

“Loving Your Neighbor Professionally”:
Theology, Social Work, and the Limits of Moral Agency

by

Emily Z. Dubie
Graduate Program in Religion
Duke University

Date: _____

Approved:

Luke Bretherton, Advisor

Joseph Winters

Lauren Winner

Eugene Rogers

Anne Allison

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

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Abstract

In response to God's call to love neighbors, some Christians in the United States enter the social work profession. Yet, within a severely curtailed welfare system and the asymmetries of the professional helping relationship, moral hazards abound in discerning the shape of this love. Charged with supporting individuals and families meet their basic needs, social workers decide and act in conditions of insufficient recourses and unmanageable caseloads. Moreover, they frequently serve as gatekeepers to medical treatment, housing, or, paradigmatically, another's children. Paternalism and exhaustion threaten.

Drawing upon interviews with thirty-five Christian social workers in the American southeast, this dissertation traces their reasons for the work, their moral deliberations and judgments, their confessions of uncertainty and regret, and their prayers. In doing so, I offer a theological anthropology and phenomenology of moral agency pressed to its limits. I contend that at these limits, the human agent finds herself to be a creature dependent on God's care for herself and for others, a confession often mediated by prayer. As a corollary, I illustrate how a properly Christian account of the moral life depends upon reconstituting a version of divine command theory situated in close relation with a prayer-infused practical reason.

For Larry

Table of Contents

<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xii</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	1
1. The Problem	3
2. The Argument.....	6
3. Situating the Study.....	7
4. Limits & Scope.....	11
5. Methodology	14
6. Structure & Chapters	21
<i>CHAPTER ONE: Command</i>	25
1. Accounting for Command’s Relative Neglect	29
2. Calling & Questions of Definition.....	37
3. Command, Moral Obligation, & Regret.....	47
4. Receiving the Command	55
5. Testing the Reception of Divine Commands.....	71
6. God’s Command & Human Agency.....	78
Conclusion	85
<i>CHAPTER TWO: Paternalism</i>	87
1. Abuse, Fixing, & Empowerment	90
2. Professional Power, Specialized Knowledge, & Practical Reason	102
3. Pride & the Virtues of Caring	114
4. Justifying Interference	124
5. Wellbeing & Contestation	135
6. Moral Binds, Failure, & Prayer	150
Conclusion	157
<i>CHAPTER THREE: Exhaustion</i>	160

1. Compassion Fatigue & Burnout Considered	163
2. Despair and the Moral Meaning of Exhaustion	171
3. Exhaustion's Causes & Remedies.....	180
4. Painful Attunement & Moral Failure.....	191
5. The Moral Gap	201
6. The Consolation of God's Call	205
Conclusion	211
<i>CHAPTER FOUR: Prayer</i>	213
1. Denunciation, Neglect, and Distortion	215
2. Petitionary Prayer, Moral Deliberation, & Divine Indwelling.....	220
3. Providence, Outcomes, & Finite Responsibility.....	232
4. Discerning Vocation, Human Capacities, & God's Presence	240
5. A Theology of Prayer	254
Conclusion	268
<i>Conclusion</i>	271
<i>Appendix</i>	278
Recruitment.....	278
Interview Guides.....	278
<i>Bibliography</i>	282

List of Tables

Table 1: Religious Affiliation of Participants.....13

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Introduction

“Any beds open?” The young man peers in as I prop open the door and wince from the January cold. “No, no, there aren’t,” I shake my head. “But come in, and we can brainstorm.” I usher the man into the lobby of the thirty-bed homeless shelter. He drops his bag in my office, and I take his name and phone number, adding it to our waiting list. Number eighteen.

We call the other shelters within a several-hour radius. No luck, and no surprise. Nor is there a cold-weather, low-barrier shelter this year, without a willing congregation or agency. So, that is not an option either. I ask the man where he has been staying: first with a friend and now in his truck, which is out of gas. As he tells me this, I remember that last winter in town, a man died sleeping in his car. Recalling the forecast for tonight, is this the moment when I pull out my credit card and cover the cost of a motel? I hesitate. Most likely, he will need a place to stay again tomorrow, and more people will come to the door, and my paycheck is small enough to begin with.

So, I offer something more immediate. Would he like some food? He nods, and I pull containers out of the fridge, from dinner the night before, brought by church people. I also confirm that he knows where to find meals around town and about the church down the street that might be able to help with gas money. Does he need more blankets? “Sure,” he says, and I head to the laundry room in the back and pick out several. “Keep checking in,” I add, as I walk him to the door, after his meal. “Our wait lists typically don’t move much in the winter, but there’s always a chance.” I try to sound hopeful, but

I feel underwater. As I close the door behind him, I manage a silent plea, “Lord, be with him.”

Later that same day, my boss walks in. “Tom is leaving tomorrow. His brother called. He’s sending money for a bus ticket. Who should I call?” I open the spreadsheet. Eighteen names. The ones at the top are people who stopped in or called over two months ago. Since arriving in the job, I had participated in this ritual several times. In the beginning, I merely had given her the top name. That number no longer worked, the next two people never called back, and the following number was answered by a person who was no longer in touch with the person on the waitlist. At that point, my boss clarified, “Who has been most persistent? We want someone who is going to answer their phone and can come in tomorrow.” I scanned down the names, as faces and stories came to mind. Who should I pick? “Lord, help me,” I murmur, as I scroll through the list once more.

This was my first job. I managed the front office, volunteers, meals, fundraising events, and community relations at a small homeless shelter in northern New England. I was not a social worker. But I was the first point of contact for anyone seeking shelter. I opened the door, I took down the names, I received the calls. And as the job was only thirty hours a week, I also picked up shifts at a near-by residential treatment center for women in recovery, as a glorified resident assistant.

In the email that announced my hiring, the director wrote, “Emily is passionate about walking out her faith by caring for those in need.” This was true. I had heard and read the Gospels since I was a child, and what Jesus told Christians to do seemed straightforward. Love your neighbors, especially those who are sick, in prison, without

homes, or needing clothes. Working at a homeless shelter seemed an obvious response to this command, plus I was able to pay the bills (barely).

Yet before I had worked there even one year, I was disoriented, emotionally flattened, and bitter. I oscillated between the satisfaction of welcoming a new person out of the cold and the devastation of deciding who should get what when, divvying out resources based on cursory knowledge. Even in a small, relatively prosperous city, there never seemed to be enough to meet the onslaught of need.

1. The Problem

This dissertation emerges out of the intuition that my experience was not singular. In the United States every day, social workers make decisions for other people.¹ They determine others' needs and their access to basic goods and services, including medical treatment, shelter, or even a person's own children. They weigh whether a person poses a risk to themselves or others and sometimes their ability to make decisions for themselves. They do so as professionals, authorized by specialized training, licenses, and, frequently, the state. Situated within asymmetrical helping relationships, social workers confront the risk that their care can deteriorate into paternalist interference.

Social workers also act and decide within a severely curtailed welfare system.

Although charged with helping people meet their basic needs, they often command paltry

¹ Troubled histories haunt the terms used to describe people who use social services. Words like client, patient, recipient, and service-user are contested and appropriately so. Even as I acknowledge the contested character of this talk, I follow ethnographic practice and adopt 'local' usage, that is, the descriptors employed by my research participants. Cf., Neely Laurenzo Myers, *Recovery's Edge: An Ethnography of Mental Health Care and Moral Agency* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2015), xiii.

resources to do their jobs. Unmanageable administrative demands add to the overwhelming task of responding to complex social problems. Given these conditions, social workers encounter a further moral hazard: their own exhaustion. To prevent burnout and compassion fatigue, they manage their expectations for what is possible in the work, adopting strategies for coping with its pressures, and adjusting their degree of engagement with service-users on and off the clock. They also do this as professionals, guided by the norms of professional codes and the procedures of employing agencies.

Both paternalism and exhaustion raise pressing moral questions. When does caring assistance become an unwelcomed interference? What is the appropriate use of professional power? How does one respond to persistent structural failures? What options for action are there in the face of boundless need?

For Christians in social work, these questions take on an additional significance. From March 2018 through November 2019, I conducted thirty-six interviews and one focus group with thirty-five Christian social workers in the American southeast.² Throughout, my participants talked about God when they discussed the challenges they face, working in hospitals, immigration clinics, schools, therapy practices, domestic violence shelters, child welfare agencies, nursing homes, homeless shelters, community advocacy groups, and crisis centers. Most of them became social workers because they understood God calling them to do so. As one put it, social work is “loving your neighbor professionally.” And yet once in the job, they quickly learn that their best

² For information on how I recruited study participants and my interview guide, see the Appendix.

efforts at this professional love can damage others or damage themselves. They overstep their appropriate roles by trying to fix or save, and concentrations of human need overwhelm their capacities for empathy and action. What does love look like here, at these limits?

As my participants discern faithful ways forward, they often do so in reference to what God also is doing. At the limits of their moral agency, they invoke divine action: God too is acting, loving their neighbors. They do not need to be in control of other people's lives, because God is. They do not need to have enough for every possible need, because God does. They most often articulate this hope in God's help through prayer. Even as God calls them into action, so they call upon God to act, confessing their need for divine assistance.

Social workers are not alone in this confrontation with human limits. Teachers, nurses, doctors, counselors, clergy, and other helping professionals also enter careers with the promise of loving their neighbor professionally. Once they arrive, however, they find that the actual practice of caring for people is much more complicated than Jesus' command to "Go, and do likewise" might suggest. Moreover, these questions extend not only to Christians in the helping professions but anyone offering assistance to others, whether connected through longstanding familial bonds or meeting for the first time across the counter of a soup kitchen. In the era of Covid-19, exhausted public health workers, overflowing hospitals rationing supplies, and burgeoning lines for food assistance all illuminate the urgent press of human need, threatening to overwhelm capacities for human action. By gathering threads of wisdom from social workers in the

crucible of social service provision, I hope to shed light on how the confession of human limits, aided by prayer, may yield surprising resources for persevering in action.

2. The Argument

The primary aim of this dissertation then is to offer a theological anthropology and phenomenology of moral agency pressed to its limits. My contention is that at these limits, the human agent finds herself to be a creature dependent on God's care for herself and for others. Often mediated by prayer, this confession lends courage for continuing the work, now appropriately attuned to human capacities and accompanied by petitions for divine assistance. As a corollary, I add a methodological contention: a properly Christian account of the moral life depends upon reconstituting a version of divine command theory situated in close relation with a prayer-infused practical reason.

Professional social workers in the southeastern United States offer a case for discerning human limits. *Loving neighbors professionally* highlights the bounded character of human capacities. The agentic limits examined in this dissertation come with diverse features and origins. These include those imposed by structural constraints; those constitutive of the human creature's knowledge about herself, others, and the outcomes of action; those given by ethical or professional obligations; those cultivated to foreclose paternalism and exhaustion; and finally, those resulting from exhaustion's incapacity. Each limit has its own moral qualities: welcomed or resisted, natural or acquired, external or interior, obscure or altogether obvious. Each, however, are implicated in the moral deliberations of the agent as she discerns what she ought to do and what she can do in any given situation. For as my participants show, in social service provision, 'ought' does not imply 'can.'

3. Situating the Study

Beginning in the 1970s, the humanities and social sciences directed attention to the capacities of human agents to realize their interests within both traditional and modern social structures.³ Dissatisfied with accounts of social action that reduce all explanations to cultural scripts, scholars sought to carve out a space for agentic possibilities, often conceived in oppositional terms. As anthropologist George Marcus observes, critical inquiry adopted a “distinctively redemptive trope” organized around a marginalized subject who “alter[s] regimes of cultural norms and behavior” through “symbolic acts of inventiveness.”⁴

This critical tradition of scholarship typically theorizes religion as among those dominant structures in which agents reproduce or resist received norms. However, as Saba Mahmood has persuasively argued, the difficulty of this presumption is that it “elides dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance.”⁵ To remedy this situation, Mahmood turns to religious agents who, although appearing to accept a “deplorable passivity” according to the standards of progressive politics, do indeed display “agentival capacity” through

³ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 6.

⁴ George Marcus, “Introduction,” in *Para-Sites: A Casebook against Cynical Reason*, edited by George Marcus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1-2. In *Politics of Piety*, Mahmood offers the same conclusion: “the normative political subject of poststructuralist feminist theory often remains a liberatory one, whose agency is conceptualized on the binary model of subordination and subversion” (14).

⁵ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14.

“*inhabit*[ing] norms.”⁶ Like Mahmood, this dissertation also takes religious actors doing religious things typically dismissed by moderns as unacceptable docility. Contrary to this assessment, I aim to show how both acting in response to God’s command and praying in fact reconstitute human agency as appropriately *human* in its recognition of creaturely finitude, fallenness, and dependence on God.

In addition to directing attention to religious actors, I also turn to social workers as subjects who resist fixed categories of resistance or domination. As George Marcus notes, such middle class professionals are “empowered subjects complexly entwined and complicit with major structures of power” and thus “share some of the same privileges and modest empowerments as those of us who interview and write about them.”⁷

Through their own accounts, my participants name the moral ambivalence and contradictions of their location within systems of social service delivery. Their capacities for action are simultaneously constrained by institutional forces beyond their control, *and* they exercise significant power over vulnerable people. Viewing such subjects with either only adulation or cynicism risks missing the vibrant moral landscape and critical sensibilities which my participants display.⁸

By inquiring after the moral agency of Christian social workers, this dissertation also engages with current trends in Christian ethics. Following the legacy of Stanley Hauerwas, I adopt an agent-centered approach to ethics and the conviction that for ethics to be Christian, it must be theological. Drawing on the recent retrieval of Augustine in

⁶ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 15.

⁷ Marcus, “Introduction,” 7, 2.

⁸ Marcus, “Introduction,” 4.

political theology, I also understand Christian formation as happening not only in ecclesial communities but through encounter with neighbors in the world. While much of civic Augustinian investigations focus on non-state political action, such as community organizing, I here extend this insight by considering the Christian working *within* state-funded agencies, bearing professional accreditations.⁹

The social worker combines in her person what Alasdair MacIntyre disapprovingly identifies as the “central *characters* of modern society”: the therapist and the bureaucratic expert.¹⁰ While MacIntyre is right that claims of managerial expertise involve “moral fictions,” this is not the only story to be told.¹¹ Despite the moral ambiguities, the therapist and the bureaucrat also can render service to the neighbor. As Karl Barth notes, the emergence of the welfare state does not make the church’s diaconal work superfluous.¹² Even as he observes the reductionist character of the state’s care (“officials doling out pensions”), he still insists, “it is surely the business of the diaconate to assist the state in placing suitable men at its disposal to act within it in this particular way.”¹³ This study then considers the many Christians who do exactly this in response to God’s command to love neighbors. Thus, rather than dismissing the professional social

⁹ See for example, Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 73, author’s emphasis.

¹¹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 73.

¹² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.3.2* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1962), 893. Hereafter *CD*.

¹³ Barth, *CD IV.3.2*, 893.

worker as therapist-and-bureaucrat, I take her as my subject. Loving neighbors professionally provides the crucible in which she discovers her own limits.

The dissertation also offers an integrative portrait of ethics, drawing together approaches typically taken as divergent. As Christian ethicist Oliver O'Donovan warns, a "methodological monism," foregrounding divine command, virtue, duty, or outcomes at the expense of others, risks a "one-legged" ethics that reduces the Gospel to "a single word."¹⁴ Moreover, as I will show, this synthetic approach follows from attending to lay Christians' talk about moral deliberation and action.

Finally, in tracing how social workers relate their action with God's, this dissertation moves into what O'Donovan calls "a borderland difficult to map."¹⁵ Theology and ethics merge and mingle as my research participants move seamlessly between talk about God and talk about the good life. While not in all the particulars, their talk exemplifies a central Barthian claim: "Dogmatics itself is ethics; and ethics is also dogmatics."¹⁶ This intersection of divine and human action returns us to conceptions of agency now conceived within a theological register. Namely, it extends Kathryn Tanner's proposal of a non-competitive relation between divine and human agency, both in receiving God's command and in prayer, as described by my participants. Thus, the

¹⁴ In this, I follow Oliver O'Donovan. Warning of the danger of reducing gospel "to a single word," O'Donovan argues that "No quarter has been given in these volumes to a methodological monism that champions virtue ethics, command ethics, imitation ethics, or even an ethic of love, against all rivals." *Entering into Rest: Ethics as Theology 3* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2017), viii.

¹⁵ O'Donovan is describing the "conventional distribution of responsibility between a Dogmatics that speaks of God's sanctifying work and an Ethics that speaks of a human work corresponding to it." *Entering into Rest*, 72.

¹⁶ Barth, *CD I.2*, 793.

dissertation suggests that a third element mediates the theology-ethics dyad: namely, spiritual practice. In retrieving prayer for Christian ethics, in particular, the dissertation seeks to remedy its relative neglect in the field.

4. Limits & Scope

In taking up the limits of moral agency as its object of study, this project also comes with its own limits. First, there are those limits arising from my decisions as a researcher. Many avenues, persons, and places present possibilities for thinking about the limits of care. I chose professional social workers across a range of specializations. Despite the diversity of their roles, my participants are united through education and licensing to justify taking their experiences together, rather than, say, focusing just child welfare workers. Another dimension of limits originating from my research decisions arises from my interview questions, which I focused on work difficulties and religious resources. For example, I did not ask participants about their views on their clients or how race, gender, and class shape practice, although participants occasionally introduce these themes themselves. Different questions would have yielded a different sort of project. Even with the data that I received, however, I have left swathes relatively untouched, especially on professional ethics and conceptions of human need. I also have sidestepped the history of social work almost entirely, despite its potential for situating contemporary practice. The opening quotations in Chapters Three and Four gesture at these possibilities, but their full development must await another project.

Second, there are also those limits arising from the characteristics of my research participants. To account for this, I offer here a description of their demographic make-up

and its implications for the study's scope. First, in restricting the study to Christians in social work, I cannot say how other religious or non-religious social workers incorporate transcendent referents or spiritual practices into their work. According to a 2018 study of a national sample of licensed clinical social workers, only 37% identified as Christian, compared with 74% of the general population.¹⁷ Thus, my findings pertain only to a minority of practicing social workers.

Moreover, the vast majority of my participants affiliate with Protestant denominations (see Table 1 for this breakdown). While I cannot say for certain that there were no Catholic or Orthodox Christians in my study, as some participants only indicated "Christian," it seems unlikely. This reflects the distribution of Christian traditions in the American southeast, and I would expect that the research would look different in other parts of the country. Finally, a 2002 study found that graduate-level social workers are twice as likely to be affiliated with more theologically liberal denominations than working-class Americans and have far less confidence in organized religion.¹⁸ While suspicion of organized religion is not evident in my own study, numerous participants do ascribe to more liberal forms of Christianity, and thus, we might also add that we cannot take their views to be representative of American Christians as a whole.

¹⁷ Holly K. Oxhandler, Edward C. Polson, and W. Andrew Achenbaum, "The Religiosity and Spiritual Beliefs and Practices of Clinical Social Workers: A National Survey," *Social Work* 63.1 (2018), 53.

¹⁸ David Hodge, "Equally Devout, but Do They Speak the Same Language? Comparing the Religious Beliefs and Practices of Social Workers and the General Public," *Families in Society* 83 (2002), 577-579.

Table 1. Religious Affiliations of Participants (n=35)¹⁹

Methodist	8 (23%)
Nondenominational	6 (17%)
Baptist	6 (17%)
Christian	4 (11%)
Episcopalian	4 (11%)
Protestant	2 (6%)
AME Zion	1 (3%)
Mennonite	1 (3%)
United Church of Christ	1 (3%)
Presbyterian	1 (3%)

A second limitation arises from the demographic characteristics of my participants. Compared with the national make-up of social workers, my participants are more female, whiter, and significantly more educated. Of my thirty-five participants, 97% are female (compared with 82% nationally), 77% white (compared with 70% nationally), and 91% masters-certified (compared with 45% nationally).²⁰ Fourteen percent of my participants are Black (compared with 23% nationally), 6% Latino/a/x (compared with 14% nationally), and 3% mixed-race and multi-ethnic.²¹ No one of Asian descent participated (compared with 4% nationally). Despite this divergence from national numbers, however, I do not find pronounced variation among my participants

¹⁹ I record my participants' answers as they gave them.

²⁰ Regarding education, those not currently holding an MSW are currently enrolled or planning to enroll soon. "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey," <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm> (2020); Council of Social Work Education, "Profile of the Social Work Workforce," (2017), 5, accessed at <https://www.cswe.org/Centers-Initiatives/Initiatives/National-Workforce-Initiative/SW-Workforce-Book-FINAL-11-08-2017.aspx>.

²¹ In the interview, I invited participants to identify their own racial, ethnic, and gender identities. Thus, throughout the dissertation, I follow those identifies they offered, i.e., Black versus African American, Hispanic versus Latina.

based on racial or ethnic identity. Based on my research, it seems that God's calling, prayer, and struggles with paternalism and exhaustion cross these differences. However, given the underrepresentation of people of color in my study, this claim remains tentative until it can be substantiated by further research.

The strongest variation on the study's themes occurred across experience and age (which I take up in Chapters Two and Three). On this count, however, my participants represent the full range of both these dimensions, with the oldest participant a retired sixty-seven-year-old and the youngest a twenty-four-year-old in her first social work job. As a whole, my participants have an average age of 40 and 12.6 years of experience as social workers.²²

5. Methodology

The methodology that directs this project follows from both my theological commitments and my object of study. As to the first, constructing the limits of human agency as an object appropriate for the discipline of theology depends upon theological premises. That is, this project considers the human creature under the aspect of God.²³ Even as it examines human action in its finite and fallen dimensions, it proceeds from the supposition (of faith) that divine agency upholds and accompanies human agency. The

²² This average is a mean. They have a median of 8.5 years of experience.

²³ Thomas Aquinas identifies God as the proper object of theology. Yet in centering God, Aquinas describes an expansive scope for the discipline: "all things are treated of under the aspect of God; either because they are God Himself; or because they refer to God as their beginning and end." *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1981), 1.1.7.

human creature never stands alone: God’s caring action always proceeds, accompanies, and keeps her.²⁴ This theological anthropology shapes the conditions in which constructive theology labors.

As for those methodological considerations following from my object of study, there is no text for attending to the limits of social worker’s moral agency. Thus, I compile my own through conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews. While I considered the attractive features of participant observation, I found that social work’s commitment to the confidentiality of clients prevented me from gaining ready access, at least within the timeframe of my research. However, interviews also proved to be a suitable approach to the question of moral agency, in that I was able to directly elicit reflection on moral and theological matters.

Through roughly thirty-six hours of interviews, I received the gift of Christian theologies arising within the social service delivery system. Through listening closely to the stories of social workers laboring to love neighbors professionally, I heard them crafting ways of talking about God and the good life. They gathered together diverse sources to do this work – a memorable scripture, a recent podcast from Brené Brown, a professional workshop, or the memory of their grandmother – all to make sense of their action and God’s.

²⁴ In *Church Dogmatics* §49, Karl Barth notes that God preserves, accompanies, and rules the human creature. *Church Dogmatics III.3* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 58-239. In the fourth chapter of the “Shorter Text,” Julian of Norwich writes that God is the “the maker, the lover, the guardian.” *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Barry Windeatt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7.

What then occasions this dissertation if indeed social workers are doing theological work themselves? Following Kathryn Tanner, I understand everyday and specialized theology as related but distinct forms of social practice. On the one hand, everyday theology responds to pressing needs, offering on-the-ground and *ad hoc* innovations for immediate action. On the other hand, academic theology maintains a relative autonomy from urgent problems, enjoying the leisure required for accessing larger repositories of traditions and theories and for elaborating complex and coherent conceptual systems.²⁵ Thus, Christian social workers theologize in conditions that sharply diverge from Christian academics in their constraints, pressures, and rewards, suggesting that they will arrive at insights otherwise inaccessible in the academy.

Thus, the theologizing of social workers does not debar an opening for more systematic and wide ranging analysis and theological reflection. Rather, the two can unfold in a synergistic relation, recognizing and receiving the gifts of the other. Again, I adopt Tanner's understanding that this is not a first- and second-order relation (in which the specialists tidy things up) but a shared laboring towards faithful, hopeful, and loving action.²⁶ This division of labor might be configured as mutual instruction, as each press the other towards truer speech. Most often, truer speech is humbler speech: in talking of God (and the good life), we speak of what we do not know.²⁷

²⁵ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 61-71, 80-86.

²⁶ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 72-77.

²⁷ As Gene Rogers writes, citing his teacher Victor Preller, "theology is the discipline in which, strictly speaking, we don't know *what* we are saying (since in this life we cannot know of God what God is) or *how* what we are saying is true (since we know by revelation)." *Aquinas on the*

To access the theologies of everyday Christians, theologians have turned to fieldwork. Following on the heels of theological turns to culture, experience, and practice over the last three decades, they have borrowed methods from anthropology suitable for writing about contemporary cultural forms. Like ethnographers, theologians cite a variety of reasons for their adoption of fieldwork. These include generating better theory, the practice of Christian virtue, and to account for bodily forms of knowledge.²⁸ As I understand theological ethics as studying the human creature's graced response to God's command, I take as vital how living people both hear the moral demand and act accordingly in their everyday settings. It is not the only source for speech about the good life, but it is a crucial one.

Further, theologians have learned from how anthropology has navigated the postmodern turn in humanities. From *Writing Culture* onward, anthropologists have reconceived representation and reflexivity as its previous epistemic foundations have come undone. Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial critiques challenged earlier claims of ethnographic realism and authority.²⁹ Similarly, many theologians and ethicists have

Supreme Court and on the Bible: Race, Gender, and the Failure of Natural Law in Thomas's Biblical Commentaries (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell: 2013), 15.

²⁸ For example, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz emphasizes ethnography's liberative value in *En La Lucha / In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 80-96; Luke Bretherton names as a mode of apprenticeship and for better theory in 'Coming to Judgment: Methodological Reflections on the Relationship Between Ecclesiology, Ethnography, and Political Theory,' *Modern Theology* 28.2 (2012), 181; and Christian Scharen and Ana Vigen emphasize it for attuning to bodily knowledge in *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. xxi-xxii, 30.

²⁹ *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). Take for example, the articles in Orin

grappled with how to hold together an appropriate epistemological humility with some ontological realism. A stuttering confession in the God revealed by Jesus might sit *alongside* another confession that human capacities to know this God (and the good which God is) are fragmented and partial, prone to error and in continual need of revision. Thus, fieldwork suggests one way for checking an overly confident theological speech: everyday talk and practice of Christians ruffles the feathers of a tidy orthodoxy. Anthropological sensibilities push theology to account for cultural fluidity and difference, to unearth the routine and the overlooked, to write the timely, and to listen to even incoherent articulations about God and the good life.³⁰

Thus, I begin with the accounts of Christian social workers who themselves are quick to identify the moral hazards and contradictions integral to professional helping relationships. As opposed to idealized accounts of Christian love, I start with (in Ted Smith's words) "actually existing" actors in the "the messy, morally ambivalent cultures in which we already live."³¹ Through foregrounding their stories, told in their words as much as possible, I aim for readers to be drawn into these moral worlds. As my

Starn's edited volume, *Writing Culture and the Life of Anthropology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

³⁰ As Sarah Coakley notes, "sociology of religion does not only expose ills and abuses; it can also turn up unexpected arenas of grace and faith: it can discover ways in which doctrine can be made newly alive by reference to its earthed manifestations, as well as ways in which doctrine is abused in its earthed distortions." Later, she insists, "The 'messy entanglements' of doctrinal truth and social reality, of buried treasure and ecclesiastical embarrassments, are to be freely acknowledged and discerningly adjudicated." *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 85, 90.

³¹ Ted Smith, *The New Measures: A Theological History of Democratic Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 12, 22.

participants reason about what they do and why they do it, we gain access to what George Marcus calls, “a certain space of ambivalence forged by subjects.”³² Didier Fassin notes something similar: ethnographic attention “provides insight into the convictions and doubts of actors, their blind spots and their lucidity, their prejudices and their reflexivity: we owe our informants the respect of restoring these dialectical tensions.”³³ Following Marcus and Fassin, then, I look to my participants to lead us into the moral intricacies and ambiguities of loving neighbors professionally.

As with any method, relying on interviews also comes with limitations. Self-reports entail failures of memory and omission, and sociologists make careers scrutinizing the difference between professed attitudes and actual behaviors.³⁴ Distortions are built into the structure of the interview,³⁵ and interviewees are often anxious to present themselves in the best light, especially when reporting religious observance³⁶ and praiseworthy behaviors.³⁷ Even as interviews still offer the best window into the moral worlds of my participants, I seek to minimize these limitations

³² Marcus, “Introduction,” 5.

³³ Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 13. Such an approach sheds light on “the logics and the assumptions, the ambiguities and the contradictions, the principles of justice and the practices of judgment” at play in benevolent efforts.

³⁴ See for example, Colin Jerolmack and Shamus Khan, “Talk is Cheap: Ethnography and the Attitudinal Fallacy” *Sociological Methods & Research* 43.2 (2014), 178-209 and Stephen Vaisey, “The ‘Attitudinal Fallacy’ is a Fallacy: Why We Need Many Methods to Study Culture” *Sociological Methods & Research* 43.2 (2014), 227-231.

³⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, “Understanding,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* (1996) 13.2, 18-19.

³⁶ Philip Brenner, “Identity Importance and the Overreporting of Religious Service Attendance,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2011) 50.1, 103-115.

³⁷ Devah Pager and Lincoln Quillian, “Walking the Talk? What Employers Say Versus What They Do,” *American Sociological Review* (2005) 70.3, 355-380.

through triangulating my participants' accounts with relevant qualitative and quantitative studies whenever I can.³⁸

Finally, as my participants describe the moral contours of their work, I draw them into a conversation with classic and contemporary texts, ranging from moral and political philosophy, social theory, and theological reflection.³⁹ I select these theoretical interlocutors based on resonances with the interview material. In these juxtapositions, I look to situate my participants' experiences within a broader landscape of moral and theological reflection *and* to identify ways in which their descriptions may confirm, reconfigure, or challenge academic theology and ethics. As I suggested above, this exchange holds out the possibility of receiving and giving mutual gifts.

In each chapter, I offer extended portraits of individual practitioners followed by analysis. In selecting these portraits, I aim for both the clarity in which they describe the problem at hand and their representative quality across my interviews. While I sometimes indicate the frequency of certain themes across the interviews and their correspondence with other studies, I argue not by quantification but by summary and interpretation.⁴⁰ Finally, despite my efforts to describe shared experiences, my participants speak in a plural voice, amplified by their diverse practice settings. Thus, although I gather common threads, no one moral experience is reducible to another. And

³⁸ For a full discussion on the complicated nature of self-reporting, see my "Presenting an Admirable Self: Moral Evaluation within the Interview," *Ecclesial Practices*, forthcoming.

³⁹ In this, I follow Luke Bretherton's approach in *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 6-7.

⁴⁰ Robert Weiss, *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 3.

yet, I proceed with the hope that even a single portrait can yield intersubjective understanding, illuminating something true about the manifold lifeworlds of Christian social workers.

6. Structure & Chapters

The dissertation is organized around key moments in the Christian social worker's moral life. In general terms, these are their reasons for the work, the moral hazards they encounter there, and their strategies for safeguarding against these dangers. Filled in with content, these categories become God's call inviting them to love neighbors, the ensuing challenges of paternalism and exhaustion imperiling this love, and then prayer for attuning moral agency to its appropriate limits. While this sequence is not strictly chronological, it does unfold as such for some of my participants, as we will see.

The structure of the dissertation communicates some of its theological premises. God's action marks its beginning and end, as the dissertation opens with God's command and closes with human prayer. Thus, my participants coordinate what they do with what God is doing. The middle of the dissertation carries with the wounds found in the work, which call out for theological and moral reflection.⁴¹ At the junctures of paternalism and exhaustion, my participants discern appropriate action in response to God's call.

Thus, the first chapter begins with divine command, a relatively neglected moral theory at the intersection of ethics and religion. Despite this, when I ask my participants

⁴¹ Mary McClintock Fulkerson describes theology as done from a wound. *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13-14.

why they are social workers, they frequently cite God's call. God's invitation arrives in a range of ways: in scripture, through the evidence of their temperament and natural endowments, by divine locution, professional codes, or the call of human need. I also take up the question of testing the reception of God's command and how it relates to human agency. This final concern sets the stage for the subsequent chapters, as participants discern moral action in the space cleared by God's call. Here, prayer frequently surfaces as a resource for this discernment. My contention throughout is that God's command establishes my participants' moral agency and prepares them to act in time.

The second chapter takes up the problem of paternalism as inherent in social work. By becoming social workers, my participants find themselves working within the asymmetries of professional helping relationships. They bear disproportionate power over service-users because of their access to resources, professional status and knowledge, and statutory obligations. Most of my participants acknowledge these disparities and endeavor to use their power to enhance the abilities of service-users to decide and act for themselves. Nevertheless, paternalism always remains a possibility, due to the structural arrangements of caregiving relationships and the moral flaws of individual social workers. My participants commonly refer to this danger as 'fixing' others, and they describe extensive criteria for identifying and guarding against it. Yet they also frequently work with service-users who lack cognitive capacities for decision-making or who are at-risk for harming themselves and others. In both instances, social workers may be required to determine another's good. Interference becomes justified, but the conditions of justification frequently change from day to day, and social workers

risk getting it wrong. Thus, discerning the difference between paternalism and care requires ongoing scrutiny of their motivations and action. Finally, participants again pray to counter their tendencies towards fixing, to observe the appropriate limits of their action, and to remember that saving others is work only appropriately done by God.

The third chapter turns to exhaustion, which gathers under one heading the experiences of compassion fatigue and burnout. Pervasive in the helping professions and among my participants, exhaustion names the collapse of moral agency resulting from the accumulated losses of the work. Overwhelming human need, unmanageable administrative demands, inadequate resources, and complex social problems all conspire to undermine the abilities of social workers to sustain empathetic engagement with service-users. All too often, they face an impossible task, tempting them to despair. To prevent this failure, my participants try to limit the demands of the work through professional boundaries and self-care. At the same time, they also confess that these strategies of self-protection are awash in moral ambivalence. A moral gap ensues between God's call to love neighbors and human capacities to do so, in light of the infinite character of human need. Here, some participants confess their need for God and find consolation and rest in contemplative prayer.

As the prior three chapters point towards prayer, so the fourth and final chapter offers an extended reflection on this theme. Prayer mediates how my participants coordinate God's action with their own, as they discern how to love neighbors in light of its accompanying moral hazards. When they reach the ends of their abilities to decide and act, they petition for divine assistance, for God to aid them in their deliberations and care for service-users when they cannot. In their praying, they also catch glimpses of

God working in their work. They see God as present to suffering patients, in small breakthroughs, expressions of tenderness, or the process of recovery. Prayer attunes them to a reality in which God is acting, in which God ensures the ultimate good, and they must only do the part which God has given them to do. Hence, as the dissertation opens with divine agency, it also closes with it. God commands neighbor love, and my participants find that all too often it perplexes and overwhelms them. Their best efforts go awry, and so, they turn to God to ask God to do what they cannot. In doing so, they coordinate divine and human agency and identify their own need for God's care.

While theological ethics commonly considers the ends of human action, it rarely takes up the questions of its limits. Prayer offers a surprising gateway into this inquiry, marking when the human creature reaches the end of what she can do. Rather than abandoning the neighbor at this juncture, however, prayer points towards a mode of persevering in love by invoking God's care, beyond the bounds of human action. In this way, theology, ethics, and spiritual practice rejoin in the symphony of Christian life, and human limits move the creature towards her greatest end in friendship with God.

CHAPTER ONE: Command

After parking in the garage of a large regional hospital, I navigate my way to the right building through the March rain. Aided by the directions of a passerby and a prolonged study of several maps, I find what I take to be the place where Amanda Little¹ (36, white, Episcopalian) said she would meet me. Waiting in an austere lobby flanked with wooden benches, I stare at antique photos of doctors and nurses. When Amanda arrives, she walks me down a flight of stairs and around the corner to her basement office. We sit nestled between filing cabinets and stacks of boxes, and photos of smiling children peer at us from her bulletin board. Amanda wears brown leather boots and stylish purple glasses. A bright green Patagonia jacket hangs on the chair behind her.

Amanda shares that she has been a social worker for ten years. She studied communications in undergrad but “floundered” afterwards, thinking at the time: “I don’t know exactly what I want to do, but I know I want to be able to help people.” Someone suggested social work, and after completing her Master’s in Social Work (MSW), she began working at an inpatient child and adolescent psychiatry unit. Now she supports children with chronic illnesses and their families, providing case management, counseling support, health education, and referrals for community resources.

Amanda thinks of social workers as “helpers,” she tells me.

You know, people there that come alongside and support other people and whatever they’re going through. And I feel that role is something that, I guess I feel a sense of calling to. I feel like God’s command to love other people as you

¹ I use pseudonyms for all research participants. I include demographic information as they report it to me.

love yourself, that's my faith...I feel a calling or greater purpose in loving people through my role.

Amanda continues,

God calls us to serve...I see that in social work, trying to reach out to people that society might deem as 'the least of these' or just have a lot of stressors and struggles in their life. I like that about social work that it cares about all people...I feel a call by God to care about all people. I can probably think of like lots of different verses [in scripture], recognizing that all people are made in the image of God and are worthy of love...they are loved by God and thus I should love them too.

Amanda continues to tell me about her passion for supporting patients to see that they do not have to be ashamed or embarrassed about living with chronic illness. When she is coaching them about how to disclose their condition to others or combatting stigma, she has "a sense of, 'I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing.' Yeah, I feel passionate about it and feel like that comes from God."

Theology and ethics coincide in Amanda's descriptions. For Amanda, she responds to God's command to love other people through being a social worker. She points to scripture, her passion for the work, and a conviction that this work is morally hers to do as all confirming this sense of God's calling. God has entrusted her with this task.

The aim of this chapter is to offer a theological and ethical interpretation of Amanda's reasons for being a social worker. Amanda provides a paradigmatic instance of how the majority of my participants speak about why they became and remain social workers: God has told them to. Amanda suggests several ways this divine directive arrives, and my participants add more: scripture, immediate divine utterance, the conscience, the evidence of one's own temperament and abilities, human instruction, the

requirements of particular situations, and even social obligations. God's address prepares Amanda for action; it grounds her moral agency.

In contemporary moral theory, anthropology of ethics, and even Christian ethics, God's command as the source of normativity remains relatively neglected. Introductory textbooks in moral philosophy and Christian ethics give a brief nod to Euthyphro's dilemma as the grounds for its dismissal and then move on to duty, consequences, and virtue. However, within the everyday moral language of religious adherents in general and Christians in particular, the answer to the question 'why should I do x?' frequently turns out to be 'God says so.'² And indeed, across my interviews, my participants appealed again and again to God's direction as their reason for loving neighbors and making social work their profession. This is even more striking, given that over eighty percent are employed by agencies without religious affiliation, and the profession of social work itself has largely been emptied of divine referents.

Based on these accounts, I reconsider a divine command theory of moral obligation as the foundation for why my social-worker participants do what they do, in the broadest sense. This is not an argument for divine command as the best or most persuasive of moral theories. It is, however, an argument for its serious consideration, because it populates everyday moral language. Moreover, this is not a retrieval of command at the cost of other approaches to ethics.

² John E. Hare, *God's Call: Moral Realism, God's Commands, and Human Autonomy* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 52.

As we noted in the Introduction, reducing the moral life to any single approach risks missing the whole.³ Thus, while God’s command prompts moral agency here at the opening of the dissertation, the subsequent two chapters take up how my participants discern appropriate action in response to this call, particularly through practices of moral judgment and moral attunement. As my participants’ descriptions make clear, however, God’s action marks the appropriate beginning. God calls human creatures into a loving response for the neighbor.⁴

Of course, the liabilities often associated with divine command theories explain its neglect, at least in part. Throughout this discussion, I gesture at these problems, including accusations of its arbitrary character, its propensity to minimize human autonomy or human reason, and its tendency to sacralize social arrangements. More sympathetic voices also point to the practical difficulty of discerning the reception of God’s command.

What follows proceeds in four parts. First, I offer a brief overview of why command has been relatively neglected in qualitative approaches to religion and ethics, moral theory, and Christian ethics. Second, I give an argument for why my participants’ moral experiences might be best categorized as divine command, against competing frameworks. Third, I discuss modes in which they receive God’s command and criteria

³ In this, I follow Oliver O’Donovan. Warning of the danger of reducing gospel “to a single word,” O’Donovan argues that “No quarter has been given in these volumes to a methodological monism that champions virtue ethics, command ethics, imitation ethics, or even an ethic of love, against all rivals.” *Entering into Rest: Ethics as Theology 3* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2017), viii.

⁴ God’s call grounds human agency and prepares the subject-as-agent for responsible action. Oliver O’Donovan, *Self, World, and Time: Ethics as Theology 1* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2013), 12, 37-38.

for testing these claims. Finally, I consider how command shapes an understanding of the relationship of divine and human agency in discerning action, with particular attention to the scope of divine requirements and human limits.

1. Accounting for Command's Relative Neglect

As a way of beginning, I consider the relative neglect of divine command first in qualitative approaches to religion and ethics, moral theory, and finally, Christian ethics.

As suggested in the introduction, in most qualitative studies of religion and ethics, God is strangely absent. Human agents and their social systems generate ethical obligations, not divine figures. For example, in the emerging field of anthropology of ethics, religious beliefs and practices are abundant, yet seldom does God or gods figure as agents capable of acting in the world. These scholars are eager to disrupt the dominance of Durkheimian duty, which presumes society's role in generating rule-like obligations and blocks out the possibility of exploring other dimensions of the moral life.⁵ As James Laidlaw explains, society has displaced God as the source of moral norms.⁶ Their retrieval, then, is not of God but of what Laidlaw calls human freedom or other advocates of the turn frame in terms of Aristotelian virtue or Foucauldian self-cultivation.⁷ But in

⁵ As James Laidlaw explains, Durkheim's legacy in anthropology has collapsed the moral and the social, making ethics synonymous with collectively sanctioned behavior and beliefs. "For an Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 8.2 (2002), 312.

⁶ Laidlaw, "For an Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom," 313.

⁷ For proponents of Aristotle as the principle source for this ethical turn in anthropology, see Cheryl Mattingly's *Moral Laboratories: Family Peril and the Struggle for a Good Life* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014) and Michael Lambek's *The Ethical Condition: Essays on Action, Person, and Value* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). For those who rely instead on Foucault, see Laidlaw, Jarret Zigon's *HIV is God's Blessing: Rehabilitating Morality*

so doing, they neglect a crucial way that religious interlocutors describe their moral worlds and justify their actions: divine command.

This absence appears most clearly in several of Didier Fassin's assessments of the emerging field. In a review of Laidlaw's *Subject of Virtue*, Fassin observes that in their readiness to displace a concern with rules (in the tradition of Kant and Durkheim) for virtue (following Aristotle and Foucault), a third feature of moral philosophy must not be neglected: consequences.⁸ Fassin selects Weber as the appropriate inspiration for such an approach, attuned to outcomes and compromises within political and historical context. Moreover, Fassin warns against the unnecessary opposition and isolation of these three camps. Pointing to empirical research, Fassin insists that most people, most of the time, consider all three in their deliberations about action.⁹ And yet missing is a fourth source of moral justification: rather than rules, virtues, or consequences, an agent may act, because God has told her to.

God also rarely appears as an actor in the anthropology of religion. Folklorist Glen Hinson calls this ethnographic tendency to 'explain away' consultants' supernatural

in Neoliberal Russia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011) and James Faubion's *An Anthropology of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). While Didier Fassin and Faubion see Aristotle and Foucault in a single trajectory, Mattingly and Lambek insist on their distinction.

⁸ Didier Fassin, "The Ethical Turn in Anthropology: Promises and Uncertainties," *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4.1 (2014), 433.

⁹ Fassin, "The Ethical Turn," 433. Fassin offers the same account in his "Introduction: The Moral Question in Anthropology," 6, in *Moral Anthropology: A Critical Reader*, eds. Didier Fassin and Samuel Leze (New York: Routledge, 2014).

experiences “a kind of ontological colonialism.”¹⁰ Even in anthropologies of global and North American Pentecostals and charismatics, such a lacuna persists, Jon Bialecki argues. He attributes this neglect to Peter Berger’s methodological atheism as the default position within anthropology, which assumes that “agency is to be located solely in human agents.”¹¹ However, Bialecki thinks this move is a mistake: “to ignore God as an agent in the world is not just to ignore or belittle the beliefs of many of our informants but to overlook an often vital mode of their engagement with the world.”¹² As an example, Bialecki points to Omri Elisha’s *Moral Ambition* (2011) on evangelical charity efforts in the American south:

We are given a great deal of description regarding how these people act out the convictions they have regarding God, but the phenomenal, evidential, or practice-based aspect of how they relate to, and interpret, God – the source of that conviction – are absent from Elisha’s account. Or to be more exact, it is the question of how God works on *them*.¹³

The procedures by which believers access God is a crucial missing piece, Bialecki concludes, especially when such access is achieved not via written texts. Rare exceptions exist, of course, such as Tanya Luhrmann and Robert Orsi, who take perceptions of divine speech or presence respectively as an object of study.¹⁴

¹⁰ Glen Hinson, *Fire in My Bones: Transcendence and the Holy Spirit in African American Gospel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 331.

¹¹ Jon Bialecki, “Does God Exist in Methodological Atheism? On Tanya Luhrmann’s *When God Talks Back* and Bruno Latour,” *Anthropology of Consciousness* (2014), 34.

¹² Bialecki, “Does God Exist in Methodological Atheism,” 33.

¹³ Bialecki, “Does God Exist in Methodological Atheism?” 39, author’s emphasis.

¹⁴ T.H. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012); Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). Luhrmann develops a psychoanalytic-epistemological approach to

Moral philosophy does not do much better. Philosophy has long outgrown divine action, and other sources of normativity predominate: human reason, nature, intuition, or tradition.¹⁵ As John E. Hare notes, most philosophers dismiss the prospect of divine command being the foundation of ethics as “simply incredible.”¹⁶ For example, after a four page discussion of Euthyphro’s dilemma, one popular introduction to moral philosophy concludes that divine command is “untenable.”¹⁷

The revival of virtue ethics, in particular, challenged theories of moral obligation as dependent upon a divine law. As Elizabeth Anscombe famously argued, such a belief has “long since been abandoned,” and thus words like ‘ought’ and ‘duty’ survive beyond “the framework of thought” that render them “intelligible.”¹⁸ Of course, Anscombe here targets deontology and consequentialism, not divine command, but she seeks to dismantle the former through association with the latter. However, exceptions to this trend exist. Particularly within the last several decades, publications by Philip Quinn, C. Stephen

analyze how charismatic Christians train their senses to perceive God. Orsi models another option: against modern assumptions of sacred absence, he grants the real presence of sacred figures as powerful agents in history, as they are experienced by adherents. Bialecki proposes a third possibility: the use of object-oriented ontology to allow God existence and autonomous agency.

¹⁵ Hare, *God’s Call*, 53-55.

¹⁶ Hare observes, “The idea that God’s command might lie at the foundation of ethics is an idea that will still strike many of my colleagues within the discipline of philosophy as simply incredible.” *God’s Command* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), vi.

¹⁷ James Rachels, edited by Stuart Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 7th edition (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2011), 54.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 33.124 (1958), 6. Remarkably, she traces this abandonment to the Reformers.

Evans, Robert Adams, and John E. Hare suggest that conceptual space may yet remain for the philosophical consideration of divine command.¹⁹

We might expect that divine command would find its best hearing within the realm of Christian ethics. However, in this, we are disappointed. As David Clough notes, few Christian ethicists “identify themselves with the language of divine command.”²⁰ To illustrate, two introductory textbooks suggest a widespread assumption that command does not offer a viable moral theory. For example, in Samuel Wells and Ben Quash’s *Introducing Christian Ethics*, divine command receives only two pages of attention in a volume of over three hundred and fifty.²¹ And indeed, the most the reader discerns is that God’s decrees, typified in the Ten Commandments, determine the moral quality of an action, and that Euthyphro’s dilemma has long since established its “apparent arbitrariness,” which “[m]any Christians and non-Christians” find “intolerable.”²² The remaining sentences suggest various strategies for regulating God’s unconstrained rule-making abilities through prior criteria and even “question[ing] whether the God being discussed here bears any regular resemblance to the God made known in Jesus Christ.”²³

¹⁹ Hare lists Philip Quinn’s *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978); C. Stephen Evan’s *God and Moral Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Robert M Adams’s *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Hare, *God’s Command*, vi.

²⁰ David Clough, *Ethics in Crisis: Interpreting Barth’s Ethics* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 125.

²¹ Sam Wells and Ben Quash, *Introducing Christian Ethics* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 116-117. Barth’s account of command receives brief mentions on 15 and 182.

²² Wells and Quash, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, 117.

²³ Wells and Quash, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, 117.

Robin Lovin, in *Christian Ethics: An Essential Guide*, also only offers two pages on divine command ethics in his introductory textbook. He equates command ethics with “the rules set forth in Scripture,” and that for adherents of this view, this provides “the only way to know what God’s will is.”²⁴ Thus, he equates divine command with a sola scriptura approach that is suspicious of human reason, experience, or nature as also offering insight into God’s will.²⁵ The absolutism of this approach, as Lovin describes it, suggests its irrelevance. Thus, as Clough notes, “If divine command ethics is currently discussed at all [in Christian ethics], it is an example of how not to do ethics.”²⁶

When scholars do publish on command, they concentrate on exegeting the work of its foremost advocate in the twentieth century: Karl Barth. However, the difficulty of taking Barth as a representative of divine command ethics is that, as Clough notes, “while he adopts the language, his interpretation of command turns almost everything about the tradition upside down.”²⁷ Nevertheless, Barth’s extensive treatment, found in volumes II.2 and III.4 of *Church Dogmatics*, frequently becomes a fault line on this issue, often more alienating than persuading.

