individual in recognizing and coping well with suffering that is ordered to their good. Although bioethics and medical practice are beginning to deal with the problem of managing pain and suffering that *cannot* be relieved, the problem that remains is the problem of suffering that *could* be relieved but *ought* not be. A weighty account of moral responses to suffering must include an account of how to distinguish among different kinds of suffering and the appropriate response (or range of responses) to the differences.

For both Paul and Luke, human suffering prompts both human and divine action to relieve it. The Kingdom of God, the eschatological consummation of God's purposes for heaven and earth, includes the relief of every kind of human suffering, and participation in the coming Kingdom entails concrete acts of the relief of one's

neighbors' suffering. Whether the language is of "bearing one another's burdens" and "pleasing our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor" (Gal 6:2, Rom 15:2) or of concern for the poor, captives, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and the oppressed (Luke 4:18, 14:13), both Paul and Luke make caring for one's neighbors a crucial moral obligation. Acts of compassion in the face of human suffering testify to the gospel and to one's allegiance to Christ. Nonetheless, Paul's affirmation of the fitness of suffering for one's allegiance to Christ, of suffering in imitation of Christ, and of suffering with Christ, on this side of the eschaton, does not allow for a strictly negative or oppositional posture toward human suffering. *Some* suffering is ordered to the good of humans, and some suffering could not be remedied without recourse to that which is not ordered to the good of humans.

Thomas does not systematically enumerate different kinds of suffering. Indeed, his exposition of suffering as one of the passions suggests that the faithful Thomist could reasonably understand all kinds of suffering as essentially alike. They are all, at bottom, aversive responses, largely but not absolutely involuntary and pre-rational, manifested in body and soul, to something perceived as unfitting to the human subject. Yet even this minimalist description hints at the necessity of prudent and wise evaluation of particular instances of suffering. The perception of unfitness is not infallible—one may judge either oneself or the painful stimulus wrongly. Similarly, the immediacy and involuntariness of the response does not militate against its plasticity; the involuntary movement may be confirmed upon rational evaluation, or it may need to be rejected and resisted. That is, the passion, the immediate and pre-rational response, may incite a genuinely virtuous response to the precipitating cause or it may prevent a genuinely virtuous response. If the latter, the prudent person will have learned effective means to thwart the passion's interference with virtue—activities that cultivate a physical or

intellectual state more conducive to virtue.

Moreover, Thomas's understanding of the life of virtue as normed by and directed toward humanity's ultimate end—beatitude—places all instances of suffering (indeed, all experiences whatsoever) within a narrative framework that does not allow them to be evaluated solely in absolute terms. Instead, moments of suffering are judged *and experienced* with reference to the trajectory of the life in which they occur.

Retrospectively, a pain may be judged to have contributed to or even caused an improvement in one's life, even when the experience remains vividly painful in one's memory (as when a heart attack motivates a man to adopt healthier eating and exercise habits). Prospectively, one may judge an anticipated pain to be worth the expected outcome, especially if the pain is temporary and necessary for the outcome (as when a scoliosis patient undergoes painful and inconvenient spinal surgery to straighten her malformed spine). Morally, a choice that entails physical suffering or material loss may be judged preferable to one that entails shame or condemnation (as when one cares for an aging parent at considerable financial and personal sacrifice).

Memory, anticipation, and moral conviction also affect the lived experience of suffering. The memory of past injuries may alleviate a present pain (as when a mother of five laughs off a sprained ankle as not to be compared to childbirth) or aggravate it (as when the repeated experience of late miscarriage makes the accompanying labor pains an agony for the woman undergoing it). The expectation of a positive result may mitigate the perception of injury (as when the anticipation of successful weight loss makes one's hunger pains less acute), just as the expectation of misery may exaggerate it (as when the hopelessness of a course of chemo exacerbates the patient's nausea and exhaustion). The expectation that physical pain will be of short duration or the knowledge that it arises from a temporary condition may moderate its effects, just as the

unexpected prolongation of a physical pain that was assumed to be temporary may intensify its effects. The satisfaction of knowing oneself to be doing right may lessen the actual difficulty of the doing.