I offer the briefest of summaries here. For Barth, God’s command is the supreme good,²⁸ known to human creatures only as God makes Godself known.²⁹ Human beings

²⁴ Robin W. Lovin, *Christian Ethics: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 44.

²⁵ Lovin, *Christian Ethics*, 44-45.

²⁶ Clough, *Ethics in Crisis*, 125.

²⁷ Clough, *Ethics in Crisis*, 125.

²⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 518, 536. Hereafter listed as *CD*.

²⁹ Barth, *CD* II/2, 548.

are in no place to judge God's commands but only obey, and every human action is confronted by God's claim, decision, and judgment. Sin, then, is the human being's attempt to decide for herself what is good and evil, following Adam's fall in becoming "an ethical man."³⁰ God rather fulfills God's own commands in the person of Jesus Christ,³¹ and human creatures only faithfully repeat Jesus' obedience to the command.³² God's command always comes in an immediate and particular encounter, never to be anticipated in advance or fixed into a text or code.³³ Rather, the creature must return afresh for God's direction, always a beginner and recipient.³⁴

In light of Barth's resolute emphasis on the sovereignty of the divine decision, many readers have concluded that Barth has left little room for human action. For example, Oliver O'Donovan argues that Barth's insistence on the definite character of God's command (as Barth puts it, "self-interpreting to the smallest details"³⁵) entails "the refusal of a role to intelligence."³⁶ No room for human deliberation remains as the

³⁰ Barth, *CD* II/2, 517.

³¹ Barth, *CD* II/2, 543.

³² Barth, *CD* II/2, 537.

³³ Barth, *CD* III/4, 9-10, 17. "It is always an individual command for the conduct of this man, at this moment and in this situation." *CD* III/4, 11.

³⁴ Barth, *CD* III/4, 10.

³⁵ Barth, *CD* II/2, 665.

³⁶ O'Donovan, *Faith Seeking Understanding: Ethics as Theology 2* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2014), 190. "For fear of compromising theological distinctiveness he denies human decision the deliberative space required to understand God's generic commands...Barth claims so much for the definite command that no work is left to the generic, and so no work for our thoughtful interpretation. This has the troubling effect of representing human decision as an exact mirror-image of the sovereign decision of God. It fails to notice how our decision must be different from God's with respect to time, relying on retention and protention, a work of deliberation in forming a purpose."

creature is left only to repeat God's prior decision. For similar reasons, Hare too notes how Barth's account has often been taken as "wildly implausible."³⁷ Prior to the 1990s, this assessment of Barth predominated, although the last three decades has witnessed a new interest in reconstructing Barth's ethics.³⁸

I do not offer not an exegesis of Barth here but one of Amanda and her fellow social workers. I inquire into divine command not because I determined to do this in advance, or I find it to be the most persuasive of moral theories (it may or may not be), but because it is how my participants speak of becoming social workers. As we will see in subsequent chapters, command does not characterize how they speak of all their decisions. In fact, other modes of moral deliberation predominate. And yet here, on the question of selecting their profession, they do not appeal to calculations of the greatest good or to an abstract moral law requiring everyone to be social workers. Rather, they speak of very particular divine instructions addressed to them in various ways. And this, I argue, forms a sufficient basis for a consideration of divine command.

³⁷ Hare, *God's Command*, 152. He continues, "Barth sometimes talks as though moral thinking is *only* particular, and as though, since God's judgements makes something right or wrong, our task is not to work out what is right, but simply to repeat God's judgment in our own. This combination of views has seemed to many to be wildly implausible." Nigel Biggar also offers a summary of Barth's critics: "If the content of God's commands cannot be expressed in terms of moral principles or rules that are always applicable to appropriate cases, if its meaning cannot be specified in terms of kinds of acts, if it has no intelligible constancy, then there can be no way of charting one's way through moral perplexity by distinguishing good and bad acts in terms of their characteristic features." *The Hastening that Waits: Karl Barth's Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 22.

³⁸ David Clough and Michael Leyden, "Claiming Barth for Ethics: The Last Two Decades," *Ecclesiology* 6 (2010), 166-182.

2. Calling & Questions of Definition

Rachel Barr (30, white, Episcopalian) and I scan menus at a casual farm-to-table restaurant near where she lives. She is on maternity leave, and her sleeping infant accompanies her. As we wait for our food, Rachel begins to tell me how during a dual MDiv/MSW program, she interned in hospitals and schools. Now she works for a community organization doing land conservation and environmental justice, with attention to how these issues intersect with social justice and community development. Her role focuses on food security issues. Working with community partners, Rachel administers a small grants programs, provides assistance on project planning, and offers community education on topics like healthy eating or rural development.

In the course of our conversation, Rachel tells me how she relates Christianity and social work.

I'm a social worker because social work principles – just social work – are about seeking out social justice, righting the wrongs, inclusion, all these good things....I feel like Christianity is like, well it can match those principles...Jesus backs up all of social work's principles, of social justice and inclusion, empowerment and those sorts of things...we're really getting at real solutions to social challenges, which I think we're called to do as Christians.

During her graduate studies, this “connection between my faith and social work” became “pretty obvious. She understood that “this is my calling, this is how I see my vocation in this world...It's just natural for me.”

After nursing her baby, Rachel returns to this topic again,

I've understood my calling, or Jesus' calling on us, to really be a part of our communities and really listen to people and not be paternalistic...that power dynamic I think, for me it all boils down to power and sharing it and finding ways of letting go of some power, whether that's just through, stop handing out food and share a meal with folks instead, so that's just a super important part of my faith. I've understood what Jesus does in his ministry on this earth, he eliminated

those power dynamics all the time, and I think we're called to do that, so that's how I've seen my own faith involved in my work.

Thus, Rachel joins Amanda in citing divine summons as providing the grounds for her work. They are not alone in this. Almost ninety percent of my participants cite some sort of divine mandate as their reason for being social workers. As noted in the introduction, this is more striking when we consider that over eighty percent are employed by agencies without religious affiliations, with twenty percent having worked at some point directly for the state. Most commonly, they use language like Rachel and Amanda, "being called" or their "calling." Rachel also refers to her "vocation," and others invoke further concepts, including "God-given passion," an "assignment" from God, "God's command," and "God's will." Others name God, Jesus, or Christian scriptures as the reason for their work. And those who do not explicitly attribute their work to God often have much to say about the relation of Christianity and social work in other ways.

Two small interview-based studies corroborate these findings: Christians in social work commonly refer to their work as a calling.³⁹ This sense is also confirmed by two social work faculty at Christian colleges, whose students cite Christianity as a primary reason for entering the field.⁴⁰ This seems remarkable, given that the field of social work

³⁹ Kris Hohn, et. al., "Integrating Faith and Practice: A Qualitative Study of Staff Motivations" *Social Work and Christianity* 44.4 (2017), 4; Lawrence Ressler and David Hodge, "Silenced Voices: Social Work and the Oppression of Conservative Narratives," *Social Thought* 22.2 (2003), 132-135.

⁴⁰ Beryl Hugen, professor emeritus of Social Work at Calvin College, observes that "many Christian students find the social work profession a good fit with their religious faith," and "almost all describe a moderate or fairly strong religious impulse to serve people and society" (105). Yet he also notes that they also quickly discover the tensions between their religious

assumes a decidedly secular stance in the United States. By secular, I mean not only that belief is just an option among others but also that the public space has been emptied of any reference to God.⁴¹ For the sake of professional credibility and social scientific investigation, social work has long curtailed its historical ties with Progressive-era social Christianity.⁴² And yet, Christians continue to enter the profession, although at about half the rate in which they are represented in the general population.⁴³

Taken together, then, my participants' explanations for why they are social workers circle around a shared reason: God has told them to. They say this despite being

commitments and the secularity of the profession (105), as well as the field's thorough neglect of religious dimensions of human experience. Against this, Hugen retrieves Christian calling as a mode for connecting faith and social work, through citing its use among the early pioneers of social work (106, 112). "Calling: A Spirituality Perspective for Social Work Practice," in *Christianity and Social Work: Readings on the Integration of Christian Faith and Social Work Practice*, 105-117, fourth edition, edited by T. Laine Scales and Michael S. Kelly (Bostford, CT: North American Association of Christians in Social Work, 2012). See also Diana S. Richmond Garland, *Why I am a Social Worker: 25 Christians Tell Their Life Stories* (Bostford, CT: North American Association of Christians in Social Work, 2015), 1-2.

⁴¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1-3. The third sense that Taylor identifies is declining religious belief and practice.

⁴² For descriptions and interrogations of the historical relationship between Christianity and social work, see Martin E. Marty, "Social Service: Godly and Godless," *Social Service Review* (1980), 463-481; Graham Bowpitt, "Evangelical Christianity, Secular Humanism, and the Genesis of British Social Work" *British Journal of Social Work* 28 (1998), 675-693; Ram Cnaan, et. al, *The Newer Deal: Religion and Social Work in Partnership* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 53-56; James Vanderwoerd, "Reconsidering Secularization and Recovering Christianity in Social Work History," *Social Work & Christianity* 38.3 (2011), 244-266; T. Laine Scales and Michael S. Kelly, "'To Give Christ the Neighborhood': A Corrective Look at the Settlement Movement and Early Christian Social Workers," *Social Work & Christianity* 38.3 (2011), 356-376.

⁴³ As noted in the Introduction, a 2018 study of a national sample of licensed clinical social workers (n=426) found that only 37% identified as Christian, compared with 74% of the general population. Holly K. Oxhandler, Edward C. Polson, and W. Andrew Achenbaum, "The Religiosity and Spiritual Beliefs and Practices of Clinical Social Workers: A National Survey," *Social Work* 63.1 (2018), 53.

employed in a field that otherwise denies this as an appropriate reason for acting. While later in the chapter we will consider how this divine communication arrives, we first consider whether and why divine command is the most appropriate way to characterize this moral experience.

As might be expected, Christian traditions of moral thought have expended substantial energy on divine speech acts, particularly prescriptive ones. And thus, we have a battery of words with a long history, some of which my participants have already named: divine will, divine command, divine call, and vocation. Are these terms equivalent in meaning? And might some more than others most accurately capture this shared sensibility? In what follows, I will consider these concepts in conversation with Rachel and select moral philosophers and theologians. In doing so, I hope to clarify what is at stake in finding the best description. Moreover, as these concepts have been the occasion of some disagreement – both in historical and contemporary treatment – I do my best to signal such instances and give reasons for these selections.

As my participants use the language of “calling” most frequently, it seems the appropriate place to begin. I also will follow Rachel and treat “vocation” as synonymous with “calling.” This equation also represents the consensus among contemporary scholarly treatments.⁴⁴ To clarify, then, what my participants mean by “calling,” we must

⁴⁴ In their works cited throughout the chapter, Robert Adams, Karl Barth, Oliver O’Donovan, and Gilbert Meilaender use vocation and calling interchangeably. Notably, John E. Hare and John Calvin only use the language of calling. Moreover, O’Donovan is right to indicate that vocation can have two senses: “it can refer both to the event of calling and to its object, the concrete form of service to which we are called.” *Finding & Seeking*, 224. While I think these two usages can appropriately bleed together, in our current context, we are focusing on the former: the event of calling and its moral implications.

answer three questions. First, does this language of calling always imply that God is the agent addressing them? As we will see, in most occasions, God is specified, but in others, God is left unnamed. Second, to what is God calling them? As a shorthand thus far, I have suggested God is calling them to the profession of social work, and I will more or less stick with this throughout the chapter. We will learn, however, that while this is accurate for a minority of participants, the majority identify broader social aims realized in social work. Third, is this calling addressed to them in particular or to all Christians or all people generally? After reviewing the outcomes of my interviews, I analyze the significance of these three questions together.

Of the thirteen participants that use the language of “call” or “calling,” they almost evenly divide between three camps. The first group, like Rachel, explicitly identifies God or Jesus as the one addressing them. As Rachel explains, “I’ve understood my calling, or Jesus’ calling on us, to really be part of our communities.” The second group implies that God is addressing them, given the context of their remarks. Amanda demonstrates this: “[social work] is something that I feel a sense of calling to. God’s command to love other people as you love yourself...that’s my faith.” While the link is indirect, she implies God’s involvement in her call. The final group does not offer any immediate reference to God. For example, when the mother of Theresa Smith (67, white, Methodist) would ask her, “Why in the world are you doing this?” (namely, working as a social worker in the context of urban poverty), Theresa would tell her, “I just feel a call to serve. I really do.” The sensation of a call floats without a reference. However, those who speak of calling like this also relate Christianity with their work elsewhere in their

interviews. Thus, I think we may assume that a reference to God is very likely, although not guaranteed.

If God is calling my participants, then what is God calling them to do?

According to Rachel, God has called her both to broad social goals and to social work as the pathway for working towards these goals. These include “social justice and inclusion, empowerment,” finding “solutions to social challenges,” “to really be a part of our communities,” to “really listen to people,” and to “not be paternalistic.” These two impulses are also evident across my interviews. Some note that God calls them specifically to social work, and others emphasize some wider purpose. These include working with kids, serving, being with people in their life transitions, working for equity and justice, relocating among the poor, working with (vulnerable) people, and Christian ministry or witness. These are their God-given tasks, and social work offers a vehicle for their realization. Thus, while participants variously identify both the profession and broader social aims as the object of their calling, these often overlap and at times even fuse together. This is especially the case given their persistent definitions of social work: to assist vulnerable people in meeting basic needs.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ In defining, my participants used ‘help’ thirty-eight times and ‘need’ twenty-nine times. Some representative definitions include Leslie Roethke (46, white, Episcopalian)’s, social work is “bettering society through meeting the needs of human beings,” or Heather Cooper (44, white, Methodist)’s, it is “helping [vulnerable populations] to gain access to the supports they need...to make their lives better.” The National Association of Social Workers’ *Code of Ethics* repeats this, although adding an additional emphasis on empowerment: “The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human wellbeing and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable oppressed, and living in poverty.” (Washington, D.C.: NASW, 2017), 1.

Finally, whom is God addressing? All participants indicate that their calling is peculiarly theirs, while some take a further step and situate it within a larger invitation to all Christians or people. Rachel demonstrates this: “This is my calling, this is how I see my vocation in this world.” Her assignment is *hers* in particular. God is not asking everyone to be social workers. However, she pivots between “my calling, or Jesus’ calling on us,” namely, those broader social aims are something “we’re called to do as Christians.” Thus, Rachel understands her individual calling to be nestled within a larger commissioning.

Summarizing these insights then, Rachel understands God to be the agent of her calling, which entails social work as the pathway for advancing broader social aims, and her calling comes to her in particular, a specific mandate within a broader invitation. What then is the significance of these three features of calling? How do these aspects move us towards an appropriate description of this moral experience?

First, the invocation of divine agency establishes ‘calling’ as a theological claim. This claim says something particular about God. God not only acts in the world but speaks. God has *communicated* something of the divine will to my participants. By this divine utterance, God enables human creatures to access something otherwise hidden. As we will see, this becomes significant when we consider that for any law to be binding, it must also be promulgated.

Second, in identifying what God has called them to do, they indicate something narrower than the Christian life. That is, the New Testament use of this word indicates

God's summons to a new way of life: a heavenly or holy calling in Christ.⁴⁶ Calling designates an invitation to all who would respond. Certainly, loving people, working with kids, advocating for justice, or even Christian ministry generally are crucial aspects of the Christian life, but it would also be a mistake to say that the Christian life is reducible to any one of these things.

To understand these invocations of calling, then, we need to say something briefly about how Christian uses of 'calling' have morphed since the close of the New Testament. As the history is generally recounted, medieval Christians narrowed calling from something shared by all Christians to monastic vocations and the evangelical counsels, accessible only to the spiritual elite. The Reformers, however, returned calling to all Christians, but they transposed it into the sphere of work, proclaiming it to be a person's "God-given vocation."⁴⁷ As Calvin describes in the *Institutes*, God has "appointed duties for every man in his particular way of life. And...he has named these various kinds of living 'callings.'"⁴⁸ As examples, Calvin points to the magistrate and the head of a household. Although the rest of Calvin's invocation of calling elsewhere in the *Institutes* fits with the New Testament pattern, this single text remains Calvin's legacy on the subject: he ties calling with work.⁴⁹ Max Weber famously characterizes this pattern

⁴⁶ Eph 1:18, 4:1,4; Phil 3:14; 2 Tim 1:9; Heb 3:1; 2 Peter 1:10. Karl Barth makes this point in *CD* III/4, 600.

⁴⁷ Barth, *CD* III/4, 602.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 3.10.6, 724.

⁴⁹ Calvin's *Institutes* contain only two paragraphs on the topic of vocation. The remaining occurrences of calling follow the New Testament's pattern of speaking of the generic call to Christian life: the hope of our calling in Christ (2.2.21), the call of holiness (3.6.2), the call to be

found in ascetic Protestantism: calling indicates “God’s commandment to the individual to work for the divine glory,” and through this, God orchestrates the specialization of workers, such that through their coordinated efforts, they might serve the good of the whole.⁵⁰ While we will return to the risks entailed in this reading of calling, our principle interest at present is to what extent my participants associate their profession and their calling. In other words, is their calling just their job?

We have already observed how Rachel and other participants identify their calling as a broader social purpose realized through social work. That is, social work appears secondary to broader ends, like loving people, working with kids, or accompanying people in life’s transitions. Several clarify that social work is only *part* of their larger calling. For example, Roger Williams (50, Black, nondenominational) explains, “social work is one of my acts of service in terms of my faith...I see it as part of my ministry, as part of what I do.” Melissa Reynolds (32, Black, Christian, who we will meet at greater length in Section 6) expresses something similar: “I think me wanting to work with people is a part of God’s calling in my life...that’s one of the things that God will have me do while I’m here on this earth.” For both Roger and Melissa, social work is only one aspect of God’s call.

sons of God (3.14.19), the call of God inviting all people to Godself through preaching and inward illumination (3.24.8), the call of God’s election (3.24.10), the calling of God by which God illuminates God’s people by the Spirit (4.16.19).

⁵⁰ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribner’s, 1958), 160-161. O’Donovan notes this as well: the language of vocation has “often been diverted, especially in German-speaking Protestantism, to refer to the forms of work in which our service is socially recognized as a useful contribution to the common good.” O’Donovan, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 224.

In this, many of my participants share an intuition with contemporary writers on vocation, who warn of the harmful tendency to reduce it to merely a job. As Robert Adams notes, vocation incorporates “the whole of one’s life...it is a matter of who and what one is called to be,” which often but not always include one’s employment.⁵¹ Oliver O’Donovan agrees. Vocation is “not a single function, but an ensemble of worldly relations and functions through which we are given, *in particular*, to serve God and realize our agency.”⁵² For some, it may be “one great and persistent undertaking,” as vocation is frequently conceived, or “many different things” woven together.⁵³ While a socially recognized role, like social work, may mold vocation in particular ways, this relation is neither exhaustive nor required.⁵⁴

Third and finally, my participants are convinced that their vocation is something given particularly to them. While they may situate it within a broader calling to all Christians or all people, there is something peculiarly theirs about it. In O’Donovan’s words, vocation is a “strongly individual obligation”⁵⁵ or a “particular, non-replicable

⁵¹ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 301. While Gilbert Meilaender’s approach to this contemporary malformation of vocation is to decenter it, Adams prefers instead to “break the identification of vocation with work” (301n10). See also Meilaender, *Friendship: A Study in Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981).

⁵² O’Donovan, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 224, author’s emphasis.

⁵³ O’Donovan, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 225.

⁵⁴ O’Donovan, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 224. Barth also resists any reduction of vocation to employment, although adding that for many people, it may include this. All human creatures have a vocation, Barth explains, because “all are destined to be recipients of the divine calling and hearers of the divine command.” *CD III/4*, 599. As Barth explains it, vocation includes the particular texture of one’s life: life stage, historical situation (political, economic, cultural context), personal aptitude and inclinations, and “sphere of operation, the field of his ordinary everyday activity.” *CD III/4*, 630.

⁵⁵ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 295.

obligation.”⁵⁶ Adams agrees. God “writes our name on more specific tasks,” he writes, offering us particular goods which are ours to love in a focused way.⁵⁷ Against the universalizability required of many ethical theories, God’s call communicates a singular moral judgment.⁵⁸

Thus, most of my participants understand God to be the agent of their calling, and that this calling is not reducible to employment but more specific than the Christian life, and finally, that it is has been given to them particularly. We now turn to the question of whether these accounts of divine calling are rightly classified as a divine command.

3. Command, Moral Obligation, & Regret

I meet Casey Lane (36, white, Presbyterian) at a small Episcopal church that has allowed me to use their parish hall for interviews. Once we are settled in a quiet room upstairs, Casey tells me that she has worked as a social worker for twelve years. She began as a community mental health worker with a psychology degree before earning an MSW. She currently works in pediatric palliative care on an interdisciplinary team that supports children and their families with a life-threatening illness. “Sometimes it’s at the

⁵⁶ O’Donovan, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 228.

⁵⁷ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 302.

⁵⁸ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 294. As an illustration of this principle, O’Donovan and Hare both reference the white stone of Revelation, given by God to the victorious person and inscribed with a hidden name. O’Donovan, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 223; Hare, *God’s Command*, 145-146. For more on particular moral judgments and the principle of universalizability, see Hare, *God’s Command*, 143-147. O’Donovan also gives a further biblical example: “When Paul obeyed the dream summoning him to Macedonia, his course of action was not only not dictated by a rule, but was one that Jesus at one point had forbidden to his disciples (Matt. 10:5). So we may have obligations which do not replicate those of any other person” (227).

time of diagnosis, sometimes it's at the time of a chronic or a crisis situation, and sometimes it's very acutely at the end of life," Casey explains. Her team helps support communication within the family and with the medical team, with medical decision-making and at the time of death, to "help orchestrate the health care systems so that can be a sacred time." Casey continues, "We're often a voice that helps see people as whole people, as people with stories that existed long before they intersected with a hospital."

While in graduate school, Casey "kept being pulled into health care and hospice and bereavement settings." She recalls, "I really felt that sacred intersection happened around physical illness and sometimes moving towards the end of life and grief very profoundly...I feel very passionate about that work." Later in the interview, she repeats this point, "I have a deep sense of clarity that I'm called to this work."

This work includes struggle for "equity and justice," especially within the hospital system, Casey adds.

It doesn't just feel like the right thing. It feels like something that has to be done for us to love and care about one another, and I feel on the hook for it in a way. I don't feel like I can just walk away from that. It feels like part of who I am and who I am as a person and as a disciple of Jesus, like it feels like what, what I am called to do every day.

This work has not been easy, however. Casey recalls a story of failure, while working with "one of those unforgettable families." She was in a prior position at the time, working in bone marrow transplant. A Black mother, whose child had received a transplant, had "layers of mental illness that impeded her ability to emotionally regulate under extreme stress, to the point that she was trespassed from the hospital by the police and was not allowed to be at her child's bedside during his death." Casey continues,

that is something that I don't know that I had power within the institution to change, but as a social worker, I will forever live with the regret for what that

meant for her and her family...there was racism at play, there was judgment, there was a lack of empathy...in retrospect there were a million ways that we could have worked around that situation that didn't happen, so yeah, lots of regret.

Later in the interview, Casey returns to this story, explaining, "My heart feels convicted in a way, how did our system fail her? And how did we fail her? Racial equity work is everything because this is how we love our neighbor, this is who we are and who God calls us to be, to treat people in a different way."

Casey's account of God's call leads us further into our search for the best description of this moral experience. Namely, is God's call a command? That is, does God's call communicate a morally binding obligation? Or does it rather indicate a good but optional path towards human perfection? Classically, these two options have been designated as divine command and divine counsel respectively.

Classical Greek and Latin poets and later medieval scholastics divide divine addresses into five categories: precepts, prohibitions, permission, counsels, and directly effective commands.⁵⁹ All of these communicate divine desire to effect change in the world.⁶⁰ For our present purposes, we can set aside directly effective addresses, which is when God accomplishes God's will in the world with God's own speech, such as 'Let there be light!' We will also pass over permission, when God says, 'You may or may not do this.' Thus, precepts, prohibitions, and counsels remain for our examination.

Put in the most straightforward terms, precepts are when God says, 'Do this!' and prohibitions are when God says, 'Don't do this!' Together, these two prescriptions

⁵⁹ Hare, *God's Command*, 32.

⁶⁰ Hare, *God's Command*, 34-35.

constitute the category of divine command.⁶¹ They generate a binding obligation as a result of God's authoritative speech addressed to human creatures. By this notification, God's pronouncement enters into force.⁶² Thus, as Adams explains, the command becomes "what we *have* to do."⁶³ Or as Hare puts it, "Obligation is accountability *to* someone" with a corresponding "sanction for some kind of non-compliance."⁶⁴

Accordingly, it involves moral seriousness: if a person fails to meet an obligation, blame is appropriate.⁶⁵ These binding obligations arise from valued social bonds, with God as the paradigmatic case. For theists, this relationship is of greatest value, and as God is capable of the greatest wisdom and justice, we may also assume that God's commands identify the best actions.⁶⁶

In contrast, counsel indicates something supererogatory, which we might describe as God saying, 'It would be good to do this.' The scholastic tradition has in mind here the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. These indicate modes of

⁶¹ In *God's Command*, Hare notes that there is a broad sense of precepts and prohibitions in which not all constitute commands, such as in the case of exhortations and warnings (37-42). However, our concern here is with the cases in which they are commands.

⁶² Thomas Aquinas argued this in *ST II-I.90.4*: "in order that a law obtain the binding force which is proper to a law, it must needs be applied to the men who have to be ruled by it. Such application is made by its being notified to them by promulgation. Wherefore promulgation is necessary for the law to obtain its force." Thomas thinks this also includes natural law, "by the very fact that God instilled it into man's mind."

⁶³ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 232, author's emphasis.

⁶⁴ Hare, *God's Command*, 46.

⁶⁵ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 235-236. "If I voluntarily fail to do what I am morally obliged to do, I am guilty. I may be appropriately blamed by others for my omission, and ought normally to reproach myself for it, in some degree" (238).

⁶⁶ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 242, 252-255.

life aiming at human perfection; they are exhorted but not morally required.⁶⁷ Thomas illustrates this divergence: “The difference between a counsel and a commandment is that a commandment implies obligation, whereas a counsel is left to the option of the one to whom it is given.”⁶⁸ God offers the evangelical counsels, he continues, as supplementary to the commands. They are not necessary, but they expedite the attainment of eternal happiness.

Contemporary theorists disagree on whether calling should be considered a command or counsel. In *God’s Command*, Hare associates calls with scholastic counsels.⁶⁹ They lack “the conceptually implied envisioning of condemnation and punishment,” characteristic of commands with their “internal reference to authority.”⁷⁰ In contrast, Barth describes vocation as marked with “the stamp of a command”: the human creature “must make a choice [regarding his vocation] for which he already finds

⁶⁷ For more on counsels, see Hare, *God’s Commands*, 44-48. For more on supererogation, see Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 260-261.

⁶⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *ST I-II.108.4*. Thomas continues: “Consequently in the New Law, which is the law of liberty, counsels are added to the commandments, and not in the Old Law, which is the law of bondage. We must therefore understand the commandments of the New Law to have been given about matters that are necessary to gain the end of eternal bliss, to which end the New Law brings us forthwith: but that the counsels are about matters that render the gaining of this end more assured and expeditious.” The counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, Thomas explains, allow for a person to attain eternal happiness “more speedily.”

⁶⁹ Fourteen years earlier, in *God’s Call*, Hare did not draw so stark a difference between ‘call’ and ‘command.’ Rather he noted his preference for ‘call’ language over ‘command’ as it stresses the love relation between God and the human creature, rather than a power relation (53).

⁷⁰ Hare, *God’s Command*, 46, 40. Hare continues, “We can still be *answerable*, but not *accountable* in the sense that a sanction is in the offing” (46). In contrast, commands include “some kind of condemnation envisaged for failure” (40).

himself chosen even as he makes it, so that he really has no other choice.”⁷¹ The arrival of God’s summons contains binding force. Adams too treats calling and vocation (which he uses interchangeably) as a command. In his words, “A call from God involves something like the pressure of a divine requirement,” and “vocations should be conceived as *commands* of God addressed to particular individuals.”⁷² Callings come with the force of an imperative that “*demand*s that one make it one’s own.”⁷³

Nonetheless, Adams also admits that vocation may occasionally act more like a counsel, although he uses the language of invitation. Once accepted, however, such an invitation “leads to commitments, obligations, and responsibilities.”⁷⁴ Accordingly, he includes both possibilities in his definition: “A vocation is a call from God, a command, or perhaps an invitation, addressed to a particular individual, to act and live in a certain way.”⁷⁵

⁷¹ Barth, *CD III/4*, 635. I have not developed Barth’s account of the relation between call and command more here as it disrupts the contrast between counsel and command, in a way that I do not find to be particularly helpful. Barth argues that one’s calling provides the context in which one receives God’s command. Calling includes one’s historical context, particular endowments, and sphere of work; here one encounters the particular commands. And yet, as this passage cited above shows, Barth still describes vocation as the reception of a certain type of command. For Barth’s discussion of vocation, see *CD III/4*, 595-647. For his distinction between vocation and command, see especially 598-600. Quoting Bonhoeffer, Barth calls vocation “the place of responsibility,” where the creature recognizes and fulfills God’s command: “vocation is the whole of the particularity, limitation and restriction in which every man meets the divine call and command,” 599. Hare follows this move: “the call is the point starting from which we are obedient. The command is to lead a life worthy of the calling (Eph 4:1), but the calling itself is not exactly a command; it is, when answered, the *context* of command.” *God’s Command*, 40.

⁷² Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 303.

⁷³ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 304.

⁷⁴ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 303-304.

⁷⁵ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 301.

With these differences in mind, let us return to Casey. Casey does not understand God's call to be an optional path. Rather, working for equity and justice is not just "the right thing" but it "has to be done," and she is "on the hook for it." She cannot "just walk away." She is accountable to God for this work: it is "what I am called to do every day."

Other participants echo Casey's insistence on the obligatory nature of God's call. For example, Kim Mulner (34, white, Christian) is among the minority of social workers who do not explain their profession with any reference to a divine command. However, she still feels a sense of obligation to God. She tells me, "I don't just feel accountable to [my employing agency]. I also feel accountable to God in my own conscience, but sometimes those things don't align, and I'm always probably not going to side with [my employing agency] in that case." Kim identifies dual sources of obligation – God and her employer – while also noting that her responsibility to the former overrides the latter. Following Adams here, we might suggest that Kim's relationship with God is of much greater value than with her employer. Thus, when moral requirements conflict, she sides with God and the obligations God has placed upon her.

Moreover, I found little evidence that God's call might be optional. Three occasions at first appeared like possibilities. Three participants had recently departed social work for ministry, teaching, and law respectively. And yet, when I looked closer, they understood these shifts to be in continuity their previous sense of vocation.⁷⁶ For

⁷⁶ As O'Donovan notes, discerning vocation is an ongoing task, "always mutating into new forms." *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 225.

example, after ten years as a social worker, Heather Cooper (44, white, Methodist) now teaches elementary students with disabilities in a public school. Yet her calling has always been “to work with kids in a way that helps them maximize their potential and with kids that wouldn’t otherwise get the kinds of help that I feel like they need. For me that is a calling.” Thus, although her current position is not formally in social work, she tells me, “I do as much social work in my current job as I ever did in my other one.” It is not a departure but a continuation of what God has asked her to do.

Thus, Casey and Kim point to the obligating character of God’s call, supporting a hypothesis that it can be appropriately categorized as a divine command, rather than divine counsel. And little evidence exists to the contrary. Thus, while I cannot say definitely that God’s call is indeed a command for all my participants, I do posit that it is indeed binding for many.

Casey also offers us another way in which she understands God’s call to be a moral obligation. When she and the system she works within fails a Black family, she tells me that she will “forever live” with regret. “Racial equity work is everything, because this is how we love our neighbor, this is who we are and who God calls us to be.” Yet in this instance, she failed, and she confesses that “[her] heart feels convicted.” She is guilty. While we take up this question of moral failure in Chapters Two and Three, for now, we merely note that Casey’s conviction adds credence to our conclusion that divine command offers the best description for this moral experience.

We now turn to the practical mechanics of the command itself. How do human beings receive God’s commands?

4. Receiving the Command

I meet Maria Zacarias (26, Latina, nondenominational) at the same church where I had met Casey. While I wait for her to arrive, I help the priest unfold chairs for the Maundy Thursday service to follow later that day. When I see Maria approach through a window, I wave her into the building. She is wearing her long hair loose, down over her plaid winter jacket, and carries a book bag. We climb wooden stairs to a drafty room reserved for us and settle into chairs that I had arranged.

Maria tells me that she has been a social worker for three years. Her first job was as a case manager for unaccompanied minors, and now she works at a mental health clinic for immigrant and refugee communities. She grew up in Peru, first in a Baptist church and then in a Pentecostal one. At the age of thirteen, she immigrated to the United States with her family. She is now twenty-six and tells me that she identifies as a nondenominational Christian. In the spring, she begins an MSW program with advanced standing.

As an undergraduate student in the American southwest, Maria began studying natural sciences, until she realized that “working with people” was “really [her] passion.” To switch her major to social work, however, was “a very hard decision;” she knew the pay would not be good. However, “it’s just something that I know that God gave me a heart for.” She repeats this later in the interview as well: “God gave me this heart, and God gave me these gifts, and God called me to do this.”

Sometimes, people question her decision. They say to her, “Oh, you’re a first-generation immigrant, and you have a college degree...you made it.” And they exhort her to pursue a career that promises greater prosperity. Yet Maria persists:

that's not really what I think God has called me, at least, to do...Once you've seen something, you can't really look away. Once you've really seen the needs that people have, I can't really just say, 'No.' And social work makes you – forces you to not look away. How do I fix it? And if I can fix it, then let me do the best that I can to help people in the now, and hopefully maybe through policies, change how people will – how it would affect them in the future too.

Because of her experience as an immigrant, Maria entered the field eager to work with other first-generation immigrants. She admits, however, that “sometimes I would be just a little thrown off whenever someone would share, ‘Oh I have an alcoholism problem,’ or ‘Oh I have a substance abuse problem,’ or ‘I have a criminal background.’ All of a sudden, it’s just like, ‘Oh I don’t know if I feel comfortable working with you.’” In social work, however, she continues, “you are supposed to see the whole system,” not just one dimension of a person’s life. As a Christian, moreover, “it is just trying to really see how Jesus sees people. I think that is social work.” She realized that she could not just work with “people that look like you.” Sometimes, God addresses her in the immigration clinic. As she explains,

sometimes it’s just, whenever [I am] looking at people – I mean it has happened that I just – not necessarily see the presence of God there, but I do feel like God just tells me, like, ‘I love this person. This is my person. This is my child. Can you love them, too?’ And yeah, there are reminders that sometimes I do get with people. I don’t really know, exactly, if that’s more based on my posture that I have that day or if that’s just more based on emotions. I don’t know. But it’s knowing that, yeah, sometimes that’s happened in the past.

Later in the interview, Maria also adds, “God also just loves everybody.”

In her work with refugees and undocumented people, Maria is moved by “what I think God says about them, and what I think God has said about me as an immigrant and a Latina, and also what I think the *Code of Ethics* for social workers really means.”

While the *Code* is not very specific, instructing you, “don’t do this or don’t do that,” it does prohibit discrimination based on origin, Maria explains. And this “resonates with...

who God says that they are...that it actually [is] something good – great!” God and the *Code of Ethics* agree: regardless of origin, people have worth, and they merit assistance based on their need.

Maria brings us to the practical mechanics of receiving God’s command. From her descriptions, we might detect at least four modes in which she understands that God is summoning her to be a social worker. She cites the evidence of her temperament and skills, the persistent call of human need, the scriptural example of Jesus, a divine voice speaking to her in the clinic, and human instruction found in professional code of ethics. Other participants too repeat these across my interviews.⁷⁷

These modes of receiving God’s command find more or less congruence with those offered by contemporary theorists. For example, Adams notes that God issues a command in a cognitively accessible sign through any of the vehicles of revelation: “a scriptural text, the utterance of a prophet or some other historical event, the requirements of some historical community, or features of an individual’s consciousness.”⁷⁸ Hare combines lists drawn from Richard Mouw and C. Stephen Evans:

- (1) Scripture, (2) natural law, (3) the *magisterium* of an ecclesial body, (4) specific commands of God to an individual, (5) examining our natural inclinations, (6) listening to our conscience, (7) teaching from other humans *as* God’s requirements, (8) teaching from other humans who do not recognize them

⁷⁷ One participant also spoke of her conscience. Occasionally, participants cite human nature or common sense, but these appear in reference to their daily decisions.

⁷⁸ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 265. As Adams suggests, divine command theory is “consistent with a wide variety of hypotheses about how the commands are revealed and how they can be known to us” (263).

as God's requirements, (9) human social requirements such as legal obligations, family obligations, and obligations of other socially defined roles.⁷⁹

The extensive character of this list implies that God uses both extraordinary and ordinary means of communication.⁸⁰ It includes both special revelation written in texts and directed towards individuals, perhaps in the form of a vision, dream, or auditory sensation. More commonplace modes include natural inclinations, the conscience, and human instruction.⁸¹ Further, we might posit that among Christians, the particulars of denominational background and Christian formation may incline individuals to be more receptive to some modes over others. Conceived in this way, divine command theory can incorporate a wide range of theories that explain moral obligation. The crucial move, of course, is that it presumes that God is the originating source of moral requirements,

⁷⁹ Hare, *God's Command*, 40n. Richard J. Mouw illustrates this spectrum: "My own commitment, in dealing with issues of religious authority, is to the kind of *sola scriptura* emphasis that was a prominent feature of the Protestant Reformation, and is still dear to the hearts of many conservative Protestants. But I want in no way to imply that a belief in the moral relevance of divine commands is the exclusive property of the people who spell out the issues of authority in a strong bibliocentric manner. For example, some Christians – especially some Anglicans and Roman Catholics – understand 'natural law' in such a way that when someone makes moral decisions with reference to natural law that person is obeying divine commands. Others hold that submission to the *magisterium* of a specific ecclesiastical body counts as obedience to divine directives. Others assume that individual Christians, even those who are not members of ecclesiastical hierarchies, can receive specific extrabiblical commands from God, such as 'Quit smoking!' or 'Get out of New Haven!' Still others hold that the will of God can be discerned by examining our natural inclinations or by heeding the dictates of conscience." Mouw, *The God who Commands* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 8.

⁸⁰ Hare, *God's Command*, 40.

⁸¹ Significantly, these latter modes do not rely upon belief in God. This represents a crucial feature of a divine command theory that aspires to account for shared features of human morality, regardless of access to special revelation. However, as we see in Maria's case, she attributes some of these modes to God explicitly. C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation*, 39.

regardless of how the agent comes to realize their binding force.⁸² In what follows, we consider each of the ways that Maria talks about receiving God's call in turn.

First, Maria describes God's call when citing her disposition and endowments for the work, which she understands as divine gifts. While an undergraduate student, Maria realizes that "working with people" is her "passion." She recognizes that, despite the poor pay, social work is "just something that I know that God gave me a heart for." Later in the interview, she repeats this: "God gave me this heart, and God gave me these gifts, and God called me to do this." Maria understands God to have given her passion and abilities peculiarly suited for this work, and that, she implies, evinces God's call. In the introduction, Amanda noted something similar: "I feel passionate about [social work] and I feel like that comes from God."

Seven others also cite their dispositions, desires, and skills as evidence of God's calling. One lists her endowments as God addressing her, to explain God's "assignment": "I gave you the skill set, and I gave you the tools, and I gave you the desire to help others and to be a social worker." Another five emphasize their natural proclivities, as contributing to their recognition of this work as peculiarly theirs, without directly attributing this to God. Thus, particular abilities and dispositions may themselves communicate a divine message. Barth notes this: in selecting one's "sphere of operation, the field of his ordinary everyday activity" or "main vocation," a person's

⁸² As we have already noted however, it is possible for a person to perceive a moral obligation without perceiving its divine source. Hare, *God's Command*, 40.

“historical situation and personal aptitude and endowment” will guide this choice.⁸³

Moreover, these very gifts make a certain trajectory possible.⁸⁴

Second, Maria references the example of Jesus as directing how she must treat service-users. Even when she is confounded by how their backgrounds and experiences diverge from her own, she tries “to really see how Jesus sees people.” In citing the actions of Jesus, Maria draws indirectly upon the Gospel stories. Many other participants too cite the example of Jesus as a reason for their work, especially Jesus’ compassion for vulnerable members of society. Others like Amanda in the introduction reference Jesus’ command to love neighbors, his teachings on being salt and light, or his parables, especially the Good Samaritan and the sheep and goats (“whatever you did to the least of these”). As one puts it, “With social work, you think of a lot of direct quotes from the bible of loving widows and orphans, and it’s meeting people where they are, and that was the definition of what Jesus did.” Remarkably, four claim Jesus for their profession: as “the matriarch of social work,” “the ultimate social worker,” or “a great social worker.” As one concludes, “The way that Jesus lives was like a social worker. He had compassion. He saw that people were harassed and helpless and he did something about it. And he gave. And he ate with prostitutes...that’s who Jesus was and is and that’s how I’m trying to be.”

Third, occasionally Maria hears God addressing her in the clinic when she looks at a client. Maria recites God’s words to her, “I love this person. This is my person. This

⁸³ Barth, *CD* III/4, 630, 634.

⁸⁴ Indeed, there is a longstanding tradition that divine gifts frequently accompany divine calls, as Hare notes, “to make that way of life liveable in an excellent way.” *God’s Command*, 48.

is my child. Can you love them too?” God declares the value of particular individuals and asks Maria to join God in loving each one. This does not happen regularly but occasionally, she observes, and she is not sure why it happens on the days when God does speak. She calls such messages “reminders,” implying that they reaffirm a prior sense of what God has asked her to do.

Maria here illustrates an instance of special revelation directed immediately to an individual through some supernatural means. While none of my participants speak of dreams or visions in realizing their call to social work, at least four describe an experience of hearing God’s voice. According to C. Stephen Evans, divine voices, dreams, or visions are “unlikely to be the normal or usual way in which people come to know their moral duties.”⁸⁵ Given their extraordinary character, these sorts of ‘inner promptings’ receive the most skepticism.⁸⁶ For example, Adams writes, “Few of us hear voices in the night, and fewer still would be wise to trust them. If each of us has a vocation, it must usually come in some other way.”⁸⁷ Thus, he not only questions the frequency of divine locutions but also their reliability.

And yet, direct divine imperatives to individuals have played a significant role within Christian tradition. Familiar examples present themselves: Paul on the Damascus road (“Get up and enter the city”),⁸⁸ Augustine of Hippo (“Pick it up and read”),⁸⁹ Francis

⁸⁵ C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation*, 39-40.

⁸⁶ Hare, *God’s Command*, 41. Notably, Hare’s examples largely consist of these sorts of experiences, to lend more plausibility to this sort of command.

⁸⁷ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 301.

⁸⁸ Acts 9:6. “Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul,

of Assisi (“Rebuild my house”),⁹⁰ or most recently, Teresa of Calcutta (“I want Indian nuns”⁹¹). In each case, the command directs a person towards their future, pointing towards the work they are do and the person they will become through such work.⁹²

Maria joins this list then: God addresses her: “I love this person...Can you love them

why do you persecute me?’ He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’” Acts 9:3-6.

⁸⁹ While in prayer and grief under a fig tree, Augustine writes, “Suddenly I heard a voice from a house nearby – perhaps a voice of some boy or girl, I do not know – singing over and over again, ‘Pick it up and read, pick it up and read.’... I stemmed the flood of tears and rose to my feet, believing that this could be nothing other than a divine command to open the Book and read the first passage I chanced upon.” *Confessions*, translated by Maria Boulding (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1997), VIII.29.

⁹⁰ Bonaventure writes of Francis, when walking near the church of Saint Damian, “at the prompting of the Spirit, went within to pray. Prostrating himself before an Image of the Crucified, he was filled with no small consolation of spirit as he prayed. And with eyes full of tears he gazed up, and he heard with his bodily ears a Voice proceeding from that Cross, saying thrice: ‘Francis, go and repair My House, which as thou seest, is falling utterly into ruin.’ Francis trembled, being alone in the church, and was astonished at the sound of such a wondrous Voice, and, perceiving in his hear the might of divine speech, was carried out of himself into ecstasy” (2.1). Later in the same chapter, Bonaventure makes it clear that Francis understood this voice to be a divine command: Francis “recalled unto mind the obedience laid upon him by the Crucifix as to the repairing of the church of Saint Damian, and like one truly obedient returned unto Assisi, that he might, if even by begging, obtain means to accomplish the divine behest” (2.7). “The Life of St. Francis,” in *Bonaventure: the Soul’s Journey into God, the Tree of Life, and the Life of St. Francis*, trans. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

⁹¹ In 1947, Teresa wrote to Archbishop Perier to appeal again for his permission to begin a new religious order. “In all my prayers and Holy Communions He is continually asking, “Wilt thou refuse?... I want Indian nuns, victims of my love, who would be Mary and Martha, who would be so united to me as to radiate my love on souls. I want free nuns covered with my poverty of the Cross. – I want obedient nuns covered with My obedience on the Cross. I want full of love nuns covered with My charity of the Cross. – Wilt thou refuse to do this for me?” *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the ‘Saint of Calcutta,’* ed. Brian Kolodiejchuk (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 96.

⁹² Interestingly enough, two of these instances – the case of Paul and Augustine – point towards a further (potential) source of divine command: a wise person and scripture, respectively. This prefigures something we will explore momentarily: God often graciously deploys multiple methods of communicating a command, allowing for testing and verification.

too?” We will return to another instance of divine locution in Section 5 when we consider testing the reception of the divine command.

Fourth, Maria also suggests that the NASW *Code of Ethics* communicates God’s command. She explains, “what God says about [undocumented immigrants]” equates with “what the *Code of Ethics* for social workers really means.” The latter prohibits discrimination based on origin, which thus “resonates with who God says that I am and who God says that they are.” God and professional ethics agree, for Maria, and both sources oblige her to act in certain ways towards her clients. We might say, then, that the *Code of Ethics* also acts as a ‘garment’ by which God communicates God’s command to Maria.⁹³ It gathers together the moral wisdom of previous generations of social workers, and although imperfect like any human moral system, its truths may be authorized by God.⁹⁴

In fact, Rachel (who we met in Section 2) echoes this language almost exactly. As she told us then, “Jesus backs up all of social work’s principles, of social justice and inclusion, empowerment, and those sort of things...getting at real solutions to social challenges, which I think we’re called to do as Christians.” Rachel identifies a correspondence between the moral commitments of social work and what God directs Christians to do, such that for Rachel, Jesus confirms social work values.

⁹³ In *God and Moral Obligation*, Evans writes, “social relationships per se generate obligations of all types, and there is every reason to think that legal obligations, family obligations, and other types of obligations will overlap extensively with moral obligations” (40-41).

⁹⁴ Adams notes that “human moral systems will be imperfect expressions of divine commands; and the question of their relation to God’s commanding will be whether and how far they are authorized or backed by God’s authority.” Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 264-5.

Like Maria and Rachel, almost half of my participants correlate the values of their profession with Christianity. For many, Christianity and social work are “intertwined,” “interwoven,” “integrated,” “blended,” in “alignment,” “the same,” “one and the same,” “fused,” or “hard to separate.” They cite shared values like justice, wholeness, health, equality, equity, human dignity, “really listening to people’s stories,” and community.⁹⁵ One participant, speaking of her baptismal vows and the *Code of Ethics*, insists, “You could lay them right on top of each other in some ways.” Thus, across my interviews, participants express a conviction that the profession’s moral mandate receives authorization from God’s command.

In addition to citations of the professional code, nine participants also cite other forms of human instruction as prompting them to become social workers. In five cases, the person was their mother, three point to an early encounter with a social worker, and one to a client struggling with mental illness. In telling these stories, none of them explicitly reference God as the source of this instruction and the sense of moral obligation in their accounts is more obscure. However, all of them later in the interview speak of a divine calling or scriptural imperative for their work, suggesting that these human intermediaries provided a further medium for a divine message. As Barth suggests, “the command of God must be proclaimed by one man to another who must hear it through

⁹⁵ Notably, these values approximate those stated in the NASW *Code of Ethics*: “service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, competence” (1). Moreover, “These principles set forth ideals to which all social workers should aspire” (5).

him.”⁹⁶ Thus, the human teacher may or may not explicitly identify the content as God’s command.⁹⁷

Finally, we arrive at the fifth and final way in which Maria hears God’s command: the call of human need. In explaining how God has called her to social work, she observes, “Once you’ve really seen the needs that people have, I can’t really just say, ‘no.’” The sheer encounter with another person’s need generates a moral obligation which Maria cannot refuse. Several others imply that their sense of calling also arises out of an early or ongoing exposure to human need.

Maria’s account fits with how divine command theorists understand intermediary vehicles to communicate God’s command. Barth proposes that “the claim of God’s command always wears the garment of another claim.”⁹⁸ Maria’s interactions at the immigration clinic becomes a medium for hearing God’s imperative. When speaking specifically of vocation, Barth observes that the human creature is “summoned by this opportunity,” perceiving “a compelling necessity, a question to be answered, a gap to be filled...a service to perform.”⁹⁹ Thus, for Maria, the presence of proximate human need

⁹⁶ Barth, *CD III/4*, 9. Barth continues, “the very command of God should be given in a very concrete form immediately from one man to another or to many others.”

⁹⁷ Evans, *God and Moral Obligation*, 40.

⁹⁸ Barth, *CD II/2*.585. He offers the following examples of command’s various ‘garments’: “An object with its question, the compulsion of a necessity of thought, one of those hypothesis or conventions, a higher necessity of life and particularly a more primitive, a necessity which in itself seems to be that of a very human wish or very human cleverness, a summons coming from this or that quarter, a call which a man directs to himself – all these can actually be the command of God veiled in this form.”

⁹⁹ Barth, *CD III/4*, 634-5. In *God’s Commands*, Hare writes, “God can put us next to the people God wants us to help...The principle of providential proximity is helpful in overcoming the despair that comes from seeing the scale of the world’s need as compared with my own pitiful

constitutes this “compelling necessity.” However, as we will see in Chapter Three, this possibility raises pressing ethical and theological issues. Given the seemingly infinite character of human need, my participants grapple with whether they thus face an infinite moral demand. In light of this, we will tarry at greater length with this mode of receiving God’s command and its accompanying difficulties.

To continue, a moral demand communicated by human need may or may not be recognized as originating in God. Hare explains God as the “magnetic center” of such claims, exerting attractive force via sensible objects.¹⁰⁰ Particular situations and relationships apply a moral pull, Hare explains, which can be identified as God’s command.¹⁰¹ God constitutes “the center of this attraction,” and God’s “call will be directly to human union with God, or to something else which is God’s selected route to this end.”¹⁰² The call of human need, crying out for assistance, then, can be recognized as underpinned and coordinated by God, as a particular path towards God. And indeed, this reading stands in continuity with the manifold voices within the Christian tradition,

resources. It is not, however, simply *obvious* whom one has been placed next to. It takes discernment, as God’s commands usually do” (53).

¹⁰⁰ Hare, *God’s Call*, 67. For the image of the divine magnet, Hare cites Plato: “Well, do you not see that the spectator is the last of the rings I spoke of, which receive their force from one another by virtue of the magnet?...But it is the deity who, through all the series, draws the spirit of men wherever he desires, transmitting the attractive force from one into another.” Plato, *Ion* 536a, cited in Hare, *God’s Call*, 48.

¹⁰¹ Hare, *God’s Call*, 47, 49.

¹⁰² Hare, *God’s Call*, 67.

which have long agreed that the love of neighbor is the primary route to the love of God. Attending to other people prepares the person to behold God.¹⁰³

In a remarkably apt illustration for our interests, Adams illustrates how a concern for human needs might be interpreted as a divine command.

Suppose you believe yourself called to take a demanding and low-paid job in a nonprofit social service agency. Being asked, ‘Why do you think you are called to do that?’ you might say that you feel a concern for the needs to be served. Perhaps you would say, ‘God has laid this concern on my heart’; but someone might try to grant you the vocation as a personal humanitarian imperative, while avoiding the theological interpretation, by grounding the imperative in psychological facts about your concern. On this reductionist account the concern you feel is not just the ground for your belief in the imperative, but the ground of its existence.¹⁰⁴

With the theological interpretation, however, “the feeling of concern” operates as “a perception of a claim on her, which is not created by her concern but communicated to her by it.”¹⁰⁵ Or as Hare puts it, to endorse the call of need is not merely a report on a feeling, as emotivism suggests.¹⁰⁶ Rather, it expresses acceptance of a larger set of “norms that prescribe that kind of response to [t]his situation,” namely that “God calls people to the same kind of [love] that God has.”¹⁰⁷ Thus, the call exists independent of a

¹⁰³ I offer two examples here, although many more could be cited. Thomas Aquinas writes, “[I]f any man loves not his neighbor, neither does he love God, not because his neighbor is more loveable, but because he is the first thing to demand our love.” *ST II-II.26.3*, reply 1. Walter Rauschenbusch agrees, “The love of man is our concrete object lesson in the kindergarten of love, and if we learn that well, and as fast as we learn that well, the love of God grows in us, and we become religious.” “Unto Me” (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1912), 19.

¹⁰⁴ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 313.

¹⁰⁵ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 314. The capacity to perceive such a claim, moreover, suggests a significant intersection of command and virtue. As Gilbert Meilaender suggests, “What duties we perceive may depend upon what virtues shape our vision of the world.” *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 5.

¹⁰⁶ Hare, *God’s Call*, 47.

¹⁰⁷ Hare, *God’s Call*, 47.

person's evaluative judgment, whether or not a person takes the further step of identifying this pull as God's command.¹⁰⁸

Accordingly, even when a person does not recognize that they are receiving a command from God, they still can be morally required to act. We might still call this general revelation of a sort. As Hare notes, "Even if people do not know God is the author, they can still be accountable to what has been revealed, and they can still have obligations. They may even have a sense of *being commanded* without knowing who it is that is commanding them."¹⁰⁹

This possibility fits remarkably well with feminist accounts of vulnerability-responsive moral requirements. For example, feminist philosopher Lisa Tessman defends the moral experience where human need generates an authoritative moral demand.¹¹⁰ As she explains, "one can come to be bound by a moral requirement just because a need or a vulnerability 'calls out' for a response."¹¹¹ Such requirements are not based on the agent's voluntary commitment but rather the moral authority of need's call. Need asks for a response, most often within prior relations, "formed and sustained by a combination

¹⁰⁸ Hare, *God's Call*, 47.

¹⁰⁹ Hare, *God's Command*, 61.

¹¹⁰ That human vulnerability generates obligations for others is by no means a modern conception, however. In his reading of the story of the Good Samaritan, Augustine assumes this to be true: "he is our neighbor whom it is our duty to help in his need, or whom it would be our duty to help if he were in need." The presence of another's need transforms them into a person to whom the duty of care is owed. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1.31, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), cited in Eric Gregory's "Agape and Special Relations in a Global Economy: Theological Sources," in *Global Neighbors: Christian Faith and Moral Obligation in Today's Economy*, edited by Douglas A. Hicks and Mark Valeri (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 33.

¹¹¹ Lisa Tessman, *Moral Failure: On the Impossible Demands of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 209.

of luck and agency.”¹¹² This account coheres with theological interpretations of this pull: human creatures encounter God’s command through the claims placed upon us by others.¹¹³

However, both Tessman and Hare warn that our perceptions of these sorts of moral claims can be skewed. As we might expect, they attribute such distortions to various sources. For Hare, of course, even though “God created us with an emotional and affective make-up, such that we can feel the pull of God’s call,” nevertheless, human capacities are hindered by sin.¹¹⁴ This seems especially the case with commands delivered via intermediaries: “the reception of the divine command in this sort of case requires discretion and discernment, and it will often be possible to get it wrong.”¹¹⁵

Tessman too observes that people possess varying aptitudes and degrees of sensitivity for perceiving human need as generating moral requirements. As a result, those who are more able to interpret others’ needs as moral demands find themselves with greater obligations.¹¹⁶ In fact, Maria’s attention to human need leads to her exhaustion, which we will consider in Chapter Three. As we will see there, when human need outpaces available resources, social workers face moral failure. And when they understand those needs as communicating God’s command, this failure multiples.

¹¹² Tessman, *Moral Failure*, 252.

¹¹³ Hare, *God’s Command*, 156.

¹¹⁴ Hare, *God’s Call*, 48-49.

¹¹⁵ Hare, *God’s Command*, 62.

¹¹⁶ Tessman, *Moral Failure*, 247.

However, variable attention to human need not only results from different temperaments but also patriarchal norms. As Tessman explains, these disproportionately dispose women to be attuned to others' needs and disproportionately assign care work to women.¹¹⁷ When we recall that 82% of social workers are women,¹¹⁸ the presence of these distortions appear evident. Translated into a theological register, here is yet another instance of sin, amplified at the ideological and structural levels. Of course, this presumes that God does not distribute this call to social work in such a disproportionate manner. It is this presumption that cuts at the heart of a matter: when does one know if existing social arrangements are the result of a multitude of divine assignments or the distorting effects of sin? Or can it be both?

Indeed, the concept of calling has been used to sacralize existing social arrangements.¹¹⁹ As we have already noted, Max Weber's famously interpreted ascetic Protestantism in these terms. Weber argues that a divinely-directed system of callings provides a "providential interpretation of the economic order," justifying the division of labor.¹²⁰ Thus, God arranges the distribution of workers, for benefiting the whole.¹²¹ And indeed, Calvin suggests something like this himself, in the sole passage on vocation

¹¹⁷ Tessman, *Moral Failure*, 233.

¹¹⁸ Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey," (2019), <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>.

¹¹⁹ In *Finite and Infinite Goods*, Adams warns that vocation can be used to endow "existing social arrangements with the aura of the sacred" (308).

¹²⁰ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 160-1. "The emphasis on the ascetic importance of a fixed calling provided an ethical justification of the modern specialized division of labor," 163.

¹²¹ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 161. William Perkin, a leading Puritan in 17th century England illustrates this connection: vocation is "a certain kind of life, ordained and imposed on man by God, for the common good." Cited in Meilaender, *Friendship*, 36.

in the *Institutes*: God’s calling delineates the lawful bounds of a person’s endeavors: “a man of obscure station” will not endeavor to “leave the rank in which he has been placed by God.”¹²²

Take an insidious example of this from antebellum America, found in prayers drafted by slave-owning ministers for use by slaves: “Let me not be slothful in business, but diligent and industrious in the calling thy Providence has allotted to me.”¹²³

According to this tract, God has assigned slaves to their lot, and thus, cooperation with the slave economy equates obedience to God. At its worse, then, invocations of God’s call can justify wicked distributions of labor in the name of God. Therefore, receiving God’s command in other garments requires careful and sustained discernment. We turn now, then, to a portrait which illustrates how one might test the reception of a divine command.

5. Testing the Reception of Divine Commands

For over thirty years, Martha Todd (65, white, American Baptist) has worked in child abuse prevention. Across the street from Martha’s office, we shuffle our chairs around at a grocery store café to avoid the afternoon sun. Martha wears a sweater covered in butterflies and speaks with energy. She first was a teacher for seven years and considered seminary before landing on social work. “I realized that I could do ministry

¹²² Calvin, *Institutes*, 725.

¹²³ Lauren F. Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 69.

through social work,” she explains, given its combination of clinical skills and concern for social justice. Her current employing agency serves children ages zero to three.

Martha tells me that despite the work’s difficulties, “it’s a calling that keeps me in it.” She goes on, “when we’re called, we’re not called for the results, we’re called to do the process.” Part of doing this process well is her commitment to be “respectful of each person’s dignity...I want to treat each person as I see that Jesus would have. Not that I always do, but I want to, and I strive to.”

As Martha approaches retirement, she occasionally mentors young Christians training to become social workers. They often struggle with professional boundaries. Martha explains: “They’ll say things like, ‘But we’re called to be there with people, and we’re called to love fully.’” Martha tells them, “Yes, we are, but if you love too fully without boundaries, you’ll lose your effectiveness, and you’ll lose your own personhood. It will eventually eat at you, it will eat your soul if you don’t have those boundaries.” Martha is sympathetic, however, because she found this to be “a really hard concept” when she was starting in the profession herself.

Because you’re filled with zeal, and you’re coming at it from a Christian perspective, then you want to love like Jesus loved. And yes, you can do that, *and* you can keep that little boundary there that protects yourself. And Jesus too went up to the mountain, and he took time away, and he processed. And he had time by himself, and he got his distance, and I think it’s a good thing for us to do too.

At the very end of our interview, I ask Martha Todd if there is anything further she would like to add. She responds,

I have felt for thirty years that this work that I’m doing now is just what I’m supposed to do. You know, even – I’ll just tell you a little personal epiphany – there was a time when I was feeling pretty burned out, I was feeling, ‘Oh my gosh, I’m not living up to my potential, I need to be doing something else.’ I was just in a bad place. And I was out taking a walk by myself, and I was praying about it, and I heard as clearly as a bell, I – I heard a voice say to me, ‘Martha,

you are doing exactly what I want you to be doing.’ [She tears up.] Oh. And that will carry you a long, long way. You know? So, on the bad days, I just go back to that voice, and I just hear it again and again and again. It was such a gift.

After I thanked her for sharing this with me, Martha continued. “I’m a firm believer that that was – I don’t get many direct communications in my life. I haven’t experienced that many times, but it was *so clear*. It was almost as if it was out loud,” she says with a laugh. And then she concludes, “It was a life-changing moment.”

After considering the practical mechanics of how God’s command might arrive, we come to the epistemological question of testing the perception of command. Given human finitude and the distortions of sin, to what extent can human beings accurately know what God commands? And thus, what processes of discernment should accompany a perception of a command? We have already noted Hare’s concern that damaged human perceptions can contribute to getting the command wrong, and Tessman warns us of the distorting power of patriarchy in its disproportionate distributions of sensitivity to human need. In other words, human sin can use claims about divine command to sacralize existing social arrangements. In addition to human sin, human finitude and situatedness in time presents possibilities for misconstruing God’s directions.¹²⁴ As an example, Hare points to the many examples of the disciples misunderstanding Jesus’ own instruction.¹²⁵ Barth too observes that such obscurity is possible, although “in a particular case [it] always arises on man’s side, not on God’s.”¹²⁶ Human factors inhibit the reception of the command, and given this risk, processes of

¹²⁴ Hare, *God’s Command*, 61.

¹²⁵ Hare, *God’s Command*, 61.

¹²⁶ Barth, *CD III/4*, 12.

moral deliberation may be appropriately applied.¹²⁷ Thus, we turn to Martha. In two different examples of God's calling, Martha demonstrates two kinds of testing.

First, in recounting her conversations with young Christian social workers, Martha invites them to critically examine what their sense of what God's calling entails. When they insist on being "called to love fully" and "to love like Jesus loved," she warns them that the social worker who "love[s] too fully without boundaries" will lose her "effectiveness," her "personhood," and "it will eat your soul." She also cites a counter example from Jesus' life. She tells them, "Jesus too went up to the mountain, and he took time away, and he processed...and I think it's a good thing for us to do too." She invokes Jesus' example as a justification for professional boundaries. In this, Martha models one way in which perceptions of God's calling ought to be tested. She draws upon another authoritative source to check the content of revelation.¹²⁸ Martha thus illustrates Adams' recommendation that a sense of divine calling should be tested against "other ethical and religious beliefs that one accepts," as well as "with other facts that are known about oneself and about the world."¹²⁹ Martha knows from experience and observation that if social workers fail to "keep that little boundary there," then exhaustion awaits. (We will return to exhaustion and the moral ambivalence but necessity of boundaries in Chapter Three.) Thus, she shares this conviction with younger practitioners.

¹²⁷ In *Finite and Infinite Goods*, Adams insists, "human claims about what God has commanded are subject to rational assessment and criticisms" (265).

¹²⁸ Hare, *God's Command*, 175; Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 314-5. This type of testing may also be implicitly at work in Maria's account offered in Section 4. She juxtaposes multiple sources: her temperament, divine locutions, professional obligations, and responsiveness to human need all confirm that God has given her this work.

¹²⁹ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 314-5.

Second, in a season of burnout, Martha tests her sense of calling in prayer. She is “in a bad place” and decides that she needs to leave social work, even though she entered the profession to “do ministry.” While walking and praying about her vocation, she wants to know if God has released her to do something else. She is testing her sense of vocation, weighing its clarity and strength in the face of discouragement.¹³⁰ As Adams writes, “Is the sense of vocation strengthened or weakened by prayer?” In response, Martha hears God’s voice “clearly as a bell,” telling her, “Martha, you are doing exactly what I want you to be doing.” Thus, God renews an invitation for Martha to persevere in social work. This prayerful encounter gives Martha courage to continue. Thus, prayer both tests a previous sense of calling and provides the grounds for receiving its renewal. As Hare notes, God’s commands are “standardly received in prayer,”¹³¹ a point that Barth also makes frequently. For example, Barth writes, “we ask we will receive the knowledge of God’s command,” and “Everything depends on whether we ask seriously”: “What ought we to do?”¹³² While this asking may take various forms, petitionary prayer is its principle form: God’s decision “must be prayed for and sought for as the grace of God.”¹³³

Christian traditions also house further criteria for testing that a person is hearing God’s voice, rather than some other voice. While Martha does not cite these directly, her

¹³⁰ In *Finite and Infinite Goods*, Adams also adds further tests: “Does it survive tribulation? Is acting on it fruitful?” (314-5).

¹³¹ Hare, *God’s Command*, 173.

¹³² Barth, *CD II/2*, 653.

¹³³ Barth, *CD II/2*, 646.

descriptions nevertheless bear striking resemblances to Teresa of Avila's criteria for divine locutions.¹³⁴ For example, Martha emphasizes the clarity of God's communication, citing each word from memory and insisting that it was 'clear as a bell,' 'almost as if it was out loud.' As Teresa notes, "[t]he locution takes place in such intimate depths and a person with the ears of the soul seems to hear those words from the Lord Himself so clearly and so in secret...the soul remembers every syllable."¹³⁵ Martha also recollects this message when discouraged even though it happened years before. It reassures her of God's direction for her to continue her work in child welfare and gives her courage. Similarly, Teresa observes that such locutions "remain in the memory for a very long time, and some are never forgotten."¹³⁶ Moreover, they also leave the soul in "devout and peaceful recollection."¹³⁷ If rather the locution has a demonic origin, the recipient would feel restless and disturbed.¹³⁸ Teresa worries about demonic or human influences that can deceive the human recipient into thinking they are receiving divine communication, and thus she provides phenomenological criteria for its testing. Namely,

¹³⁴ For a similar account of divine locutions, see John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, book 2, chapters 28-31. For a synthetic treatment of locutions in the Christian tradition, see Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1982), 427-428, and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life, Prelude of Eternal Life* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book, 1947), volume 2, part 4, chapters 54-55. Hare also offers a phenomenology of hearing God's voice which shares several features with those mentioned here, including the voice's authority as distinct from the recipient's own voice, its familiarity and continuity with previous occurrences, the recipient's subsequent peace, and other good effects. *God's Command*, 41.

¹³⁵ Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 6.3.12.

¹³⁶ Teresa, *The Interior Castle*, 6.3.6.

¹³⁷ Teresa, *The Interior Castle*, 6.3.6.

¹³⁸ Teresa, *The Interior Castle*, 6.3.16.

the command must be clear, memorable, and consoling.¹³⁹ Martha too includes these features in her account of hearing God's voice.

Teresa suggests two more such tests that fit with those that are implicit within Martha's counsel to the young social workers. First, Teresa insists that any locutions "not in close conformity with Scripture" should not be given any attention, as they are not from God.¹⁴⁰ Scriptural witness offers a plumb-line for verifying any direct revelation to individuals. When Martha cites the example of Jesus withdrawing from the crowd, she exhorts young social workers to also cross-reference their understanding of God's calling with scripture. Jesus, she thinks, justifies the adoption of some protective strategies even for social workers committed to 'loving fully.'

Second, Teresa advises her nuns to consult a "learned and prudent confessor" after receiving a divine location: "His Majesty wants the soul to consult in this way; and that it does so does not mean it is failing to carry out the Lord's commands."¹⁴¹ To not do so is "very dangerous."¹⁴² Consultation with a wise mentor coheres with God's desires, Teresa explains, and is not a sign of disobedience. In a similar way, Martha

¹³⁹ In *God's Command*, Hare offers a parallel account from Barth: "clarity and distinctiveness, external origin, familiarity, authority, and providential care" (175). North American charismatic Christians also agree, as Tanya Luhrmann describes in *When God Talks Back*. She identifies four tests to determine whether God has spoken: the voice is not like the recipient's own (due, for example, to its spontaneous or unexpected character), it is in continuity with scripture and/or God's character, circumstances or others confirm the revelation, and it is followed by a feeling of peace (63-70).

¹⁴⁰ Teresa, *The Interior Castle*, 6.3.4.

¹⁴¹ Teresa, *The Interior Castle*, 6.3.11.

¹⁴² Teresa, *The Interior Castle*, 6.3.11.

provides counsel to young social workers, sharing from her wisdom garnered through years of practice. She aids them in testing their sense of what God is asking them to do.

In weighing her perception of God's command, Martha relies upon her powers of discernment. She does not merely repeat what she thinks God has said. In the final portrait, we take up the question of human agency more directly and its relation with divine command.

6. God's Command & Human Agency

I meet Melissa Reynolds (32, Black, Christian) at her seminary cafeteria. We stand in line to order and make small talk over the noise of other students. Ten minutes later, we find a table outside. I check my recorder and shift my chair to avoid the sun, and Melissa comments on the noise of birds in the background. We begin the interview, and I ask Melissa about her religious affiliation. "Christian. Grew up Baptist," she begins, shading her eyes. "Spent some time in a Pentecostal denomination and now I'm thinking about being ordained in the United Church of Christ, but I attend a United Methodist Church – so I'm – I haven't made any particular declarations, but I just say Christian." Although Melissa is now in seminary, before that, she practiced as a licensed clinical social worker for seven years.

Melissa's first job was in crisis response, working with people thinking about hurting or killing themselves. She did in-home assessments for suicidal ideation, "to assess where that person was at psychologically and help that family planning on how to work with them, with the client. I jumped in headfirst in a super intense job," Melissa adds. She spent the following five years doing "incredibly intense" work for a hospital in

adolescence medicine. She rotated various days between high schools and a clinic for teens. Kids would come in with a range of needs, including depression, suicidal thoughts, and in the wake of sexual violence or gun violence. She also worked a second job for some of that time in an emergency room, “dealing with lots of tragic child abuse cases” – “that was really intense work.”

Melissa describes “wanting to work with people” as “part of God’s calling in my life.” She adds, “that’s one of the things that God will have me do while I’m here on this earth.” She gains support for this conviction through “see[ing] God help me in my clinical work.” For example, in the midst of an interaction, she sometimes has “this feeling, like maybe I should ask this question, maybe I should say this.” She continues, “I felt within the Spirit – I felt within me prompting me.” While Melissa’ colleagues often praise her, observing “your clinical instincts are always spot on,” Melissa attributes this as “a gift of discernment,” drawing from her “Pentecostal side.”

Melissa also asks for God’s help at work when she is uncertain how to act. Her “constant question” is “calling on, Ok God...what am I supposed to do?” She prays “especially when I don’t know what to do...there’s certain things, they don’t teach you at school.” For example, she tells me how when she was working in palliative care at the hospital, she needed to do an imprint of a dead infant’s foot for the parents. “What do you do if you’re terrified of dead bodies?” Melissa asks me, even as she notes that such a gesture was “this radical way of showing love and care for the client, but it’s like, me, Melissa, taking a dead baby foot and implanting it in cement. It’s like, ‘God, I can’t. I can’t, I can’t do this.’” In that instance, another social worker helped her, and Melissa expresses her thanks, “*Whoo God!*” Summarizing these sorts of instances, Melissa

recaps: “There’s nothing that can prepare you for it. Alright God, what are we doing here? What’s next? Because I’m out of – I don’t have the words. I don’t have the ability.”

Although Melissa continues to feel called to this work, there came a moment when she was “doing too much, seeing too much, overworking myself.” This was when she was working two jobs, in the emergency room and the adolescent medicine clinic.

She remembers,

What was internally going on was, ‘This is too much for me. I think I’ve reached my limit here with this at this time in my life.’ At the same time, I know that that’s a part of my calling to be with people, in transitions of life, whether that be being with a family when someone’s dying, being with a person before they die. I know that death is a part of my calling. That feels weird, but I’ve seen myself in like the gifts that come up – I think spiritual gifts that come up within really crisis-type situations and for whatever reason, I’m able to be calm, not freak out, to comfort folks.

For the last two years, Melissa has stepped away from social work while she has been in seminary. “God’s like, ‘Ok, we need to do some different kind of work.’...I think I look at social work as holistic care and in order for me to participate in holistic care, I myself have to work on what that looks like for me internally. What does it look like for me to care for myself holistically?”

Melissa draws us into the question of how human action corresponds with the divine command. While the following three chapters offer an extended reflection of this question, Melissa previews for us how divine and human agency intersect in discerning human action and its limits. God calls Melissa to work with people, to be with them in transitions, especially those occasioned by death. However, as John Hare notes, divine command theories sit in tension with another sort of moral experience: “we have to work

out for ourselves what to do and what not to do.”¹⁴³ God’s call does not relieve Melissa of the need for deliberating about right action. She knows this is her work to do, and yet she faces crisis after crisis, such that moral uncertainty and decision abound. Contra some accounts of divine command, she does not merely mimic what God has told her to do.¹⁴⁴ God orients her as a moral agent in the world, prepared to act in time, and she must discern the particulars.¹⁴⁵ As we will see in the chapters that follow, my participants take this as a given. Without sensing any disjuncture, they cite God’s call and their own processes of discernment.¹⁴⁶

Take for example Melissa’s decision to leave social work for a period and go to seminary. She cites divine direction for this: “God’s like, Ok, we need to do some different kind of work,” but then she quickly follows with the observation, “I myself have to work on what [holistic care] looks like for me internally.” God directs Melissa, and Melissa must work out the details. These need not be contradictory statements. Melissa acts within the ground cleared by God’s summons. As John Hare explains, God’s

¹⁴³ Hare, *God’s Command*, 1-2.

¹⁴⁴ In *Finite and Infinite Goods*, Adams characterizes these other approaches in “prescribe as much as possible of the detail of life in unambiguous commands that people are taught by their religious community” (272-273).

¹⁴⁵ In *God’s Command*, Hare explains, “God reveals enough to keep us going, but does not reveal the whole thing, because God is respecting our need to *work out* how to live” (61). Or as Oliver O’Donovan explains, “God’s call to us to serve him is the content of our responsibility...Centered and secured by this call, we are not swallowed up by what has been, not dissipated by what is yet to be, but can exercise our freedom in identity with ourselves.” *Self, World, and Time: Ethics as Theology I* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2013), 38.

¹⁴⁶ David Clough suggests that this might be framed as a “dialectical tension between our need to act responsibly and our need to be open to God’s command.” There are risks in either direction, he proposes: on the one hand, claiming to possess absolute certainty about God’s will and, on the other, abandoning any efforts at hearing God’s instruction. Clough and Leyden, “Claiming Barth for Ethics,” 176, in reference to David Clough, *Ethics in Crisis*, 125-132.

command communicates God's chosen route to union with God, and human beings freely come into agreement with this end.¹⁴⁷ In this way, Hare continues, "autonomy can be reconciled with a version of divine command theory," in which human beings recapitulate God's will in their own will.¹⁴⁸ Melissa here agrees with God's instruction: she should withdraw from social work for a time. She has reached her "limit," "doing too much, seeing too much, overworking myself," and even though she still senses God's original calling, she hears God again and agrees that she too requires care. God's command does not in itself cause her act.¹⁴⁹ She reflects on her experiences of exhaustion, and she comes to the same conclusion as indicated by divine summons.

Even as Melissa exercises her moral agency, she does not think that God has left her to reason unaided. In her clinical work, she feels the Holy Spirit prompting her internally, to ask this or that question. While her colleagues praise her "clinical instincts," she attributes this to divine grace moving in her processes of moral reasoning, or what she calls "the gift of discernment." As Kathryn Tanner notes, this reflects the immanence of God's creative agency within creatures, "working interiorly, in their

¹⁴⁷ In *God's Call*, Hare adds that it is possible to share such an end, albeit with "many different degrees of clarity and fullness" (116). For example, it is possible to not understand the prescription even if we accept. Hare continues, "We can be autonomous if we trust God to tell us to do what will in the end produce the highest intrinsic good, namely (as Scotus puts it) that we become co-lovers with God. So we carry out our obligations because God has made them obligatory, but also because we share this end with God" (118). God's commands are not "merely dictatorial but relational – heading us toward union. But since morality is relational in this way, it has to be seen as involving also our autonomous submission to these commands. Because we share a final end with God, our submission is not blind, though we may not always see how the route leads to the end" (119).

¹⁴⁸ Hare, *God's Command*, 115. Barth writes, to choose "what God has chosen for him" is true freedom, where the creature actualizes God's will in his "own decision and deed." *CD III/4*, 595-596.

¹⁴⁹ Hare, *God's Command*, 56.

depths.”¹⁵⁰ Thus, what God does and what creatures do need not be set in a competitive relation. Paul Tillich offers his own version of this coordination. Human reason itself derives its “structure” and “ground” in God, allowing for what he calls theonomy. Rather than a dyad between autonomy and heteronomy, Tillich argues, the moral law can simultaneously arrive from God and human reason.¹⁵¹

As Melissa coordinates her action with God’s action, she also appeals for divine help. In her work, she prays, “Alright God, what are we doing here? What’s next?” Her training does not supply all the answers, and so her “constant question” is “calling on God, Ok God...what am I supposed to do?” Prayer accompanies her as she discerns what God’s command looks like in the particulars of her work. “I don’t have the ability,” she confesses, noting her ongoing need for God. At her limits, Melissa reaches for God. We will return to this role of prayer at human limits in the chapters that follow.

¹⁵⁰ Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988), 95. For this point, Tanner cites Thomas: “God [can] cause a movement of the will in us without prejudice to the freedom of the will.” *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3.89.1, trans. Bourke. She also cites Peter Fransen: “God then does not work in us from the outside, violently imposing Himself on us, binding and determining us to do what is good. As Creator, He stands at the wellspring of our existence, at the point where it flows uninterruptedly from His creative hand. He alone can reach our freedom at its source and yet do it no violence.” *Divine Grace and Man*, trans. G. Duport (New York: New American Library, 1965), 172.

¹⁵¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 85. Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck also used this concept, predating Tillich, according to Mouw, *The God who Commands*, 18. Robert M. Adams offers his own interpretation on theonomy: “Let us say that a person is *theonomous* to the extent that the following is true of him: He regards his moral principles as given him by God, and adheres to them partly out of love or loyalty to God, but he also prizes them for their own sakes, so that they are the principles he *would* give himself if he were giving himself a moral law. The theonomous agent, in so far as he is right, acts morally because he loves God, but also because he loves what God loves.” “Autonomy and Theology Ethics” in *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 126.

Thus, Melissa's descriptions direct us to an account of divine command which has ample room for human intelligence and responsibility. Human agents must discern the shape of their action, in light of what they understand God to be saying.¹⁵² Unlike some divine command theories, my participants do not understand God to be prescribing every detail of their lives.¹⁵³ As we will see in Chapter Two, this means that some participants simply act and decide without explicit reference to God's call on most days. God's commission fades into the background as they live into the form of life that God has given them.

Melissa's descriptions also lead to another question concerning divine command and human agency, which will concern us principally in Chapter Three. Namely, does God ask more than is humanly possible? While Melissa is working in the adolescence medical clinic and the emergency room, she realizes, "This is too much for me. I think I've reached my limit here with this at this time in my life. At the same time, I know that that's part of my calling to be with people, in transitions of life." Like Martha, Melissa is exhausted, she has reached her limits, *and* she knows that still she is called to this work. As we will see in Chapter Three, God's calling can console and strengthen at the edge of human capacities. However, as we see here, God can also affirm this sense of limitation and redirect into "some different kind of work," as God does for Melissa. Finally, in Chapter Four, we will also see how God's call can indicate limits within the work. That is, God's vocational assignments proportion responsibilities to fit with human capacities.

¹⁵² O'Donovan agrees, stating that the discernment of vocation is ongoing, as it is "always mutating into new forms." *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 225.

¹⁵³ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 272-273.

However, these manifold outworkings of God's command await further development in later chapters.

Conclusion

When my participants describe their reasons for becoming social workers, they point to God's command. God asks them to serve, love neighbors, work with kids or vulnerable people, and to be with people in life's transitions, and so they enter a profession charged with these tasks. Many experience God's directive as morally obligating. As Casey tells us, she feels "on the hook." Moreover, God's command arrives in manifold ways, including scripture, human temperament, professional obligations, divine locution, and the call of human need. Given the realities of human sin and finitude, these perceptions require testing in prayer, through juxtaposition with other sources, and consideration with wise mentors. Finally, God's command does not overwhelm human agency, negating its role. Rather, it prepares the agent for action in the world. God's command can console, as in Martha's case, to continue in the face of difficulty and disappointment. Or as in Melissa's case, God's command can confirm a sense of human limits, to redirect or withdraw from the work given. In either case, my participants must work out how to live in light of what God has said.

The chapters that follow are concerned precisely with these discernments. Given God's summons, what does loving neighbors look like across asymmetries of power within the professional helping relationship? Or when the social worker is exhausted and human need outpaces her response? These questions characterize my participants' day-to-day labors, and in the thick of figuring out what to do, they often return to God for

help. In this job, with these people, under these constraints, they pray to discern what love looks like here. Or as Melissa puts it, “Ok God...what am I supposed to do?” And thus, human agency, called into being by God, returns to God, confessing its need for God.

CHAPTER TWO: Paternalism

“Would that it were as easy to do something for one’s neighbor’s good or to avoid injuring him as it is for the kind-hearted and well-instructed individual to love him. But here good will alone does not suffice, for it is a work demanding great understanding and prudence.”¹

Counting internships, Sarah Daniels (24, white, Christian) has worked as a social worker for four years, she tells me, over our table at Panera. While in high school, she took a test at the career center. When social work appeared in the top five recommendations, “I just went with it.” Since that beginning, however, “things I’ve seen, people I’ve interacted with” has shown her that “this is what I’m supposed to be doing. That’s become evident.” She now works at a state psychiatric facility in the adult male admission unit. Sarah speaks earnestly,

It’s a very fast paced environment. We get lots of individuals involuntarily committed or who have substance use issues, who have attempted to kill themselves before they come in, lots of legal issues. So, every day can be a combination of assessments, working with families, working with community providers, and then also working one-on-one with the patient.

Being a Christian directs Sarah’s social work practice. The “teaching of Christianity,” she tells me, directs her to “help those who are poor...you are that person’s advocate, and that’s a commandment.” This conviction persists despite the “general stigma” of the profession, people thinking that she “take[s] kids out of homes.” Against these stereotypes, Sarah insists that social work means “acknowledging humanity” and “meeting people where they are, and guiding them to whatever they’re trying to get to.”

¹ Augustine, *The Catholic & Manichaeon Ways of Life*, translated by Donald A. Gallagher and Idella J. Gallagher (Washington: Catholic University of American Press, 1966), 1.26.51.

Yet the possibilities for realizing her aspirations of advocacy and empowerment fade when it comes to her most difficult decisions. Foremost among these is whether or not to petition a patient for incompetence – “making a case that they are not able to make decisions for themselves, and somebody else needs to make decisions for them.” Her petition initiates a court proceeding to assess whether a person needs a guardian, someone legally authorized to manage that person’s affairs. “The whole guardianship process I take very seriously, because as soon as their rights get taken away, it’s very difficult for them to get them back.”

Like the many Christian social workers we met in Chapter One, Sarah too understands her work as a response to God’s command. Yet she also has to work out what loving neighbors professionally looks like in any given situation. Divine summons does not negate her own need for moral judgment. The judgments concerning us here are those concerning the wellbeing of service-users.

Like Sarah, social workers every day decide whether to admit or discharge from medical or residential services, to report suspected child abuse or undocumented persons, to involuntarily commit a person to psychiatric treatment, to recommend the termination of parental rights or that a child be placed in a juvenile detention center or return to their family. In each case, Sarah notes, “this is somebody’s life”: these decisions significantly impact others’ life outcomes. And yet, sometimes a social worker’s best judgment is to render assistance without that person’s input or even against their express wishes.

Tacit within these decisions is the problem of paternalism. While my participants infrequently use the word itself, they regularly name its features as a pressing concern in their day-to-day interactions with clients. Even as they identify and denounce paternalist

tendencies within the profession, they also confess their own histories of unlearning their own inclinations to fix, control, and save. However, they also frequently work with service-users who are at risk of harming themselves or others, or have limited decision-making abilities, the two conditions which typically justify intervention. Thus, they find themselves making determinations about the wellbeing of other people, even as they strive to safeguard and foster agency.

This chapter considers how in light of God's command, my social-worker participants discern the appropriate form of help in particular situations. As Augustine notes in the opening quotation, to do good for one's neighbor is "a work demanding great understanding and prudence." Thus, I analyze the moral criteria and practices of judgment upon which they rely to guard against the dangers of paternalism. Rather than denouncing or idealizing my participants, I aim to show them as they are: human beings trying to love neighbors within the messiness of social service delivery, against structural constraints, in the midst of political contestation, and across asymmetries of power in the professional helping relationship. They do this all while struggling with their own moral imperfections and cognizant of the risk that their best efforts to care can disintegrate into harm. Integral to these navigations, I argue, my participants discern the limits of their moral agency and what they can appropriately do for others. At times, this discernment culminates in prayer as participants situate their action and its proper boundaries in light of divine action.

This chapter is organized around six portraits.² Each introduces themes I found across my interviews: the agency-enhancing aspirations of social work; the asymmetries of the professional helping relationship; confessions of pride and acquiring the virtues of caring; justifying interference; determining wellbeing for another amidst contestation; and tragic double binds, failure, and prayer. Rather than begin with a review of relevant literature, I let secondary material surface in conversation with the portraits. By doing so, I hope to offer a more granular account of the practices of moral judgment than often found in academic discussions of paternalism and care.

1. Abuse, Fixing, & Empowerment

We met Martha Todd (65, white, American Baptist) in Chapter One in our discussion of testing God’s command. As we noted there, Martha has worked in child abuse prevention for over thirty years. Returning once more to our conversation, Martha leans towards me over the table, moving her tea into her other hand. “Social work,” she insists, “is empowering people to be the very best that they can be, and helping people move towards wholeness.” This includes supporting the client’s “internal work” on the personal level, more systemic interventions for “connecting them to resources and to systems that can also empower them.” It also entails,

believing in them, being there with them. I don’t believe in fixing people. I don’t buy that. But just walking alongside people and providing them connection – where a lot of people, low-income people, people with disabilities, people with mental health issues, they lack power, because they’re not connected. They’re not

² For every portrait detailed here, three others could have served equally well in its place.

connected to other people, and they're not connected to the power in our system. So, helping connect people, so they can benefit from some of that power.

For Martha, social work aims to overcome the isolating effects of disconnection, to enhance people's wellbeing.

Later in our interview, Martha insists that this assistance must exclude the abuse of power. Proselytizing is a good example, she explains, "using your power to try to influence people in any way – it's just not right." Later, she returns to this point, "there's nothing worse than a professional taking – abusing a position of power in any way," citing proselytizing again and adding financial or sexual manipulation. "There's nothing that makes me madder than a person with a position of power and privilege taking advantage and giving us a bad name. I mean, social workers already – we have a terrible reputation in the general public as the one who 'takes your children away.'" With this final clause she lifts her fingers to indicate scare quotes, citing perceptions of social workers as child snatchers.

While financial and sexual misconduct illustrate grave malformations of help, Martha recounts more routine challenges, what she calls "dealing with people's free will." For her, this has been "the hardest thing" about the work:

we can offer suggestions, we can offer resources, we can use motivational interviewing, we can be their support system, and sometimes people still make very destructive choices, and it is so difficult when you almost see the writing on the wall, and you just want to yell – but we can't fix people. We can't stop people from making their own choices.

According to Martha, the struggle of social work is to balance supportive intervention with human freedom. A social worker can persuade and exhort, but she cannot compel, even when she anticipates harmful outcomes. In contrast, 'fixing' inappropriately interferes with another's choice.

Despite its challenges, Martha stays with the work, because “it’s a calling” for her. “I have decided that when we’re called, we’re not called for the ‘results’” – she waves her fingers again to indicate scare quotes – “we’re called to do the process, to do what we’re called to do. And then it’s up to God, and that person, that individual, what the results will be.” Moreover, Jesus demonstrates the type of social work to which Martha aspires. With laughter, she insists,

Jesus would have been a great social worker. Honestly! I use him as my model sometimes: he was so non-judgmental...and he welcomed people that were ‘the other,’ that were considered the outcast, he treated people with dignity and respect, and yet he empowered them to act themselves. He didn’t do it all for them, he used an empowering model where he would ask them questions and tell them stories, and they would have to figure it out themselves... he’s a great model for social workers.

Jesus enables the action of those with diminished agency; he draws them into engagement with the world without preemptively acting on their behalf. Martha returns to this point later in the interview: “he didn’t try to fix anybody,” but rather, “all he did was offer people health, wealth and wholeness, community and connection – he just kept offering over and over again, and that’s how I see our role.” Social workers invite people towards wellbeing.

However, there comes occasions when social workers must do than more offer an invitation. As Martha observes, “our first job is to keep children safe.” Moreover, they have “a duty to report,” that is, to notify Child Protective Services of suspected child abuse and neglect. The decision of “when and how to make a report” can be “so painful when we know what the ramifications will be.” The stakes are high. Children can die, and Martha has seen it happen. While some cases can be “as clear as a bell, no

ambivalence, but then there are other times where it's gray." Further, the question is not only, should her team report it, but also how to report it:

Do we call the parent first and tell them, or would that endanger the child? Do we have the kind of relationship with the parent that we can go out and make the report together, which looks actually better for the parent? Or is this a dangerous kind of a situation where we need to make the report, and nobody knows about it, and really emphasize that this is an emergency, or is it something where we need to call the police?

As Martha insists, the manner of reporting also matters for securing the safety of children and, to whatever degree possible, maintaining the best possible relationship with a parent.

At her agency, however, they do not face these professional judgements alone. Rather, "we always process it with at least one other person or supervisor, and more than likely we'll get three different minds thinking about it." Consultation frames the decision.

Martha introduces us to the professional helping relationship within the setting of child protection. Along with her coworkers, Martha decides whether and how to make a report to Child Protective Services or what services to discharge and to whom. Across the field, social workers bear disproportionate power over clients. They produce effects that matter to people, withholding or granting access to medical treatment, housing, food, and even one's own children.³ As feminist political theorist Joan Tronto notes, "care is

³ According to Jeffrey Stout, power is "the capacity that an individual, group, or institution has to produce effects that people would have reason to care about." *Blessed are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America* (Princeton University Press, 2010), 55.

not an activity that occurs between equal and autonomous actors or objects, but between those who have needs and those who can provide for those needs.”⁴

Since Rousseau, unequal relationships, like the ones between social workers and clients, are commonly read as necessarily domineering. A person with disproportionate power inevitably exercises inappropriate control over another through exploitation or other forms of interference. Martha notes this perception of social workers: “we have a terrible reputation in the general public as the one who ‘takes your children away.’” In their critical history of social work, Chris Chapman and A. J. Withers represent this view, explaining that “the guiding ethic of professional social work” is how it “attributes a healing power to relationships of domination.”⁵ The asymmetries between social worker and client are nothing other than domination, even if the profession mistakes them as therapeutic.

This condemnation of helping relationships responds to historical abuses. In their efforts to do good, North American social workers have been complicit with the state’s efforts to regulate unruly individuals and groups towards ideals of employment, housing, and sobriety for ‘productive’ lives. Moreover, social workers have implemented the state’s eugenic and racist programs, especially in regard to Black and Native

⁴ Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 145.

⁵ Chris Chapman and A. J. Withers, *A Violent History of Benevolence: Interlocking Oppression in the Moral Economies of Social Working* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 13.

communities.⁶ Thus, denunciations of social-work power states the problem at its starkest; domination happens within professional helping relationships.

Martha recognizes this: she also denounces abuse in the clearest terms. But she does not stop here. She proposes moral criteria for distinguishing between different uses of professional power. That is, Martha suggests that unequal relationships need not result in domination. Social-worker power can be used not only to injure but also to benefit service-users.⁷ Implicit in Martha's descriptions is a conviction that exercising power over someone is normatively neutral.⁸ The crucial piece is distinguishing between its

⁶ Richard Hugman, "Power and Authority in Social Work Practice: Some Ethical Issues," in *Rethinking Values and Ethics in Social Work*, edited by Richard Hugman and Jan Carter (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2016), 75. With regard to America's Native peoples, Weaver argues that social workers have acted not only as agents of control but also "federal paternalism" by implementing colonial policies. This included the widespread removal of indigenous children from their families, first through residential schools and then through child protection measures, and the sterilization of Native women. Hilary Weaver, "Ethics and Settler Societies: Reflections on Social Work and Indigenous People," in *Rethinking Values and Ethics in Social Work*, edited by Richard Hugman and Jan Carter (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2016), 138. In *A Violent History of Benevolence*, Chapman and Withers also offer an extensive account of historical abuses.

⁷ This definition of power foregrounds human agency. An emphasis on human agents, however, need not exclude another account of power drawn from Foucault. Namely, inherited social configurations and discourses also produce socially significant effects in the world. However, it would be a mistake to reduce power to merely this, that is, only to agentless, anonymous forces. This move discards the human actor and offers little traction for moral analysis. In this, I follow Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized*, 302n.

⁸ In *Blessed Are the Organized*, Stout concludes, "Exercising power over someone is not necessarily a bad thing, but domination is" (303n). Stout draws his account of domination from political philosopher Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997). Cf. Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 252-254. Luke Bretherton agrees, "While power and sin must be accounted for, not all power is bad." "Coming to Judgment: Methodological Reflections on the Relationship between Ecclesiology, Ethnography, and Political Theory," *Modern Theology* 28.2 (2012), 179.

positive and negative uses.⁹ Thus, rather than pronouncing all disproportionately powerful agents as domineering, Martha proposes that moral criteria must be applied. For this purpose, she lays out three uses of professional power: abuse, fixing, and empowerment.¹⁰

First, Martha rules abuse out of bounds and grieves its occurrence. Here, social workers seek their own aggrandizement through financial or sexual manipulation and violate clear ethical prohibitions, such as proselytizing. They are, in religious ethicist Jeffrey Stout's words, "taking advantage of the available opportunities for exploitation."¹¹ While masquerading as professional help, this is not help at all but domination, only benefiting the more powerful party. As Stout explains, this arbitrary imposition of the one person's will upon another without accountability is analogous to the relationship of master and slave, and thus, broadly condemned in the United States as "horrendous" and "unjustifiable."¹²

Fixing provides Martha's second type of professional help. While Martha indicates that abuse is clearly out-of-bounds, she also condemns fixing. Fixing, alternatively, offers a more tempting prospect. In fact, while many participants shared

⁹ Such distinctions between just and unjust elites are "ethically important," as they merit different treatment, Stout argues in *Blessed Are the Organized*, 305n.

¹⁰ This typology runs throughout many of my interviews. Fifteen participants use the language of empowerment as their desired model for social work. Those who do not often invoke related themes: four spoke of advocacy, and three about being a voice for others, and one even questions the dominant language of help. Seven share Martha's pejorative use of fixing. Occasionally, the language of 'fixing' is used positively, although never with people as its object.

¹¹ Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized*, 304-305n.

¹² Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized*, 302-303n, 213-214. For Stout's full discussion of domination and power, see 53-66.

Martha's condemnation of fixing, they also suggest that it describes the prevailing tendency of the profession or employing agencies.¹³ Here, a professional intervenes to prevent harm or to enhance wellbeing, motivated by caring concern. The problem, however, is the interference fails to respect the client's freedom and dignity. It oversteps and overexerts. It does not observe appropriate limits. Thus, fixing discounts the service-user's free will to prevent what Martha calls "very destructive choices." It seeks another's wellbeing but overzealously and in the wrong way. The right way, Martha insists, is by persuasion and exhortation, in motivational interviewing or offering suggestions and resources. Martha acknowledges the lure of fixing, however, is "the hardest thing" for her about the work.

Martha also aligns fixing with judgmentalism, another disposition frequently condemned by my participants.¹⁴ This error leads the social worker to categorize and diagnose too quickly, with too much certainty. In this way, judgmentalism blocks out consultation with service-users, preferring the social worker's assessment for advancing service-users' interests. This presumptuous substitution of judgment undermines the agency of clients. As we will see in later portraits, however, Martha's renunciation sits uneasily with social-worker responsibilities to exercise professional judgment.

Martha's description of fixing (and its judgmentalism) fits with classic definitions of paternalism. Take Gerald Dworkin's restatement of John Stuart Mill's original

¹³ Four more use related language, including "working for" (as contrasted with "working with") and paternalistic.

¹⁴ Like Martha, they also often link this to Christian ideas of non-judgmentalism. Two even cite Jesus' satirical invitation for the sinless to throw stones.

proposal: paternalism is “the interference with a person’s liberty of action justified by reasons referring exclusively to the welfare, good, happiness, needs, interests or values of the person being coerced.”¹⁵ Even Martha’s word choice (‘fixing’) implies an action that aims at improvement. Fixing, like paternalism, names a particular *form* of benevolence, which fails to respect individual autonomy through interfering with what is ‘none of your business.’¹⁶ Notably, Martha incorporates a concern with the paternalist act and paternalist motivation, a division which animates liberal theorists.¹⁷ That is, she is concerned by the use of coercive means (in restricting an agent’s freedom) and the presumptuous invasion of matters that legitimately fall within another’s sphere.¹⁸ Like Mill, Martha too insists that a social worker ought not compel a service-user but rather try (in Mill’s words) “remonstrating with him, or reasoning with him, or persuading him, or entreating him.”¹⁹

The temptation of paternalism, however, is an intractable problem within caregiving relationships. As Tronto notes, it “arises inherently out of the nature of care

¹⁵ Gerald Dworkin, “Paternalism,” *The Monist* 56.1 (1972), 65. In 1859, John Stuart Mill published *On Liberty*, in which he argued that while person may be reasoned with and entreated, he argued, she ought not be coerced by law or public opinion, even if it is for her own benefit. He writes, “the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forebear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinion of others, to do so would be wise, or even right.” *On Liberty* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1954), 11-12.