These examples point not only to the holistic framework within which human passions must be interpreted but also to the plasticity of the very experience of them. Pain and suffering, like all the passions, are characterized by passivity, yes—they are the more strongly felt as their conflict with volition increases. But they are not experienced *exclusively* as passivity. The human passions occur within a framework of activity and passivity, of volition and involuntariness, that makes all but its most extreme forms susceptible to some form of willed behavior. The plasticity of human experience of the passions means, for Thomas, that the one who is suffering continues to be a moral agent, capable of incorporating her experience of suffering into her moral projects.

In short, for Thomas, the plasticity of human passions allows one to talk of suffering well, and one cannot endure or evaluate suffering well without prudence. Even if one's immediate physical and emotional responses to stimuli are largely involuntary, they are not outside the realm of rational (and thus moral) discernment. With prudence—that is, with the wisdom and skill to measure one's activity and experience according to the hoped-for end of beatitude—the moral agent can discern which pains are to be shunned and which embraced. She can welcome and appreciate when her reflexive and pre-rational aversion to what is genuinely unfit guides her away from evil, and she can resist and overcome that reflexive aversion when it attempts to lead her away from a difficult but necessary or worthy task.

Catherine of Genoa, likewise, did not distinguish different kinds of suffering in any systematic or theoretical way. Her work gives the appearance of treating all pains and pleasures as essentially alike: all pleasures as potential temptations and distractions

and all pains as spiritual disciplines. Yet in a different way than Thomas, she evidences a kind of prudential evaluation of suffering, such that she judges and responds to some aversive experiences differently than others. The primary difference she enacts is between her own suffering and that of others. In contrast to the essentially self-contained asceticism of some mystics (indeed, in some tension even with her own rejection of the comforts of friendship), Catherine's life of ascetic piety leads her toward, rather than away from, others. Though she welcomed her own experiences of physical pain and illness, her primary work after her experience of spiritual awakening was the relief of others' physical pain and illness. She enacts, therefore, a complex evaluation of the meaning of suffering in the well-lived life, one to which the simplistic modern concepts of consent and autonomy do not entirely do justice. Instead, it is her understanding of her own vocation, her own special calling to a particular kind of relationship with the Pure Love of God, that guides her evaluation of the role of suffering in a well-lived life. Her own experiences of illness and pain are judged to be well-ordered to her spiritual good, yet she focuses her attention on the relief of others' suffering. The illness and pain experienced by patients at the hospital in Genoa are unsuitable and call for her care in relieving them.

The other prudential consideration she brings to bear upon her evaluation of her own aversive experiences is the consonance between her bodily experience and her rational will. That is, when she purposes to serve the sick in the hospital, her own natural aversion to noxious smells and sights is an impediment to her. Though she welcomes other experiences of aversion—unpalatable food, uncomfortable sleeping arrangements, etc.—she rejects *these* experiences of aversion as unsuitable. Her revulsion at lice or pus or the stench of illness leads her away from her duty, while her discomfort from hunger leads her toward her duty. Her program of habituation to the

sights and smells of the sickroom is geared towards eliminating her capacity to experience noxious stimuli, whereas her other ascetic disciplines are intended to embrace those noxious stimuli. While her will is a factor here, again, the difference is not between those aversive experiences she autonomously chooses and those she does not choose; the difference, rather, is between those aversive experiences that are fitting to her vocation and those that are not. Catherine perceives *some* of her experiences of discomfort or distaste as opposed to rather than congenial to her spiritual and vocational projects. It is not the case that any and all suffering—all aversive physical experience—is compatible with an ascetic spirituality. Even the ascetic must be attentive to the complex interplay of forces at work in her life. Where a noxious stimulus makes one shrink from an obligation, it is unwelcome; where it contributes to the project of stripping away distractions, it is useful. Like Thomas, who evaluates ascetic practices with respect to their effect on the community and on the moral agency of the individual, Catherine, too, evaluates carefully her embrace of the grotesque. The standard against which she measures it, however, is not reasonable care for her own capacities or for the sensibilities of her companions. It is, rather, her own uncompromising standard for the performance of her vocation. She *must* relieve the physical suffering of her patients; therefore, she *must* eliminate her natural aversion to their grotesqueness.