¹⁶ Christian Coons and Michael Weber, “Introduction: Paternalism – Issues and Trends,” in *Paternalism: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 5.

¹⁷ Seana Shiffrin, “Paternalism, Unconscionability Doctrine, and Accommodation,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 29.3 (2000), 211-212.

¹⁸ Coons and Weber, “Introduction,” 4-5.

¹⁹ Mill, *On Liberty*, 12.

itself,” given the asymmetries of care.²⁰ Care-givers typically possess both competency and resources for meeting needs, making it easy to discount those who are receiving care.²¹ It is precisely this ongoing enticement that Martha seeks to combat with her third type: namely, empowerment.

With empowerment, Martha presents a respectful interference that enhances the capacities of service-users. This vision aligns with what the *Code of Ethics* of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) describes: social workers “seek to enhance the capacity of people to address their own needs.”²² Moreover, workers engage clients as “partners in the helping process,”²³ include them for “meaningful participation in decision making”²⁴ and promote their “socially responsible self-determination” and “capacity and opportunity to change and address their own needs.”²⁵ Martha uses the language of “walking alongside” and “connecting” a person to available resources, so that they can “be the very best that they can be.” This represents a modification of social-

²⁰ Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 147, 170.

²¹ Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 145-146, 170. “By its very nature, care is rarely an activity engaged in by equals; the fact that A needs care and that B provides it, means that A is in B’s power. A and B are not in this situation equals. Nor is A at this moment, needing B’s assistance, autonomous. There is always implicit in care the danger that those who receive care will lose their autonomy and their sense of independence. Similarly, the question of whether the temporary absence of equality and autonomy translate into a permanent state of dependency on the one hand and a condition of privilege on the other, or of denying some of the ability to make decisions for themselves, is a moral question that is always implicit in the provision of care” (146).

²² National Association of Social Workers, “Ethical Principles,” in *Code of Ethics* (2017), 1. Hereafter, NASW, *Code*. The *Code* also includes one reference to empowerment in the Preamble.

²³ NASW, *Code*, 6.

²⁴ NASW, *Code*, 5.

²⁵ NASW, *Code*, 5-6.

worker agency, positioned alongside a service-user rather than domineering over her, even with the best intentions. Martha's invocation of Jesus makes this distinction clearest: empowerment means non-judgmentalism, respectful treatment, and supporting others' action.

Implicit in this vision of empowerment is a particular understanding of the human being: the development of human capacities depends upon others. Rather than a self-sufficient individual who wards off relationships as external constraints, Martha's understanding of empowerment implies that human autonomy is fundamentally relational.²⁶ This fits with feminist scholars who insist on the interpersonal dimensions of agency. As Laura Specker Sullivan and Fay Niker explain, "rational autonomous capacities are made possible by the support of numerous surrounding agents who enable careful reflection and judgment."²⁷ Relationships support the development of human capacities and their proper exercise.²⁸ Lacking such support, these capacities can become "disabled or oppressed."²⁹ Like power, relationships too ought to be understood as normatively neutral: they can both constrain and support agency. In our case, Martha understands social-worker interventions as the last resort, when other supportive agents

²⁶ As Margaret Farley notes, personhood is "grounded in both autonomy and relationality." *Compassionate Respect: A Feminist Approach to Medical Ethics and Other Questions* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), 36-37.

²⁷ Laura Specker Sullivan and Fay Niker, "Relational Autonomy, Paternalism, and Maternalism," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 21 (2018), 653.

²⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 654. This reliance can be both causal and constitutive. "Causally, socialization and relationships can either impede or enhance the development and exercise of autonomy competencies. Constitutively, the concepts and values we use to identify our selves are shaped by our social context" (653).

²⁹ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 653.

have failed or are absent.³⁰ At their best, social workers can offer, in MacIntyre's words, "those relationships necessary for fostering the ability to evaluate, modify, or reject our own practical judgments."³¹ Social workers do this, Martha explains, through asking questions, providing suggestions, and supporting others to figure it out for themselves.

Martha also cites being called to the work as offering critical leverage against fixing and supporting her commitment to empowerment. Because God has called her, she need not be fixated on results; she can honor the process of working with people and the slow pace of collaboration. She can support others as agents of their own lives, and she also looks for divine action: "it's up to God, and that person, that individual, what the results will be." Martha curbs her own responsibility: she need not guarantee the outcomes of other peoples' lives, nor can she. This exceeds her capacities, and so she turns to God who remains involved beyond her reach.

Thus, Martha's threefold typology – abuse, fixing, and empowerment – name how professionals use their power in relation to service-users. As Martha outlines, social workers must observe appropriate limits in exercising their own agency in order to support clients' agency. Otherwise, they risk undermining service-users' ability to decide and act for themselves. In the following portrait, we continue considering this need for

³⁰ In *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre agrees: to become an independent practical reasoner is not only a story of a particular person but also "a history of those particular others whose presence or absence, intervention or lack of intervention, are of crucial importance in determining how far the transition is successfully completed" (73).

³¹ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 83. He continues, "to ask, that is, whether what we take to be good reasons for action really are sufficiently good reasons, *and* the ability to imagine realistically alternative possible futures, so as to be able to make rational choices between them, *and* the ability to stand back from our desires, so as to be able to enquire rationally what the pursuit of our good here and now requires and how our desires must be directed and, if necessary, reeducated, if we are to attain it" (author's emphasis).

moderating the use of professional power, given the social worker's specialized knowledge and experience and, thus, the ongoing risk of paternalism.

2. Professional Power, Specialized Knowledge, & Practical Reason

Liz Long (38, African American, Baptist) has been a social worker for fourteen years. We meet at Panera on the evening she reserves for preparing for an upcoming exam for a clinical addiction specialist license. After she decided against becoming a lawyer, God led her to social work, she explains. It is her "assignment." She first worked in child welfare for six years, then as a crisis counselor at a police department, and now at the hospital for the last seven years. "I gravitate towards the hot-messness," Liz tells me. Describing her current role, she explains,

I deal with more of the complex cases, the ones that have no insurance, the ones that have substance abuse issues, domestic violence issues, complicated family dynamics. For example, you may have a seventy-year-old who had a stroke and now she's incompetent and incapacitated and can't make any decisions – but she's got five (this is actually a real situation that I actually dealt with) – but she's got five kids, husband deceased, no identified power of attorney. All the kids have a legal right to have a say and trying to help them coming to a majority of a decision.

Other examples she offers include working with patients in need of psychiatric treatment or who need to file for disability and find long term care facilities. Summing up, she observes, "if it's complicated and hard to do, I do that. And I do that for the neurosurgery, ICU [intensive care unit], thoracic ICU, and the basic floor, meaning those who are on regular beds...Technically my hours are 8:30 to 5:00. I try to stick to that. Because trust me, they aren't going to pay you for any more."

Like Martha, Liz too embraces an empowerment model of social work. She understands her role as being a "voice" and an "advocate" for service-users. She explains

that this includes being “that strength and that reminder that, ‘Yes, you can do this,’ in regard to that person, that patient, that family, whoever you’re trying to help.” There are occasions, she continues, where she knows she could save time by not bringing a family member or patient in on a decision, “to make the process easier” or “get them out of the hospital faster.” However, in these instances, “I always have to have in my mind, if I do this or don’t do this, will God be pleased with me?”

Liz learned her foundational skills in the field while working as a child welfare social worker. Investigations and assessments leading to the removal of children and the reunification of families, as well as the termination of parental rights and the adoption of children – all of these, Liz insists, “makes you use a lot of your senses, a lot of your – what I call – your sixth sense, your gut feeling.” For example,

the ability to be able to scan a home, assess a situation, know what safety things to look for, know the smell of crack, know the smell of different types of alcohols, know the signs of what bruises look like, whether they’re new or old, know the signs of a woman who may be in a domestic violence situation – all that takes a certain level of technique, of assessment, and clinical judgment, and education that you can’t get from a book... you can read it in a book all day long, but it means nothing until you actually see it.³²

There is a certain “rawness” to Child Protective Services (CPS) work, Liz explains: this is “real social work.”³³ Moreover, out of necessity, CPS social workers “tend to be more

³² Liz continues, “Someone can describe the smell of what crack smells like, but until you smell it, you’ll never get it. Someone can describe to you, oh they beat the kid black and blue, they have bruises everywhere, but until you actually see it, and then you, and then learn, like you can’t guess it, you can’t say ok, a bruise is actually ten days old, but you know how to determine whether if it’s brown or yellow or red, you just learn by physically seeing it, you know.”

³³ Liz adds, “Everybody who does social work needs to do a few years with CPS [Child Protective Services]. If you haven’t, if you haven’t worked as a child welfare social worker, if you haven’t done investigations or assessments or removed somebody’s child or reunified

aware of things that normal people who don't deal – well, people who are not in that field pay no attention to.” This attention cannot be learned from books but through on-the-job observation.

Throughout the interview, Liz insists on the value of practice over theory. Social work education is meaningful only insofar as it equips work in the field, she explains. When she recently took classes in substance abuse, she was disappointed: “you have somebody so far removed from practice in substance abuse, I'm like, you can't tell me anything. You can tell me theory, you can talk to me about techniques...but if you have not implemented this, and you don't use this...I'm wasting my time and money.” In contrast, valuable learning must “relate to actual practice and real time and real people.” Appropriate social-work actions vary in different settings: “every intervention and technique doesn't look the same in all demographics.”

Yet, she acknowledges that theoretical knowledge has been part of social work's efforts to defend its legitimacy: “I know social work has fought hard for respect, and they try to make it a hard science.” Despite this pragmatic function, Liz counters, “It's not a hard science; it's not always an $A+B=C$.” Moreover, she appreciates this: “I'm ok with the fact that there's not always an exact equation...you can't forget about what makes social work, social work: the actual doing, the helping, the behind-the-scenes that nobody knows about.”

somebody's child or had to terminate somebody's rights to get this child you know adopted by a family that wants him, you haven't done social work.”

However, this practical know-how that Liz celebrates provides no guarantee for its appropriate use. When I ask Liz about what has been most challenging, she recalls working for CPS and, in particular, how many children were taken into custody without adequate evidence. As she explained,

sometimes you knew ok, well, they [children] were possibly, or the potential to be, or the suspicion that they might be neglected or in a drug infested environment. Now if it's straight-up abuse, no if-and-buts about it. There's immediate safety risks, ok it's a no brainer. But cases where, you had concerns, and the situation wasn't perfect, and maybe it's going to lead to them having to be taken into custody, but people using their authority saying, 'Let's just go ahead and do it now.' And that, many a times, that bothered me, and it hurt me to the core, because I'm like, if ...you had an attorney worth their JD and the time to really process through and represent you well, they probably could have got so many temporary custody removals of kids overturned...I had serious ethical issues with being trumped – pun intended – by a supervisor or a program manager saying, 'Oh, we're going to do this,' and I clearly say, 'You don't have enough [evidence], this is not right. And you're taking away this parent's rights just because you think this is what's going to happen. And you don't have proof.' Now I can say those cases where they jumped the gun on it, I think their gut feelings were correct, but I'm like, they still didn't do it by the book. And that didn't happen that often, but when it did happen – because regardless, that's somebody's children. I didn't have kids when I worked for CPS. Now I have two children, and I cannot imagine somebody taking my children out of my arms. Are you serious? Yeah, that right there probably is the icing on the cake.

Over the course of our interview, Liz sketches the specialized know-how required for social work practice. She learns this practical knowledge in the field through sensory and intuitive attention, and it serves as the ground for “clinical judgment.” Even as she studies two evenings a week for a clinical license, the most valuable skills cannot be picked up through textbooks. Yet she also recognizes a more technical body of knowledge (“hard science”) that, despite her skepticism, has been central to defending the profession's legitimacy.

Liz's first type of practical knowledge bares a family resemble to what MacIntyre calls “practical intelligence,” or “Aristotle's *phronesis*, Aquinas's *prudentia*.” As

MacIntyre explains, this is “the capacity to judge and act with an eye to such particularities, [which] is on an Aristotelian view, *the* key moral and intellectual virtue.”³⁴ As she describes it, Liz’s decision to, for example, remove a child from a home, comes only from careful assessment. Does this child show signs of abuse? How old are these bruises? Does that smell like cocaine or not? Liz exhibits a responsiveness to the situation which cannot be learned in textbooks but only through long apprenticeship (“if you haven’t worked as a child welfare social worker...you haven’t done social work”). She must deliberate about action in every situation. In this, Liz follows Aristotle: practical wisdom “must also recognize the particular; for it is practical, and practice is concerned with particulars.”³⁵

Therefore, to safeguard children and preserve families, CPS workers learn how to pay attention to the details.³⁶ In recognizing what is at stake, weighing relevant “harms and dangers,” and considering “possible alternative futures” given the circumstances, they then select the most fitting response in these circumstances.³⁷ Despite efforts to the

³⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 118, author’s emphasis.

³⁵ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1141b15, at 146.

³⁶ Certainly, other “qualities of mind and character” are involved here as well, in addition to practical reason, for example, a calm and courageous disposition in the face of crisis. For now, however, we are focusing on this trait only. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 92.

³⁷ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 92, 94. Similarly, in *Moral Boundaries*, care theorist Joan Tronto notes the presence of judgment within relation to care relations. “Care as a practice involves more than simply good intentions. It requires a deep and thoughtful knowledge of the situation, and of all of the actors’ situations, needs and competencies...Those who engage in a care process must make judgments: judgments about needs, conflicting needs, strategies for achieving ends, the responsiveness of care-receivers, and so forth” (136-137).

contrary, these sorts of judgments resist standardization. Rules and procedures can only get the social worker so far: they are never sufficient for guiding action.³⁸ As Liz notes, the social worker acquires a capacity for wise judgments only through the training of experience.³⁹

Liz also references a different kind of social-work knowledge, or at least efforts to generate this kind of knowledge, what she calls “hard science” and “A+B=C.” Even as Liz relays her skepticism about the usefulness of scientific social-work knowledge, she observes that defending this aspect of the field has been integral to the its longstanding fight “for respect.” Liz is right. As early as the 1890s, the first social workers endeavored to join the rank of other professions through adopting social scientific methodologies and establishing schools for formal training.⁴⁰ When a prominent 1915 speech cast doubt on their professional status, they redoubled their efforts to establish the

³⁸ As McIntyre argues, “Knowing how to act virtuously always involves more than rule-following.” *Dependent Rational Animals*, 93.

³⁹ Or as Hauerwas notes, “the person of practical reason must have a capacity for perception of particulars that comes from being well trained.” *The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 15. For a discussion of how practical reason relates to professional discretion, see Anders Molander, *Discretion in the Welfare State: Social Rights and Professional Judgment* (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁴⁰ For a short history of social work’s early efforts at professionalization, see Philip Popple & P. Nelson Reid, “A Profession for the Poor?: A History of Social Work in the United States,” in *Professionalization of Poverty: Social Work and the Poor in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Gary R. Lowe and P. Nelson Reid (New York: Aldine de Gruyter: 1999), 12-17 and Mina Carson, *Settlement Folk: Social Thought and the American Settlement Movement, 1885-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 129-138. According to Carson, “In crucial ways the settlement leaders shared the faith of the Progressive Era in what they saw as benign and constructive social control and manipulation by ‘expert’ functionaries. The partial professionalization of settlement work was of a piece with the settlers’ gradual assumption of authority in the public and private lives of their neighbors” (137).

field in “learning and science.”⁴¹ The first *Code of Ethics*, published in 1960, also emphasized this feature: “Professional social workers are dedicated...to the disciplined use of a recognized body of knowledge about human beings and their interactions.”⁴² This stress can also be seen in the recent emphasis on ‘evidence-based’ approaches and audit systems, or what social work instructor Nigel Parton describes as “increasing efforts to scientize and rationalize practice.”⁴³

Early anxieties to defend the professional status of the work also led to the formation of accreditation and licensing agencies. These bodies govern social-work knowledge and certify *professional* social workers, as distinct from others working in social welfare. Like Liz, the vast majority of my research participants hold Master of Social Work degrees and often additional licensures and certifications.⁴⁴ Together, expert knowledge, self-governance, and a commitment to public welfare establish the professional’s authority over an arena of human life.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Flexner Report cited in David M. Austin, “The Flexner Myth and the History of Social Work,” *Social Service Review* 57:3 (1983): 369. For more on the Flexner Report, see Patricia McGrath Morris, “Reinterpreting Abraham Flexner’s Speech, “Is Social Work a Profession?”: Its Meaning and Influence on the Field’s Early Professional Development, *Social Service Review* 82.1 (2008): 29-60.

⁴² NASW, *Code of Ethics*, 1960. Accessed <<https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/History>>.

⁴³ Nigel Parton, “Some Thoughts on the Relationship between Theory and Practice in and for Social Work,” *British Journal of Social Work* 30 (2000), 450, 460.

⁴⁴ Over ninety percent (32) have a Master of Social Work (MSW), with the remaining (3) currently enrolled or shortly enrolling. Around fifty percent (18) hold licenses in clinical social work, issued by the state licensing board. While licensing boards vary from state to state in the particulars, they set standards for professional qualifications, training, and conduct.

⁴⁵ Albert W. Dzur, *Democratic Professionalism: Citizen Participation and the Reconstruction of Professional Ethics, Identity, and Practice* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 45.

This scientific knowledge contrasts with the practical knowledge that Liz values. Her professors speak of theories with little relevance to “actual practice and real time and real people.” Liz is not interested in “exact equations” which contribute little to the “the actual doing, the helping.” She must tailor her action for every situation. Thus, Liz compares two modes of social-work knowledge and practice, what Parton contrasts as “practical-moral” and “rational-technical.”⁴⁶

However, both forms accrue authority (albeit of different qualities) to the social worker. Even as Liz describes the practical wisdom entailed in scanning a room, identifying the smell of cocaine, or approximating the age of bruises, she is the one assessing, deciding, and acting. To draw from Abbott’s classic treatment of the professions, Liz appears confident in her ability “to classify a problem, to reason about it, and to take action on it: in more formal terms, to diagnose, to infer, to treat.”⁴⁷ Liz’s experience lends her an expertise upon which she bases her judgments. Her specialized knowledge contributes to her professional status and the asymmetries in the professional helping relationship.

To be clear, this disproportionate distribution of professional power is not inherently bad. Following Martha’s insights in Section 1, it all depends on how the power is used. Abuse, paternalist fixing, and empowerment all represent possibilities within the helping relationship, and each merit different moral assessments. The asymmetries do, however, provide more occasions for domination and paternalism

⁴⁶ Parton, “Some Thoughts on the Relationship between Theory and Practice,” 449-463.

⁴⁷ Andrew Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 40.

respectively. As Hauerwas notes, professionalization comes at a high cost, accompanied by “subtle and unavoidable temptations”: “[professional] roles often justify or encourage a patronizing behavior, unjustified paternalism, as well as a dangerous inequity of power between the professional and the patient.”⁴⁸

Liz presents us such a case when she recalls occasions in which CPS supervisors and program managers preemptively took children into state custody without adequate evidence. Liz recalls her anger at how they “us[ed] their authority.” In addition to the power that comes from commanding access to services and resources (noted in Section 1) and specialized knowledge and professional training, here we add a third source of social-work power, namely the state’s authorization. Liz references the statutory power that some social workers assume as employees of the state.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, “Medicine as Tragic Profession,” in *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1977), 194-195. Recognition of professional abuses of power precipitated a groundswell of public distrust for professional claims to expert knowledge and authority, beginning in the late 1960s. See Popple & Reid, “A Profession for the Poor?” 22; Dzur, *Democratic Professionalism*, 4. This suspicion is reflected in Martha’s observations about social work’s “terrible reputation.” According to Dzur, the traditional model of professionalism casts the professional as the “expert, specialist, guide,” while laypeople are “clients, consumers, wards” (63). Yet, as sociologists and other critics began to point out, this approach produces a “general blindness to issues of power,” failing to define and direct both its “healthy and unhealthy” operations (62-63, 68).

⁴⁹ As the NASW *Code of Ethics* notes, “social workers’ responsibility to the larger society or specific legal obligations may on limited occasions supersede the loyalty owed clients...Examples include when a social worker is required by law to report that a client has abused a child or has threatened to harm self or others” (1.01). In “Power and Authority in Social Work Practice,” Hugman notes, these child protection responsibilities are “among the most contentious areas of social work both within the profession and between social work and the wider society” (72). Even for those social workers who do not work for the state, they still bear statutory responsibilities as mandatory reporters. Federal and state constitutional law, statutes, regulations, and court orders all stipulate professional responses to certain situations, even if the social worker is not employed by a public agency. In the United States, every state now has mandatory reporting laws, requiring the notification of appropriate authorities whenever child abuse and neglect is suspected. See Frederic G. Reamer, *Social Work Values and Ethics*, 4th

These officials invoked Liz's anger when they "jumped the gun" based on probabilities ("you think this is what's going to happen"). However, she also observes that these projections of abuse were likely right ("their gut feelings were correct"), invoking the same language she used earlier to describe the practical wisdom garnered in the field. Nevertheless, they lacked "proof" and "didn't do it by the book." The main issue, then, is not their judgment but how they acted on that judgment – how they used their power. They did not follow procedures, they "trumped" her objections, and the parents and their children do not appear in the decision-making process.⁵⁰ Rather, their authority allows them to act on their judgment of a situation, even in defiance of procedural safeguards – albeit, for the safety of children, but at the cost of a breaking up a family and restricting a parent's rights.⁵¹

edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 72, 84-86. My research participants frequently spoke of these binding legal requirements, most often to report suspected child abuse, but also in regard to reporting undocumented immigrants and in to make involuntary mental health commitments.

⁵⁰ Liz's assessment of the Child Protective Services (CPS) workers' judgment shows a remarkable symmetry with Thomas Aquinas's account of judgment. The CPS workers fail to meet one of Thomas's three criteria, rendering their judgment "faulty and unlawful." While they are authorized by the state, and their judgment is correct, it is not "according to the right ruling of prudence" but based on suspicion only. Thomas denounces this as "rash" judgment: "when the reason lacks certainty, as when a man, without any solid motive, forms a judgment on some doubtful or hidden matter." *Summa Theologica* II-II.60.2, trans. Fathers of the English Dominic Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981).

⁵¹ This interference may or may not count as paternalism, depending on how one defines the category. In particular, if the criteria include benefiting the target, this occasion misses the mark: the intended beneficiary is a third party (a child) and not the parent. See Frederic G. Reamer for more illustrations of this point, "The Concept of Paternalism in Social Work," *Social Service Review* (1983), 255-257. As anthropologist and former social worker Merlinda Weinberg notes, to protect the child is to exert control over or against the mother. She describes this dynamic as "the paradoxical position of practitioners as agents of discipline and care." "Paradox and Trespass: Possibilities for Ethical Practice in Times of Austerity," *Ethics and Social Welfare* 12.1

Given the asymmetrical power within the professional helping relationship, the social worker is often in the position to decide whether an intervention deepens or minimizes this difference. As Joan Tronto notes, care is “implicated in existing structures of power and inequality,” and at times, “functions ideologically to maintain privilege.”⁵² The outcome is open-ended: structural inequalities can be used for domination or empowerment. MacIntyre too notes that institutionalized relationships, like the social worker and client, have a “double-character.” On the one hand, they can be means to flourishing, making possible the realization of necessary goods for both ourselves and others.⁵³ On the other hand, they also can “give expression to established hierarchies of power and the uses of power...instruments of domination and deprivation, [which] often frustrate us in our movement towards our goods.”⁵⁴ Thus, he exhorts “an awareness of how power is distributed and of the corruptions to which its use is liable.”⁵⁵

(2018), 6, 11-12. Finally, for an insightful anthropological account of how CPS workers face irresolvable and competing mandates of child protection and family preservation, see China Scherz, “Protecting Children, Preserving Families: Moral Conflict and Actuarial Science in a Problem of Contemporary Governance,” *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 34.1 (2011), 33-50.

⁵² Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 21.

⁵³ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 102.

⁵⁴ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 102-103.

⁵⁵ In *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre adds that Augustine, Foucault, Hobbes, Marx, and others all “remind us that institutionalized networks of giving and receiving are also always structures of unequal distributions of power, structures well-designed both to mask and to protect those same distributions. So there are always possibilities and often actualities of victimization and exploitation bound up with participation in such networks. If we are not adequately aware of this, our practical judgments and reasoning will go badly astray. The virtues which we need in order to achieve both our own goods and the goods of others through participation in such networks only function as genuine virtues when their exercise is informed by an awareness of

Applied to Liz's context, this means attending to how state authorization, specialized knowledge, and formal training can create conditions in which a professional can misuse her power, such as disregarding procedural protections or excluding service-users from decision-making processes. That is, institutionalized features of professional helping relations can pave the way for the failures of care, such that the ideals of empowerment require continual renewal.

Because of Liz's professional power, she can bypass consultation with patients and their families if she chooses. However, she understands herself as accountable to God in this regard. When faced with the temptation to speed up the process through a unilateral decision, she asks herself, "If I do this or don't do this, will God be pleased with me?" While the asymmetries of the professional helping relationship make cutting corners possible, she is subject to God's oversight. God gave her this "assignment" in the first place, and even though she must discern its particulars, she remains answerable to God.

In addition to these systematic sources of failure, another overlapping source also requires attention: the moral character of social workers themselves.⁵⁶ Our next portrait

how power is distributed and of the corruptions to which its use is liable. Here as elsewhere we have to learn how to live both with and against the realities of power" (102).

⁵⁶ I take this heuristic division from MacIntyre, who identifies two interwoven sources for the failure of care: "individual moral failure, arising from the vices of someone's character" and "systematic flaws of some particular set of social relationships in which the relationships of giving and receiving are embedded." He also notes that the latter frequently produce the former. *Dependent Rational Animals*, 102.

considers how one social worker discovered her own paternalist-fixing tendencies and sought to unlearn these through acquiring what MacIntyre calls “the virtues of caring.”⁵⁷

3. Pride & the Virtues of Caring

At age thirty, Laura Henderson (35, white, Christian) changed careers.⁵⁸ She left her work in graphic design to complete an MSW, and for three years, she worked with young adults aging out of the foster care system. She recently started a new job at a hospital’s smoking cessation program. Becoming a social worker, she told me, has “been harder than I expected...Instead of being able to control anything in my design...I started working with a person.” Later in the interview, she expanded on this point,

When you work with people, it actually reflects things about yourself, and so I have learned so much about myself... We are asked to come alongside and support people, listen. I had to catch myself so many times when I wanted to jump in and fix. I wanted to tell instead of listen, I wanted to challenge instead of listen...It’s really hard to work with people with weaknesses, but it actually has shown me my own weaknesses and just my own human-ness.

Using the same language as Martha, Laura confesses her own tendencies of fixing others. Becoming a social worker has meant new self-knowledge won through the daily labors of supporting her clients.

Over time, Laura learned that trying to ‘fix’ service-users’ problems for them ultimately does not work. When the patient is not included in the solution, Laura observes, “it just goes wrong.” From doing in-home treatment, she found that if she went

⁵⁷ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 77.

⁵⁸ Unlike the other profiles in this chapter, Laura’s account is drawn from two sources: an interview and a focus group in which she participated subsequent to her interview.

in with a plan, she would often go back the next week and not see any change: “a patient can tell me all day what the plan is, but when I leave, they’re the ones implementing it.” She learned “from failure.” Only once she began “including the patient in the solution...hearing their input and having them creatively come up with the idea,” did she “start to see the patient flourish.” Through trial-and-error, she began incorporating service-users in planning and received better outcomes.

Laura also agrees with Martha that in place of fixing, the aim of social work ought to be enhancing clients’ capacities for decision and action. As she puts it, social work is “empowering an individual who may be stuck, whether they’re oppressed or underserved mentally or emotionally impaired, just helping them...so they can make the best decision for themselves.” Social work at its best is *social*, she emphasizes: it fails when it “drops the social, when we don’t include the patient.” When Laura is uncertain about how to move forward in any particular case, she “always go[es] back to what does the client want, and then go from there.” Being “patient-centered,” she told me, is “very grounding.” “I’m a better practitioner when I meet the patient where they are instead of having my own agenda and like, ‘These are the things we need to do.’” Unlike in graphic design, Laura must relinquish control.

This vision of an appropriate relation to her clients (which rejects fixing) is also fortified by Laura’s recognition of their God-given value: “I’m working with an image bearer of Christ. So, seeing the worth and value and dignity in that person...I’m not there to fix the person...but I’m there to walk alongside them, human to human.” Like Martha, Laura renounces fixing for human connection and accompaniment.

Laura's on-the-job learning also incorporates her motivations for the work. She shares,

I had to learn really quickly as a social worker that...I needed to question my motives for doing things...I can't go and try and be the good Samaritan to bring my own glory, because if I do that in social work, I'll get burned out very quickly – I'll drop the social part and just do work to try and control and get results.

This impulse not only damages her clients but also herself. She must scrutinize her own capacities for self-deception: pride cloaks itself with the production of quick results and good-Samaritan desires. This contrasts, she continues, with “when I actually take a step back and do things more relationally and follow the ethics within the profession, when I'm on the right path.”

Such appropriate motivations and corresponding interactions with service-users requires ongoing emotional attunement. Laura describes the back-and-forth of these adjustments. This entails

understanding my limit – I can't go in and save these people – but also keeping a thick skin and a soft enough heart to be able to connect with people, and still allowing myself to cry so I'm human with people, but also not be a bleeding heart, because I also can't save people. It is a daily dance. I try to keep it as a dance instead of a wrestle, but you know, I'm always learning.

However, this rejection of fixing and the accompanying self-scrutiny departs from what she sees in many of her coworkers. As Laura explains, “one thing I really see in social work – not with everyone – but I see that people went into social work because they're either wounded or they're really trying to find their identity by fixing people.” Laura traces the impulse to fix to past injury or an existential search.

In contrast, Laura attributes Christianity with healing her own tendencies towards control. Being a Christian, Laura explains,

helps me see that I'm not the answer. It's Jesus...I'm able to say that I don't fix people, and I'm not able to find my work and identity in being able to help someone. It's actually found in Christ first, and out of that fullness – I don't do it well everyday – but out of that fullness, is actually when I can go and show up instead of actually looking to other people to help them.

Laura need not center herself as the solution to other's challenges. Rather, Jesus ultimately solves problems. Through rejecting a soteriology that focuses on the social worker, she remains appropriately engaged, accompanying the client without assuming responsibility for their lives. After sessions with clients, she frequently prays, she tells me: "I think that actually relieves a lot of things that I could carry on my shoulders...I can still walk alongside them, but I don't have to carry them. That would be too heavy to carry."

Laura brings into focus the emotional and moral attunement requisite in providing good care. She also illuminates those individual moral failings that incline the professional towards paternalism. She returns us to Martha's language of fixing but delves into the motivations behind it. In so doing, she steps back and deliberates on her past actions, evaluating her reasons and desires for acting thus. She determines that her inclinations to "jump in and fix," "tell instead of listen," "control and get results," and lead with "[her] own agenda" are misdirected. They aim at "[her] own glory" and project herself in a salvific role of "sav[ing] people."⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Laura is not alone in her paternalist confessions. Seven other participants confess their own inclinations to fix, save, or rescue others, particularly at the start of their careers or recognized that this is a common tendency of young social workers. Three participants even appeal to the image of superman or superwoman, to describe their attitude as a young social worker, swooping in to rescue a hapless victim in an assertive, solo intervention.

Laura's analysis bears marks of classic Christian treatments on pride. I draw from Augustine and Aquinas here given their wide influence. Augustine writes, "pride is a perverse imitation of God. For it hates a society of equals under God and instead wishes to impose its own domination on its fellows in place of God's rule."⁶⁰ Laura too recognizes that fixing subtly seeks to replace God with herself as "the answer" in other people's lives. This impulse prefers her rule to God's, displaying what Augustine calls a lust for domination that subjugates others in its ambitious search for "despotic power."⁶¹ Both Augustine and Laura understand that pride covetously wants to control others and advance one's own agenda.⁶² Aquinas agrees with this portrait, noting that the proud person "aims higher than he is" and "wishes to overstep beyond what he is."⁶³ In this, he resists being subject to God⁶⁴ and "presume[s] inordinately on his superiority over

⁶⁰ Augustine, *City of God*, trans. William Babcock (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2012), 19.12 at 367. Augustine offers a similar commentary in his *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*: "You ought to wish all men to be your equals; and if by wisdom you surpass any, you ought to wish that he also may be wise. As long as he is slow, he learns from you; as long as he is untaught, he has need of you; and you are seen to be the teacher, he the learner; therefore you seem to be the superior, because you are the teacher; he the inferior, because the learner. Unless you wish him your equal, you wish to have him always a learner." *Homilies* 8.8, translated by H. Browne, from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, vol. 7, edited by Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888.), revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/170208.htm>>.

⁶¹ Augustine, *City of God*, 1.31. As Augustine notes, to seek such domination is also to be dominated by that very desire. The earthly city is "under the dominion of its very lust for domination" (1.preface).

⁶² Commenting on Augustine, Eric Gregory writes, "Love attends to reality and emotionally wills good for another, but it does not grasp the neighbor with an agenda." *Politics and the Order of Love: an Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 253.

⁶³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II.162.1.

⁶⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II.162.5.

others.”⁶⁵ Similarly, fixing usurps a role that only God appropriately plays: salvific interference in people’s lives. Laura must recognize that she is a human agent, fitted with only human capacities.

Moreover, like Laura, Augustine and Aquinas recognize that virtue and good deeds dangerously attract pride. As Laura observes, her efforts to “be the good Samaritan” actually conspire “to bring my own glory.” In a letter to a monastery, Augustine writes, “pride lurks even in good works, so that by it they are undone.”⁶⁶ Aquinas cites this passage to make the same point.⁶⁷ Elsewhere, Augustine also warns that the works of mercy may lead the giver to exalt herself over the recipient:

For if you have done a kindness to the wretched, perchance you desire to lift up yourself over against him, and wishest him to be subject to you, who hast done the kindness to him. He was in need, you bestowed; you seem to yourself greater because you bestowed, than he upon whom it was bestowed. Wish him your equal, that you both may be under the One Lord, on whom nothing can be bestowed.⁶⁸

Several paragraphs later, he adds a warning that pride can engage in the same acts as charity: “Charity feeds the hungry, and so does pride: charity, that God may be praised;

⁶⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II.162.3, reply 4, see also II-II.162.5, reply 2.

⁶⁶ Augustine, Letter 211.6. He continues, “what avails it to lavish money on the poor, and become poor oneself, if the unhappy soul is rendered more proud by despising riches than it had been by possessing them?” Translated by J.G. Cunningham, from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, vol. 1, edited by Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102211.htm>>.

⁶⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II.162.5, reply 3; see also 162.6, reply 1.

⁶⁸ Augustine, *Homilies to First Epistle of John*, 8.5.

pride, that itself may be praised.”⁶⁹ This deceptive quality of pride leads Aquinas to note that pride “creep[s] in secretly.”⁷⁰ Pride continually threatens to corrupt love.

The solution, Augustine proposes, is one that Laura also identifies: self-interrogation. In the passage just cited, Augustine exhorts, “Return to your own conscience, question it.”⁷¹ Laura learns that she too must “question my motives,” recognizing the subtle forms that pride can take in her efforts to help others. The majority of Laura’s interview material cited above illustrates her self-scrutiny. Her efforts to fix, control, and save her clients marked her early entrance into the field, she confesses. Aquinas too thinks pride can be “discovered by the judgment of reason.”⁷²

Once pride has been exposed through self-evaluation, Aquinas suggests three strategies for keeping it at bay: “considering one’s own infirmity,” “God’s greatness,” and “the imperfection of the goods on which man prides himself.”⁷³ Laura does all three. She observes that the work has “shown me my own weaknesses and just my own human-ness;” Jesus is “the answer”; and her efforts to fix people failed anyway. The sin of pride leads Laura to an “understanding [of] my limits.”⁷⁴ She cites prayer as a way to attune herself to this threefold recognition.

⁶⁹ Augustine, *Homilies to First Epistle of John*, 8.9.

⁷⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II.162.6, reply 1.

⁷¹ Augustine, *Homilies to First Epistle of John*, 8.9.

⁷² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II.162.6, reply 1.

⁷³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II.162.6, reply 1.

⁷⁴ Jean Bethke Elshtain notes this as the desired outcome of the sin of Augustine’s earthly city: “this sin should usher into a rueful recognition of limits, not a will to dominion that requires others for one to conquer.” *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 94.

Moreover, Laura's maturation has emerged in pedagogical encounters with others. In what she calls "a daily dance," she has learned how to adjust her sense of responsibility and emotional sensitivity to others' needs. Failure has been her teacher: watching her best efforts to help others make no difference and her bouts of burnout has led her to critically evaluate her desires and reasons for acting.⁷⁵ In his commentary on Augustine and neighbor love, Eric Gregory notes, "Love must be trained and ordered, or better yet, always training and ordering."⁷⁶ For Laura, becoming a social worker and, thus, working with people has become the arena of her moral formation.

However, Laura's recognition of her pride is only a first step. The next is to change the way she practices social work, particularly through incorporating service-users into decision-making processes. Her efforts to enhance their agency represents one dimension of what MacIntyre calls "the virtues of caring and teaching."⁷⁷ Recalling our discussion of relational autonomy in Section 1, Laura plays a part in enabling others to become what MacIntyre calls independent practical reasoners, and the moral qualities and dispositions required to do this excellently are rightly identified virtues.⁷⁸ Laura emphasizes listening especially, as the key to "meeting them [service-users] where they

⁷⁵ "In so evaluating my desires I stand back from them, I put some distance between them and myself *qua* practical reasoner, just because I invite the question, both from myself and from others, of whether it is in fact good for me to act on this particular desire here and now." MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 69.

⁷⁶ Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 262. Or as MacIntyre notes, to act with "just generosity" or "from attentive and affectionate regard" requires training ourselves to have appropriate motivations and feelings through "the education of the affections, sympathies, and inclinations." *Dependent Rational Animals*, 121-122.

⁷⁷ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 77.

⁷⁸ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 77.

are,” “so they can make the best decision for themselves.” She also reimagines her work along equitable lines: “to walk alongside them, human to human,” using an image that Martha also cites. Prayer aids Laura in sustaining this posture, to remember that she is not God. She cannot carry her clients; she cannot unilaterally heal them, but God can. Her job is to accompany them on their journeys towards wholeness.

Thus, Laura is not only concerned with correcting her own motivations. She wants to see her clients “flourish,” and she is eager to “follow the ethics within the profession.” Outcomes and duties matter too. She weaves together a moral triad of good reasons for empowering practice: it is the right thing to do, it produces beneficial outcomes, and it arises from appropriate motivations. Her actions cannot be separated from who she is as an agent.

Moreover, Laura observes that motivations for the work often extend to a social worker’s personal history and search for selfhood. Many people, she notes, go “into social work because they’re either wounded or they’re really trying to find their identity by fixing people.” In fact, numerous qualitative studies bear out this connection between dysfunctional families of origin and the selection of social work as a career. For example, when compared with graduate students in counseling, business, and education, social work graduate students report much higher rates of sexual abuse, and their families of origin have higher incidences of substance abuse and domestic violence.⁷⁹ Moreover,

⁷⁹ Robin Russel, et. al., “Dysfunction in the Family of Origin of MSW and Other Graduate Students” *Journal of Social Work Education* (1993): 121-129. More recent studies also observe this pattern: “The Impact of Family of Origin on Social Workers from Alcoholic Families,” *Clinical Social Work Journal* 28 (2000): 281-302; Jonathan Parker, “Why become a professional? Experiences of care-giving and the decision to enter social work or nursing education,” *Learning*

social work students who report higher rates of psychopathology and violence in their families of origin are also more likely to cite family history as influencing their decision to become social workers.⁸⁰ To be clear, these sorts of “wounds” ought not to be confused with our earlier discussion of pride. They are, however, a further illustration of the significance of the individual social worker within the helping relationship. She enters the interaction already as a moral agent, with her own story, moral convictions, and character.

Thus, alongside the systematic features of the professional helping relationship, attention must also be given to the dynamic moral development of individual social workers. To properly diagnose the successes and failures of care, then, an agent-centered virtue ethics must accompany structural analysis. Those systemic asymmetries of the professional helping relationship (discussed in Section 2) amplify practitioners’ vice or virtue, in turn shaping her exercise of moral agency.

To return to Laura’s confessions, fixing indicates a vicious overreach of social-work power. As theologian Stanley Hauerwas notes, “sin is the positive attempt to overreach our power as creatures,”⁸¹ thinking that “we must do everything (pride) or

in Health and Social Care 1.2 (2002): 105-114; Elizabeth Lewis Rompf and David Royse, “Choice of Social Work as a Career: Possible Influences” *Journal of Social Work Education* 30.2 (1994): 163-171.

⁸⁰ “Sherrill Sellers, “Private Pain, Public Choices: Influence of Problems in the Family of Origin on Career Choices among a Cohort of MSW Students,” *Social Work Education* (2007): 869-881.

⁸¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 46.

nothing (sloth).”⁸² In this case, paternalist fixing names when social workers intervene too much, assuming that they must do everything to benefit a service-user. Hauerwas warns of the outcome: such efforts degenerate into aggressive efforts at control.⁸³

However, fixing is not inevitable. As Laura shows, moral learning is possible. Anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly calls this “processes of becoming,” the struggle towards the good life in the midst of human suffering, scarcity, and failure.⁸⁴ Mattingly goes on to identify care work as a “moral project,” “a complex reasoning task that engenders ongoing moral deliberations, evaluations, and experiments in how to live.”⁸⁵ Indeed, Laura displays how the difficulties of caring for people press her towards self-examination and the ongoing moral attunement of her “daily dance.”

Thus, together Liz and Laura orient us to some of the institutional and individual flaws that incline social workers towards fixing others. Disproportionate power and expert knowledge within the professional helping relationship on the one hand and pride on the other conspire, hindering the ideals of empowerment and diminishing a recognition of the appropriate limits of human agency. The next portrait adds a further consideration. In certain conditions, deciding for a service-user may not be paternalist-fixing at all but appropriate care.

4. Justifying Interference

⁸² Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 48.

⁸³ Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 48-49.

⁸⁴ Cheryl Mattingly, *Moral Laboratories: Family Peril and the Struggle for a Good Life* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 10.

⁸⁵ Mattingly, *Moral Laboratories*, 4.

The receptionist at the large front desk of the retirement community points me to the office of Lydia Schweitzer (56, white, United Church of Christ).⁸⁶ Walking past older adults chatting, I leave the lobby with the vaulted ceiling, overstuffed chairs, and potted plants. The walls of Lydia's office are lined with calendars, inspiring placards, and family photos. Directly behind me, the photos of former social work interns smile from a bulletin board. Pointing at the board, Lydia tells me that although supervising interns is "a big commitment," it is part of "giving back to the profession and trying to show the people coming up how much fun it is working with older adults."

For the last thirty years, Lydia has worked with older adults and people who are dying. "That's my gift, my calling," she told me, "being with people at that point of transition in their lives." She began her career as a "boots-on-the-ground DSS [Department of Social Services] social worker" in a rural county, working for Adult Protective Services.

People would come in with whatever problem they would have with their older adult, whether someone's neglecting themselves, whether you're caregiving and you're overwhelmed, whether someone needed home health, whatever it was, they'd come into intake, and they would send me out, to assess the situation to figure out what to do.

Visiting people in their homes was a "great job," Lydia recalls, even though it could be "scary as heck" – "you're on your own...with no backup." She had a "great, great supervisor," at the time, "whose door was always open." This made the job "doable": "I could go to her with any situation, she was always really willing to talk it through."

⁸⁶ I supplement the material from Lydia's interview with a subsequent email exchange for clarification on several points.

After this introduction to social work, Lydia then worked for many years in hospice also doing home visits. This included supporting AIDS patients in the early 1990s, “when nobody got well from AIDS.” The hardest part of doing hospice work, she told me, was leaving a patient’s home: “you’re not sure they’re going to be ok, that they have enough help, that there’s enough support, that the family is coping.” This uncertainty and isolation eventually led her to shift from hospice work to work at a retirement community, where she supports three hundred adults in independent living.

Lydia explains her current role this way:

if you have a problem, if you are sick, if you’re going into the hospital, you have a new diagnosis, if you need to apply for Medicare, change your insurance, whatever it is, you need help from within the system here – I’m the go-to person for all of those folks. So I do a lot of crisis intervention. I’m the person that moves people through the system. So if you live in an apartment and have dementia, and you get sick, and you need to move to assisted living, I’ll be the one who will talk to you about that, if you can be engaged. If you can’t, I’ll be talking to your family. We’ll work together to figure out where you belong.

Residents enter the community in good health. However, as they age and their needs change, Lydia arranges more assistance and eventually nursing care. Sometimes this happens against the wishes of a resident, and these decisions are among her most difficult.

The whole making people move is a hard thing. Nobody wants to move to assisted living. And so that line between when does somebody have to move because they’re not safe or other people are not safe around them, versus when would it just be a good idea, but I’m going to respect their self-determination to make a bad choice. So sometimes those feel hard. Especially when somebody’s super mad at you. Railing at you and I mean, I see how much better – usually a month after they get assisted living, they’re like, ‘Wow this is so great, why didn’t I do this ages ago?’ I know what it looks like on the other side for most people and that gets me through when they’re so angry. Because part of the cognitive lost is not remembering what you don’t remember. People have good insight. They think, ‘I’m fine, I’m not making any trouble.’ Those sort of judgments – it’s playing God to an extent, deciding where people are – whether they can live in their apartment, whether they need to move, how you’re going to do that. Figuring

out when to bring people's families in is a tough one, because I want to respect their adult right, but then people come to the point when they can't make a good decision for themselves and figuring out where those lines are, those are tough.

Lydia identifies advanced dementia in particular as contributing to some residents' "lack of judgment": "they really think that they do not have any deficits and are fine living on their own—even when they're not taking their pills, having repeated incidents of setting off the fire alarm when they cook or wearing the same clothes for days on end."

Lydia does not face these decisions alone. She begins with the resident herself, "if she's engageable," observing, "Of course I always prefer to engage residents as much as I can if they are able to understand." From there, she reaches out the family and then her team: "we'll send the pharmacy team out to see if they're doing their meds ok. I'll have the nurse practitioner see them. I might refer them to a neurologist or talk to their family doctor. Or have their children do that to grease the wheels." Having this support has been a "great thing" about her work here: "there's a whole group to engage." She also cites "a very supportive boss," who will go with her to tough conversations with residents. He "share[s] that load, so I'm not absorbing all that on my own."

Sometimes Lydia must decide to move a resident into more supportive housing within the retirement community. Such interventions depart from her default commitment to "respect their adult right" or "self-determination," which even extends to letting residents "make a bad choice." But at some point, two conditions emerge which not only justify but require her interference, namely, cognitive loss and safety. However, when these conditions occur is not self-evident. She must "figur[e] out where those lines are." To do so, she consults with the resident, their family, and her team, to identify when her commitment to residents' self-determination must be replaced with her own

judgments about what constitutes their wellbeing. Then she must weather residents' anger, reassuring herself that usually residents appreciate the change after it happens. She does not savor this aspect of her job: it is "playing God."

Lydia's citation of safety and deliberative capacity as justifying interference follows the guidance of the NASW *Code of Ethics*. Social workers may limit their clients' self-determination: "when, in the social workers' professional judgment, clients' actions or potential actions pose a serious, foreseeable, and imminent risk to themselves or others"⁸⁷ or when they "lack the capacity to make informed decisions."⁸⁸ Recall that professional judgment on the probabilities of risk provided the basis for interventions in child protection cases in Section 2. To the credit of the writers of the *Code of Ethics*, it

⁸⁷ NASW, *Code*, 1.02 at 7. "Social workers respect and promote the rights of clients to self-determination and assist clients in their efforts to identify and clarify their goals. Social workers may limit clients' rights to self-determination when, in the social workers' professional judgment, clients' actions or potential actions pose a serious, foreseeable, and imminent risk to themselves or others" (7). The *Code* appears to use the language of risk and harm interchangeably, elsewhere preferring harm. For example, "Social workers' primary responsibility is to promote the well-being of clients. In general, clients' interests are primary. However, social workers' responsibility to the larger society or specific legal obligations may on limited occasions supersede the loyalty owed clients, and clients should be so advised. (Examples include when a social worker is required by law to report that a client has abused a child or has threatened to harm self or others.)" (1.01); "Social workers should obtain client consent before conducting an electronic search on the client. Exceptions may arise when the search is for purposes of protecting the client or other people from serious, foreseeable, and imminent harm, or for other compelling professional reasons." (1.03i); "Social workers should protect the confidentiality of all information obtained in the course of professional service, except for compelling professional reasons. The general expectation that social workers will keep information confidential does not apply when disclosure is necessary to prevent serious, foreseeable, and imminent harm to a client or others" (1.07c).

⁸⁸ *Code*, 1.14 at 16. "When social workers act on behalf of clients who lack the capacity to make informed decisions, social workers should take reasonable steps to safeguard the interests and rights of those clients" (16).

makes explicit that determining this decision depends on the discretion of the social worker.⁸⁹

John Stuart Mill also cites versions of harm and limited cognitive capacity as occasions in which interference is permitted. Regarding the former, he writes, “the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.”⁹⁰ (Mill excludes self-harm as a warrant.) Regarding the latter, he notes that if a person lacks “the maturity of their faculties,” then they “must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury.”⁹¹ However, what quickly becomes apparent is that both conditions depend on some party’s judgment. That is, someone other than the target of the intervention determines what counts as harm and inadequate “faculties.” We will leave the question of harm for our discussion of wellbeing in Section 5, simply noting here that what Mill means by the concept has animated extensive scholarly debate.⁹²

⁸⁹ While I am aware that various diagnostic tools exist to aid these judgments, especially in medical settings, none of my participants mentioned them.

⁹⁰ Mill, *On Liberty*, 11-12. Elsewhere, Mill describes a liberty of “doing as we like, subject to such consequences as may follow: without impediment from our fellow-creatures, so long as what we do does not harm them, even though they should think our conduct foolish, perverse, or wrong” (15).

⁹¹ Mill, *On Liberty*, 12. The full citation reads as follows: “It is perhaps hardly necessary to say that this doctrine [of liberty without interference] is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties. We are not speaking of children, or of young persons below the age which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood. Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others, must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury.”

⁹² Following Nicolas Wolterstorff, I too “avoid taking up the vexed question of what Mill means by ‘harm,’ and the equally vexed question of whether or not his harm principle is compatible w/ his utilitarian maximizing principle.” *Justice in Love* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 231n10. For an introduction to these debates, see D.G. Brown, “Mill on Harm to Others’ Interest,” *Political Studies* 26.3 (1987), 355-395; Nils Holtug, “The Harm Principle,” *Ethical*

Regarding cognitive capacity, however, Mill almost immediately displays how the concept is far from neutral. In this case, he decides who is able to direct their own lives, based on racist and imperialist logic. He writes, “For the same reason” that his doctrine of liberty applies only to people “in the maturity of their faculties,” it not only excludes children but also,

we may leave out of consideration those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage...Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provide the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end.⁹³

Mill’s assessment misrepresents the cognitive capacities of whole populations.

The point here is not that all judgments about others’ deliberative abilities are prone to racist distortion or even error. Rather, it is to show that they are not always neutral declarations of fact but judgments and, thus, fallible. For example, take these conditions which Wolterstorff lists as justifying paternalist intervention.

Sometimes we find ourselves in the position of being responsible for a person’s good when she herself is incapable of making a decision on the matter at hand. She is an infant, or severely impaired mentally, or psychologically disturbed, or recovering from surgery, or in a comma, or mentally confused, or fallen into dementia.⁹⁴

While some these incapacities are transparent and at least temporarily stable (say, infancy), others arise suddenly or slowly, potentially changing from day to day. Mental confusion, dementia, psychological disturbance, or recovery from surgery – all of these

Theory and Moral Practice 5 (2002), 357-389; Piers Norris Turner, “‘Harm’ and Mill’s Harm Principle,” *Ethics* 124.2 (2014), 299-326.

⁹³ Mill, *On Liberty*, 12-13.

⁹⁴ Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love*, 224.

may ebb and flow, rendering a person more or less capable of deciding on a given matter at hand at any particular time. Like determinations of potential harm, they depend upon a professional assessing and deciding, an act which, as we have shown, is shaped both by the systemic features of the helping relationship and the individual social worker as a moral agent. This dynamic, however, appears lost to contemporary theorists on paternalism. Typically, they simply note that paternalism is justified when the target lacks decision-making capacity, with no remark on who makes this determination.⁹⁵

As a social worker, however, Lydia is tasked with this decision. She understands that her residents' deliberative capacities are dynamic and not always clear-cut and unambiguous. She balances the assumption that "people have good insight" with the reality of cognitive loss ("not remembering what you don't remember"). It is not a zero-sum game between agency and dependency but understanding how the two continually shape each other.⁹⁶ Thus, Lydia must discern the extent to which a person remains able to participate in decisions about her own life, on the supports she needs as she ages.⁹⁷ As Lydia notes, "those sort of judgments – it's playing God to an extent." It is a burdensome task, immediately suspect, because it exceeds human capacities. Lydia implies that God

⁹⁵ In my review of this literature, I found no case where the author observed that an agent must arrive as this prior decision.

⁹⁶ As Christian ethicist Sandra Sullivan-Dunbar notes, "all of us simultaneously experience some degree of dependency and express some degree of agency. The degree of dependency and agency varies according to the person and her stage of life. But not only do both these realities pervade our experience, they shape each other: we express our agency within boundaries set by our varied limits and dependencies." *Human Dependency and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 28.

⁹⁷ In *Justice in Love*, Wolterstorff notes, "the concept we really need is that of a deliberative agent concerning the matter at hand" (225).

alone ought to exercise such power over others, and yet Lydia faces the necessity of decision. It is a “load” that she is grateful to “share” with her boss, “so I’m not absorbing all that on my own.”

Given this, Lydia wisely turns to others. In her process of consultation, she starts with the resident, “as much as I can if they are able to understand.” If Lydia decides that advanced dementia prevents them from “being engageable,” she reaches out to the resident’s family, and then an array of colleagues with varying specializations, all to assess a resident’s ability to live independently. She also names the important role that supervisors past and present have played in “talk[ing] through” challenging scenarios. Lydia considers the particulars of the situation with colleagues, inviting them to contribute to and correct her reasoning.⁹⁸ Her practice mirrors Aristotle’s advice: “On great matters we call upon others in deliberation, because we do not trust ourselves in deciding between alternatives.”⁹⁹

Thus, to justify interference, the professional first must identify the risk of harm or lack of decision-making capacity. Interference bears the burden of proof, and these are the two conditions of proof.¹⁰⁰ While Lydia displays reluctance about assuming these

⁹⁸ In *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre notes, “Practical reasoning is by its nature, on the generally Aristotelian view that I have been taking, reasoning together with others, generally within some determinate set of social relationships” (107). Moreover, we depend upon friends and colleagues to correct the moral and intellectual errors in our practical reasoning (96).

⁹⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1112b 10-11. I should note that while my participants commonly cite processes of consultation in their decision-making processes, for others, this is not possible given the urgency or isolation of their work. They bear the burden of decision alone.

¹⁰⁰ “All human beings assume, so it appears to me, that free non-coerced action is a fundamental good, in the sense that coercion always has to be justified by some good that it achieves or some obligation that it fulfills. Coercion always bears the burden of proof; freedom from coercion never does.” Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love*, 236.

responsibilities for others, she shows no hesitation in asserting that this is what care entails as her residents age. She agrees with Farley: when caring for older adults, “Dependence on others grows as capacities become limited.”¹⁰¹ That is, once the worker decides that one of two justifying conditions are present, an intervention is not paternalist-fixing but appropriate assistance. What in other cases is an agentive limit to observe becomes a moral obligation to perform.

Recalling Martha’s threefold typology of abuse, paternalist fixing, and empowerment, Lydia’s descriptions require the introduction of a fourth category, what we might call justified-interference-as-care. Some theorists maintain the label of paternalism here. For example, Wolterstorff insists, “Nobody sees anything wrong in paternalism in such cases; on the contrary, paternalism may be obligatory.”¹⁰² However, for the sake of clarity, a distinct moral category is warranted. Bioethicist Tom Beauchamp and legal theorists Seana Shiffrin and Joel Feinberg agree: when a person lacks decision-making capacity, an intervention ought not be called paternalism.¹⁰³ The

¹⁰¹ Farley, *Compassionate Respect*, 28.

¹⁰² Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love*, 224. Wolterstorff is referring here to cases where the target lacks decision-making capacity.

¹⁰³ If the label is retained, it is usually distinguished as soft paternalism or weak paternalism. However, Joel Feinberg insists: “it is severely misleading to think of it [soft paternalism] as any kind of paternalism,” as does Tom Beauchamp: “‘weak paternalism’ is not paternalism in any interesting sense.” Joel Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law, vol 3: Harm to Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 14; Tom L. Beauchamp, “Paternalism and Bio-Behavioral Control,” *The Monist*, vol. 60, no. 1 (1976), 67. In “Paternalism, Unconscionability Doctrine, and Accommodation,” Shiffrin argues that it is not paternalist to intervene in the affairs of a child or a person with intellectual disabilities as they lack “full legitimate authority over themselves” (219n). Coons and Weber’s entire edited volume *Paternalism* also rules out these cases as paternalism in a meaningful way, explaining that they only consider hard paternalism, that is, interference in the affairs of a competent adult. As they

designation of paternalism itself marks an act as condemnable and its agent repugnant, and thus, another term is needed.

As Lydia's stories show, to distinguish between paternalism and justified-interference-as-care depends upon the professional's judgment. Is this a case when a person poses a reasonable risk of injuring herself or others? To what extent is she capable of directing her own life? The social worker must, in O'Donovan's words, "feel out the boundaries between categories," to discriminate between capacity and incapacity, safety and risk.¹⁰⁴ While interfering without adequate reason is morally condemnable, so too is withholding care if Lydia's two conditions are present. As Eric Gregory notes, "A strict observance of nonmaleficence as the only way to respect another person risks its own kind of moral failure, both to others and ourselves."¹⁰⁵ And yet as Lydia notes, these conditions are always changing, and thus, social workers face a profoundly difficult "practical-moral" task.¹⁰⁶ On the ground, from day to day, they must deliberate whether any particular intervention qualifies as care or paternalism.

Moreover, once a professional judges that the risk of harm or incapacity are present and an intervention would be justified, a further occasion of discrimination arrives: determining another's good. Our penultimate portrait turns then to the question

explain, "interference is justified if and only if the 'target' person is not acting sufficiently knowledgeably and voluntarily" (2n).

¹⁰⁴ Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment: the Bampton Lectures, 2003* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 18.

¹⁰⁵ Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 299.

¹⁰⁶ Parton, "Some Thoughts on the Relationship between Theory and Practice," 449-463.

of wellbeing and how it unfolds as a negotiation not only between the social worker and client but within a world of insurance companies, office politics, institutional procedures, and rival professionals.

5. Wellbeing & Contestation

Nancy Peterson (47, white, Methodist) meets me on the last day of her vacation. We enter the parish hall of a church close to the hospital where she works in the psychiatric unit. There is an AA meeting upstairs, so we sit in the church office, between filing cabinets and bags of donated clothes. She is wearing a blue summer dress, sandals studded with gems, and necklace bearing a cross.

Nancy begins by warning me that her enthusiasm for social work might make her ramble: “I’m very passionate about being a social worker, so I love to talk about it.” She has practiced social work for twenty-four years, since the year before her daughter was born. She tells me, “I love being a social worker. I love helping people. I love our profession...knowing that we’re all out there fighting for social justice...making the world better for people.” With a clinical license and a specialization in mental health, Nancy has mostly worked in hospital settings. She recounts, “I worked in pretty much all the medical units, but once they put me in the emergency department – doing the evaluations with folks coming in with suicide or substance abuse programs – my heart just exploded, and I fell in love from there on out.”

In her current role, Nancy supervises seven other social workers in an inpatient psychiatric unit with twenty beds. As she explains, with the exception of managing medication, the “social workers are basically responsible for pretty much everything for every patient.” When a patient gets admitted from the Emergency Room, “we are the

start-to-finish people,” beginning with an assessment of their mental health and “their psycho-social needs.” This includes everything from “where do you live, who’s your support, what are your financial circumstances, what kinds of things are going on for you outside of here.” Her patients stay anywhere from a few days to several months. They range from homeless individuals, those “on the cusp of financial despair,” to the “really wealthy, who don’t think there’s anything wrong with them and shouldn’t be with all these crazy people.” During their stay, the social workers run individual and group therapy sessions, and occasionally family sessions too if there is family involved, alongside “all the discharge planning.” Nancy toggles through the list: “medication assistance, transportation assistance, housing assistance. You name it – we do it. Whatever that’s going to keep them more mentally stable, to be safe in the community, that’s our goal.”

Despite Nancy’s enthusiasm for the profession, she notes that social work gets a “bad rap.” Most people think of social workers as the “people that go and take children out of people’s homes, or the people that throw old people into nursing homes.” She used to think this too, until just after college, when she volunteered at a women’s domestic violence shelter in Oklahoma City run by the local United Way. She recalls watching a social worker on staff there: “she worked with moms, and she did groups, and she did individual work, and she did individual therapy with the kids. I was like, oh my gosh.” So, after concluding her stint there, Nancy enrolled in a Master of Social Work program.

Throughout her career, Nancy has often had to address patients’ fears and suspicions about social workers. When she was in home health care, making home visits,

“family members automatically assumed that I was coming to put mom in a nursing home.” She would tell them that no, her job was “make life...a little more safe, a little more stable,” and then she would begin with the question, “what can I do to support you and to connect you?” In contrast to prevailing stereotypes, Nancy re-narrates social work interventions. She explains, “we’re connectors. I’m not going to fix anything for you necessarily...We investigate, we dig, we really plug people in to where they’re going to be best supported.”

Several times during the interview, Nancy returns to her rejection of fixing, despite its persistent pull. When she first became a social worker, she tells me, “I remember thinking that I can just come in here and fix it all and do everything.” Even after twenty-five years of practice, and her vehement rejection of this approach, Nancy still feels the temptation: “It’s that whole bleeding heart thing, I guess. I want to make things better for people. That’s something I struggle with inside of myself.” This impulse is common among her profession, Nancy thinks:

I’ve met very few social workers who don’t have somewhat of a bleeding heart. I think our outpouring of emotion and wanting to fix all the things – when they just can’t all be fixed – tends to lead to burnout...but it’s not really our jobs to fix them. It’s our job to help the person that we’re doing the therapy with to think through things, because how I might fix it might not be in their – how they see it fixed. I think that that can be a real struggle also. I know how I think you should handle this situation but instead I’ve got to build you up so that you can figure it out on your own.

Against a tendency towards excessive compassion, Nancy returns to her ideal of empowerment. This means supporting her patients’ decision-making, rather than working from her own assumptions about what should happen. Nancy continued,

I might from a personal perspective not understand you, or understand the lifestyle that you are choosing to live, but I’m going to respect the crap out of it,

and I'm going to work with you in every way possible to help you develop that, if that's who you need to be and want to be.

Nancy insists on honoring and supporting service-users' self-determination.

At the hospital, this means advocating for patients, especially when doctors assume they already know what a person needs. Resisting a doctor's assessment can be difficult, especially as social workers are "not looked upon very highly by most other professions." Nancy cited several situations where "the real professionals" – here she indicates scare quotes with her fingers, highlighting a dubious usage – "had the idea of what they thought this person needed." And she had to push back: "that's not what they really feel like they need, and you can't push your agenda on them, because they're a human being, and they have rights, and they have a reason to say why they need what they need in a given moment." This contest between the medical team and social workers has been "very consistent" over her twenty-four years of practice, although she notes that some doctors do "want to listen."

In contrast to these other professionals, social workers simply have a distinctive approach, Nancy explains: "we want to meet the person right where they are." To illustrate, Nancy tells me a story about a patient:

who was perfectly fine – happy being homeless, I mean, he just – his level of illness led him to be just a little bit too paranoid to share a room with somebody, or you know. And I would have a lot of doctors or nurses say, well, you need to – you know – find him a place to live, or you need to, blah blah blah. You can get the gist of it. But I'm like, 'But that's not what he needs.' I got to go and find out what this person feels like they need the most: 'You might think I need one thing, but that's not what I need.' And so I think that separates social work a lot. We really are in the business of empowering people. Whatever it is that they think they need, that's the direction that we want to go for them.

Against pressure from doctors and nurses, Nancy defends the patient's understanding of his needs, and this is where she too begins.

Yet as Nancy also acknowledges, this is not straightforward in a psychiatric unit where patients are on medication and often come there “because their thinking is not right.” As Nancy explains, “We have to walk a very, very fine line between ‘are we doing what’s in their general, best interest?’ versus ‘what they think their best interest is,’ when their thinking is distorted already.” She gives the example of a patient dealing with bipolar mania, with a “very grandiose” sense of himself:

I’ve had lots of patients come onto the unit thinking they’re Jesus or something of that nature. And then, not wanting us to bring in family because they don’t have family, because mother Mary is no longer – it gets to that level, of psychosis. So, at what point do you say, ok, I want to honor this person as an individual, but I know for a fact that I have to reach out to their family in order to better serve them and to start developing a good safety plan for them. So where do you break that confidentiality?

The determination of need also unfolds within a meshwork of bureaucratic procedures and political maneuvering. This is something social workers learn on the job, Nancy tells me, as everyone “comes in relatively naïve to the politics, to the bureaucracy.” Identifying and addressing need takes place within the ongoing negotiation of trying to do “what’s best” for the patient “in a way that the rest of the team’s not fighting back on.” She offered a further example: a patient needs five medications after discharge, and yet a government agency will only pay for three. “Do we pull other resources together that we might need down the line for somebody else? But we know that this person is going to need these things.”

Alternatively, sometimes bureaucratic restrictions prevent doing what seems to be the right thing for a patient. She explains, “it’s really against policy to get them their insulin because that’s not a psychiatric med, but if they walk out the door without their insulin, then what happens?... You’re breaking policy in a way, but at the same token, I

know this person really needs these things.” Again, Nancy recognizes a need, identifies the appropriate action, and yet is prevented from acting. She struggles with this. This also happens with decisions about when to discharge someone: “everyone’s saying, insurance is saying, they got to get out, they got to get out.” And yet, there might be no housing for this person, despite the social workers’ best efforts. “We’re all looking at each other – this is horrible. I hate this. I think that’s what I dislike about my job the most – not having what we need to really set people up for success.”

Nancy’s stories return us to the dilemma that has woven its way throughout this chapter: how to balance two accounts of her patients’ wellbeing. On the one hand is “what they [patients] think their best interest is,” and on the other is what the professionals determine is “their general best interest.” Emerging from her dual commitments to honoring her patients’ self-direction and the requirements of care, she confronts what are often competing accounts of her patients’ needs and wellbeing. Moreover, the realities of scarcity, bureaucratic regulation, and political contestation condition and constrain her actions on behalf of her patients.

Defining wellbeing is, according to Adams, “one of the more difficult [tasks] of ethical theory.”¹⁰⁷ Yet, the “primary responsibility” of social workers, according to the *NASW Code of Ethics*, is “to promote the well-being of clients.”¹⁰⁸ Nancy’s approach

¹⁰⁷ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 84. This is not to say that social workers need to be ethical theorists. In *Justice in Love*, Wolterstorff notes, “We can make sound judgments about whether or not something is good for someone without being able to explain what it is for something to be good for someone” (3).

¹⁰⁸ NASW, *Code*, 1.01.

seems straightforward enough: “I got to go and find out what this person feels like they need the most.” This, for Nancy, is what it means to be “in the business of empowering people.” According to this approach, an investigation into a person’s aims and aspirations is integral to advancing their wellbeing. Or as the *Code of Ethics* puts it, social workers “assist clients in their efforts to identify and clarify their goals.”¹⁰⁹ In beginning with a person’s account of their interests we might say that Nancy adopts the most influential approach to well-being: a person defines their own wellbeing, especially in reference to their desires.¹¹⁰

At first glance, this strategy appears promising for its ability to stave off paternalism.¹¹¹ It assumes that a person is the best authority on her own good, because as Mill notes, “[h]e is the person most interested in his own well-being” and most knowledgeable concerning “his own feelings and circumstances.”¹¹² Or as Nancy explains, her patients “have a reason to say why they need what they need in a given moment.” Even if Nancy does not understand that choice, she is “going to respect the crap out of it” and “work with you in every way possible to help you develop that, if that’s who you need to be and want to be.” This move endeavors to block external interference as a less reliable imposition.

¹⁰⁹ NASW, *Code*, 1.02.

¹¹⁰ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 84.

¹¹¹ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 86.

¹¹² Mill, *On Liberty*, 96. In *Human Dependency and Christian Ethics*, Sandra Sullivan-Dunbar notes, “It may be the case that when we are relatively autonomous, we are the best judges of what is good for ourselves, and that our observable choices provide the best source of information about that good. This is the presumption upon which contemporary and political and economic theories are built” (29).

However, Nancy also recognizes the problems with this approach: sometimes her patients desire things that are not good for them, because “their thinking is distorted.” As one textbook explains, psychotic symptoms include “distortions and impairments of thought, feeling, and behavior,” and an overall disconnection from reality.¹¹³ Mental illness may hinder the ability of her patients to make appropriate judgments about their lives and wellbeing. And when this is the case, Nancy must assume responsibility for directing some aspect of their lives, as we saw with Lydia in Section 4.

We might add that even without the incidence of psychosis, defining wellbeing based on a person’s desires also raises difficulties. In general, people frequently desire things that are not good for them. Adams describes several ways that this can be so: this could be due to altruistic desires where they sacrifice their good; through idealistic desires, where they love a principle over their own good; or through “ill will or indifference toward oneself,” whether due to “self-hatred or depression.”¹¹⁴ To overcome this default, theorists (and others) turn to hypothetical desire: what a person would desire *if she knew better*. However, this returns us to the same problem, of determining a person’s wellbeing based on another’s superior knowledge, and thus, in the end, offers little defense against paternalism.¹¹⁵

Given this, Nancy, like Lydia, maps decisions about a person’s wellbeing as unfolding between two often competing authorities: that person herself and the

¹¹³ Clair de la Lune, et. al., “What is Psychosis?” 8, in *A Clinical Introduction to Psychosis: Foundations for Clinical Psychologists and Neuropsychologists*, edited by Johanna C. Badcock and Georgie Paulik.

¹¹⁴ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 87-90.

¹¹⁵ For an extended discussion, see Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 85-99.

professionals (e.g., doctors, nurses, social workers, etc.). She describes this as “walk[ing] a very, very fine line.” The fine line here draws together Nancy’s aims of empowerment, condemnation of fixing, and recognition of the occasional need for justified-interference-as-care. It is an exacting balancing act between, what Christian ethicist Sandra Sullivan-Dunbar calls, “determining the good for others and fostering agency.”¹¹⁶

The social work profession at large anticipates this conflict along a well-worn dyad: autonomy and beneficence, self-determination and safety, respect and best interests. The *Code of Ethics* invokes the language of “service” and “dignity and worth of the person,” as two of six core values.¹¹⁷ Moreover, it expects that these values will generate competing imperatives when applied to actual situations. Social work textbooks on ethics typically follow discussions of ethical principles immediately by their many ensuing conflicts: between the practitioner’s personal and professional values, between the client’s and the professional’s values, and the relative ranking of the profession’s values.¹¹⁸ This principle-based approach to ethics assumes that none of its core values maintain an absolute priority over others. As the *Code of Ethics* observes, “[r]easonable differences of opinion” exist among social workers, and recourse in instances of moral conflict is found only in the practitioner’s “informed judgment” and imaginative

¹¹⁶ Sullivan-Dunbar, *Human Dependency and Christian Ethics*, 28.

¹¹⁷ The remainder are social justice, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence.

¹¹⁸ Valerie Bryan, et. al., *The Helping Professional's Guide to Ethics: A New Perspective* (Chicago: Lyceum Books, 2015), 9. Bryan et. al. surveys eight model syllabi for professional ethics courses, recommended by the Council on Social Work Education. All eight “focused specifically upon either the identification of conflicts inherent in the profession’s stated core values, or upon conflicts based in the more abstract philosophical principles from which the core values are derived, including autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice” (13).

consideration of “how the issues would be judged in a peer review process.”¹¹⁹ The professional is left to discern her actual obligations through balancing competing demands in actual situations.¹²⁰

Nancy’s priority is clear, however. In whatever way her patients choose to live, she’s “going to respect the crap out of it,” and “in every possible way” assist them to “develop that.” She knows that all too often, as Weinberg and Campbell note, “professionals set the terms of what is taken to be health and illness, normalcy and dysfunction.”¹²¹ As much as possible, Nancy wants to shift the balance of power towards

¹¹⁹ NASW, *Code*, 3. As Merlinda Weinberg and Carolyn Campbell note, social workers interpret core values and particular situations in divergent ways, leading to different assessments of what is a dilemma and how it might be resolved. Personal values, religion, ethnicity, race, gender, seniority, and experience all as playing a factor in these varying assessments. “From Codes to Contextual Collaborations: Shifting the Thinking About Ethics in Social Work,” *Journal of Progressive Human Services* 25 (2014), 38-39.

¹²⁰ Brett McCarty, “Medicine as Just War? The Legacy of James Childress in Christian Ethics,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 38 (2018), 59; Bryan, et. al., *The Helping Professional’s Guide to Ethics*, 7-8; Farley, *Compassionate Respect*, 24-25; Weinberg and Campbell, “From Codes to Contextual Collaboration,” 40. As Sarah Bank adds, the professional is “an impartial moral agent, acting rationally by applying principles, weighing up the consequences of various courses of action and prioritising the various principles in particular cases.” *Ethics, Accountability, and the Social Professions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 79.

This focus on the deductive application of principles to context can be traced to bioethics, as a response to unethical research on human subjects disclosed in the early 1970s, such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. First in the Belmont Report (1974) and then further developed by Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress in *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), principlism offered an approach to professional ethics based on a set of ideals: respect for persons or autonomy, beneficence, distributive justice, and nonmaleficence. (Nonmaleficence was added only with the second publication.) Bryan, *The Helping Professional’s Guide to Ethics*, 4, 7.; cf. Farley, *Compassionate Respect*, 24. In the NASW *Code of Ethics*, the first three core values align with those proposed by Beauchamp and Childress: service translates to beneficence, dignity and worth of the person to respect for autonomy, and social justice as distributive justice. As ideals drawn from deontology and utilitarianism, each represents a prima facie obligation.

¹²¹ Weinberg and Campbell, “From Codes to Contextual Collaborations,” 46.

her patients. She is not eager to determine their good for them, even though they are experiencing varying levels of psychosis – and thus distortions in their abilities to decide and act. Like Martha and Laura, Nancy shares their distaste for paternalist-fixing and endorses empowerment as her preferred vision of social work.

This does not mean that Nancy rejects interference entirely, however. Rather, the responsibilities of care depend upon highly contextual judgments, as we saw with Liz and Lydia. During the interview, she references two contrasting cases. In the first, she defends her patient's refusal of housing against doctors who demand that she arrange it for him. Even though shelter is a basic human need, she thinks that in this case, her patient's "level of illness led him to be just a little bit too paranoid to share a room with somebody." In the second case, she "know[s] for a fact" that she must contact a patient's family to build a "safety plan," in violation of her patient's express wishes and right to confidentiality. While in one instance, she defends her patient's desires against critics, she reluctantly bypasses them in another. This variability displays Nancy's professional judgment, regarding both her patient's decision-making capacities and what constitutes their wellbeing. Sometimes her patients may be the best authority on what is good for them, and at other times, she may be.¹²² Nancy does not cite the *Code of Ethics* to resolve this quandary, nor a decision-making model drawn from competing principles. Rather, she emphasizes what Weinberg and Campbell call "situated and contextual nature

¹²² In *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre argues, while we know our desires, we do not always know what is best for us (70). "What is or would be good or best for me is something on which, apart from the fact that generally and characteristically I know more about myself than others do, I may in many and crucial respects be no more of an authority than some others and in some respects a good deal less of an authority than some others" (71).

of practical relationships.”¹²³ Her patients’ flourishing varies by context, and to discern its features, Nancy must rely upon practical reasoning.¹²⁴

Even with this variability, however, Nancy appeals to a certain objectivity when she determines what wellbeing looks like for her patients. She “know[s] for a fact” that she must reach out to a patient’s family for their own safety. In observing the “central human reality” of dependent relationship, Sullivan-Dunbar notes, “When we determine the good for others, this understanding of ‘good’ must be objectively defensible.”¹²⁵ In Nancy’s case, to advance the safety of this person requires coordination with family members outside the hospital.

However, this objective dimension also ought to include the patient as an active participant in decision-making. Sullivan-Dunbar continues, judging the good for another “should also be shaped through dialogue, attentive observation, negotiation, and prioritization with the care recipient about the content of care.”¹²⁶ In fact, a review of qualitative studies of involuntary mental health patients (who comprise a portion of the patients that Nancy works with) finds that those patients who receive appropriate information about their treatment and opportunities to provide input and even contest it report that this contributed to their recovery and empowerment.¹²⁷ Thus, rather than opposing care and respect, the two must be held together, in Margaret Farley’s words, as

¹²³ Weinberg and Campbell, “From Codes to Contextual Collaborations,” 38.

¹²⁴ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 77.

¹²⁵ Sullivan-Dunbar, *Human Dependency and Christian Ethics*, 28.

¹²⁶ Sullivan-Dunbar, *Human Dependency and Christian Ethics*, 28.

¹²⁷ Marianne Wyder, et. al., “Personal Recovery and Involuntary Mental Health Admissions: The Importance of Control, Relationships, and Hope,” *Health 5.3A* (2013): 574-581.

“mutually illuminating”¹²⁸: “only if they are integrated, each requiring the other, will their full meaning be conceptually clear and practically useful in moral discernment.”¹²⁹

Nancy’s discernments, however, include more than her patients: they unfold within a complex landscape of political contestation. Insurance companies, partner agencies, hospital policies, government regulation, doctors, and nurses all vie to determine her patients’ wellbeing. Standard liberal discussions of paternalism miss this dimension, by focusing only on the dyadic interaction between a potential paternalist and a target. As Nancy makes clear, she acts within a broader institutional setting and social network.¹³⁰ For example, insurance companies press for early discharges, and hospital policy restricts the sorts of medicine she can arrange. Thus, we meet another kind of limit: external constraints that impinge Nancy from caring for her patients. Christian ethicist Sandra Sullivan-Dunbar summarizes this insight: “caregivers do their work within unjust social, political, and economic structures, and their relative privilege or marginalization within these structures profoundly affects their capacity to meet their caring obligations.”¹³¹ Notably, these limits diverge from those cultivated by Martha and Laura as a safeguard against the misuse of their power.

¹²⁸ Farley, *Compassionate Respect*, 42.

¹²⁹ Farley, *Compassionate Respect*, 4. Numerous other philosophers and Christian ethicists insist on weaving this dichotomy (variously framed) together. For example, in *Politics and the Order of Love*, Eric Gregory insists that “[love and justice] serve together in the process of moral judgment even as they are distinct capacities of our moral personalities” (176). Analogous is MacIntyre’s discussion of justice and generosity in *Dependent Rational Animals* (120-122) or Wolterstorff on love and justice in *Justice in Love*, especially the Introduction and Chapter 9.

¹³⁰ John Christman, “Relational Autonomy and the Social Dynamics of Paternalism,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 17 (2014), 371.

¹³¹ Sullivan-Dunbar, *Human Dependency and Christian Ethics*, 4.

Given Nancy's description of the hospital hierarchy, we might identify social workers as among "the petty empowered," borrowing a phrase from anthropologist George Marcus.¹³² Overbearing doctors question Nancy's judgments and inhibit her from providing the care that she determines is best. As Nancy explains, social workers are "not looked upon very highly by most other professions." To defend the patient's assessment of what they need, Nancy must also defend the credibility of her profession to the "real professionals."¹³³ Social workers thus inhabit an ambivalent middle ground: they are not the elite who bear power without accountability, nor are they disempowered, as their actions have profound effects on individual, families, and communities. As noted in the Introduction, their location within social service provision means that they are, in Marcus' words, "complexly entwined and complicit with major structures of power."¹³⁴ They bear disproportionate power over service-users, *and* their action is constrained by other professionals, bureaucratic procedures, and insurance companies.¹³⁵

As Nancy notes, these constraints sometimes impede her from caring for her patients in the way she judges to be appropriate. Policy prevents her from securing

¹³² George Marcus, "Introduction," in *Para-Sites: A Casebook against Cynical Reason*, edited by George Marcus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 3.

¹³³ As Michael Walzer notes, needs are cultural forms, socially recognized and political contested. *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 66-79. Moreover, needs must first be interpreted before they can be satisfied. See also Nancy Fraser, "Women, Welfare, and the Politics of Need Interpretation," *Thesis Eleven* 17.1 (1987), 88-106.

¹³⁴ Marcus, "Introduction," 7.

¹³⁵ A crucial feature of Nancy's power is to be what Dzur in *Democratic Professionalism* calls a "bridge agent," positioned between the complex institution of the hospital and her patients (3). Situated as an intermediary, she has the power to advance or minimize her patients' assessments what they need in the ensuing negotiations. Dzur explains that bridge agents possess "the power to distract, encourage, limit and inform democratic deliberation" (9-10).

insulin, and insurance companies press for premature discharge, even though she has yet to find them housing. In these situations, she expresses emotional pain: “This is horrible. I hate this.” In fact, this is what she “dislike[s]” about the job most: “not having what we need to really set people up for success.” A gap opens between Nancy’s aspirations for practice and what is feasible within her particular institutional context. Instead of limiting her action to avoid paternalist interference, here Nancy regrets that she cannot do more.

Within nursing practice, there is a term for this experience: moral distress. Coined by bioethicist Andrew Jameton in 1984, moral distress names “when one knows the right thing to do, but institutional constraints make it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action.”¹³⁶ In the face of such blockages, caregivers feel relatively powerless.¹³⁷ Anthropologist and former social worker Merlinda Weinberg advocates the adoption of this concept for social work, as it recognizes both the institutional obstacles that inhibit practitioners from ethical practice and the “emotional price that workers pay when failure occurs.”¹³⁸ Nancy’s turmoil at being unable to ensure appropriate care fits with Weinberg’s insistence that “shortfalls in resources are moral issues for

¹³⁶ Andrew Jameton, *Nursing Practices: The Ethical Issues* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 6, cited in Merlinda Weinberg, “Moral Distress: A Missing but Relevant Concept for Ethics in Social Work,” *Canadian Social Work Review* 26.2 (2009), 141.

¹³⁷ Jameton, *Nursing Practices*, 54, cited in Weinberg, “Moral Distress,” 141.

¹³⁸ Weinberg, “Moral Distress,” 148.

practitioners.”¹³⁹ Moral distress then provides an analytical tool that corrects the field’s general inattention to the social causes of failures in care and worker burnout.¹⁴⁰

The gap between social workers’ aspirations for their work and their actual ability to do good brings us to our final portrait. Prayer emerges once again as a mode of reckoning with the failures of care and the limits of human action.

6. Moral Binds, Failure, & Prayer

I weave my way through cubicles before I find Jamie Carlston (31, African American, AME Zion). After exchanging a greeting, we relocate to her supervisor’s enclosed office, so we can talk without disrupting her colleagues. Jamie is wearing a white summer dress, punctuated with yellow flowers and covered by a black cardigan. Nine years before, she received her Bachelor’s in Social Work. Having grown up with a mother who was a social worker, Jamie tells me, “I feel like I’ve been doing social work my whole life.” After graduating, she spent five years working in juvenile delinquency prevention and then community advocacy work. She then completed a dual MDiv/MSW degree, was ordained in the AME Zion church, and continues her work in youth advocacy. Now a program manager at a nonprofit organization, she supports young people to pioneer “community-based solutions” within a Racial Equity framework.

¹³⁹ Weinberg, “Moral Distress,” 148.

¹⁴⁰ Weinberg, “Moral Distress,” 140. As Weinberg and Campbell note, a reliance on professional codes reduces the realm of the ethical to the worker-client dyad, while “de-emphasiz[ing] the broader systematic problems.” “From Codes to Contextual Collaborations,” 46.

Her first social work internship was as a case manager in the juvenile justice system, in delinquency prevention. “Day in and day out” for a year, she made recommendations to judges about whether minors should be sent home or to a detention center, and the length of that stay. “Playing judge and jury of someone else’s life,” Jamie recalls, was “extremely hard.” There was minimal consideration for the youth’s preference, she lamented. They “never really got a voice in any of the decision.” She would tell a young person, “I did this in your best interest,” and they would “rebel” and respond, “I don’t care,” or “I’m going to live my life.” Moreover, she felt caught between two bad options: “do I play into mass incarceration...or do I send them to a dysfunctional home,” with uncertain access to food or safety?

Supervisors helped her “become objective” in her decision-making, rather than “being led emotionally in that moment.” Many of her young clients knew

how to manipulate the emotions of their case manager...they would cry on the stand or beg and plead for you not to do this or to do that, for their own interest. And then a week later, they’re back in your office, and you’re like, did I make the right decision? Did I make the wrong decision? Because you’re right back here, and now I have to send you to the detention center, because I took this chance [with a previous recommendation to send them home]...and now you’ve done something that has you right back in front of the judge.

This happened frequently, she recalls. She would send a youth home, and “a week later, they’re back in your office” with another offence.

Despite it being over nine years ago, she still remembers one instance in particular. In this case, she recommended for a young woman to be sent home instead of to a juvenile detention center. “She ended up being raped, and became pregnant,” Jamie told me,

that was really hard for me, and really stuck with me, that I still think about. If I would have recommended a group home or a detention center, would that have

been the outcome for her life? And did I make a wrong decision in that moment of saying she needs to be home with her mom, you know? So that was hard. Really, really, really hard. And I still think about it.

Jamie remains uncertain about whether she made the right judgment for this young woman.

Over time, Jamie began to question whether her work was “really fixing the problem” or just “putting band aids on it.” Thinking back over her various roles, she came to suspect that much of social work was “not necessarily to change anything” but only to help “people stay comfortable in a system that is going to continue to abuse them, continue to marginalize them.” She could provide referrals – to trainings and community education – but despite this, she kept “seeing the same things over and over again.” Moreover, as a Black woman, she would see “the same people come across my desk,” and “all of them for the most part look like me,” affected by “years of systematic oppression.” Paraphrasing James Baldwin, she observes, “to be Black in America is always to be in a state of rage.” And to be in social work, “it just becomes a whole other level.” Burnout and her persistent questions (“How do I fix this? What do I do?”) led her to leave direct practice for advocacy work and policy change, although still as a social worker. This shift has relieved some of her frustration and exhaustion. She no longer is “giving people solutions” but “helping people understand the root causes” through education.

Social workers persistently fail to realize their aspirations for the work, Jamie thinks.

We put on our superwomen cloaks and we're like, today, I'm going to fix everything and I'm going to save everybody. And I'm going to make all things right in the world today. And then we go out here with the best intentions and the biggest hearts, and we come home crushed every day, because we didn't save

everybody. And we didn't fix everyone and the whole world is just as a messed up as when I woke up this morning and watched the news.

Jamie acknowledges both the heroic efforts and excessive aims of social workers.

“Fixing everything” and “saving everybody” surpass what is humanly possible. And this failure exacts an emotional toll. It leads Jamie to doubt herself and her vocation: “when success doesn't happen, you can lose yourself: am I really called to this? Should I really be a social worker?”

Jamie responds to her own overreaching benevolence and ensuing failure with prayer. She tells me,

prayer just reminds me that there is a higher power that is present and that is at work and that it's not my job to fix the world. I am not the savior of this world...Prayer really just helps me to understand that I am a part of the solution. I'm not the solution. But I am working in relationship with a God that is, that knows the answer to every question. That can see in ways that I can't see. That can move in ways that I can't move. That can do things that I cannot do. But that is equipping me every day to get up and be like, 'You know what, I may fail today, I may not get to see all of my clients. I may make the wrong decision that will ruin someone's life. But knowing that if I do, if I do not xyz, that there is a God that can make it all right.'

Prayer, Jamie concludes, “grounds me back in my weakness and in my humanity.” She asks God to remind her of her “identity,” so she does not “lose that feeling of who you are and start to feel like I'm the savior.” It also provides the avenue for asking God for wisdom: “I'm *always* praying for wisdom,” she explains, especially “to give me the wisdom on how to navigate these systems of racism or oppression.”

Jamie brings into focus the moral binds of care, its ensuing failures, and a turn to prayer at care's limits. In her juvenile delinquency prevention work, she aspires to advance the wellbeing of youth, but on most days, she finds herself stuck between two bad or at least uncertain options. On the one hand, if she recommends that the judge send

a young person to a detention center, she contributes to mass incarceration. On the other hand, recommending that they be sent home often entails the dangers of poverty, substance abuse, and neglect. Despite her best efforts to weigh the options and decide in her client's best interests, unintended harm is often unavoidable, only too painfully illustrated by the story of the young woman who is raped upon her return home.

Operating within a world of damaged systems and people, tragic choices add a further dimension to the weight of deciding another's good. Sometimes there is no good to be had, or that good is marred and obscure. Weinberg calls this feature of social work ethical trespass: "workers can never fully predict the outcomes of their decisions...Uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity underlie all actions in the field. Practitioners can only choose among an array of less than perfect options, knowing that they cannot get it 'right,' only better or worse."¹⁴¹ Jamie could not have predicted that her young client would be the victim of terrible violence as the outcome of her recommendation. But the other option was similarly shadowed: neither does a detention center or group home provide a guarantee of safety. While moral distress (introduced at the end of Section 5) names those occasions when a worker knows the right course of action but is impeded by institutional constraints, here in the case of ethical trespass, there is no right option. As Weinberg explains, "regardless of what stance an individual practitioner takes, both good and harm will follow."¹⁴² Regardless of their intentions, the social worker's *participation* in the social processes of care (and in this case, the juvenile

¹⁴¹ Weinberg, "Paradox and Trespass," 15.

¹⁴² Weinberg, "Moral Distress," 147.

justice system) makes this so.¹⁴³ Or as Jamie implies, there is no good way to be “judge and jury of someone else’s life.”

To manage this tragic dimension of the work, Weinberg proposes a list of virtues, although she does not use this language. Humility, bravery, self-compassion, forbearance, “an awareness of one’s failures,” and critical self-reflexivity all name dispositions necessary for surviving the emotional turmoil of watching how one’s best efforts at caring for others disintegrate into harm.¹⁴⁴ Weinberg insists that critical self-reflection extends not only to the practitioner as a moral agent but also to the profession and its assumptions.¹⁴⁵ Redirecting or limiting the use of social-worker power through advocacy and activist stances, as well as dissident speech, all provide modes for “problematizing the helping relationship” and considering not only the client but larger structures at play.¹⁴⁶ Thus, when facing moral tragedy, Weinberg agrees with Hauerwas: the virtues and particular visions of the good guide the agent.¹⁴⁷

Jamie too identifies a number of these dispositions, acquired to manage the failures integral to her work. She embraces a posture of critical self-reflexivity by expressing her growing dissatisfaction with direct practice. After several years in the field, she begins to suspect that she is keeping people “comfortable in a system that is

¹⁴³ Weinberg draws the concept of ethical trespass from M. A. Orlie: “harmful effects...inevitably follow not from our intentions and malevolence but from our participation in social processes and identities,” *Living Ethically, Acting Politically* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 5.

¹⁴⁴ I combine here Weinberg’s proposal for responding to both moral distress and ethical trespass found in “Moral Distress,” 148 and “Paradox and Trespass,” 15-16 respectively.

¹⁴⁵ Weinberg, “Paradox and Trespass,” 16.

¹⁴⁶ Weinberg, “Paradox and Trespass,” 15-16. e

¹⁴⁷ Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 22.

going to continue to abuse them.” This leads her to redirect her attention to policy change. Alongside adopting an advocacy approach, she also notes her failures and her ongoing need for humility. This recognition parallels Laura’s struggles with pride in Section 3.

Jamie adds a further virtue that Weinberg does not include in her list: a prayerful confession of her need for God. Joining Laura, Jamie introduces us to the themes considered most fully in Chapter Four. She asks God for divine assistance to become a certain type of person: a person who can wisely navigate wicked systems and do it humbly. She also understands that the act of praying itself also produces qualities of responsiveness. Prayer grounds her in her “weakness” by acknowledging again and again that she is not the savior. Prayer breaks her addiction to success and messianic illusions, as well as the corresponding temptation to despair of her vocation every time she fails. It allows her to continue the work, not as a “superwoman” but as a finite and fallen human creature. Prayer attunes Jamie to the reality of her limits in the work of loving neighbors professionally.

As Jamie describes her praying, she also coordinates her action with God’s. Her responsibility is only partial; she is “not the solution” but “work[s] in relationship with a God that is.” Moreover, acknowledging her limits does not mean that she abandons her work. Rather, she proceeds in a new way: galvanized and humble. She knows that even her best judgments are, in O’Donovan’s words, “merely interim, waiting for the judgment that is to come.”¹⁴⁸ Although she would like to accomplish so much more, she cannot.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ O’Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 238.

This understanding allows even her failures to be cast in a new light. Jamie looks with hope to divine rectification: God “can make it all right.” This confession fits with O’Donovan’s observation: “In seeing and naming failures the conscience opens them to the redemptive work of God who forgives sin and brings good out of the evil we have done.”¹⁵⁰ Jamie also includes those evils that she has not done but works within: God’s redemption reaches even into the depths of mass incarceration and systemic racism. Thus, Jamie holds onto hope in divine care, even as she grapples with failures that are both structural and her own.

Conclusion

Drawn into the work as a response to God’s command, my participants have to work out what loving neighbors looks like within the landscape of social service delivery. Divine summons begins the work but does not negate the need for human discernment. As Augustine notes at the opening of this chapter, to do good to a neighbor and avoid injuring her requires “great understanding and prudence.”¹⁵¹ Over time, through trial-

¹⁴⁹ In *Ways of Judgment*, O’Donovan notes, “Our judgment is never more truthful in its correspondence to God’s judgment than when it acknowledges its own severely limited capacity for truth” (22). Human judgment is not and cannot be final. “How much more we should like to accomplish... We can do none of this. We can only watch the sin of Cain repeat itself, and only, as it were, repeat the murderer’s crime back to him, responding to force with force” (28-29); “Human action is always subject to limits that make it fall short of its intellectual conception, and the action of political authorities, despite the illusion of being able to transcend limits, is peculiarly subject to them” (29).

¹⁵⁰ Oliver O’Donovan, *Entering into Rest: Ethics as Theology 3* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017), 85.

¹⁵¹ Augustine, *The Catholic & Manichaeian Ways of Life*, 1.26.51.

and-error and the gift of wise supervision, social workers learn how to enhance recipients' agency through appropriate support. The moral quality of this care unfolds within a myriad of considerations: disproportionate professional power, institutional pressures, consultations with recipients, supervisors, coworkers, and the social workers' own character.

Throughout these negotiations, my participants discover the appropriate limits of moral agency. Paternalism names the moral hazard of overstepping within the professional helping relationship. Although aimed at the recipient's good, it ultimately damages them through undercutting their ability to decide and act. However, the temptation to fix, control, and save is perennial given disproportionate professional power and human pride. Thus, as my participants grapple with their fragile efforts at care, they interrogate their actions: Is this appropriately empowering? Am I overstepping my powers? Are these conditions sufficient to justify interference? Or have I slipped into paternalism? At their best, they test their motivations and interpret the particulars of the situation, relying upon a practical know-how garnered over time. This is a profoundly difficult moral task. Thus, even when they offer their best judgment on what care looks in these particulars, they may still get it wrong.

Finally, some participants discern their own limits by turning to God for assistance. While these themes emerge only briefly here – in Laura and Jamie's portraits – they point towards a pattern throughout my interviews, which will crescendo in Chapter Four. As Laura and Jamie suggest, in prayer, they reckon with their moral failure and look to God to transform it. Prayer also grounds them in what they can do and, crucially, in what they cannot. In asking God to humble them and guide them, prayer attunes the

social worker to what she is: a fellow traveler also in need of ongoing help. Thus, prayer suggests an antidote to paternalist interference through reminding the social worker that she too is *human*. Fixing, controlling, and saving exceed her mandate, and she must care within her limits. Before we take up prayer at length, however, we turn to a further moral hazard integral to social work: exhaustion.

CHAPTER THREE: Exhaustion

“Social workers know that genuine social service is nothing soft-handed and perfumed. It is exhausting, baffling, dirty work...It loads them up with the troubles of others, and they bear their griefs and carry their sorrows like the one who was ‘a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.’”¹

We met Maria Zacarias (26, Latina, nondenominational) in Chapter One. “God gave me this heart, and God gave me these gifts, and God called me to do this,” she told us, explaining why she became a social worker. For three years, Maria has worked first as a case manager for unaccompanied minors and now at a mental health clinic for immigrant and refugee communities. While she understands her work as “being the hands and feet of Jesus,” it is also “very exhausting, especially working with cases that have very high needs. I mean, physically, mentally, emotionally exhausting.”

Maria’s first social work job was working as a case manager for unaccompanied minors. In this role, Maria regularly listened to young girls’ stories of crossing the border, which often included sexual violence. “That hits me hard,” she remembers, and yet,

You don’t know what to do with those emotions, and then the next day you’re required to put in again so many hours and do all these reports and case notes, and things that you have to do, and answer calls, and still be okay when talking to other people, but you have this in the back of your mind, and it’s hard to process that. A lot of times, you’re just pushed as a social worker to just ‘Okay, forget about it for now.’ You have to keep on working – there are all these other clients waiting for you. And not leaving enough time to process things – just makes you burnout.

After attending to others’ trauma, Maria laments the endless pressures which prevent her from reflecting on her own emotional responses. The administrative responsibilities and

¹ Walter Rauschenbusch, “Unto Me,” (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1912), 26.

the ongoing queue for more services continues, leaving little time for grief. Hearing reports of sexual violence also bleeds into her life outside of work: “it’s hard to let go of that and step into your personal life...it’s hard to just turn it off sometimes.”

The urgent nature of supporting undocumented children in detention centers also multiplies these demands. She tells me that the timeliness of her reports could accelerate or delay a child’s release. This produces

that weight, pressure of, ‘If I send this today, then that child will probably leave next week, but if I send that at the end of the week, then that child will probably stay an extra week.’ And that’s a huge thing for them, because a lot of time they’re being retraumatized in the detention center. So, with that, I will stay until midnight writing reports...so it can be very exhausting and very, very tiring.