Margaret, like Catherine, interprets and experiences her illness and pain with reference to her spiritual vocation, but her understanding both of her vocation and of the role of bodily pain and illness within that vocation are quite different than Catherine's. Her body is rather the conduit of the divine will than an obstruction of it. She perceives her body, especially in its illnesses and involuntary movements, as performing the work of obedience on her behalf, when her rational will still pursues other goods than the good God intends for her. Her vocation is contemplative where Catherine's is active:

her work for others is primarily the work of prayer. She is aided—even directed—in this work through her involuntary bodily experiences, through which she is apprenticed in a kind of openness of spirit that allows God to work through her. This requires an embrace of a different kind of suffering than Catherine embraced. The frustration of her own will, the recalcitrance of her own body, the inadequacy of her natural inclinations and desires—all these are forms of suffering, and it is through them that Margaret learns God’s will. She, too, seems uninterested in categorizing or labeling the different kinds of suffering she experiences; it is only in their effects or resolutions that she can judge their character.

If there is something that all three theologians together can gesture toward, in a way that might be particularly helpful for modern biomedical discourse, it is the need for “paying attention.” Margaret’s narrative begins with the illness that prompted her to begin paying attention, but both women exemplify, each in her different way, a kind of patient attention to the capacities and inclinations of their bodies, even in the midst of conflict over whether their bodies or their wills more faithfully express the divine will.¹ They pair this with a correspondingly patient attention to the shape of their own lives as lived toward God, in concert with Thomas’s understanding of the ends of human life. The immediacy of pain and suffering—that is, both the intensely personal nature of it and its tendency to focus attention on the moment in which it is occurring—tends to incline any well-meaning person toward an immediate—that is, timely, effective, and

¹ The time for such patient attention to patients’ bodies is at a premium in modern medical practice. In her recent memoir, Victoria Sweet (*God’s Hotel: A Doctor, a Hospital, and a Pilgrimage to the Heart of Medicine* [New York: Riverhead Books, 2012]), a physician who practiced medicine among the poor in San Francisco, observes that time is becoming the scarcest commodity in medical practice. She offers several anecdotes of diagnostic or treatment insights gained from a period of attentive listening and observing of her patients’ suffering. The most remarkable thing is how little time this actually takes: at one point, she says she got in the habit of sitting with a patient for *fifteen minutes* in order to better observe and understand his or her pains and pathologies. This was something she had to learn, to argue for, to portray as worthwhile, in contrast to the inefficient “efficiencies” of the health care industry. She even had to coin a name for it: Slow Medicine (borrowing from the recent Slow Food movement).

efficient—response. What is appropriate and even obligatory in an emergency room is not appropriate to the whole of human experience of suffering, however. It takes time, reflection, prudence, and sensitivity to place instances of pain, illness, injury, or sorrow in the narrative of the life in which they occur. It may even take time and reflection to experience those pains rightly—to learn what my body is telling me with this twinge or ache or muscle weakness, which foods or chairs or motions or memories prompt that sharp pain, whether that racing heart is anxiety or guilt or heart failure or love or a good workout. From the individual experience of injury or illness to the broadest societal controversies over the practice of medicine, human suffering calls forth an immediate inclination to *solve the problem*, yes. But if that charitable impulse to action is not matched by an equally charitable commitment to understanding, it will not be well-ordered.

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Biography

Sarah Conrad Sours was born in Wilmington, Delaware, on September 10, 1974. She graduated *cum laude* from University of Delaware in 1996 with an Honors BA in English and Music. She graduated *summa cum laude* from Duke Divinity School with a Master of Divinity in 2001. She received a John Wesley Fellowship in 2004 and a dissertation fellowship from The Institute For Discipleship at Southwestern College in 2009.