The weight of being a gatekeeper for another’s departure from a detention center presses upon her, and she exerts herself many hours into the evening without additional pay.

However, she will have to get up and do it again the next day, because there are many more children sitting in detention centers or in her office sharing their border-crossing traumas. The need seems infinite, while Maria is not.

Like Maria, most social workers in the United States find their jobs to be “physically, mentally, emotionally exhausting.” In my interviews, I found that sixty percent report periods of burnout, and forty percent have experienced compassion fatigue. Recent quantitative studies suggest even higher rates, with three quarters of social workers having burned out at some point in their career, and half experiencing “high” or “very high” levels of compassion fatigue.²

² Darcy Clay Seibert, “Personal and Occupational Factors in Burnout Among Practicing Social Workers: Implications for Researchers, Practitioners, and Managers,” *Journal of Social Service Research* 32.2 (2005), 25-44; David Conrad and Yvonne Kellar-Guenther, “Compassion Fatigue,

Fifty years ago, compassion fatigue and burnout entered our vocabulary, as efforts to identify a phenomenon among people working in human services. Since then, the terms have gained traction and popularity.³ In this chapter, I take these two terms as entry points into the exhaustion that comes from responding to human need that does not end.⁴ Like paternalism, this exhaustion arises within the landscape of social service delivery, exacerbated by chronic underfunding, bureaucratic demands, and concentrated exposure to social suffering.

Here again, my participants work with God's call to love neighbors in the background, and yet, given the conditions of the work, they frequently come up short. All too often, care becomes an impossible task as human need outpaces their ability to respond. Exhaustion names this accumulation of failure, with despair threatening to further undermine their ability to act. To stave off this collapse and persevere in the work, social workers search out their limits in advance. Periodic withdrawals from the work, mediated by professional boundaries and self-care, offer some degree of protection, but as my participants will tell us, these are rife with moral ambivalence. Thus, a gap

Burnout, and Compassion Satisfaction among Colorado Child Protection Workers," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 30 (2006): 1071-1080.

³ For example, Anne Helen Peterson's *Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020) illustrates the contemporary salience of the concept. *Times Magazine* includes Peterson's book on its Top 100 books of 2020, see <https://time.com/collection/must-read-books-2020/5904394/cant-even/>.

⁴ While I am focused here on the exhaustion peculiar to caregiving, there are many other forms and causes of exhaustion, such as that arising from poverty, racism, or manual labor. For a discussion of the exhaustion of poverty, see Linda Tirado, *Hand to Mouth: Living in Bootstrap America* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2014), especially Chapter 4: "I'm Not So Much Angry as I'm Really Tired."

emerges between their commitment to care, buttressed by God's command, and their limited capacities to do so. In this painful disjuncture, many of my participants look to God. In prayer, they confess their inability to do what God has asked them to do, and they ask God for help in loving their neighbors professionally. The moral hazards of exhaustion then, like paternalism, tutors social workers in the limits of their moral agency.

The chapter is organized in six sections, oriented again around portraits of social workers. I begin with surveying burnout and compassion fatigue's main features, and then I draw upon the concept of despair and the impossibility of social work's task to tease out exhaustion's moral significance. Next, I consider exhaustion's causes and remedies and then examine the moral failure requisite in properly attuning to others' suffering. Given the boundless character of human need and its endless demands, I subsequently outline an ensuing moral gap, in which God's command to love neighbors outpaces human capacities. The final section considers how God's call galvanizes the social worker to remain in her work, and how repeated failure leads to a recognition of dependency on God, expressed particularly in prayer.

1. Compassion Fatigue & Burnout Considered

I am seated in Amy Anderson's office at a community center for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. She is a 29-year-old white Episcopalian who has practiced social work for the last eight years. She tells me, "There's all these things that social workers do: food, housing, shelter, mental health, addiction – it can be everything, because we live in such an unjust world." Amy sighs deeply. As the clinical director, much of her work is "tending to crises and trauma." She trains staff, orients new

participants, supports caregivers, keeps records, and assists with what “in the social work world...would be called behavioral challenges.”

Eight years ago, with a BA in Social Work, Amy started her first social work job, working at a day center for homeless and low-income women and also at a church with a food bank and inclement weather shelter. “I felt called to be located near the poor, as an overarching Christian vocation and then particularly for me,” Amy remembers. Later, after completing a dual MDiv/MSW program, she then worked in crisis response for people with disabilities. In that work, “everything’s an emergency,” Amy explains. This included responding to a crisis line, visiting service-users anytime they were admitted to a hospital across twenty-five different counties. This meant

walking into situations where you have no idea of what the situation is except they hurt someone or hurt themselves. You just have no idea. And it’s not sustainable. It’s a non-sustainable job. And you know that. All of us who are working there were grounded people; we loved each other; we had a good community in the agency. So we would try and remind each other, ‘Take time for yourself and self-care and blah, blah, whatever.’ But it was impossible.”

The challenge of social work, Amy continues, is “it’s a pretty skewed scale, because you’re seeing hundreds – for some agencies, even thousands – of people every day who have no end of suffering and no end of ways that you can help them.” Of course, the job is not lucrative, she continues, which means that people have to have “some level of passion to do it, so even within your passion to do it, you’re constantly having to think about, ‘Is this going to be too much?’ And trying to pull back.” “Strict boundary policies” help with that: they “help sustain people for a long time to be in this role, because it’s just so skewed.”

One story from Amy’s previous job continues to “haunt” her. A man named Robby stayed at the crisis center for a period of respite; he was on her caseload. After he

left, a pair of eye glasses turned up, but no one knew whose they were. A week later, a person from Robby's group home called: they were Robby's glasses, and they arranged to come pick them up. But no one came, Amy explains. "The glasses were just sitting on the coffee table for months and months." Every time she saw them, she thought to herself, "I should follow-up." Robby does not use words to communicate, Amy continues, "Most of what he does is uses pictures, which means eye glasses are even more important to him than most people. He lives in a group home which means everything goes slower; he can't just run out and get a new pair of glasses. That just haunts me; I could have figured it out." She was not, however, able to summon the energy:

everything's an emergency, I'm just running around all over the place...you're serving fifty other people who are cutting themselves and punching other people in the face...you're just emotionally wrecked all day, every day. So even just the thought of calling his mom, who wasn't a very easy person to talk to, was just too much for me. But I always regret doing that.

I ask Amy if she had ever experienced burnout or compassion fatigue. Yes, both, she says. She once read an article on the differences between the two terms: "It was somewhat helpful; I don't remember it now." Moreover, that very morning, in fact, she was reflecting to herself, "I think I'm in a period of compassion fatigue." She knows this is happening when "I'm just annoyed by people's needs, and that has happened to me a lot." She has been working at home this week, she continued,

I just need space. I don't need time off necessarily. I just need space from people's needs. That would be the difference between burnout and compassion fatigue. I feel all kinds of energy to finish the calendars and curriculums and all of that. But if Daytona [a program participant] texts me one more time, I'm going to lose it.

Amy attributes compassion fatigue as arising from her own mental health, and her struggle with saying ‘no’ to people’s needs. Otherwise, “People keep taking and taking and taking.”

Burnout, in contrast, looks slightly different for Amy: “there’s days where I just really can’t get out of bed; you can’t do anything, can’t send an email.” She toggles off burnout’s causes: scarce resources, inadequate pay, “not having enough time to recover” from the emotional losses at work. Returning to her previous job in crisis work, it was “very important, but there was not a balance of joy and suffering. There was no balance. It was all suffering.”

In all thirty-five interviews, I asked my participants about compassion fatigue and burnout.⁵ I chose these terms not because I am certain that they represented clinically discrete categories, but I understood them to be entry points into the broad stream of physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion. Each participant appeared familiar with the terms. Several cited attending recent workshops or trainings or, like Amy, reading articles on the subject. One even ran her own workshops for various professional groups (“There’s so much interest in it right now – oh! People are hungry for it.”). Some spoke generally about exhaustion, like Maria; others like Amy drew distinctions between the two concepts.

For Amy, compassion fatigue names an interpersonal exhaustion: she is “going to lose it” if she receives any more texts from participants at the community center. She

⁵ I also asked about secondary trauma, but I have restricted my attention here to burnout and compassion fatigue, given the limits of this chapter.

struggles to say no, and so “people keep taking and taking and taking.” Her solution that week was to work from home to get “space from people’s needs.” She still has energy for administrative matters, however. In contrast, burnout describes a more extensive exhaustion. General functioning diminishes: she cannot get up, she cannot send emails, she is overwhelmed on all fronts. Suffering outweighs joy, and there is not enough program funding, pay, or staff support to hold it together.

Most of my participants agree with Amy that burnout encompasses all work pressures, while compassion fatigue is peculiar to interactions with service-users. About a quarter, however, reserve burnout for stress originating from strictly administrative or institutional sources. As we will see momentarily, this variability is reflected in the development of the two terms. What they always share, for my participants, however, is a litany of overlapping symptoms. These include disrupted sleep, illness, sadness, grief, weeping, disappointment, resentment, emotional numbing, dread for human interactions and work tasks, cynicism, bitterness, waning empathy for patients, conflict with coworkers, fantasies of escape, and quitting.⁶

The language of burnout first appeared in the United States in the mid-1970s.⁷ Psychologist Herbert Freudenberg published an article entitled “Staff Burn-Out” in 1974, followed two years later by another psychologist Christina Maslach’s “Burnout.”

⁶ One participant reported that over a forty-year career, she periodically quit her jobs every five to six years because of burnout. Another spoke of her fantasies of working at a department store. ‘Quitting’ fantasies also can be found in social work literature more broadly. As an example, see Annie Fahy, “The Unbearable Fatigue of Compassion: Notes from a Substance Abuse Counselor who Dreams of Working at Starbucks,” *Clinical Social Work* 35 (2007), 199-205.

⁷ For a discussion of burnout’s modern antecedents, including ‘stress’ and the ‘science of fatigue,’ see Anna Katharina Schaffner, *Exhaustion: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 202-213.

Working independently, both published extensively on the phenomenon among professionals in the human services in the following decades, joined quickly by others as the concept gained traction. According to Maslach, “Burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment among individuals who do ‘people work’ of some kind...the stress aris[ing] from the *social* interaction between helper and recipient.”⁸ Thus, burnout leads to the loss of capacity for emotional engagement with others and a corresponding reduction of interactions to what is merely required. After retreating into detachment, cynicism, and even callousness, practitioners often confess feelings of guilt and failure.⁹

Over time, the concept of burnout has become less tied to what Maslach calls “people work” and has expanded to any exhaustion resulting from a work-related source. In later publications, Maslach drops the helping relationship from her definition, focusing only on chronic exhaustion, cynicism and detachment, and feelings of ineffectiveness in any workplace.¹⁰ As Schaffner notes, burnout is “now recognized as a serious occupational health problem in most sectors,”¹¹ and some European countries include it

⁸ Christina Maslach, *Burnout: The Cost of Caring* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1982), 3.

⁹ Maslach, *Burnout*, 4-5.

¹⁰ Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter, *The Truth About Burnout: How Organizations Cause Personal Stress and What to Do About It* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), 17-18.

¹¹ Schaffner, *Exhaustion*, 214.

as an established medical diagnosis.¹² Moreover, while burnout's symptoms overlap with depression, it lacks the stigma, as it is increasingly attributed to organizational pressure.¹³

As burnout lost its original ties with "people work," compassion fatigue maintained this specification. The Oxford English Dictionary indicates that its usage began in the late 1960s to refer to "apathy or indifference towards the suffering of others or to charitable causes acting on their behalf, typically attributed to numbingly frequent appeals for assistance."¹⁴ In the early 1990s, however, it gained further specification within the helping professions, such that contemporary studies frequently attribute the term to nurse Carla Joinson¹⁵ or trauma therapist Charles Figley.¹⁶

In 1992, the magazine *Nursing* published Joinson's "Coping with Compassion Fatigue." Addressing nurses, it begins with the question: "Burned out and burned up – has caring for others made you too tired to care for yourself?" Joinson describes compassion fatigue as a form of burnout, particular to the "caregiving professions."¹⁷ Joinson observes, "Because your profession sets you up for compassion fatigue, you'll

¹² Schaffner, *Exhaustion*, 215-216.

¹³ Schaffner, *Exhaustion*, 216.

¹⁴ The Oxford English Dictionary lists its first use in 1968 by A. W. Farmer at the Lutheran World Federation, "You have been hearing and perhaps using, as I have, the phrase 'Compassion Fatigue.' We are just tired out with all the repeated appeals to do good."

¹⁵ Susan Ray, Carol Wong, Dawn White, and Kimberly Heaslip, "Compassion Satisfaction, Compassion Fatigue, Work Life Conditions, and Burnout among Frontline Mental Health Care Professionals," *Traumatology* 19.4 (2013), 255, in reference to Carla Joinson's article, "Coping with Compassion Fatigue," *Nursing* 22 (1992): 116-122.

¹⁶ C.D. Craig and G. Sprang, "Compassion Satisfaction, Compassion Fatigue, and Burnout in a National Sample of Trauma Treatment Therapists," *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping* 23.3 (2010), 320.

¹⁷ Joinson, "Coping with Compassion Fatigue," 116.

almost certainly experience it at some point in your career.”¹⁸ According to Joinson, it is “emotionally devastating,” characterized by “classic stress patterns”: physical exhaustion, illness, depression, anger, and emotional detachment from patients.¹⁹ She attributes its causes as twofold: driven by (what she calls) the “personalities” of caregivers and “outside sources.”²⁰ The first include nurses’ self-understanding as “nurturers” and idealistic expectations, while for the latter, Joinson identifies the “infinite” nature of human need, multiple professional functions, stressed colleagues, unrealistic administrative burdens, and caregiving responsibilities at home.²¹

While we will return to Joinson’s discussion of compassion fatigue’s causes in Section Three, for now, we simply note that her account resembles Maslach’s early description of burnout. Again, this mobile usage of the two terms over time fits with my participants’ descriptions and justifies my examining them together. Taken together, compassion fatigue and burnout indicate a withdrawal of moral agency. While paternalist fixing names its overexertion – overstepping the appropriate responsibilities of the social worker – exhaustion suggests agency’s retraction. The social worker cannot respond to human need; she cannot fulfill her profession’s mandate. When Amy is

¹⁸ Joinson, “Coping with Compassion Fatigue,” 119.

¹⁹ In “Coping with Compassion Fatigue,” Joinson illustrates with a contrasting portrait of two nurses. After Jackie’s favorite patient suddenly dies, she grieves and then talks to her pastor about “lingering feelings of helplessness and anger” (116). In contrast, Marian “stopped crying over patients long ago,” after earlier in her career “despair and frustration nearly drove her away from nursing”: “she knew she had to learn to control her feelings,” and she no longer gets emotionally involved (116). Joinson explains while both experience compassion fatigue, the first nurse deals with it in a healthy way, while the second ignores it and detaches herself from the work (119).

²⁰ Joinson, “Coping with Compassion Fatigue,” 116.

²¹ Joinson, “Coping with Compassion Fatigue,” 116, 118-119.

burned out, she cannot get out of bed, she cannot send an email, she cannot do anything. Or when she is experiencing compassion fatigue, she is unable to engage with the needs of program participants: if she receives one more text, she is “going to lose it.”

Exhaustion describes this retreat into passivity. The exhausted social worker fails to act, or if she does, she can offer only a truncated version, deflated of any vivifying spirit.

In this withdrawal of agency, exhaustion bears a resemblance to what literary theorist Sianne Ngai calls “ugly feelings.” These negative affects signal an agent’s decreasing power to act, indicating “ambivalent situations of suspended agency.”²² Through cataloguing irritation, anxiety, paranoia, and envy, Ngai suggests that such “ugly feelings” make visible the problems presented by obstructed agency.²³ Moreover, these “moments of conspicuous inactivity” act as “political allegories,” “charged with political meaning.”²⁴ As Ngai suggests, exhaustion can illuminate broader structural realities bearing down upon agents and their ability to act. While we consider those systemic features funding exhaustion in Section Three, we first deepen our analysis of exhaustion through considering its moral meaning.

2. Despair and the Moral Meaning of Exhaustion

I ring the front doorbell of a house where Nicole Parsons (30, mixed-race, multi-ethnic, Baptist) has her office. From inside, I hear a “Come on in!” and so make my way in, to find Nicole barefoot in yoga pants. She welcomes me into her office, painted dark

²² Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 1.

²³ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 3. Ngai does in fact address exhaustion and fatigue but as a feature of another emotion that she calls “stuplimity”: a combination of shock and exhaustion. See chapter 6.

²⁴ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 14, 3.

red, and her glasses fog up as we speak. After offering me tea, she hands me a pamphlet about her employing agency. “Propaganda,” she remarks with a smile. Nicole finished her MSW a year ago. This is her first official social work job, she explains, although she did plenty of internships before. Nicole’s focus is macro-social work: “asset-based community development and community organizing and advocacy work,” she tells me. “That’s just where my heart is.”

When called upon to explain social work to people, she tells them it is “loving your neighbor professionally” such that “people are cared for and have their needs met and can grow and thrive and flourish.” As a kid, Nicole hated social workers. Her mother was a refugee, and social workers treated her “horribly,” threatening to take Nicole into state custody. However, since age sixteen, Nicole has been volunteering in homeless shelters, helping with community programs, and writing grants. “I didn’t realize that was social work when I was doing it,” she recalls, but after that recognition, she “signed up to be a social worker.” She now works for a faith-based organization doing community education. This includes organizing a community garden, supporting small nonprofits to write grants, and facilitating a recent panel on police brutality and gender.

When I ask Nicole about challenges she faces in her work, she identifies not having enough time, resources, or pay “to get things done.” “All my friends who are social workers – macro or clinical – say there is not enough hours in the day.” She also cites compassion fatigue. She explains it this way: “You don’t have enough time or resources, and literally people’s lives are hanging in balance, so you want to give them what you have.”

During her first year of social work school, Nicole interned at an agency supporting refugees. Nicole recaps, “It was an incredibly painful experience. I don’t know if I can do that in a mental health capacity again... You just have to hold space and hold pain for somebody, and the systems are all against them, and they’re stuck, and there’s literally nothing you can do.” She lists off the obstacles facing refugees: language barriers, difficulty in finding work, trauma, threats, discrimination.

When she began to recoil from this work, she did not at first realize it was compassion fatigue.

It took me a long time to figure out what I was experiencing. I had the typical experiences – I didn’t want to go to work, I didn’t want to go knock on people’s doors, I didn’t want to sit and have tea in their homes, even though I love them deeply, because I didn’t want to sit and listen to more stories about people’s lives falling apart and their brother just got killed in such-and-such country.

Nicole’s accumulated grief finally erupted in a movie theater. She went with friends to what she thought was a science fiction movie, but it turned out to be a military film:

I cried through the whole movie and had a complete panic attack...the kids in that movie that got bombed, they were the names of kids from the same country that I work with...I had a lot of compassion fatigue. That really brought it out, and I was like, I can’t do this anymore.

After this, Nicole’s supervisor helped her “ease up” some of her work with people: “I did a little more paperwork for a while, and I wrote a handbook.” During that time, she also saw a therapist “to care for myself.” Nicole recalls, “My therapist was like, ‘It sounds like you have despair.’ And I was like, ‘Oh my God, my compassion fatigue has turned into despair.’ It’s still hard for me to work with the refugee community, because I don’t want to go to that place again.”

In her current job, Nicole has safeguards in place to prevent another encounter with despair. Her employer insists that she does not work outside of her hours: “if we’re

not paying you for it, don't do it." Nicole also meets with a coworker every week "to make sure we're not overextending ourselves... Those things help with compassion fatigue." She also has learned to tune into her own signals: "when I'm just too stressed out, and I can't handle it, and I need some rest, and my anxiety's high, and I'm about to burn out, I'm going to go for a walk." Other "outlets" for wellbeing include baking and checking in with other social workers to see "what they're going through."

Nicole's exhaustion accumulates over time as she tries but fails to adequately address the needs before her. Social workers Joan Berzoff and Elizabeth Kita's definition of compassion fatigue fit closely with Nicole's descriptions. She is "overwhelmed by the cumulative losses of her work."²⁵ The refugees whom Nicole works with are (in Berzoff and Kita's words) "entrenched in complex social problems, within systems that do not provide (or cannot provide) enough of what patients actually need," and thus, Nicole's best efforts cannot ameliorate "the persistent excess of suffering"²⁶ Thus, Nicole's therapist suggests, and Nicole agrees, that her "compassion fatigue has turned into despair." Repeatedly hearing refugees' stories of suffering and witnessing the overwhelming obstacles they face, Nicole begins to retreat, determining that she is unable to offer them any meaningful assistance.

²⁵ J. Berzoff and E. Kita, "Compassion Fatigue and Countertransference: Two Different Concepts," *Clinical Social Work* 38.3 (2010), 345.

²⁶ Berzoff and Kita, "Compassion Fatigue and Countertransference," 343-344. Berzoff and Kita define compassion fatigue as resulting from "the cumulative experience of caring for people who are suffering, and the personal experience of the persistent excess of suffering despite one's best efforts at ameliorating."

This descent into despair resembles Thomas Aquinas' analysis of the same topic. According to Thomas, despair considers a future good that is impossible to attain. This recognition of impossibility repulses a person, so that they withdraw their efforts.²⁷ The dynamics of despair stand in contrast with hope. For Thomas, hope also looks towards a future good that, while arduous, remains obtainable. Desire for this good aids action "by making it more intense."²⁸ The possibility of the good's realization energizes the pursuer. So too, we might guess that in the beginning of Nicole's work with refugee families, she aimed for their wellbeing. Hope for what is possible moves her to action. However, as she begins to reckon with profound systemic injustices, she falters. She begins to think that "there's literally nothing you can do," which then this becomes, "I can't do this anymore." Impossibility overwhelms her capacity for action, and as Thomas explains, "when hope is given up," Nicole is "drawn away from good works."²⁹

Thomas's account also resonates with the connection between compassion fatigue and despair, drawn by Nicole's therapist. Thomas too thinks that excessive sorrow leads to despair. The causal mechanism, in fact, is that overwhelming sorrow clouds one's ability to distinguish between an arduous or impossible good. When a person is "over downcast...this state of mind dominates his affections, [and thus] it seems to him that he

²⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Providence (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1981), I-II.40.1, 4. Hereafter *ST*.

²⁸ Aquinas, *ST* I-II.40.8.

²⁹ Aquinas, *ST* II-II.20.3. He cites a gloss on Proverbs 24:10: "*If thou lose hope being weary in the day of distress, thy strength shall be diminished, says: Nothing is more hateful than despair, for the man that has it loses his constancy both in the every day toils of this life, and, what is worse, in the battle of faith.*"

will never be able to rise to any good.”³⁰ That is, Nicole’s ability to determine whether or not wellbeing is possible for refugee families is compromised by overwhelming sorrow at their current suffering. This oppressive sorrow renders action impossible and births despair.

Drawing upon the wisdom of the desert, Thomas identifies this sorrow as sloth. It “so weighs upon man’s mind, that he wants to do nothing...Hence sloth implies a certain weariness of work.”³¹ While moderate sorrow for evil is appropriate and praiseworthy, on the other hand, immoderate sorrow is not, Thomas insists, especially when “it so oppresses man as to draw him away entirely from good works.”³² The excessive sorrow of sloth, then, paralyzes a person, rendering her immobile and tempting her to abandon her vocation.³³ Nicole begins with a commitment to loving her neighbor professionally,

³⁰ Aquinas, *ST II-II.20.4*. The full citation reads as follows: “the fact that a man deems an arduous good impossible to obtain, either by himself or by another, is due to his being over downcast, because when this state of mind dominates his affections, it seems to him that he will never be able to rise to any good. And since sloth is a sadness that cast down the spirit, in this way despair is born of sloth.” Moreover, Aquinas continues, “those who are sorrowful fall the more easily into despair.” He cites 2 Corinthians 2:7: “*Lest...such an one be swallowed up by overmuch sorrow.*” Finally, “a man who is full of sorrow does not easily think of great and joyful things, but only of sad things, unless by a great effort he turn his thoughts away from sadness.”

³¹ Aquinas, *ST II-II.35.1*.

³² Aquinas, *ST II-II.35.1*. Thomas’ specifies sloth to be about some spiritual good, but I think my use of it here regarding neighbor love is defensible, insofar as this love is referred to God.

³³ According to David Elliot, “Sloth is one of the most complex moral concepts in the tradition.” *Hope and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 69. In her history on the concept, Rebecca Konynduk DeYoung explains, “[Sloth] is a serious vice because one’s entire commitment to one’s life to God is at stake; sloth essentially concerns one’s fundamental commitment to one’s spiritual identity and vocation.” “Sloth: Some Historical Reflections on Laziness, Effort, and Resistance to the Demands of Love,” 179, in *Virtues and their Vices*, ed. Kevin Timpe and Craig A. Boyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). See also Seigfried Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Chapel Hill: University Press, 1967).

and oppressive sorrow causes her to withdraw from those neighbors. Even several years later, she remains hesitant to engage with refugees again, because she doesn't "want to go to that place [of despair] again." Existential and agentic paralysis threatens.

Another dimension of Thomas's account of despair also bears bringing out in relation to Nicole's story. At the time of Nicole's work with refugees, she is young and only in her first year of social work school. Thomas predicts what follows: youth tend to be hopeful, he writes, because they "have not suffered defeat, nor had experience of obstacles to their efforts" and thus "are prone to count a thing possible to them."³⁴ And when experience teaches them otherwise, hope evaporates quickly. Indeed, quantitative studies consistently show that younger social workers have the highest rates of burnout.³⁵ Thus, in addition to oppressive sorrow, youthful inexperience can also hinder accurate judgment on the possibility of realizing a future good.

For Thomas, determining which future good is impossible and which is merely arduous hinges upon good judgment. Knowing the difference only comes through hard-won experience.³⁶ Like social workers distinguishing between paternalism and justified-interference-as-care in Chapter Two, here again so much depends on the particulars. It is difficult to say whether Nicole's judgment regarding refugee wellbeing was correct such that despairing withdrawal was an appropriate response, or if inexperience or oppressive sorrow distorted her assessment and thus her ability to sustain engagement. Regardless,

³⁴ Aquinas, *ST I-II.40.6*.

³⁵ Robert H. Schwartz, et. al., "Social Worker Hope & Perceived Burnout: the Effects of Age, Years in Practice, and Setting" *Administration in Social Work* 31.4 (2007), 103-119.

³⁶ As Thomas explains, experience offers "the knowledge which would help one to judge truly a thing to be impossible." *ST I-II.40.5*.

in her current role, she relies upon others' help to make these distinctions. Her employer limits her work to within set hours, and a coworker checks in weekly to make sure she is "not overextending" herself. She has moderated her action to fit with her revised judgment of what is possible. New boundaries of engagement follow.

From our discussion in Chapter Two, we might also add that sometimes social workers aim at a good that rightly exceeds not only their appropriate role but also their abilities. For example, trying to fix service-users through paternalist interference or control the outcomes of an intervention aims beyond what is possible. One social worker shares this very observation, again connecting it to youthful zeal:

the social workers who were twenty-six-ish and had just come out of school, they felt like they could save the clients, the patients. There was just this real visceral reaction to injustice, like it was on us to fix the problem. And it was a weight that would be carried that cause extreme burnout really quick...However, we can't save anyone. We can only help as best we can.

Aiming at saving people is not only an inappropriate goal for social workers, but it also quickly overwhelms human capacities. "Extreme burnout" ensues. Expectations of what is possible need to be adjusted, this social worker claims. Yet the fervor of youth does not know this, until the weight of such ideals and the paucity of results crush them.

Other qualitative research on social workers has also found this connection between despair and the impossibility of social work's task. In *The Weight of the World*, Pierre Bourdieu records an 1991 interview with a French social worker, entitled "Impossible Mission."³⁷ In his introduction, Bourdieu describes the "abdication of the

³⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, et. al. *Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, translated by Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 189.

state,” which has abandoned social workers and other minor civil servants “in their efforts to deal with the material and moral suffering” produced by current economic policy. They face persistent “contradictions between the often endless missions entrusted to them, especially in matters of jobs and housing, and the invariably paltry means granted to them.”³⁸ The “most dramatic of all” contradictions, however, is the dashing of their aspirations that are in the end unrealizable. The present schooling system, in particular, has prepared them to hope for a life that is not possible.³⁹

Anthropologist Paul Brodwin too, in his ethnographic study of frontline mental health workers, insists that they face “a near impossible task.”⁴⁰ In their charge of “safeguard[ing] their client’s lives,” they assume a “limitless obligation for people with decades of homelessness, debilitating symptoms, and long histories of imprisonment and hospitalization,” all in the context of “the massive social abandonment of the destitute sick.”⁴¹ Brodwin concludes the first chapter by observing, “If they shoulder a crushing ethical burden, it is because we [as a society] have placed it there. Their expressions of bewilderment and despair should come as no surprise.”⁴²

In two different countries, twenty years apart, Bourdieu and Brodwin insist that state and market forces collude to ensure that social workers’ tasks are far too demanding and available resources much too small. Bourdieu and Brodwin attribute the

³⁸ Bourdieu, *Weight of the World*, 184.

³⁹ Bourdieu, *Weight of the World*, 184.

⁴⁰ Paul Brodwin, *Everyday Ethics: Voices from the Front Line of Community Psychiatry* (Berkeley, University of California, 2013), 1.

⁴¹ Brodwin, *Everyday Ethics*, 1, 3.

⁴² Brodwin, *Everyday Ethics*, 24.

impossibility of this mission not to paternalist aspirations that aim at what is impossible but structural pressures that amplify human need and gut means for response. This attention leads into the political dimensions of exhaustion, to which we turn now.

3. Exhaustion's Causes & Remedies

Jennifer Elliot (33, white, Baptist) and I tuck into a booth in the corner of the breakfast dinner. She suggested the place; it is close to where she has a doctor's appointment after our meeting. Jennifer begins to tell me how she became a social worker. After college, she volunteered with the Peace Corps in Panama. While there, she worked with severely abused children: "that's what got me into the field of child abuse and neglect." There was no government recourse, she remembers. In contrast, "our government actually takes an interest in children being abused and has a system set in place for how to work with families." Upon returning home, she enrolled in a Master of Social Work program upon return, with a "tiny insignificant" scholarship from the Department of Social Services. For the last eleven years, Jennifer has worked for Child Protective Services.

When a report of suspected child abuse comes in from a hospital or neighbor, Jennifer explains, CPS sends out an investigator. "If it meets the statutory definitions," then it transfers to someone like her: "I do in-home work, which is where we don't have custody of the kids, and we try to keep it that way. There are some issues, but they are safe enough in their house." She also occasionally has to do foster care cases. "Foster care is awful." She points at my notepad, "That's the part that I hate the most. You can note that." In both instances, she supports parents and children, visiting families in their homes, and maintains contact with therapists, teachers, neighbors, and family friends.

Jennifer has had burnout or compassion fatigue “at times,” she says “but not as extensive as most people. I have really intensely strict boundaries. I won’t even leave my work stuff in my car where I can see it. It has to go in my trunk. I learned that pretty early on. I don’t answer my phone. My phone goes off when I leave work – my work cell.” In addition to these professional boundaries, Jennifer also manages intense work demands through planning vacations with her husband: “that’s what gets me through, knowing there’s an end.”

The last three weeks, however, have been “the worst it’s been, actually.” She took custody of three children, and then suddenly,

I’m working ten hour days back to back or twelve hour days back to back. I can’t get my head to turn off...I always have late nights once a week, but if I have multiple in a row, that’s when I’m starting to burn out. I know that I’m getting work done, and that I’m doing a good job, but my brain will not turn off. I’m not sleeping well. As soon as I wake up I’m thinking there’s seven things I need to do for this meeting.

This only happens several times a year, Jennifer continues. When she takes custody of children, “I can’t control the amount of work,” and “it’s really out of control, the amount of stuff that you’re required to do...Those are the real periods of burnout, because I just can’t get a break.”

Typically, after three or four weeks after taking custody, work demands settle out. Sometimes she swaps a custody case for a coworker’s in-home case, if, for example, “I’m not a right match for this family. They need a real hands-on, all-the-time social worker, and that’s not me.” In these instances, “I really force my agency’s hand to accommodate what I know I will survive at...They don’t want to lose me.”

When I ask why Jennifer thinks social workers burn out in general, she cites three reasons. First, “we’re dealing with the most intense problems, and we’re seeing it from

everyone's perspective." Families arrive on her caseload because of domestic violence, opioid addiction, and mental illness. "Every case I have is at least two of those," Jennifer explains. Moreover, families often cycle through the system. "It's so generational," Jennifer laments. Often Jennifer's supervisor can remember working with the mothers of the mothers with whom Jennifer works. Moreover, Jennifer feels for everyone involved: "I have sympathy for parents and the kids and the grandparents."

Second, "there's always underfunding." This is the case for both mental health and for substance abuse treatment, she tells me. "If you don't have Medicaid, it's really hard to find any kind of treatment [for substance abuse]." The same goes for mental health. A court can require therapy, she explains, but with Medicaid, she and her client have to find a therapist who will accept being reimbursed at a lower rate and, often, is located on a bus line. Without Medicaid, the co-pays are often beyond a family's ability: "my families that are on private insurance – two kids with a lot of trauma. It could be \$60. How are you going to do that weekly?" To make matters worse, politicians "keep talking about privatizing Medicaid completely, which would literally never work...Hearing all this stuff going on lately leads to more burnout. It's not going to get better. Everyone's trying to make it worse."

Third, bureaucratic requirements also contribute to burnout. "Especially if you work for a government agency, the feds want all this paperwork, the state wants all this paperwork, and the county wants paperwork to simplify the other people." Workers are usually better in the office or doing home visits: "you can't do both," Jennifer insists. She illustrates with an example: "I have a friend who is terrible at documentation. She loves her job until the end of the month, and she has seven days of paperwork. And she

just can't do that. So, she'll end up working off the clock on a Saturday." Moreover, "the decisions made on the state level are really difficult." For example, a recent mandate has required the installation of a new computer system:

Obviously, someone's nephew of the senator made a lot of money, because the words don't even make sense, but they're really pushing it, and it's caused a lot of turnover. We've had two entire teams of four people each leave in the last four months, because they're pushing that and extra policy but not really giving us extra support...Oh, now we're supposed to do double? But how do you do that? How do you suddenly just start doing double?

Prior to this, Jennifer had never had more than twelve cases. However, after those eight social workers left, her caseload "shot up to eighteen." "We weren't able to get new people fast enough, and then you get new people, and they're not trained."

Jennifer knows that she is approaching burnout when she cannot turn off her mind. She becomes unable to sleep, or when she does, she wakes up thinking of the "seven things" she needs to do for her next meeting. She becomes unable to withdraw her attention from work demands. There is no on-off switch available, and she has no power to hold the demands of work at bay. Jennifer's descriptions invoke common burnout metaphors: an engine without fuel, a depleted battery, or an overloaded computer circuit. Each likens the human person to a machine who must manage her finite energy supplies.⁴³

In her history of exhaustion, Anna Katharina Schaffner traces this conception of exhaustion to the Hungarian-Canadian endocrinologist Hans Selye. Beginning in the 1930s, Selye built upon the earlier work of American physiologist Walter B. Cannon, who

⁴³ Schaffner, *Exhaustion*, 206, 217-219. As Schaffner observes, "there seems to be a persistent tendency in modern Western medicine to think of the body as a vessel filled with a finite amount of energy that can be terminally exhausted" (208).

pioneered the concept of “stress” and studied how organisms self-regulate in response to disturbances.⁴⁴ Seyle focused on the body’s biochemical reactions to external threats, warning that “body’s adaptability, or *adaption energy*, is finite.”⁴⁵ As Schaffner explains, Seyle relied upon mechanical images to describe this energy source and its depletion. For example, he writes, “just as any inanimate machine gradually wears out, even if it has enough fuel, so does the human machine sooner or later become the victim of constant wear and tear.”⁴⁶ Accordingly, Seyle recommended rest and vacation as means for restoring depleted stores.⁴⁷ In this model, then, the individual is responsible for monitoring her exposure to stress to preserve her energy.⁴⁸

Jennifer does just that: in usual circumstances, she rigorously tracks her engagement with work demands through “really intensely strict boundaries.” These have protected her from less burnout than most social workers, she insists. When she leaves work, she turns off her work cell and stows her “work stuff” in the trunk of her car. She does not even let herself see it. “I learned that pretty early on,” she reflects. By turning off her phone, Jennifer also turns off her professional responsibilities. Her boundaries protect her from the ceaseless demands of her clients and employer.

When the National Association of Social Workers’ *Code of Ethics* references boundaries, it focuses exclusively on the limits of professional activities “to protect

⁴⁴ Schaffner, *Exhaustion*, 204.

⁴⁵ Hans Selye, *Stress Without Distress* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975), 38-39, cited in Schaffner, *Exhaustion*, 205.

⁴⁶ Seyle, *Stress Without Distress*, 38-39, cited in Schaffner, *Exhaustion*, 206.

⁴⁷ Schaffner, *Exhaustion*, 207.

⁴⁸ Schaffner, *Exhaustion*, 206.

clients.”⁴⁹ For example, social workers ought to avoid relating to clients outside of their professional responsibilities when “there is a risk of exploitation or potential harm to the client.” When avoiding such dual relationships is not possible, social workers are “responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries.”⁵⁰ Despite this, my participants rarely speak of boundaries for protecting clients. Rather, their boundary talk is almost entirely for protecting themselves. As Nicole notes, such precautions are “to make sure we’re not overextending ourselves.” Through staving off exhaustion in advance, my participants understand boundaries to enable them in continuing the work. They represent premediated withdrawals to protect against a more profound collapse. Amy observes precisely this: “strict boundary policies...sustain people for a long time to be in this role, because [social workers’ exposure to suffering] is just so skewed.”

Like Jennifer, my participants speak of boundaries as the on-off switch of their emotional engagement, associating professional obligation with the hours of their shift. Another CPS worker described how she is “really protective of those boundaries”: “I don’t get wrapped up in things that make me stay an hour late, because I just cut it off and go home.” This is how she has lasted in the field, she explained: “either you burn

⁴⁹ See National Association of Social Workers, *Code of Ethics* (2017), 1.06c, f, h; 1.09b; 1.10. It also insists on appropriate boundaries between supervisors and workers (3.01b) and field instructors and students (3.02d).

⁵⁰ NASW, *Code*, 1.06c. As another example, the *Code* warns of “boundary confusion” through “posting personal information on professional Web sites” (1.06f) or “accepting requests from or engaging in personal relationships with clients on social networking sites” (1.06h).

out, or you get to this point where you figure out how to shut it off.” Again, the image of the switch, cutting off, shutting off, and turning off marks the end of the day’s shift.

Like Jennifer stowing her work bag in her trunk, my participants often employ ritual-like activities to facilitate this release. Turning off phones and emails is most routine. Others describe watching the same show after work every day (“my forty minutes of detox”) or stripping off work clothes upon entering the house (“symbolic of letting your day go”). They also find ways for temporary withdrawals during the workday, when pressures are particularly acute. Yoga in the office, a trip to Starbucks, listening to nature sounds for five minutes, and taking lunch outside (“I’m very, very, very deliberate about that”) all name strategies for holding the demands at bay.

Self-care forms a close companion to boundary talk, mentioned by Amy earlier. While Jennifer does not use this term, she speaks of planning trips with her husband to remind herself that “there is always an end in sight” and rest and travel awaits. She counters the threat of overwhelming obligation through looking towards its cessation. Other commonly-cited strategies for coping with work-related stress include exercise, spiritual practices, therapy, and time with family.⁵¹ Like boundaries, these efforts at self-care manage energy resources. While boundaries prevent depletion, self-care aims at restoration, as suggested by Seyle recommending vacation as a remedy. Numerous participants insist on the importance of self-care, especially to counter the tendency of

⁵¹ See also Perette Arrington, “Stress At Work: How Do Social Workers Cope?” National Association of Social Workers (2008).

social workers to neglect their own needs. As one participant explained, “we’re always willing to help people, but we ourselves – we don’t help ourselves.”

However, when Jennifer cites the causes of burnout and compassion fatigue across the field, she does not mention the failure of boundaries or self-care. Instead, she points to three institutional and structural factors: pervasive social problems, underfunding for social services, and unreasonable bureaucratic demands.

Like Jennifer, my participants frequently point to broader societal ills that contribute to their exhaustion. In addition to opioid addiction, domestic violence, and mental illness, others add to the list: poverty, racism, chronic illness, among other things. As Amy puts it, “there’s just so many heinous things happening in the world.” Or as another observes, for “much of social work, you’re working with the poor and the oppressed where they’re not just dealing with one issue that you can easily fix – it’s like a dozen issues.” We might gather these features together under the banner of social suffering.⁵² According to Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock, this concept draws together “an assemblage of human problems that have their origins and consequences in the devastating injuries that social force can inflict on human

⁵² Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock, “Introduction,” in *Social Suffering*, ed. Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). According to Kleinman, et. al., the concept of social suffering draws together “an assemblage of human problems that have their origins and consequences in the devastating injuries that social force can inflict on human experience” (ix). It draws together issues that are otherwise categorized separately, such as “substance abuse, street violence, domestic violence, suicide, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, sexually transmitted disorders, AIDS, and tuberculosis,” among other conditions, to foreground their social, political, and economic dimensions (ix).

experience.”⁵³ This category foregrounds the social, political, and economic dimensions of human suffering.⁵⁴ Moral philosopher Lisa Tessman describes such suffering as “[t]he background conditions of the world we live in.”⁵⁵ While resulting from human actions and thus “potentially preventable,” widespread social suffering nevertheless provides the backdrop for responding to human need in the immediate term.⁵⁶

In addition to persistent social problems, Jennifer also cites shrinking resources and growing demands on social workers. Almost a third of my participants recount inadequate funding, understaffing, and chronic scarcity as causing exhaustion. Nicole joins Jennifer here, insisting, “social workers are not given enough time, resources, or pay to get things done.” Twenty percent of my participants also name unmanageable work expectations imposed by bureaucratic regulations or employers. Jennifer described how this works: more administrative demands mean staff burnout and quit, which in turn increases the caseload of remaining workers. These concerns fit with recent quantitative studies as well. In a 2008 survey, over three thousand social workers identified the foremost causes of work-related stress: not enough time or resources to do their job (31%, 11%), heavy workloads (25%), difficult clients (16%), inadequate salaries (16%), too much responsibility (15%), and long hours (13%).⁵⁷

⁵³ Kleinman, et. al., “Introduction,” ix.

⁵⁴ Kleinman, et. al., “Introduction,” ix.

⁵⁵ Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 85.

⁵⁶ Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 84. Her examples include “poverty, child abuse, violence against women, political torture, slavery, and genocide.”

⁵⁷ Arrington, “Stress At Work,” 2-3.

With the exception of working with difficult clients, these factors all point towards the erosion of the welfare state. Since the Great Recession, tax cuts, budget reductions, and declines in charitable giving all contribute to many social services reducing programs, closing offices, hiring less qualified staff, relying on volunteers, moving to part-time workers, freezing salaries, and decreasing benefits.⁵⁸ These all increase staff turnover and concentrate pressures on already overburdened staff and decrease the quality of services.⁵⁹

This assessment of exhaustion's causes focuses on institutional and structural factors, and thus it fits with another trajectory in stress research, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s. Drawing from Seyle's work, Swedish medical doctor Lennart Levi highlighted the worker's socio-economic conditions and thus advocated for political reform to protect occupational health.⁶⁰ Rather than charging individuals with the task of managing their energy supplies, this approach looks instead to organizations and the state to safeguard employees' quality of life.⁶¹ According to Schaffner, the burned-out employee, on this account, is a "victim of [her] alienating work environment and broader

⁵⁸ M. Abramovitz and J. Zelnick, "The Logic of the Market versus The Logic of Social Work: Whither the Welfare State?" *Social Work and Society International Online Journal* 16.2 (2018), 4.

⁵⁹ Abramovitz and Zelnick, "The Logic of the Market," 5. As Sandra Sullivan-Dunbar notes, "caregivers do their work within unjust social, political, and economic structures, and their relative privilege or marginalization within these structures profoundly affects their capacity to meet their caring obligations." *Human Dependency and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 4.

⁶⁰ Schaffner, *Exhaustion*, 210-212.

⁶¹ Schaffner, *Exhaustion*, 210. As Schaffner notes, in social democratic welfare states in Europe, "citizens expect the state to play a more active, reformist, and interventionist role in protecting them not just from physical but also from psychosocial stressors" (220).

psychophysically damaging sociocultural developments, which are beyond his or her control.”⁶²

There is a subtle mismatch here: Jennifer names institutional and largescale societal patterns that lead to her exhaustion. And yet her remedies unfold on the level of her own individual choices. She holds exhaustion at bay through self-management techniques, within a system that ensures that exhaustion is an inevitable feature of the job – as Joinson told nurses twenty-five years ago. No one else is protecting her from the ceaseless demands of responding to human need, so she must do it herself. This is the case for many participants: they acknowledge the social, political, and economic pressures they confront within a deeply broken system, and they endeavor to survive in it as best they can. Boundaries and self-care offer them a chance at preserving some degree of moral agency, now modified to a more limited form, to continue caring within an otherwise profoundly damaged system.⁶³ No room is left for political action beyond the bounds of a work shift, and this itself also signals their exhaustion.

To recap, Jennifer understands social workers’ exhaustion as originating from addressing social suffering with inadequate supports and overbearing demands. When Jennifer describes “the most intense problems,” however, she also adds a corresponding factor that we have not yet mentioned, namely, the “sympathy” she feels, “seeing it from

⁶² Schaffner, *Exhaustion*, 216. In *The Truth about Burnout*, Maslach and Leiter agree, observing that while burnout is commonly attributed to individuals (their “characters, behaviors, or productivity”), it actually results from the workplace’s social environment (18).

⁶³ For a critical account of the risks and value of self-care, see Liz Kinnamon, “Attention Under Repair: Asceticism from Self-Care to Care of the Self,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 26.2 (2016): 184-196.

everyone’s perspective.” The ‘everyone’ here refers to the children, parents, and grandparents who find themselves engaging with Child Protective Services. The next portrait turns now to the painful attunement to others’ suffering and the moral ambivalence of self-protective strategies.

4. Painful Attunement & Moral Failure

“God, burnout is extremely present.” Janeen Houghton (37, white, Christian) laughs as she shifts in her chair. Janeen has been a social worker for six years. She understands social work as “advocacy, justice...working alongside and with and for people on the margins.” Her current job is in crisis prevention and intervention with individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities and mental health diagnoses, starting from age six. “I’ve had a lot of burnout this year,” Janeen continues. Ninety percent of the people she works with struggle with physical aggression, she explains, “which means they’re either hurting themselves or some other people. When they come to us, they’re in a bad place. It’s not an easy fix...A good part of the job is just hearing really sad stories.”⁶⁴

After graduating with a political science degree in the Midwest, Janeen found her way to a L’Arche community on the East coast. She wanted to become an Episcopal priest, but halfway through seminary, her mom was diagnosed with a terminal illness. Janeen took a leave to care for her mother during her decline. As she watched her mother

⁶⁴ Later in the interview, Janeen quantifies this observation: “Seventy percent of my job is bad news.”

become less able-bodied, Janeen reconsidered her career trajectory. After her mother's death, she enrolled in a social work program with a focus on disability.

The most difficult thing about her work, Janeen tells me, is "shutting off." Unlike other sorts of jobs, there is not an "end point of the day." Even if your shift is over, Janeen continues,

you're leaving people to fend – to deal with struggles that you're trying to help them with, but you get to leave, physically get to leave, but how do you leave that mentally and come back the following day?...Finding a way to shut off without simultaneously not caring....it's been a struggle. I can shut off, but when I find that I really shut off, I stopped emotionally investing in the people and the clients and the work.

When I ask about burnout and compassion fatigue later in the interview, Janeen revisits this same theme. Some burnout comes from her struggle with her response to burnout, namely, mentally disengaging at the end of her shift. On the one hand, she tells herself, "this is just what I have to do," but on the other hand, "I don't think it is healthy for me, for my employees [other support staff], or the individuals [they are serving]."

And yet, such disengagement is the only way be

able to do the level of self-care when the need [of service-users] could require sixty hours of work easy and not having that guilt, you know, 'I'm shutting off my phone tonight,' and you're feeling guilty... We talk about self-care a lot, but for me, how do I do that without feeling like I've abandoned...the individuals that [we're] serving?

Janeen goes on to describe what she does for self-care: spending time with friends and family, watching the Bachelorette, and running especially. "My level of saying, 'I need to do something for myself, or I'm going to lose it,' has never been more active this past year, where you just are like, 'I need to be around people who I think might actually care about me.'" But this train of thought also encounters difficulties. Janeen continues,

my life looks pretty good compared to the individuals I work with and the families I work with. So there's a level of like, again, maybe back to guilt, just why do you need that when you get to home without...just learning that your child...just had a mental health break that has sent them into a psychiatrist hospital?...So, finding again the balance of like, 'If I take care of myself, I'll do better at taking care of people,' and then saying, 'Why do I need so much self-care when things are so much better for me than they are for this family?'

Christianity was not Janeen's reason for becoming a social worker, she explains.

It is, however, what keeps doing the work. "Even on the shitty hardest day," she tells me, "Christianity...keep[s] me staying after those days or weeks or months, knowing that this is what I think people – the type of thing people should be doing for other people."

Janeen continues by describing a friend who works as an event planner for an insurance company. "She *loves* it. And sometimes I'm like, 'Gosh, I wish I could do something like that, because I think the pressure might be less. You're dealing with an event – yeah, maybe it will go bad, but it's not a human life.'" But then Janeen also thinks that she wouldn't last in that job. Being a Christian, she wants

to be dedicating your life to something that for you feels weighty...as a Christian, I feel the weight of like human-to-human touch and relationship and bettering the day-to-day of somebody's life, and allowing their tragedy or their joy or their triumph or their sadness, having that be part of me as well and shape me and learn from.

Seven months later, I meet Janeen again in a small focus group. We sit in wooden chairs at the back of an Episcopal church, eating quiche and salad. Janeen again shares about the tension between her clients' needs and her own, supported with frequent nods from the other participating social worker.

if I didn't have some level of boundaries to say, 'This is where I have to cut my phone off and cut my email off' and look at somebody and say, 'This is all we can do,' I wouldn't want to do anything else in any other realm of my life for people. I feel like that sounds so selfish...because it can come off as a privilege that I even have enough resources to say I'm allowed to draw boundaries and have my own mental health and go see my own therapist, where there are people that are not –

there are families and systems that don't have enough money to go do that, they don't have enough time to say, 'I'm going to break now,' because they're working two jobs to support their five children.

Janeen also expresses her frustration about a popular expectation that social workers must always be ready assist others. This “makes it more difficult to balance the boundaries and your own needs.” She protests: “we can't do it all! This can't be – this service field – can't actually meet every need of the people.” Despite this impossibility, Janeen grapples with the persistence of need:

When you're surrounded by people who are in need *all the time*, it's being able to forgive yourself – maybe not forgive yourself – to be able to say, you aren't the end-all-be-all and almost, like, don't have the hubris to think you can fix it all...It's not easy. It's really hard. It takes a lot of consciousness to not pull out my phone while I'm breastfeeding my daughter...It's ever-present work.

Janeen returns us to Jennifer's discussion of boundaries as a necessary measure against burnout. Janeen departs from Jennifer in two notable ways, however. First, she uses the language of burnout not to describe the exhaustion originating from institutional pressures but those generated by overwhelming human need. Burnout for Janeen results from the impossibility of responding to ever present need, as well as the acute moral challenge of being appropriately sensitive to that need. Second, unlike Jennifer, Janeen dwells on the moral ambivalence of her protective strategies. She wonders, how does she “shut off without simultaneously not caring?” When she disengages from work in order to care for herself and her family, she feels selfish and guilty. It seems like she is abandoning service-users who are still struggling. And yet she must reserve space for her own wellbeing. If left unchecked, the needs of others will burn her out, as they are pervasive, profound, and urgent.

Thus, Janeen searches for a “balance” between being too disengaged from service-users (for the sake of her own care) and being overly engaged (and thus overwhelmed). She describes the problem through several oppositions: boundaries and empathy, shut off and connection, self-care and care for service-users. Implicitly, this includes both her allocation of time and emotional energy. While she observes that disengaging is not “healthy” for herself or service-users, neither is the other extreme in which she neglects herself and her family and ultimately undermines her ability to care for service-users in the longer term. Thus, she judges both extremes as faults: one expresses too much sensitivity to others’ needs, while the other shows too little. In weighing these various degrees of sensitivity to others, Janeen is, in MacIntyre’s words, “appeal[ing] to standards of appropriate feeling, of feeling that is proportionate to its objects, of feeling that is a mean between too little and too much.”⁶⁵ Moral failure awaits in either direction, and so, Janeen searches for a virtuous middle.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 116.

⁶⁶ In *Dependent Rational Animals*, Alasdair MacIntyre writes, “it is the virtue and not just the capacity for sentiment that is needed. Sentiment, unguided by reason, becomes sentimentality and sentimentality is a sign of moral failure” (124). In Janeen’s rejection of indifference to her clients, she also rejects Max Weber’s ideal bureaucrat who works “without hatred or passion, and hence without affection or enthusiasm.” According to Weber, professionalism generates a “spirit of formalistic impersonality” as a guarantee for equal treatment, excluding emotions from the social worker’s labors. Max Weber, *Economy & Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 225. Thus, if both anguish and indifference are moral errors, then bureaucratic settings encourage the latter. Simone Weil even suggests a certain inevitability to this. The employee of the penal system is brutal and flippant, as “the automatic effect of a professional life which has as its object crime seen in the form of affliction, that is to say in the form where horror and defilement are exposed in their nakedness. Such contact, being uninterrupted, necessarily contaminates, and the form this contamination takes is contempt.” It is a short step to translate Weil’s insights to social services, where employees daily behold other forms of human suffering. While none of my participants name the dangers of contempt, they do name cynicism, resentment, numbing, the waning of empathy, and

However, despite Janeen’s search for an appropriate disposition, the right balance has not presented itself. After six years, bafflement still persists. Moral philosopher Lisa Tessman thinks this is right. While Aristotle assumes that a virtuous mean exists within all spheres of action, Tessman insists that this is simply not the case with sensitivity to suffering. Tessman offers her own version of Janeen’s two extremes. Indifference and anguish, she argues, are both “morally unacceptable,” and there is no appropriate moral disposition found between them.⁶⁷ Every point on the spectrum is simultaneously “too indifferent and too anguished.”⁶⁸ As Tessman explains, if a person devotes her attention to a particular group of suffering people, that invariably requires indifference toward other groups in other places. Such a “daily indifference” is necessary for “self-protection,” and yet, even a tiny group of suffering people have enough suffering such that, “if I am open to it, I am filled with their anguish.”⁶⁹

We have already seen this anguish in Nicole’s case. Through opening herself to the suffering of a small group of refugees, Nicole experiences emotional collapse. As

bitterness all as outcomes of the accumulated exposure to human need and corresponding exhaustion. Simeon Weil, “Implicit Forms of the Love of God,” *Waiting for God*, translated by Emma Craufurd (New York: Perennial, 2001), 96.

⁶⁷ Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 83.

⁶⁸ Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 85. “If someone notices my constant anguish, they will urge me to use less of my energy on the needy; I should go out and enjoy myself more or focus on my family or my work. I should, it seems, know how to ignore others’ suffering better.” However, simultaneously, “Someone else will at the same time notice how appallingly little I attend to others’ suffering: am I doing nothing for prisoners’ rights, nothing for immigrant workers exploited and endangered in sweatshops? Now it seems clear that I should be morally condemned for failing to act in the face of all that suffering that results from injustice. And, they will both be right: at any intermediate point in the sphere of sensitivity and attention to others’ suffering, I can be characterized as both excessively anguished and excessively indifferent” (85).

⁶⁹ Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 85.

Tessman notes, such “extreme sensitivity is psychically unsustainable” and “ultimately destroys the life or at least the well-being of the agent her/himself. One finds a self so immersed in the boundless pain of others – and so exhausted with the efforts of ameliorating that pain – that no piece of the self is left free to experience joy or to flourish.”⁷⁰ Thus, with Nicole: her despair causes her not only to withdraw from loving neighbors but also to lose any sense of wellbeing.

Given the absence of a virtuous mean between anguish and indifference, Tessman concludes that the agent is caught, and moral failure is unavoidable.⁷¹ Janeen too gestures at such failure in citing her feelings of guilt. When she leaves work at the end of her shift and mentally disengages, she understands this as abandoning her clients. For Janeen, a genuine moral dilemma exists between her own needs and those of her clients.⁷² Care theorist Joan Tronto affirms this: “[o]ften care-givers will find that their needs to care for themselves come in conflict with the care that they must give to others.”⁷³

Feminist care theorists often point to these value conflicts as a ground for reducing or eliminating overwhelming moral demands generated by human need. That is, concerns for fairness, justice, or self-care can modify or cancel competing needs for

⁷⁰ Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 85.

⁷¹ Tessman, *Moral Failure: On the Impossible Demands of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 234. In *Burdened Virtues*, Tessman summarizes, “The background conditions of the world we live in make it impossible to escape both the horror of indifference and the psychic pain (and perhaps exhaustion) of sensitivity and attention” (85, author’s emphasis).

⁷² I have argued elsewhere that this zero-sum game between caregiving and self-care is not necessarily the case all the time. For a full discussion, see my “Caregiving, Self-Care, and Contemplation: Resources from Thomas Aquinas,” *New Blackfriars*, online preview.

⁷³ Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 109.

care.⁷⁴ For example, building on Nel Nodding's work, Rita Manning writes, "My actual obligation [to care for another in need] rests on...my ability to do something about filling it." For Manning, the caregiver's ability and thus obligation to care is limited by her need to care for herself and to prevent herself from "suffer[ing] caring burnout [which] also diminishes my ability to care for others in the future."⁷⁵ However, while Janeen recognizes her need to care for herself in order to care for others, she does not think that any ensuing conflict lessens her obligation to clients. By turning off her phone and becoming inaccessible, she fails them, and she wonders about her need to forgive herself.⁷⁶

Here again, Tessman agrees with Janeen's moral intuition. Tessman too thinks multiple moral requirements remain standing, despite an agent's inability to meet them

⁷⁴ Tessman, *Moral Failure*, 245. As an extended case, Tessman refers to Eva Kittay's *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1999). John Hare cites Kierkegaard's pastor in *Either/Or Volume Two* on this point: to reduce the moral demand is to accept (in Kierkegaard's words) "the easy, cozy conclusion: One does what one can." Cited in *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 26.

⁷⁵ Rita Manning, "Just Caring," in *Explorations in Feminist Ethics: Theory and Practice*, edited by Eve Browning Cole and Susan Coultrap-McQuin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 49.

⁷⁶ In *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics*, Robert M. Adams describes the dynamics of failure and guilt: "If I voluntarily fail to do what I am morally obliged to do, I am guilty. I may be appropriately blamed by others for my omission, and ought normally to reproach myself for it, in some degree" (238). Guilt, Adams insists, is "not properly the name of a feeling, but of an objective moral condition which may rightly be recognized by others even if it is not recognized by the guilty person" (239). Moreover, guilt may be "expiated, discharged, or forgiven" (239). In addition to guilt, wrong actions typically include two other features: harming another through the action and alienation from others. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

all.⁷⁷ Any move to reduce the demand would render the moral life too moderate, Tessman argues and, thus, would miss Janeen's agonizing struggle with guilt.⁷⁸ While Janeen is off the clock, her clients are not. Thus, Janeen recognizes that even her temporary withdrawals from care may result in irreplaceable loss.⁷⁹ Bernard Williams calls this a moral remainder. When an agent is unable to respond adequately to another's need, such a remainder is experienced emotionally as regret.⁸⁰

This conflict between Janeen's needs and service-users' needs intensify in light of the scope of boundless needs. Janeen is "surrounded by people who are in need *all the time*," such that the work is "ever present." She must "look at somebody and say, 'This is all we can do.'" Janeen cannot meet an infinite demand, and neither can the social work profession. Recall that Joinson identified the "infinite" nature of human need as among the sources of compassion fatigue.⁸¹ Tronto too describes this dynamic: "caring will always create moral dilemmas because the needs for care are infinite."⁸² Moreover, Tessman agrees: "other's needs, vulnerabilities, and dependencies may be *inexhaustible* sources of moral requirements, which are consequently impossible to fulfill, generating

⁷⁷ Tessman, *Moral Failure*, 245. Nel Nodding also names the possibility of guilt: "In caring we risk guilt, either through accidents while caring is sustained or through the lapse of caring." *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 39.

⁷⁸ In *The Moral Gap*, John Hare notes that guilt forms an appropriate response to continuous moral failure (32).

⁷⁹ Tessman, *Moral Failure*, 250.

⁸⁰ Cited by Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 88.

⁸¹ Joinson, "Coping with Compassion Fatigue," 116, 118-119.

⁸² Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 137.

“unavoidable moral failure.”⁸³ Given this, Tessman concludes that the moral life for those who are sensitive to the call of need can be “impossibly demanding.”⁸⁴ Notably, this account troubles the connection between happiness and virtue in the present life. In a world of infinite need, those attuned to it face the prospect of what Hare calls a “guilt-ridden life of devotion to duty.”⁸⁵

This devotion takes on a further dimension when we return to a suggestion in Chapter One: that human need may be one of the guises in which God’s command arrives. Need calls out for response, and to endorse this call can express an acceptance of a broader set of norms, including that God calls people to love neighbors.⁸⁶ We also noted how this maps on with feminist accounts of vulnerability-responsive moral requirements, such as those described by Tessman. We see this here: Janeen recognizes the pull of need as mediating God’s command. While she did not become a social worker for Christian reasons, she keeps at it because of them. Her understanding of

⁸³ Tessman, *Moral Failure*, 233-234, author’s emphasis. Dallas Gingles rightly insists that despite academic debates about the coherence of moral dilemmas, for all practical purposes, they are very real in a world where “moral purity is a utopian impossibility.” “Justifications and Judgements: Walzer, Bonhoeffer, and the Problem of Dirty Hands,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 37.1 (2017), 83. James Childress also offers an account of when prima facie obligations are overridden, what he calls “residual effects” or “moral traces.” Regret, remorse, or guilt mark the violation of those duties. See Brett McCarty, “Medicine as Just War? The Legacy of James Childress in Christian Ethics,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 38.2 (2018), 59-60.

⁸⁴ Tessman, *Moral Failure*, 252. “Furthermore, when the impossible demands are apprehended through an *intuitive* judgment – as they will tend to be when the person with endless needs is a proximate or intimate other – the fact that one must inevitably act in opposition to one’s own intuitions makes moral life particularly difficult.”

⁸⁵ Hare, *The Moral Gap*, 31.

⁸⁶ John Hare, *God’s Call: Moral Realism, God’s Commands, and Human Autonomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 47.

Christianity leads her to think that “working alongside and with and for people on the margins” is “the type of thing people should be doing.” Being a Christian causes her to dedicate herself to work that is “weighty”: to support meaningful change in someone’s life, to be open to their joys and sorrows, to encounter them as another human being. Thus, Janeen understands a peculiar invitation to this work arising from her Christian confessions.

This connection between human need and God’s command adds a theological dimension to the moral failure we just described above. If need communicates moral obligation, and that need is boundless, and Janeen’s ability to succor it is not, then she fails not only another person but also God. She cannot do what God has asked of her, and this knowledge contributes to the moral anguish of this failure. While this interpretation may press beyond Janeen’s explicit sense-making, Amy Anderson (from Section One) lays out this connection explicitly, as we will see in this next section.

5. The Moral Gap

In a follow-up interview, seven months after our initial conversation, I meet with Amy again sitting on the couch in her office. Amy is narrating the wide-ranging responsibilities of social workers. She explains how the relatively constrained abilities of social workers to act according to their ideals also funds exhaustion.

If social workers had free range and unlimited money, it would be really different. You could actually...[practice according to] the best values of social work, because you could ask the person, ‘What do you think that you need? Here’s \$15,000 to go get a car and an apartment.’ There’s no social worker that I know that can actually do that. So that is...part of why you have to ‘let go and let God’ is I literally did everything I could do from my position, and that’s a heavy, heavy thing. And as Christians, I have found that that has been even harder, because I think, Ok, I believe in God’s love incarnate in Jesus and that means to eat with the poor and be with them and do life in such a way that is loving. And that is not what it looks like right now for me to be giving this person two food stamps. So,

it's a constant press of 'You should be doing more,' 'I can't be doing more.' Or, this person needs a friend, but all I have to offer them is shampoo. That's hard. That's a lot of fatigue.

According to Amy, God's invitation to love neighbors stretches far beyond food stamps and shampoo. However, even though God asks more of her, she "can't be doing more." She is caught between a moral 'ought' and her own limits. That is why she has to "let go and let God." She releases the remainder and hopes in divine action. Even as she looks to God, this painful disjuncture between what God has asked and her persistent failure generates its own fatigue.

John Hare describes this experience as the "moral gap": "the gap between what God demands of us and our natural capacities after the fall to meet that demand."⁸⁷ He traces the theological origins of this account of the moral life to Augustine and his anti-Pelagian writings. According to Augustine, human failure to meet God's demand causes human creatures to realize their dependency upon God and ask for divine assistance.⁸⁸ Augustine writes, "God bids us do what we cannot, that we may know what we ought to seek from him."⁸⁹ Prayer forms the main avenue for asking for this divine aid. (While

⁸⁷ John Hare, "Augustine, Kant, and the Moral Gap," in *The Augustinian Tradition*, ed. Gareth B. Matthews (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 251. See also Hare, *The Moral Gap*.

⁸⁸ Hare, "Augustine, Kant, and the Moral Gap," 251.

⁸⁹ Augustine, *On Grace and Free Will*, XVI.32. "The Pelagians think that they know something great when they assert that 'God would not command what He knew could not be done by man.' Who can be ignorant of this? But God commands some things which we cannot do, in order that we may know what we ought to ask of Him. For this is faith itself, which obtains by prayer what the law commands...For it is certain that we keep the commandments if we will; but because the will is prepared by the Lord, we must ask of Him for such a force of will as suffices to make us act by the willing. It is certain that it is we that *will* when we will, but it is He who makes us will what is good." Trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887.) We find a further example in Augustine's *Confessions*: "And all my hope is nowhere

we take up prayer in the next section, its full development awaits Chapter Four.) The Reformers recover this set of Augustinian insights, Hare explains, arguing that God's commands instruct human beings in their need for divine grace. Take Luther, for example: "Reason thinks that man is mocked by an impossible commandment, whereas I maintain that by this means man is admonished and awakened to see his own impotence."⁹⁰

While knowledge of human limits leads to confessions of dependence on God, Janeen and Amy suggest that this knowledge is discovered through encounter. In their professional roles, both observe the profundity of human need beyond their ability to repair. They feel the press of obligation, but they also have intimate knowledge of what happens if they try to do it all. Exhaustion follows and the full withdrawal of agency. Recall Amy in Section One describing what burnout looks like: she cannot get out of bed, she cannot send an email, she cannot do anything. Thus, they both recognize the

except in your great mercy. Grant us what you command, and command us what you will," translated by Rex Warner (New York: New American Library, 1963), 10.29.

⁹⁰ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming R. Revell Company, 1957), 158. Hare goes on to trace how this inheritance functions in Kant's moral theory and how modern moral philosophy as a whole retains this three part structure, namely, "the moral demand, our defective natural capacities, and the possible being (the authoritative source of the demand)." This residual structure of morality, Hare suggests, is "a survival of the belief in a perfect and infinite moral being, whom we imperfectly resemble, and who created us to resemble him more than we do." Moreover, this three-part structure "produces a constant and inevitable sense of failure" and corresponding guilt, and the desire to avoid guilt, then, becomes "a primary motivator of the moral life." Finally, traditional Christianity offers "a set of doctrines about God's initiative on our behalf to make it possible for us to live in a way that is pleasing to him" (24-25). Charles Taylor too describes a version of this moral gap in "A Catholic Modernity?" which we will consider in Chapter Four, found in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

necessity of discerning the hazy lines of their own limits prior to this collapse. The difficulty, of course, is knowing exactly where those limits lie.⁹¹

As Janeen suggests, pride makes discerning limits more difficult. In grappling with the limits of her ability to meet overwhelming need, Janeen wonders about forgiving herself but then changes tact. No, perhaps not forgiveness is order but something else: “to be able to say, you aren’t the end-all-be-all and almost, like, don’t have the hubris to think you can fix it all.” Pride obscures limits, presuming that an agent possesses the capacity to “fix it all.” Like Laura and Jamie in Chapter Two, Janeen roots out this deception and confesses that she cannot do it all. The moral universes of paternalism and exhaustion suddenly draw close together. Exaggerating human capacities plays a role in both malformations of care. In both cases, social workers act beyond the appropriate bounds of human agency. In paternalism, they exceed what is appropriately theirs to do, damaging service-users’ agency. In exhaustion, they respond to legitimate need, but in doing so, damaging their own agency and thus their ability to care for others in future. Both cases call for moderating agency by identifying and observing limits but of different kinds.

Finally, this discernment is not a one-time task but ongoing. Each encounter invites moral reflection on what one is able to do, and this is part of the fatigue that Amy describes. Amy’s insistence on “let[ting] God,” however, points to a resource beyond the restrictions of exclusive humanism. As John Hare explains, “Our sense of what we can

⁹¹ Hare, *Moral Gap*, 26. Hare develops this in conversation with Kiekegaard’s *Either/Or, Volume Two*.

do is variable, and it depends crucially on what kind of assistance we think is available.”⁹² If there is the possibility of God’s help, how then does this shape human agency at its limits? The final section takes up this question.

6. The Consolation of God’s Call

We have already met Maria Zacarias at the beginning of the chapter. She described then for us the weight of working with unaccompanied migrant children and at a mental health clinic for immigrants and refugees. God called her to this work, she told us, because social work is “being the hands and feet of Jesus.”

Later in our interview, Maria confesses that she has difficulty with professional boundaries. She is “trying to get better,” as she determines what she can and cannot do for clients. For example, she can offer resources, like the times of an AA meeting, but she ought not make a call for a person that they can do themselves. However, determining limits becomes more difficult in light of her Christian confessions. When she is feeling “low in energy and low in hope” at work, she asks herself the question “Who does God say I am?” and she then applies this to service-recipients. God’s love for each person that she meets in the clinic orients her in her interaction with them. “But also, at the same time,” Maria continues, she must remember “that I’m not a family member, that I’m not – I can only do so much as a social worker, as a professional...Professionally, there’s just knowing that there’s limits too, which also can get really blurry.”

⁹² Hare, *Moral Gap*, 26.

As an example, Maria told the story of a Latina woman who came to the clinic the week before, who was being beaten by her husband. She was planning on leaving him, Maria explains, but had no place to go, no money, and no car. “Where are my children going to go? How am I going to survive?” the woman asked Maria. “Inside of me, I’m like, ‘Oh gosh, lady, we don’t – ’” thinking that none of these needs line-up with what her agency provides. Nevertheless, Maria tried to brainstorm resources with her outside of the clinic. Throughout, the woman kept insisting, “I literally have nowhere else to go.” Maria wrestled within herself. Should she just do what her profession prescribes? Maria describes this professional response: “I’m the clinic manager, and I’m supposed to give you this paper, and then you go and handle it on your own.” But “sitting there and really hearing her and just the depths of her needs,” Maria saw “there was so much value in her and so much strength in her taking this step.” In that moment, she decided to give the woman her personal phone number in case she needed help with transportation or outfitting her apartment. Maria also offered to find people from her church who might be able to help, and the woman was “very thankful for that.” “That was the first time that I gave my phone number to someone in that clinic,” Maria tells me. She made that decision “based on my emotions. I mean, just seeing her needs, because I feel like if – I can’t do that with everybody that comes in, because everybody just shares so much of their lives with me, but I also can’t really do that because then I’ll just have everybody calling me.”

At the clinic, Maria sees and talks with people all day. When not working, she seeks out solitude, taking long walks before or after her shift. During this time, she savors the beauty of trees, finds “moments of quietness,” and “talk[s] to God – just me

and God.” Since college, Maria continues, she has understood herself to be “an intercessor”:

that’s a gift that God has given me a lot – praying for people, and I love putting myself before God for other people and praying for them...but sometimes if it’s too much of that, and not also balancing it out with me and God, it’s that – I can’t. I’ve tried to do that before, and it didn’t help the burnout I was feeling. So just having that space of just me and God by ourselves.

Sometimes she meets with God at home, in a closet where she sits with her eyes closed in the darkness. This time of encounter reminds her of

who the Holy Spirit is and how he manifests himself through me, and understanding ‘What do I do with the gifts that you have given me?’ And I need everything to be rooted in him, because I can’t be a social worker if I don’t have God with me, and I can’t do the job that I want to do if I don’t have Him with me. It’s just for me, it’s just too much – it’s very heavy.

Later in the interview, Maria returns to this theme. Her work can be

very exhausting, and very, very tiring in itself, just working in the social work field, and for me, faith is really the fuel that keeps me going, and it keeps me hopeful. Because a lot of times, it’s really hard to stay hopeful. You can’t really tell people, ‘It’s going to be okay,’ because you don’t really know, because you don’t know if there’s going to be a raid tomorrow, if there’s going to be a check-in on a certain highway and then they’re going to get sent to a detention center by ICE officials...it’s hard to a lot of times believe that there’s something good coming for people that you meet. A lot of times, it’s that – just being hopeful is hard. So, really, I always go back to, ‘Why am I here?’ A lot of times I have to remind myself, ‘Why am I here? Where is this passion coming from?’ And then I have to remind myself that yes, it’s because God gave me this heart, and God gave me these gifts, and God called me to do this, and this is really the driving force behind me doing this work, because I don’t think I could do this kind of job if it wasn’t with that reminder.”

Maria confesses her difficulty with professional boundaries: God’s invitation to care sometimes presses her beyond them. At the same time, however, she tries to take seriously those limits prescribed by her profession. She is a social worker, not a family member, and this entails different obligations. However, in the pain of seeing a woman’s need and knowing that it exceeds what she can address in her professional capacities, she

offers her personal contact information and a promise of assistance from her church community. Although Maria confesses that she cannot do this for everyone, she decides in this instance, with this person, to step beyond the boundaries prescribed by her professional role.

Even as Maria labors on the edge of her capacities, she finds solace in God's command. When Maria identifies her calling as sustaining, she echoes Calvin's same insistence. Returning to the passage we cited in Chapter One, Calvin writes that God's calling offers "a singular consolation" and "no slight relief from cares, labors, troubles, and other burdens... Each man will bear and swallow the discomforts, vexations, weariness, and anxieties in his way of life, when he has been persuaded that the burden was laid upon him by God."⁹³ So too with Maria. Her conviction that God has given her this work is the "fuel that keeps her going" and "the driving force behind me doing this work." Like Calvin predicts, this conviction does not solve her struggle with exhaustion, but it does strengthen her to continue in the midst of weariness. Without such assurance, the work is "too much." Robert Adams notes this feature of vocation as well: it instills confidence in action, even "in the face of discouragement and in the face of some negative results."⁹⁴ When Maria's hope wavers because ICE check-points and raids threaten, she reminds herself that "God gave me this heart, and God gave me these gifts,

⁹³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 3.10.6, 725. In the same paragraph, Calvin also insists that God honors the most ordinary of labors: "no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight."

⁹⁴ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 315.

and God called me to do this.” Barth also insists that God’s command “instill[s] courage and not fear” into its recipient, because the command itself is “the grace of God,” “quickening and refreshing.”⁹⁵ That is, as God asks Maria to do this work, God also enables her to do it, renewing Maria in her determination to love.

Finally, Maria finds strength in regularly withdrawing from others’ needs to commune with God. This even includes pausing her commitment to intercessory prayer to “hav[e] that space of just me and God by ourselves.” Without this “balancing,” burnout persists. Augustine too describes the need for such retreats, given the burdensome demands of caring for neighbors’ needs. While he notes that the contemplative, active, and mixed lives all offer faithful ways of living,

It does matter, however, what [a person] he holds back in his love of truth and what he pays out in the duty of charity. No one ought to be so completely at leisure that in his leisure he takes no thought for serving his neighbor, nor should anyone be so fully active that he makes no room for the contemplation of God.⁹⁶

Elements of both lives ought to infuse each other, Augustine explains, as the contemplative life primarily receives, and the active life primarily gives.⁹⁷ Augustine goes on to warn about seeking an appointment to the episcopate, as this person “bears the

⁹⁵ Barth, *CD III/4*, 585-6. Barth takes a further step, however, to insist that God’s command is “the easy yoke and the light burden of Christ.” This departs from Maria’s insistence that the work is “very heavy.”

⁹⁶ Augustine, *City of God*, 19.19.

⁹⁷ In *Entering into Rest*, O’Donovan too notes that early Christian readings of the story of Martha and Mary caution against drawing too great of a distinction between the active and contemplative: “wishing to say (with Augustine, a monk and founder of monasteries) that the duality of the active and contemplative must be embodied in every working vocation. What the story invites us to consider is not the elevation of a certain *kind* of work (contemplative, or intellectual) over or alongside another kind (active, or manual), but the transforming moment of rest which must accompany *all* work...Attentive listening to Christ in worship provides the coherence with which the variety of our working undertakings can be grasped together as a service” (134).

responsibility of caring for [those he is set over]”: “the drive of love takes on righteous activity.” However, this drive communicates a “burden” which threatens to take away the “pleasure” of contemplation and “leave us swamped.” The duties of neighbor love, if left unchecked, eclipse beholding God.⁹⁸ From his pastoral work, Augustine anticipates the crushing charge of responding to the needs of those within his ecclesial community. While Augustine dedicates only sentences to this danger in the *City of God*, Thomas repeatedly cites this passage in his own discussions of the episcopacy, accepting Augustine’s premise that the duties of love will overwhelm when not balanced with the “delight” of contemplation.⁹⁹ Maria knows this need for resting in God, found only as she sets aside her caring labors, even those expressed in prayer.¹⁰⁰

Implicit in this vision of contemplative prayer is a pronouncement about human need. Its urgent necessities will not have the final word. Need will cease, and the creature will rest in God. In heaven, Thomas insists, “one man will no longer succor another, as he needs to in the present life.”¹⁰¹ The tasks of care are limited to this age and, thus, so too is its exhaustion.

⁹⁸ Augustine, *City of God*, 19.19.

⁹⁹ Thomas cites this entire passage directly: “The love of truth seeks a holy leisure, the demands of charity undertake an honest toil...If no one imposes this burden upon us, we must devote ourselves to the research and contemplation of truth, but if it be imposed on us, we must bear it because charity demands it of us. Yet even then we must not altogether forsake the delights of truth, lest we deprive ourselves of its sweetness, and this burden overwhelm us.” *Summa Theologica* II.II.182,1, reply 3.

¹⁰⁰ For an extended account of Thomas Aquinas on the relation of contemplation and caregiving, see my “Caregiving, Self-Care, and Contemplation: Resources from Thomas Aquinas,” *New Blackfriars* (2020), online preview.

¹⁰¹ Aquinas, *ST* II-II.26.13.

Thus, while Amy emphasizes how God's incarnate love asks for more than shampoo, here Maria highlights its consolation despite her failure to fulfill that same call. Her conviction of God's command gives her courage for action, even when there are many reasons to despair, and her labors are still not enough. God girds Maria up, and Maria finds a more modest agency: one that cannot do it all, recognizes this, and relies upon divine help.

Conclusion

The exhaustion that arises from caregiving faces needs that do not end and that conflict with the caregiver's own needs. With social service delivery, complex social problems, inadequate resources, and unmanageable demands heighten this flattening of agency. The social worker faces needs that legitimately make a claim upon her, and yet to respond to them diminishes her ability to act. Thus, she retreats to periodic withdrawals, moderating her efforts in order to preserve herself. Boundaries and self-care name these retreats, aiming to stave off demands and restore energy respectively. And yet, as Janeen insists, these efforts come with deep moral ambiguity. Between anguish and indifference, there is no fitting sensitivity towards suffering, and moral failure ensues, given the background conditions in which she works. Translated into a theological register, God's command mediated through human need outpaces the human creature's capacities to respond. Integral to this painful moral experience is also a divine pedagogy: the human creature cannot fulfill God's command without divine assistance, and so she learns to ask God to help her do what God has asked. Thus, Maria finds

consolation in God's call, which strengthens her to continue in the work, and consolation in contemplative prayer, resting in and beholding God for God's own sake.

CHAPTER FOUR: Prayer

*Intercession is the counterpart in the life within of social work in the life without.*¹

Prayers have echoed throughout the dissertation. In Chapter One, Martha asks God to clarify her vocation when she is burned out. Melissa dialogues with God throughout the day, confessing her uncertainties, asking for direction, and expressing gratitude (“Whoo God!”). In Chapter Two, Laura entrusts her patients to God’s care after sessions, so that she doesn’t “have to carry them.” Jamie prays to remember that it is not her “job to fix the world” but God is “the solution,” and she asks for wisdom in navigating racist and oppressive systems. In Chapter Three, Maria intercedes for service-users, but to prevent her own exhaustion, she balances this with contemplative resting in God (“just me and God by ourselves”).

In each case, these social workers arrive at a point of limitation, and here they pray. They entrust God with themselves, the situation, and those with whom they work. Whether discerning action or its cessation, they situate themselves in light of what they understand God to be doing and what they hope God will do. They are not alone, and their finite responsibility is nestled within divine care.

However, as we will see, the modern period largely rejects prayer and its presuppositions of divine agency. On this account, prayer is immature, irrational, and irresponsible, representing an otherworldly escape and an abandonment of moral action.

¹ Vida Scudder, “A Plea for Social Intercession,” in *The Church and the Hour: Reflections of a Socialist Churchwoman* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2000, originally 1917), 123.

Christian ethicists also neglect prayer in accounting for the moral life, and those theologians who do take up prayer warn of its potential for distortion.

Despite these indictments of prayer, my participants overwhelmingly pray about their work and on the job.² Across denominational affiliations, they utter silent appeals over copier machines, take contemplative pauses outside of hospital rooms, express gratitude while driving back from a home visit, whisper petitions with coworkers huddled together behind closed doors, and send off prayer-request texts to friends at church. As they respond to God's call to love neighbors, they grapple with the demands of this love. They do this most often in prayers that coordinate their action with God's. As they request, recognize, and hope in divine care for service-users, they confess their need for God in their moral deliberations and in history. Their powers and knowledge are limited, in contrast to those at God's disposal, so they ask God to supply what they cannot. They cannot meet human need alone. In doing so, they discern what part is theirs to do, locating their endeavors within the primacy of God's care. Thus, I argue that prayer constitutes a crucial mode for discerning action and attuning to the limits of human agency.

This chapter proceeds in five sections, with four organized around portraits of social workers. The first offers some preliminaries: how select modern thinkers

² In the first twenty interviews, I did not ask about prayer. Nineteen brought up the topic of themselves. In the following fifteen interviews, I asked about prayer directly, and all described the ways they pray for work concerns. Given that more than 75% of Americans pray, and almost 60% pray daily, this finding ought not surprise us. Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, "'Nones' on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults have no Religious Affiliation," (Washington, D.C.: Pew Forum, 2012), <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/> and "Religion Among the Millennials: Introduction and Overview," (Washington, D.C.: Pew Forum, 2010), <https://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials/>.

denounce prayer, Christian ethicists neglect it, and theologians warn of its distortions. Second, we consider how petitionary prayer hosts moral deliberation and the Spirit's indwelling in that process. Third, we take up an account of providence coordinated with the limits of human knowledge and powers concerning the outcomes of action. Fourth, we follow how participants discern vocation, the limits of their action, and God's presence in their work. The final section draws many of these threads together into a theology of prayer, which coordinates human and divine action.

1. Denunciation, Neglect, and Distortion

Like divine command, prayer too has been subject to criticism in the modern period. In outlining the central charges against prayer, Immanuel Kant and Karl Marx renounce prayer as irrational, deceptive, and a retreat from responsible action. As a feature of "*illusory faith*...overstepping the bounds of our reason," Kant calls prayer "a superstitious illusion."³ Through expressing "a *stated wish*," prayer tries to "work upon God," but this fulfills no moral duties, Kant insists, and "nothing is accomplished by it."⁴

³ Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1960), 182-183, author's emphasis. Kant continues, "[prayer] is no more than a *stated wish* directed to a Being who needs no such information regarding the inner disposition of the wisher; therefore nothing is accomplished by it, and it discharges none of the duties to which, as commands of God, we are obligated; hence God is not really served" (183). Kant distinguishes prayer, however, from "the spirit of prayer" which he welcomes. The latter is "A heart-felt wish to be well-pleasing to God in our every act and abstention, or in other words, the disposition, accompanying all our actions, to perform these as though they were being executed in the service of God" (183). The first relies upon words and "tries to work upon God," while the latter only works upon the one who prays, bringing about "their own moral improvement" (183-186).

⁴ Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, 183.

While Kant grants that prayer may benefit children, it ought not be endorsed by rational adults.⁵

Marx too insists that prayer is an illusion, undermining human reason. Only through refuting “heavenly *oratio* [prayer]” may reason be recovered and social criticism commence.⁶ Religion, with its praying, offers only an “illusory happiness,” hindering the “demand for their real happiness.”⁷ Thus, Marx observes, “The criticism of religion disillusioned man so that he will think, act and fashion his reality as a man who has lost his illusions and regained his reason; so that he will revolve about himself as his own true sun.”⁸ For Marx, then, prayer offers a comforting fantasy which dulls the pain caused by oppressive conditions and thus undermines protest.

For both Kant and Marx, then, prayer deludes people, hindering real action, and the use of reason, and thus it ought to be discarded with the other relics of religion.⁹

⁵ Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, 186. Kant approves of one dimension of prayer within his purely rational religion, namely, “the *spirit of prayer*” which brings about “moral improvement” through elevating the will to act “as though” such actions are “executed in the service of God” (183, 186). By extension, Kant suggests that value of prayers at church as “a moral ceremony...to set in motion the moral motivating forces of each individual” (185).

⁶ Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), 53.

⁷ Marx, “Contribution,” 54. Marx argues that philosophy must “unmask human self-alienation in its secular form now that it has been unmasked in its sacred form. Thus the criticism of heaven is transformed into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics” (54).

⁸ Marx, “Contribution,” 54.

⁹ As an example of this argument in contemporary philosophy of religion, see John McClendon who insists that “the powerless should not pray” as it undermines critical inquiry and political action. He cites Frederick Douglass’s condemnation of prayer as “idle” and “a hollow mockery.” John H. McClendon, *Philosophy of Religion and the African American Experience: Conversations with my Christian Friends* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 74, 361. We might also add Friedrich Nietzsche’s assessment of prayer: “Prayer has been devised for such men as have never any thoughts of their own, and to whom an elevation of the soul is unknown, or passes

Their legacies together contribute to the modern dismissal of prayer, as undermining human autonomy, failing to achieve real goods, and having no role to play in moral deliberation. As Charles Taylor notes, this account of secularity is not to indicate that religious devotion is necessarily in decline.¹⁰ In fact, three-quarters of Americans continue to pray, and most of them pray daily.¹¹ It is rather to explain that belief in God (and as a corollary, prayer) is only an option and often an embattled one.¹² Or as Andrew Prevot notes, “those who continue to pray in the modern epoch are confronted with the crisis of determining how to make sense of this practice in the midst of such a potentially prayer-negating intellectual culture.”¹³

Even among Christian ethicists, prayer receives little attention. Since 2002, the *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* has published not a single article on prayer, and only four contain brief discussions in relation to other topics.¹⁴ This marks a significant

unnoticed,” *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), paragraph 128 at 184.

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 1-3.

¹¹ See note 2. Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “‘Nones’ on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults have no Religious Affiliation,” and “Religion Among the Millennials.”

¹² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

¹³ Prevot, *Thinking Prayer*, 19-20

¹⁴ Warren Kinghorn, “Presence of Mind: Thomistic Prudence and Contemporary Mindfulness Practices,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 35.1 (2015): 83-102; Myles Werntz, “Broadening the Ecclesiocentric Claim: Possible Futures for Christian Nonviolence,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 39.2 (2019): 303-318; Jonathan Malesic, “‘Nothing is to be Preferred to the Work of God’: Cultivating Monastic Detachment for a Postindustrial Work Ethic,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 35.1 (2015); Autumn Alcott Ridenour, “The Coming of Age: Curse or Calling? Toward a Christological Interpretation of Aging as Call in the Theology of Karl Barth and W. H. Vanstone,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 33.2 (2013): 151-167. A fifth article merely contains the word “prayer” once: Kyle Felder, “Calvin’s

departure from the patristic and medieval integration of ethics and spirituality. As Servais Pinckaers notes, “what we call spirituality was the high point of Christian ethics” in the patristic period.¹⁵ He traces the origins of this separation within Catholic moral theology as pre-dating Enlightenment critiques of prayer to the emergence of the manual tradition in the 16th century. Textbooks for training priests reduced the moral life to obligation, leaving the study of beatitude, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and grace to dogmatic theologians.¹⁶ The arrival of the Age of Reason solidified this separation, leading Pinckaers to observe, “Under the influence of rationalism, we have too long believed that theology was a work of pure reason and prayer a matter of emotion.”¹⁷ And yet, such a separation undercuts the energizing center of the Christian life. Pinckaers continues, “The Christian cannot follow the way of the Beatitudes and virtues without the help of the Holy Spirit, and we cannot obtain this help without continual prayer.”¹⁸ Through the neglect of divine assistance, then, Christian ethicists risk “falling into the traps of legalism on the one hand and natural humanism on the other, to say nothing of

Burning Heart: Calvin and the Stoics on the Emotions,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 22 (2002): 133-162.

¹⁵ Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 206.

¹⁶ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 259-268.

¹⁷ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 163. For more history of this separation and recent efforts at reintegrating spirituality and ethics within Catholic moral theology, see the articles in *Ethics and Spirituality*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Lisa A. Fullam (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2014). In *Becoming Good, Becoming Holy: On the Relationship of Christian Ethics and Spirituality*, Mark O’Keefe offers another Catholic attempt at reunited these two disciplines (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995). To my knowledge, there is no equivalent treatment of Protestant ethics.

¹⁸ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 155.

the danger of Pelagianism.”¹⁹ Thus, Christian ethics lives within this legacy of its separation from dogmatics and spirituality, to its own detriment.

This is not to say, however, that prayer is and always will be innocent. Like any Christian practice, prayer has been subject to manifold distortions, including a long history of sacralizing violence and idolatry.²⁰ As Andrew Prevot notes, “Baptized and believing Christians who prayed to a nominally Christian God have murdered Jews, brutalized indigenous communities, let the poor starve and die, and sold shackled bodies to the highest bidder.”²¹ Lauren Winner offers an illuminative case, describing how slave-owning women in antebellum America prayed for the docility of their slaves and their own equability in the management of plantation households.²² Such prayer, Winner argues, “fixes the petitioner more firmly into an evil system,” deepening blindness to misdirected desires and complicity.²³ This is not to say that prayer should be abandoned, Winner insists, but that one should pray “knowing its potential for distortion.”²⁴

Gustavo Gutierrez also warns of a related distortion, reminiscent of Marx’s critique of religion. He too identifies “the kind of spiritualism that serves as a refuge from the troubles and sufferings of daily life.” Religious devotion lull people into acquiescence to injustice, medicating against real pain. However, Gutierrez insists that this is not the only

¹⁹ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 264.

²⁰ Prevot, *Thinking Prayer*, 27.

²¹ Prevot, *Thinking Prayer*, 27.

²² Lauren F. Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 69-76.

²³ Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, 86.

²⁴ Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, 61.

story. Rather, there is “the celebratory and contemplative dimension of peoples who find in the God of their faith the source of their demand for life and dignity.”²⁵ That is, spiritual practice can awaken people to the reality of their lives and galvanize political struggle.

Thus, we begin our extended reflection on prayer with a rather complex portrait of its contemporary situation. Kant and Marx denounce prayer as deceptive and irrational. Christian ethics neglects prayer given its historical separation from theology and spirituality. Finally, prayer also suffers its own distortions, giving credence to its critics. These preliminaries bear upon our reflections that follow, as we attend to how my participants make sense of why and how they pray, especially at the limits of moral agency.

2. Petitionary Prayer, Moral Deliberation, & Divine Indwelling

Roger Williams (50, Black, nondenominational) greeted me in the lobby of the early childhood center for low-income families. As I followed Roger through the hallway, I noticed carpeted classrooms opening in both directions, punctuated by children’s drawings and the occasional water fountain. Once we arrived in Roger’s office, we pulled black swivel chairs up to the oval conference table. Roger works here part-time as a consultant on programming for children with disabilities and behavioral issues. On the other days, he has a therapy practice.

²⁵ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. and ed. Sr. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), xxxii.

While working on his Bachelor of Science in Education, Roger taught high school history as a student teacher in another southeastern city. During that time, Roger recalls, “as I became more and more aware of the kind of struggles in their immediate neighborhoods and their immediate homes, it just seemed foolish to be teaching them about Western Europe.” After graduating, Roger worked in food distribution to pay the bills, “trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life.” He began reading books with Black first- and second-grade boys during the lunch hour as a volunteer, and then he was hired by a foster care agency. “I stumbled into social work,” Roger explains and has been in the field now for twenty-five years. According to Roger, this work is what he is “called to do” and “part of my ministry.”²⁶

Social-work decisions are difficult, Roger insists, because practitioners always start without enough resources to solve any problem. “I hate to put this in money terms, but that’s probably the easiest.” Take some problem, Roger continues, that “calls for 100% of some type of resource, but then you’re only able to garner 60% of that.” So, the social worker must decide which parts of the problem to tackle, based on an analysis of “which parts of the problem would yield the best result for the future.” But “you’re dealing with people,” which means “it’s not that cut and dry”: “mental health, behavioral health, social and emotional health, and it’s not that easy to quantify and to add up and calculate those things.”

²⁶ As Roger explains, “Social work is one of my acts of service in terms of my faith. God has given me a specific skill for it...I see it as part of my ministry...I just happen to get paid for it.”

Given these difficulties, I ask Roger how he approaches decisions at work, and he tells me that he prays.²⁷ As Roger puts it, “before I make a decision, I pray about it, after I’ve made a decision, I pray about it, sometimes in the midst of making a decision, I pray about it.” For example, when Roger must decide in the midst of a conversation, Roger tells me, “I can’t just ask you to stop, have a prayer break, and then get back to you.” So, he addresses God while also listening to his client: “Please, I have no idea how to help this person. Please give me some insight.” After that person leaves, he might “take a moment to pray and ask God to just please bless whatever this conversation that you and I had.”

Roger also insists on delaying decisions to allow for more prayer. If it is not an emergency, “judgments can wait,” Roger thinks. Especially if he faces a difficult dilemma, he hits the “pause button” and asks to call someone back in ten minutes or the following day or week. This way, Roger has “the opportunity to pray about it.” While some social workers think that requesting such a delay communicates incompetence, Roger asserts that real competence comes from “pick[ing] up the appropriate tool,” which in many occasions is a prayerful pause for deliberation. However, he adds that doesn’t typically tell people, “‘Let me pray about this,’ but ‘Let me think about this.’”

Roger also invites others to pray with him. Roger frequently recruits friends, his spouse, and even his kids to pray about people he works with, depending on the situation, he explains. Sometimes this includes prayer with colleagues at work. He points to the

²⁷ He prefaced his answer by acknowledging our shared Christian confession: “I don’t usually reveal this, because people don’t understand, but I thank you for this interview – you understand where I’m going with this.”

paper covering the window in the office door. “Every once in a while,” he tells me “we have a prayer session back here.” If there is a persistent issue, two ladies “go down the hall — we know who each other are — and grab two or three people,” depending on “who’s available,” and they pray about “what’s on your heart.”

Moreover, Roger also cites his belief that “the Holy Spirit is present.” Thus, in addition to his praying, his decisions also have “influence from the Holy Spirit.” Roger elaborates,

Because, I have that indwelling, right? And I believe that, and I rely on that. I’m absolutely dependent on it, right? So, in my dependence I see it in everything. I see it as interwoven in everything that I do, because of who I am and my relationship with Christ and my relationship with God.

The Holy Spirit also enables him to be compassionate and humble, he adds. “I don’t think you have to be a Christian to treat people well,” Roger observes, but being a Christian means that “even if you’re a naturally humble person...[you] understand that that’s part of your spirit that God gives you that is propped up by the Holy Spirit.” This recognition “does give you a different perspective.”

In his role as a therapist, some of his toughest decisions have been whether or not to involuntarily commit someone because of suicidal ideation. He points at me, explaining, “if I feel like you’re in real harm, I can pick up the phone, call the sheriff, and have you taken directly to [the hospital].” In emergencies like that, Roger notes, “You just have to render a decision, and I think what helps me with that is my prayer life and my faith.” He calls this his “faith approach”:

I have a deep faith that ultimately, whatever happens, is not in my hands. So that actually...gives me a lot of relief in terms of making decisions, because if I pray about it, and I make the very best decisions that I possibly can, then whatever the result’s going to be, then that’s what it’s going to be. And I’m ok with that because of praying about it. Now, sometimes the result is not comforting, or it’s

not satisfactory to me, but I just believe in the long term...if I don't get the immediate outcome that I'm looking for, then again, ultimately, I'm not in charge of that person's timeline...I'm asking God for the best solution in this situation, so whatever happened here, if by faith I believe that God hears my prayers and I believe that he is ordering these things to happen, then whatever this outcome is here is going to be ultimately beneficial for that person in the future where I can't see.

Even if Roger makes a mistake in his decision, he has a “deep faith” that “the Guy that I serve can work that out.” Because of this, prayer “relieves the pressure” and reminds him to be “humble and understand that I'm not the decider.”

Roger also talks about praying when we discuss burnout and compassion fatigue. He tells me about a group of men at his church who pray for him. “I can text right now to tell them that, ‘Dude, I'm over the edge. I'm standing on the edge right now.’ And either they'll call up and pray with me – I think prayer helps me a lot – and they advise me. They let me know when I'm piling on too much.” He also prays daily with his wife and two children. “Another thing in terms of compassion burnout,” Roger continues, “sometimes I just literally have to pray and cry about it, because sometimes I see things that I can't do anything about.” He cites meetings with “parents who will not comply with what we're asking them,” when their children have “pretty extreme” behavior, such as “hitting teachers, hitting other children.”

I've sat at this table and told them, ‘If you can't follow these directives, then they cannot come back to this school.’ And that's difficult, right? Because I want their children here, but the parent won't do what they're supposed to do, therefore the child won't do what he's supposed to do...Those are hard on me. I have to pray through those, just to realize that I do have a reason and I'm not being mean to them. It feels like it, but I'm not.

Roger thinks this is part of his responsibility, preparing parents and students for public school: “when people have the capacity to understand, I do believe that God does hold me accountable for letting people know [the truth].”

My other participants follow Roger: petitionary prayers for both themselves and service-users crowd their descriptions of their work. In the first instance, they pray for themselves when they are, with Roger, “standing on the edge” with nothing more that they can do. They also pray when they are exhausted, overwhelmed, in distress, and against hopelessness. They ask God for help in bearing up under the pressures of their work and to meet the particular demands of the day. This includes general prayers, as one shared, “Help me be better in my role as a social worker,” or particular requests, uttered on the way to see a patient, “Give me the peace, patience, gentleness that I need to be able to help this individual.”

Prayers for themselves also frequently entail their ability to care well for others. Like Roger’s petitions for guidance, these prayers often concern service-users. They ask for clear thinking, wisdom, to know what to say, for direction in how to handle a situation. As we heard from Melissa in Chapter One, her “constant question” is “calling on, ok God...what am I supposed to do?” Amy from Chapter Three describes these sorts of prayers as “problem-solve pray[ing]”: “I have this problem; please help this person.”

Finally, they also pray directly for the wellbeing of service-users, without reference to themselves, especially when service-users are in trouble or in danger. They pray for their needs to be met, for healing, for knowing they are loved, to be reconciled with God. Studies of social workers show that this variety of prayer is widespread, with as many as 72% praying privately for clients.²⁸ All told, while my participants mention

²⁸ Chris Stewart, “Personal religiosity and Spirituality Associated with Social Work Practitioners’ Use of Religious-Based Intervention Practices,” *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work* 25.1 (2006): 74. Stewart also found that 29% have prayed or meditated with a client directly.

other varieties of prayer (including praise, thanksgiving, confession, and contemplative silence), petition predominates.

In this, Roger and my participants share with Karl Barth an emphasis on prayer as “simply asking.”²⁹ Barth identifies petition as “the constitutive element in what takes place in prayer.”³⁰ For Barth, the Christian “simply turn[s] to God who has drawn so near to him...with the intention that God should give to him, and that he should receive from God, all that is necessary to his situation...[and that which] only God can really give to him.”³¹ As illustrated by Roger’s petitions for assistance, the pray-er approaches God with “privation and desire,” standing with “empty hands.”³² Such asking, Barth thinks, is the “most necessary and natural expression” of the Christian life.³³

As we saw, Roger’s petitions also animate his moral deliberation. God has called him to social work, to Christian ministry within this particular sphere, and this summons to action leads him back to God in prayer. When Roger asks God, “Please give me

For a review of other quantitative studies, see Michael J. Sheridan, “Ethical Issues in the Use of Prayer in Social Work: Implications for Professional Practice and Education,” *Families in Society: the Journal of Contemporary Social Services* 91.2 (2010), 113. In contrast to Stewart, Sheridan found that 55% prayed for clients and 33% prayed or mediated with clients (114).

²⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3*, edited by T. F. Torrance and G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 268, hereafter designated as *CD* followed by volume number. Later, Barth writes, “The only possible status of the creature in this matter is that of one who asks...Asking is the only thing that he can do, the only spontaneous response that he can make. When he asks for it, when he says to God: I have not, and Thou hast; Therefore give me what Thou hast and I have not, he acknowledges and magnifies God Himself as the Giver” (274).

³⁰ Barth, *CD III.3*, 267.

³¹ Barth, *CD III.3*, 269.

³² Barth, *CD III.4*, 91, 97.

³³ Barth, *CD III.3*, 270.

insight” for how “to help this person,” he asks an ethical question. He does not deliberate on his own but does so in dialogue with God. Against the modern dismissal of prayer recounted in Section One, Roger assumes that ethical deliberation is also always a matter for prayer. Contra Kant and Marx, he deems human reason to be insufficient to direct his judgment alone. He is “dealing with people,” and “it’s not that cut and dry.” Behavioral, mental, and emotional health resist straightforward calculation and prediction, and so he turns to Another with reasoning abilities exceeding his own.

In stitching together prayer and ethics, Roger again points us towards Karl Barth. As we noted in Section One, few Christian ethicists incorporate prayer into their accounts of the moral life. Barth, however, represents an exception.³⁴ In addition to insisting that “Dogmatics itself is ethics; and ethics is also dogmatics,” Barth understands prayer as central to this integration.³⁵ In his commentary on Barth’s ethics, Gerald McKenny notes, “For Barth, the characteristic ethical question – ‘What should we do?’ – is a question asked of God in prayer.”³⁶ The answer comes only as an answer to the

³⁴ In his *Ethics as Theology* trilogy, Oliver O’Donovan also models the integration of moral theology and spiritual theology. In conversation with Barth, he too offers an account of prayer in the moral life. As he notes, “Developed and self-conscious moral thinking begins and ends by calling on God.” *Self, World, and Time: Ethics as Theology I* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2013), 38.

³⁵ Barth, *CD* 1:2, 793. The bulk of Barth’s treatment on prayer occurs in III.3, §49 and III.4, §53. While he mentions prayer on a little over a hundred of 9,000 pages, its theological significance outweighs its limited treatment. Barth also wrote elsewhere on prayer, including a collection of sermons titled *Prayer*, 2nd edition (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985) and the posthumously published fragments in *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV.4: Lecture Fragments*, ed. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981). Here he organizes the Christian life as invocation, a calling upon God, through an exposition of baptism, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Lord’s Supper (xi).

³⁶ Gerald McKenny, *Analogy of Grace: Karl Barth’s Moral Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 237.

creature's question addressed to God.³⁷ McKenny continues, "Barth thus transforms ethical deliberation into a spiritual practice – not in the sense of a technique of self-formation but rather an encounter with God...he returns ethics to the spiritual life – specifically, to the practice of self-examination before God – from which modern ethics extricated it."³⁸ Thus, dogmatics as ethics is insufficient. A further component is needed: spiritual practice. Prayer bridges talk about God and the good life, coordinating divine call with human response, and human question with divine response.³⁹ So too with Roger.

In fact, Roger models what we might call a prayer-infused practical reason. In praying, he learns how to interpret the world around him for the sake of action. As Alasdair MacIntyre explains, this skill arises from "complex social interactions with others."⁴⁰ Roger has expanded these interactions to include God. When he must decide

³⁷ In *Analogy of Grace*, McKenny notes, "the answer to the ethical question comes not as knowledge possessed by a human subject but as the answer to her prayer" (9-10). Later, McKenny returns to this point, "in the act of sincerely asking after this knowledge [of the rightness and goodness of actions and of ourselves in our actions] we know (*kennen*) the command of God as something we must receive from God and put ourselves in position to hear. This position is precisely the position of prayer, and prayer for Barth is the paradigmatically responsible moral act" (92).

³⁸ McKenny, *Analogy of Grace*, 237-238. "After Eden, legitimate ethical inquiry can only take the form of prayer" (102). John Webster reaches a similar conclusion on Barth's account of prayer: "prayer allows the Church to discern the particular response required in a particular context. Ethics is therefore as much a spiritual exercise for Barth as it is one of human action." *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 170.

³⁹ Sarah Coakley too gestures at the integration of theology and ethics as realized through prayer. In contrast from Barth's focus on petition, however, Coakley centers contemplative prayer, which offers an avenue for purifying human judgments and assimilating doctrine. *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity,'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 87.

⁴⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 14. In *Entering in to Rest*, Oliver O'Donovan draws upon Romans 12:3 to describe practical reason this way: to "think about thinking judiciously" for the sake of

whether to involuntarily commit someone to psychiatric treatment, he asks God for “the best solution.” There are procedures, to be sure, but these are insufficient for guiding his action. Thus, Roger silently addresses God in the middle of an assessment: “Please, I have no idea how to help this person. Please give me some insight.” He asks God to aid him in the particulars: how might he assist *this* person. Thus, like Melissa in Chapter One, he invites God to illuminate his deliberations on how to act.

Prayer also provides a forum for stepping back from his past actions, to evaluate his reasons and desires. When Roger bars a child from receiving services, he prays, recalling to God why he did so, namely, to hold parents accountable. Through bringing his decision before God, he remembers his justification for action: not for arbitrary control but for the good of the child and her parents. Even as Roger exercises his disproportionate power in the professional helping relationship, he does so with awareness of God as present to him in prayer, as available for counsel and moral reflection.

Roger’s understanding of moral deliberation as prayerful dialogue with God follows from his conviction of divine action in history. O’Donovan describes this dynamic as follows: “Prayer is the form thought takes when we understand that agency implies a relation to the government of the universe, at once cooperative and dependent. It is precisely as prayer that moral responsibility may be assumed.”⁴¹ Thus, as Roger

“practical service...concrete deliberations differentiated by the variety of gifts and offices” (21). Moreover, in contrast to theoretical reason, practical reason always “terminates in the decision to act...in relation to a context in the world” (23).

⁴¹ O’Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, 38-39.

discerns his action, he coordinates what he is doing with what God is doing. In particular, Roger understands that God (the Spirit) is acting within him and God (unspecified divine Person) is acting in history.⁴² We focus on the first dimension of divine action here, leaving the latter for the following section.

Roger insists on the centrality of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit for his decision-making and for empowering virtuous action. “The Holy Spirit is present...influenc[ing his decisions],” and Roger is “absolutely dependent” on the Holy Spirit “indwelling” him. In addition to decision-making, Roger also attributes his ability to be kind and humble to the Spirit. His natural capacities are a divine gift, “propped up by the Holy Spirit.” Thus, Roger confesses his dependence on God, present to him in the Third Person of the Trinity. He decides and acts only because God makes it possible.

Roger’s avowal of his absolute dependence on divine upholding fits with traditions of Christian theology: God founds the creature and her powers.⁴³ Namely, Roger exists and acts only insofar as God upholds him through God’s creative agency.⁴⁴ In confessing his reliance upon God, Roger accepts this as a feature of his life, as

⁴² Roger’s recognition of these two actions is itself a grace from God. As Barth writes, the Word enables the creature’s recognition of God, and the creature awaits “the revelation of his own Lord as the Lord also of world-occurrence.” *CD III.3*, 249-250. We might also add a further feature of Roger’s dependency, not developed by Roger himself. Namely, the indwelling Spirit makes prayer possible in the first place (cf. Romans 8:25-27, see also Barth, *CD III.4*, 94).

⁴³ Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988), 84-85.

⁴⁴ As Tanner notes, “The theologian should talk of created efficacy as immediately and entirely grounded in the creative agency of God” (91).

descriptive of who he is.⁴⁵ According to Barth, this acknowledgement is the only thing that distinguishes the Christian from others: Roger “says Yes to being a creature.”⁴⁶ The recognition of dependency counters the human temptation towards “continual illusions...want[ing] always to be more than a creature.”⁴⁷ Given Roger’s disproportionate power in the helping relationship, it is precisely at this juncture of decision where this temptation is most acute. Paternalism abandons this recognition of shared creatureliness, presuming instead to be superior to the neighbor. In contrast, to be a creature is to depend on God’s help and thus also to ask for it, reaffirming Roger’s commitment to petition.⁴⁸

Furthermore, Roger locates this divine action inside of himself. God the Spirit indwells him and thus works *within* Roger’s deliberations and inclinations, not in addition to them.⁴⁹ Kathryn Tanner describes this dynamic thus: “God brings forth the operations of created causes by working interiorly, in their depths...God operates from within created causes, in the very place from which their operations arise.”⁵⁰ Roger uses

⁴⁵ And by doing so, Barth thinks that he thus becomes a “true creature,” “renouncing all claim to distinction” and “laying aside all claim to self-glory,” *CD III.3*, 240. “[T]he creature is always in need to the extent that in all its manifestations and experiences it always stands in need of its Creator as the only powerful Giver,” *CD III.4*, 95.

⁴⁶ Barth, *CD III.3*, 240. “[H]e accepts and affirms the fact that he is only a creaturely subject like the others” (240). Elsewhere, Barth puts it this way: “The only advantage ‘we’ have over the world around us is that we know that He is our Lord and theirs too, and that we may use the access to God which He has opened up for both us and them,” *CD III.4*, 102.

⁴⁷ Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology*, 240.

⁴⁸ In *Analogy of Grace*, McKenny notes, the Christian life is one of “vigilance and prayer, lived in constant awareness of our dependence on God’s grace” (63-64).

⁴⁹ Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology*, 94.

⁵⁰ Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology*, 95.

the language of “influence” to name this dynamic. On Tanner’s account, however, this description mistakenly implies that Roger possesses some sphere of action independent from God’s action.⁵¹ Given Roger’s insistence on seeing the Spirit’s indwelling “in everything” and that he is “absolutely dependent on it,” we can guess that he would accept Tanner’s correction. Either way, Roger understands God to be active within his moral deliberations and actions because of his faith in the Spirit’s indwelling.

In the following portrait, we take up the second way in which Roger coordinates divine and human agency. Roger’s “faith approach” looks to God’s action not only interior to his decisions but also in history, caring for his clients in response to his prayers. As we will see, Roger is not alone in this conviction.

3. Providence, Outcomes, & Finite Responsibility

We met Amanda Little (36, white, Episcopalian) at the opening of Chapter One. While seated in her narrow office in the underbelly of a large hospital, she recounted then how her passion for social work “comes from God.” She has a “sense of calling to love those that might be difficult to love...a sense of calling to the least of these.” She endeavors to respond to this invitation each day, supporting children with chronic illnesses and their families.

Later in our interview, Amanda tells me how she frequently prays about work, while on the job and at home. Sometimes, she explains, “I’ll just say a prayer, even in the midst of working with people, like ‘I’m not really sure what to say,’ or ‘Help me here.’” At night, she prayerfully reviews the day: “sometimes I experience this sense of

⁵¹ Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology*, 95.

God being with me in that [challenging scenario].” Other times she experiences God’s correction or directing her with new ideas. She also “give[s] thanks to God for his help and for his presence.” Summarizing, Amanda explains that prayer makes possible “a resting and a knowing that I don’t have to be in control, and that I’m doing what I know is best to help and that I have to rest in knowing that I can’t see that God will water and bring to fruition.”

Sometimes Amanda’s decisions are caught between balancing a family’s wishes and her sense of a child’s best interest, concerning medical treatment, sex education, or the age of disclosing an illness to a child. In these situations, Amanda prays: “I will bring those before God and ask for help in knowing how to act, and I [will] sense a guiding from the Holy Spirit.” She shared the story of working with a family that, while very loving, declined to put their child on medication necessary for his immune system. Amanda wrestled with whether or not to report medical neglect to Child Protective Services. She turned to God for guidance. She recalled her prayer: “God, what should I do? I don’t want to cause more harm, but I also do not feel like they’re attending to his medical needs, and he could die” – not immediately, she added, but eventually. She also discussed the scenario with a Christian colleague. From prayer and this consultation, Amanda felt

a peace, moving forward, making that report, just trusting that, I think ultimately, in all the work that I do, I’m not God, and I don’t know the future, and I’m trying my best, and I’m trying to support people, and yet I find a peace in knowing that ultimately God is in control, and he cares a lot more for these people, even more than I do, that he wants what’s best for them, and will ultimately be in control of how things turn out for them all.

She also observes God at work in her work. Tears, in particular, indicate to Amanda that “something’s happening.” When patients cry, Amanda thinks “those can be

holy moments,” and she prays silently, “God, be in this moment. Help me know what to say. How to provide comfort.” She also senses God’s assistance when she convenes meetings with families in the aftermath of painful events, such as a child’s attempted suicide. Those meetings are “scary and hard,” weighed down by “a lot of heaviness,” and yet Amanda feels “a sense of God’s help in it.”

Amanda joins Roger in uniting moral deliberation and prayer. She too discerns what God’s command looks like in the particular and relies upon dialogue with God to do so. At the close of the day, she reviews her day in prayer, sensing God’s correction and comfort, and then looks ahead to the next day, attentive to God’s direction. When she faces a decision about her patients, she turns to God for assistance. She asks, “God, what should I do?” When recalling one case of whether to make a CPS report, she weighs the options with God: “I don’t want to cause more harm, but I also do not feel like they’re attending to his medical needs.” With prayer and consultation, she tries to make the best decision possible. However, she is “not God,” she does not have to be “in control,” and she does not know the future. In contrast, God cares for her patients (“even more than I do”), God “wants what’s best for them,” and God “will ultimately be in control of how things turn out for them.” While she cannot see how “God will water and bring to fruition,” she “trust[s]” that God’s care reaches into the future. Thus, she can “rest” in this knowledge and find “peace.” In prayer, Amanda marks the limits of her action; she can only do so much. Even as she confesses this, however, she finds solace in looking towards divine action that does not share her limits.

Amanda’s formulation here closely resembles Roger’s. Roger too insists that he does his best for others but still looks to God, who is “in charge of that person’s

timeline.” This gives Roger “a lot of relief.” Even when outcomes are “not comforting” or “not satisfactory,” Roger still believes “by faith” that God hears his prayers, and that God is “ordering these things to happen,” such that the outcomes will be “ultimately beneficial for that person in the future where I can’t see.” Even if he makes a mistake, he trusts in divine reparations. God labors in the wake of flawed human judgments, adjusting and rearranging, turning wrong on its head.

Thus, with Roger, Amanda makes peace with the limits of her moral agency through invoking a doctrine of providence. Not only did God create the world, but God also actively sustains and accompanies it as the Lord of history.⁵² In this, Amanda echoes a long history of Christian reflection. Divine providence is, in O’Donovan’s words, “something simply to *believe*.”⁵³ Amanda cannot see into the future, and her prayers reach beyond these confines, entrusting her clients to divine care. Such hope, O’Donovan continues, is “a matter of faith, not of sight, that the whole of history leads patiently towards the end that crowns it, God working everything together for good, and to discern that shape in history is to hold to a promise, not to look through the historical records.”⁵⁴

⁵² As Barth notes, “The simple meaning of the doctrine of providence may thus be summed up in the statement that in the act of creation God the Creator as such has associated Himself with His creature as such as the Lord of its history, and is faithful to it as such.” *CD III.3*, 12.

⁵³ Oliver O’Donovan, *Entering into Rest: Ethics as Theology 3* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017), 95. Or as Augustine puts it, God is “the highest, and the nearest, most hidden and most present.” *Confessions*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: New American Library, 1963), 6.3. And Barth’s version: God’s presence in history is both “real” but “concealed.” *CD III.3*, 19.

⁵⁴ O’Donovan, *Entering into Rest*, 96. Barth makes the same point: “the history of God’s glory...is a hidden history, which is neither felt, seen, known, nor dialectically perceived by man, but can only be believed on the basis of this Word of God.” *CD III.3*, 19.

Amanda's hope in God's past, present, and future care directly follows her confession of creaturely dependency. Amanda is "not God" and not in control, and this is good news. God is the source of the world's processes. According to Barth, while all creatures experience God's providence, the Christian subject consents to them. This represents a double 'yes': the Christian welcomes God's rule *and* creatureliness. Together, this constitutes Amanda's participation in God's lordship "from within."⁵⁵ As with Roger's account of the Spirit's indwelling, we find two distinct but cooperative agencies here, divine and human, with Amanda acting within God's action.

Given Amanda's insistence on the ultimate, her account of providence also carries eschatological overtones. God is not only the Lord of history but also the Lord of time. Thus, as Charles Mathewes notes, while Amanda must live "in time," she need not be "content with(in) this dispensation as conclusive."⁵⁶ To be clear, Amanda is not hoping for an imminent apocalypse but a beneficial future for service-users, ensured through divine oversight.

While proponents of eschatological language frequently emphasize its creative and critical leverage on existing social arrangements, Amanda is not here calling the status quo into question.⁵⁷ She is, rather, insisting on the finitude of her responsibility for

⁵⁵ Barth, *CD III.3*, 242.

⁵⁶ Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 17. Eschatological imagination communicates the hope that "things today are not ultimately as they will be" (38). As O'Donovan adds, "the teleology of classical ethics is drawn, in a Christian context, inexorably into the magnetic field of eschatology." *Entering into Rest*, viii.

⁵⁷ For example, see Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life*, 35 and R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 168-170.

others and the outcomes of her decisions, given her hope in divine justice and care.

Amanda looks for a gratuitous intervention from outside creaturely powers. She need not be the salvific agent who ensures ultimate benefit for patients; only God can guarantee this finality.

Roger and Amanda's appeal to God's providential care is largely unpalatable to modern sensibilities, appearing as an abdication of responsibility. Kant and Marx's critiques of prayer render Roger's "relief" and Amanda's "peace" in the wake of their prayers as deceptive and childish. For Kant, such prayers fulfill no moral duty and accomplish nothing. For Marx, the offense is even deeper: when they send off a CPS report or go through with an involuntary commitment, they accommodate to a system that brutalizes people, and they fool themselves in thinking that they are not directly responsible for these outcomes.

Philosopher J. B. Schneewind illustrates this withdrawal of social responsibility due to a belief in God's ongoing intervention. He describes a "divine corporation," where a perfect supervisor delegates tasks to employees for the production of a supremely important yet complex good. However, the employees cannot understand or achieve this good alone, so they depend upon the supervisor to assign duties, rectify errors, and close gaps.⁵⁸ The workers must simply perform their tasks, relieved of responsibility beyond their restricted duties. Schneewind concludes that Christian

⁵⁸ J. B. Schneewind, "The Divine Corporation and the history of ethics," in *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, ed. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). As Schneewind puts it, "individual responsibility for the successful outcome of a joint endeavor varies inversely [with] the complexity of the enterprise and the perfection of the director" (180).

confidence in “constant providential supervision of life” works this way: human beings recuse themselves when they believe God to be taking care of things.⁵⁹ Conversely, when belief in God’s action wains, human responsibility grows.

At stake here is a judgment about human capacities. Amanda and Roger determine that they are simply unable to guarantee others’ life outcomes. As Roger notes, when working with people, “it’s not that easy to quantify and to add up and calculate those things.” Despite this, however, the social work profession has endorsed a trajectory that prioritizes measurable outcomes, especially in the form of evidence-based practices. While valuable for ensuring the quality of services, this emphasis also risks what James D. Whitworth and colleagues call the “results trap.”⁶⁰ In these cases, social workers “assume too much responsibility for the results of their work and/or they start to believe that they can truly control their client’s outcomes.”⁶¹ Practitioners fail to recognize their own limits, and stress and burnout often ensue.⁶²

Thus, while Schneewind is concerned with the evasion of human responsibility, Whitworth et. al. insists on the dangers of social workers taking on too much responsibility.⁶³ This returns us yet again to the problem of discerning the limits of moral

⁵⁹ Schneewind, “The Divine Corporation,” 185.

⁶⁰ James D. Whitworth, Chris Stewart, and Randall Woodward, “Managing the Results Trap: Resources Drawn from the Integration of Spirituality, Religion, and Practice,” *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 38.2 (2019), 217-218.

⁶¹ Whitworth, et. al., “Managing the Results Trap,” 230. “This belief then leads to an overemphasis on trying to control client outcomes along with a subsequent feeling of accountability for their client’s choices and eventual consequences of those choices,” 218.

⁶² Whitworth, et. al., “Managing the Results Trap,” 230.

⁶³ John Hare offers an alternative strategy for countering Schneewind’s portrait. He writes, “as far as I can see, there is no way to determine whether this movement [of decreasing divine

agency. Certainly, Amanda and Roger bear some responsibility for the decisions they make regarding others' good. Retrospective assessment of their judgments ought to concern not only their truth but also their success.⁶⁴ However, when Amanda and Roger are facing such a decision, they peer into an unknown future, without the insight gained from such a retrospective weighing of results. At this juncture, they acknowledge their limited capacities for forecasting outcomes. To think otherwise would indeed be its own illusion.⁶⁵ Indeed, MacIntyre identifies "managerial effectiveness" as a "moral fiction," claiming a kind of predictive knowledge that is not humanly possible.⁶⁶

Some participants relate these agentive limits with their vocation. For example, Martha Todd, who we met at the beginning of Chapter Two, explains that she stays in the work even though the outcomes are disappointing, because "it's a calling for me." She continues, "when we're called, we're not called for the results, we're called to do the

responsibility and increasing human responsibility] is progress towards a desirable kind of autonomy without settling first whether there is a God who has created us and rules the world providentially...If there is, and we decline to regard ourselves as God's subjects, this is not a desirable form of autonomy but a form of foolishness." *God's Call: Moral Realism, Divine Command, and Human Autonomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 117-118.

⁶⁴ Oliver O'Donovan writes, "An act of judgment may therefore be assessed by the success of its outcome, as well as by the truth of its pronouncement" (8). Moreover, he insists that truth and effectiveness are not alternatives (9). *The Ways of Judgment: The Bampton Lectures, 2003* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

⁶⁵ In *Ways of Judgment*, O'Donovan writes, "Human action is always subject to limits that make it fall short of its intellectual conception, and the action of political authorities, despite the illusion of being able to transcend limits, is peculiarly subject to them" (29).

⁶⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 75. Such claims are based in "factual law-like generalizations" for producing "casual explanations and predictions by means of which the manager could mold, influence and control the social environment" (77). MacIntyre continues, "the Enlightenment's mechanistic account of human action included both a thesis about the predictability of human behavior and a thesis about the appropriate ways to manipulate human behavior" (84).

process, to do what we're called to do. And then it's up to God, and that person, that individual, what the results will be." Thus, Martha insists on accompanying people, as a response to God's invitation to love, regardless of results. We return to this relationship between vocation and discerning the bounds of finite responsibility in the following section.

Before we do, however, Amanda offers us a final insight. As she discerns the scope of her powers, she does not give up on caring at those limits. Even as she renounces being in control over future outcomes, she persists in prayer. Thus, she assumes a moral responsibility of another kind: to ask for God to "water and bring to fruition." Although a patient has exited her immediate care, she asks for divine care, and in this, against Kant, she accomplishes something indeed.⁶⁷

Admittedly, we have not addressed the full weight of Marx's critique here, namely, that prayer can lend support for dehumanizing systems. We take this question up further in the following portrait, as well as the role of God's call in proportioning human responsibilities.

4. Discerning Vocation, Human Capacities, & God's Presence

I meet Katie Barclay (31, white, Mennonite) in the parish hall of a church letting me host interviews there. She is wearing black-rimmed glasses with her hair pulled back into a long braid. Katie grew up Presbyterian, she begins, although now she worships at

⁶⁷ For the sake of focusing on human limits, this chapter says little about the *mechanics* of prayer itself, that is, how God freely incorporates the human prayer in God's action. As one participant explains, by "praying for his will to be done, God is giving you a way to work with him, so that his will is done, because it's not always done in this world. It's a fallen world. But when you pray for his will to be done, that gives God a way to work." For more, see Barth, *CD* III.3, 284-288.

a Mennonite church. She recounts how after college, she wanted to go to seminary but decided to volunteer with AmeriCorps first. During this time, she worked in early childhood services, and she “started to realize, *oh* – what social workers actually did.” Thus, after concluding her several-year AmeriCorps stint, she earned a dual MDiv/MSW and since then has been in the field for three years, focusing on homeless children and early intervention. She currently coordinates children’s services at a homeless shelter. This includes afternoon and evening children’s programming, behavioral management for children in group settings, supporting children’s case management, helping families connect with mental health providers, and recruiting and managing volunteers.

Katie understands social work to be “the call of my life right now and an expression of ministry.” However, she continues,

I do also feel that there’s some forms of social work that may not be expressions of Christianity to the extent that it’s not focused on the person but focused on the institution...The work that I’m doing right now very much intersects, and I think if I were trying to do something different within the field of social work, it may not.

To weigh her engagement with various kinds of social work tasks, Katie asks herself, “Does God want me to spend my heart beats on this?” For example, “when I’m spending 75% of my time copying the same paperwork five times over, and poring over it, and making sure that I copied it to this fifth place and not just the first four, that to me feels like poor stewardship.” The issue here, she concludes, is when her energies are “focused more on pleasing our funders than the people in front of us.”

Katie identified institutional delays as one of the more frustrating aspects of her work. Her personality, she told me, “tends more towards institutional burnout than compassion fatigue.” For her, working in shelter environment means, “I’m more likely to

be overwhelmed by institutional structures that I am by the things that families are holding...my faith has equipped me to hold these stories in a way that it hasn't quite equipped me to be like, 'I just want to buy some paper plates. How long do I have to wait?'" Or "'Why is it taking you three months to refer this four-year-old who's not talking?'" And I can't do anything about it."

Given the pressures of the work, Katie has been "very, very intentional...to develop spiritual practices." While she was in AmeriCorps, she worked three eleven-hour shifts then, so she had regular time "to focus on that formation" and to develop "certain habits of the heart." She would "set aside that [morning] time for intercessory prayer" to "pray for families." She also learned how to pray "in the thick of it." She gave me a recent example. When a child was yelling expletives at the shelter the night before, "in that moment, I can remember to tap into prayer as I'm saying, 'We use kind words in this space, but your behavior is telling me you need your mom right now.'" These prayers are brief, Katie continues, "God give me the words," or "God help me to see the beauty of this person," or "God give me wisdom." Katie smiles, "When you're in the immediacy of it, you don't have time for complex sentences."

Her spiritual practices have also changed over time. While in AmeriCorps, she also focused on silence and "using different parts of my brain and heart...to be intentional about honoring those parts of myself as well." This included reading scripture in the daily office, needlework, and cultivating friendships with others who "feel a strong call to solidarity with the poor." More recently, she has adopted some new spiritual practices, including involvement in a small community garden and preaching at her local congregation. "To do work that's not necessarily child-focus, remind[s] me that this

work [namely, social work] is a big part of who I am, but it's not all of who I am." She also now prays the beatitudes at lunch, "just reminding myself of who I want to be in that space," and has recently added the fruits of the Spirit.

Her praying also extends to what she calls "extreme gratitude." These are the occasions of "Oh, yes!" Katie explains. Like when "this mom who doesn't have the intellectual capacity to remember to change her child's diaper has got a home visitor who's going to come in once a week and to help work with her on creating checklists." She notes that "the gratitude and the petitions are held together."

When I ask Katie if she ever senses God's presence or activity in her work, she says, "Very slowly. All we really do is plant seeds." She cites a prayer which became important to her while in AmeriCorps. It was written in memory of Oscar Romero and part of the Compline Office she prayed then: "Prophets of a Future Not Our Own."⁶⁸ Katie paraphrases: "The basic gist is that all we ever do is this teeny-tiny part of this much larger plan that God has in place. I try to hold on to the moments when I'm like, 'Wow! This teeny-tiny thing, this child is saying a new word...[or] seeing kids being really happy.'"

⁶⁸ A selection of the prayer reads as follows, "We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us...We plant the seeds that one day will grow...We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest." The US Catholic Bishops note that the prayer was presented by Cardinal Dearden in 1979 and written by then-Fr. Ken Untener who later became bishop of Saginaw, Michigan in 1980. Pope Francis quoted the prayer in 2015. Accessed <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/prophets-of-a-future-not-our-own>.

Katie also describes two extended examples of seeing God at work. She recalls working with one girl who “really, really struggled with very strong tantrums every day.” Another staff person with a background in counseling reminded this child, “You have a choice. This is a choice you’re making. Was this a good choice or a bad choice?” This staff person gave her words, Katie explains, to be able to reflect on her action, and over time, it began to bear fruit. “I remember hearing her say at one point, ‘Oh I made a bad choice.’” On another occasion, she was working with a mother with “developmental challenges” at the shelter who frequently threatened her young sons with sending them to jail when they misbehaved. After one instance where they were hitting each other, Katie pulled in the mom to discuss the incident, “Do you have any idea why they might be so upset?” The mother replied, “Well, they thought they were going to see their dad today, and he’s in jail and might be going to prison for ten years, and so they’re probably disappointed about that today.” Hearing this reply, rather than the threat to send them to jail, was another moment: “the whole shelter system was enabling her to do a little more reflection work.” Katie recaps, “I see God in very teeny-tiny things, but I’ve very grateful for them when I do.” She adds, “all these people are held by God, and that I’m one tiny part, but ultimately God will be the one caring for them and providing for them. I think that helped me hold my own work more gently and lightly.”

By praying, Katie becomes attuned to the limits of her agency, in relation to divine agency. Like Roger and Amanda, Katie also petitions God in the midst of interactions. She asks God for words, wisdom, and to perceive another person’s beauty, and she also sets aside time for praying privately for service-users. Like Amanda, she also describes forms of prayer beyond petition. These include expressions of gratitude,

silence, and praying scripture in the daily office and during her lunch hour. Katie understands this final form of prayer to remind herself of “who I want to be in that space.” Her prayers have a pedagogical dimension, shaping the person that she will become. In describing the range of spiritual practices that she adopts for her own “formation,” Katie uses the word “intentional” six times.

Anthropological studies of prayer focus on this self-fashioning function that Katie identifies. For example, the prayers of American charismatic Christian women, Egyptian Muslim women, postulants in a Mexican convent, and recovering addicts in a Russian Orthodox-run rehabilitation program all coincide to shape religious and social identities.⁶⁹ Thus, Saba Mahmood concludes that for her Egyptian subjects, ritualized prayer provides a “necessary means to the realization of a pious self” and “a teleological program of self-formation.”⁷⁰ Jared Zigon too observes that prayer offers “a significant ethical technique” for rebuilding the self.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 13, 75; Rebecca Lester, *Jesus in our Wombs: Embodying Modernity in a Mexican Convent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 198-205; Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Jarrett Zigon's *HIV is God's Blessing: Rehabilitating Morality in Neoliberal Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

⁷⁰ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 128.

⁷¹ Zigon, *HIV is God's Blessing*, 118. This interest in spiritual practices draws much of its interpretative power from Michel Foucault's technologies of the self. In an interview near the end of his life, Foucault described an “exercise of self upon self by which one tries to work out, to transform one's self and to attain a certain mode of being.” “The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom: An Interview with Michel Foucault on January 20, 1984,” conducted by Raul Fornet-Betancourt, Helmut Becker, and Alfredo Gomez-Muller, translated by J. D. Gauthier, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 12.2-3 (1987), 113. For more examples of religious and ethical work on the self, see Talal Asad's *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1993) and Michelle Molina's

Katie also understands her prayers as moving her towards becoming a certain kind of person. In asking for the fruits of the Spirit and the Beatitudes, Katie requests divine assistance for acquiring a litany of attributes, including love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, humility, hunger for righteousness, mercy, and purity. Furthermore, Katie's prayers coach her to discover the limits of her moral agency. In particular, she refers to a prayer which "became important to [her]" while in AmeriCorps, paraphrasing it this way: "all we ever do is this teeny-tiny part of this much larger plan that God has in place." She prays this at the close of every day, recalling that her work that day rests within God's much greater work. Her praying reminds her that "all these people are held by God," and she plays only "one tiny part." Like Roger and Amanda, she also reassures herself that despite her finite role, she can hope in divine care: "ultimately God will be the one caring for them and providing for them," and thus, she can "hold [her] own work more gently and lightly."

Katie's language here returns us to the theistic account of vocation we developed in Chapter One. Theologians that we considered there also correlate God's calling with human limits. Barth explains that vocation is a "special limitation and restriction"⁷² and "limited thing which He [God] will have of him [God's creature]."⁷³ Calvin too invokes "limits" and "bounds" placed on a person by God's calling, so that "no one, impelled by

To Overcome Oneself: The Jesuit Ethic and Spirit of Global Expansion, 1520-1767 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

⁷² Barth, *CD III/4*, 597.

⁷³ Barth, *CD III/4*, 595.

his own rashness, will attempt more than his call will permit.”⁷⁴ Adams develops this theme in a way that closely resembles Katie’s own account: there is

a single project for the world, God’s project, that is prior to any of our projects; and each of us is to take a part in it. We are responsible only for our part; there are outcomes that are other people’s responsibility, or God’s, in a way that limits our responsibility.⁷⁵

Thus, God’s assignment not only gives Katie work to do, but it also demarcates its limits.

Thus, she is free to do the good she has been given to do.⁷⁶

Notably, Katie’s theistic account of vocation, discerned in prayer and proportioned to her capacities, sits in tension with other accounts of God’s calling that we have considered. Janeen and Amy in Chapter Three suggest that what God asks of Christians is overwhelming and perhaps impossible. A moral gap ensures between human capacities and the moral demands to love neighbors. Reminiscent of Augustine, God’s commands precisely are *not* proportioned to human capacities, thus ushering the social worker into a recognition of her limits and need for God. In contrast, Martha in

⁷⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 3.10.6, 725.

⁷⁵ Robert M. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 303.

⁷⁶ In *Finite and Infinite Goods*, Adams believes that vocation meets “our need for responsibilities proportioned to our capacities,” guarding against the dangers of being “fragmented, going too many different ways; or crushed, seeing my obligations as unlimited; or immobilized by the clamor of competing claims” (292). He continues, “In view of our inescapable limitations, we need responsibilities much more limited than that of optimizing the future history of the world. Unmanageable responsibilities are not morally empowering. Much moral energy can be wasted in guilty imagination of duties we know we are not going to perform. The concept of vocation speaks to our need. A vocation is more limited and more specific...It may be very difficult, but it is always a path that we may actually follow; a sense that it is given to us as a real possibility and one that engages enough of our love to motivate us to follow it” (299-300). Gilbert Meilaender agrees: vocation offers a check on the expansive tendencies of work; it entails that God is ultimately responsible for the whole. *Friendship: A Study in Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981), 100.

Chapter One exhorts young social workers to reexamine their understanding of God's calling: to "love fully" without professional boundaries misunderstands what God has asked of them, she thinks. Phenomenologically, my participants experience both of these things: God asks beyond human capacities, and God proportions responsibilities to fit those same capacities. While some of this turns on the content of God's call, as Martha suggests, it also hinges upon an assessment of those capacities.

However, just as human finitude and fallenness can lead to distorted understandings of God's calling, so too can they blur perceptions of human capacities. Thus, Katie must distinguish between those limits which she should welcome (that finite part which she is to play) and those limits which she should resist, because they arise from sin, both structural and her own. That is, some constraints on human action call out for remedy and reform, while others are constitutive of human agency.

Indeed, Katie illustrates the ongoing work of discerning the difference. While she assents to her own finitude, she does *not* assent to the broken systems in which she works.⁷⁷ Bureaucratic delays, mountains of paperwork, and pandering to funders while neglecting service-users all point towards deformations of social work, Katie insists. These pressures constrain her agency: whether buying paper plates or referring a nonverbal four-year-old to further services, sometimes, she observes, "I can't do anything about it." Like Nancy in Chapter Three facing down insurance companies, this is a kind

⁷⁷ I borrow this point from Sarah Coakley in *God, Sexuality and the Self*, who insists that an insistence on the political and social context of theology is "precisely *not* an assent to fallen political or ecclesiastical structures in need of reform or transformation" (84).

of agentive limit to which Katie must not attune herself. Rather, these constraints call for resistance and the kind of political advocacy that Marx wants.

Against Marx, however, Katie displays how religious confession sharpens her sense of injustice and readies her for action. She returns to God's calling, received in prayer: "Does God want me to spend my heart beats on this?" God's desires direct the use of her energies, serving as a plumb line against which she weighs the work before her.

Yet prayer offers no guarantee that Katie will arrive at this conclusion. As we learned from Lauren Winner in Section One, Katie's prayers for, say, the fruits of the Spirit and the beatitudes could lead in another direction. Like the slave-owning women, her requests for love, kindness, and humility could aid her acceptance of wicked constraints. For example, anthropologist Jared Zigon argues that within the Russian Orthodox-run therapeutic process, prayer contributes to the production of subjects better prepared for neoliberalism, through supporting the "personal cultivation of autonomy and discipline."⁷⁸ Thus, given the realities of human sin, prayer can shore up unquestioning support of a destructive system. But as Gutierrez insists and Katie illustrates, it also can galvanize rigorous assessment and responsive action.

The central difficulty, of course, is that sin and finitude do not exist in tidy, separate categories. In the present age, they overlay and mingle with one another, in both social structures and human desires. Thus, Katie must prayerfully discover her "teeny-tiny part," feeling out the difference between those limits which she should welcome and

⁷⁸ Zigon, *HIV is God's Blessing*, 12, 17.

those which she should resist. Whether it is buying paper plates, redirecting a child in crisis, or recruiting volunteers, Katie must discern what she can do. Given the murky moral landscape in which she works, she may reach an inaccurate conclusion, whether concluding prematurely that she can do no more or pressing beyond her capacities or appropriate role, risking exhaustion or paternalist interference respectively. Prayer provides no guarantee to getting this right. However, prayer draws the human agent into dialogue with God. She does not need to decide alone, because she is not alone, and she is not the only agent responsible for care.

This leads us to a further discernment. When Katie speaks of finding her “teeny-tiny part,” she does so alongside an understanding of divine action. God is acting in two ways. First, like Roger and Amanda, Katie believes that God is “ultimately” caring and providing for the people at the shelter. Second, she sees God already doing “teeny-tiny things” in their midst. A child speaks a new word, another reflects on a poor choice, and a mother develops greater insight into her children’s distress. These proleptic anticipations reassure Katie that God indeed is on the move, that “all these people are held by God, and that I’m one tiny part.” Thus, Katie credits this twofold knowledge as enabling her to do her finite part and to do it “more gently and lightly.”

This recognition of God at work resounds throughout my interviews.⁷⁹

Participants identify God acting in “breakthroughs,” “little victories,” “little miracles,”

⁷⁹ These answers were in response to my question, “I’m curious if you ever have moments of sensing God’s presence or activity in your work?” Some qualitative researchers may object to this interview question. By asking about God’s activity or presence, I risk leading my participants to answer in the affirmative, that they do indeed see God in their work. While I recognize this possibility, I think this question remains defensible because as a theologian, I

“small changes,” “holy moments,” and “little impressions.” These include the bond between a baby and parent, kids deciding not to hurt themselves, parents who come to see their child in a more loving way, the recovery process, a moment of vulnerability in a therapy session, an adoption finalized, a resource falling into place, in community gatherings for prayer and political advocacy, or a teen cherishing herself, gaining self-confidence, or overcoming shame, or women at a homeless shelter brushing their teeth (“That’s God. That’s got to be.”). God also appears, they insist, when service-users are resilient, mourning, suffering, crying, or ministering to volunteers. They also point to God when they themselves find the right words, when they believe that each person is beautiful and valuable, when they are present to others, when they are patient, or when they experience peace. That is, they see moments of God at work both within service-users and within themselves.

These occasions all name God’s good gifts in others’ lives and their own.⁸⁰ Even when participants point to mourning, suffering, and tears, they indicate the gift of God’s own presence in the midst of pain. As Casey from Chapter One puts it, “I really sense God as a comforter in the hospital, and God as grieving in the hospital, bearing the

understand the interview as an occasion to invite talk about God. And this question did indeed elicit this sort of reflection. As one observed, “Sorry this is taking me a long time, because I haven’t vocally really said this.” Others noted that they do not normally share their observations of God with others. Some expressed uncertainty: “I think so,” one ventured, and another shared, “Sometimes it’s hard [to see God], but I’ll say yes.” A sizeable group (8) answered in enthusiastic and confident tones: “Definitely,” “Absolutely,” “All the time,” “Oh heavens yes.” Only two declined: “That’s one that I have trouble with...I’m not sure that I have a good answer to that,” and “I don’t think I would say that specifically...I’m not sure that I see God per se.”

⁸⁰ Cf. James 1:17.

suffering of God's children in the hospital, and that God being with us makes the pain more bearable day by day." Or as Amanda in Section Two notes, when people are crying, "those can be holy moments," so she silently prays, "God, be in this moment." Human grief offers openings to divine encounter, so she invites God to be present.

These descriptions return us again to Barth's account of providence.⁸¹ Barth writes, "When a man believes in God's providence, he does not know only *in abstracto* and generally that God is over all things and all things are in His hand, but he continually sees something of the work of this hand, and may continually see God's will and purpose in very definite events, relationships, connexions and changes."⁸² Moments of recognition come only as divine gifts and "daily bread, manna from heaven," "necessary and salutary for the believer in his time and place."⁸³ The Christian can only ever stretch out her hands and ask for more.⁸⁴ These moments of seeing God rarely concern "larger

⁸¹ Thomas Aquinas offers another theological entry point into this endeavor of identifying God at work. According to Thomas, when a human creature sees an observable phenomenon, she possesses a "natural desire" to identify its cause (*ST* 1.12.1). Wonder grips her, and through natural reason, she can peel back the layers of causality until she reaches towards the "first cause of things" (*ST* 1.12.1). Thus, for Thomas, human observation of the world provides the possibility for affirming God's existence: "God is known by natural knowledge through the images of His effects" (*ST* 1.12.12).

⁸² Barth, *CD III.3*, 23. A belief in providence can cause a person "to see something of God's rule...God Himself at work at various points" (24). Later in the same volume, Barth emphasizes how God awakens the Christian to see God's "real but hidden" action (249). The Word guides the Christian in its continual rediscovery, nourishing her faith and thus preparing her for participation in God's providential rule. As the human creature is awakened to faith by the Word, she is surprised by God, in God's goodness and the gift of such believing (252). This seeing of God's action moves towards the creature's own obedient action.

⁸³ Barth, *CD III.3*, 24.

⁸⁴ Barth, *CD III.3*, 24.

or total issues,”⁸⁵ confirmed by my participants’ emphasis on their diminutive character. Moreover, they yield only a “relative, provisional and modest knowledge in need of correction, yet true and thankful and courageous knowledge.”⁸⁶ My participants also share this sense: these “little impressions” give them gratitude and strength for persevering in the work, heartened by the knowledge that God too is acting.⁸⁷ As Katie notes, the petitions weave together with gratitude. Her thanks follow her identification of God at work.⁸⁸

Implicit within these recognitions is a sense that God’s presence is not uniformly dispersed across all times and places.⁸⁹ My participants’ recognition of peculiar moments of divine presence also include occasions of divine absence. As one social worker remarks, “I see the devil more than I do God.” Paul Griffiths describes this variation as the “rough ground” of the world, such that “the glory of the LORD is not evenly

⁸⁵ Barth, *CD III.3*, 56.

⁸⁶ Barth, *CD III.3*, 23.

⁸⁷ As Paul Griffiths observes, we receive the Lord’s “unexpected and delightful gifts” with “open-handed and open-mouthed gratitude.” *Decreation: The Last Things of All Creatures* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 319.

⁸⁸ As O’Donovan notes, “thanksgiving...presupposes moral discernments made by particular agents.” *Entering into Rest*, 79.

⁸⁹ In *Decreation*, Paul Griffiths notes, “This weaving together of presence and absence, of glory and lack, is what makes the world (unlike heaven in this respect) rough ground, ground on which the glory of the LORD is not evenly distributed. At one extreme there is the intensity of presence found in the Eucharist, which is the fullest anticipation of heaven available in the world; at the other, there are deathcamps and bloodfields, slaughter and despair, desolation and devastation, which are the fullest anticipations of hell available in the world. There is much between these two; and there is no timespace in the devastated world that is, without remainder, hell’s presence-that-is-lack (such a timespace would cease completely to be), just as there is no timespace that is, without remainder, heaven’s presence” (313-314).

distributed.”⁹⁰ Consistent with the stories of scripture, God chooses particular people and places for dispensing grace.⁹¹ And thus, my participants pray for God to arrive within those places of relative absence.

Following this ontological observation, however, is an epistemological problem. To identify where and how God is at work falls within the purview of moral discernment. While Christian theology may declare that God acts in human lives and in history, it cannot say *which* lives and *which* events.⁹² As O’Donovan explains, “Only moral reflection engages directly with the distinctiveness of particular acts, particular lives, particular histories” and to recognize the movements of God within them.⁹³ This brings us to another human limit: human knowledge of God’s activity is always subject to error.⁹⁴ While we return to this point in the final section, for now, we recall Katie’s gratitude at discovering God in particular moments. These glimpses of God’s present action reassure her of God’s ultimate care for those at the shelter, which reaches beyond her abilities, and this enables her to welcome those limits constitutive of her vocation.

5. A Theology of Prayer

I meet Caroline Bradley (48, white, Christian) in the hospital cafeteria. It is hard to find a seat. New medical students fill the tables during their orientation. After

⁹⁰ Griffiths, *Decreation*, 313.

⁹¹ Paul Griffiths, lecture, Christian Theology, Duke Divinity School, Sept. 28, 2016.

⁹² O’Donovan, *Entering into Rest*, 73-74. Barth offers a similar observation: there is no “practical principle” or “constant programme” for identifying such events. *CD III.3*, 25.

⁹³ O’Donovan, *Entering into Rest*, 74. This recognition itself is a gift of God, O’Donovan explains. “There is a self-reflective character in the work of God: he is at work within the Christian experience of acting, and he is at work within our recognition that he is at work” (79).

⁹⁴ Barth notes that a person always can misunderstand what God is doing. *CD III.3*, 25-26.

wandering around for several minutes, we finally come upon a quiet corner down the hall. Caroline wears a white medical coat, embroidered with her name and “Clinical Social Worker” in red.

After raising two children, Caroline tells me that she decided to go back to school at age thirty-eight. Since completing school, she has practiced social work for eight years. The helping professions are in her blood, she continues. Her father was a dentist, and her mother a nurse. She now works with trauma patients: “gang violence, domestic violence, motor vehicle accidents, falls – those are primarily the big ones,” she tells me. “I love what I do,” Caroline reflects. “It’s a horrible service, and yet you witness people getting their lives back every day.” She never would have picked trauma. She was assigned there as a temp, and one of her first patients had survived a suicide attempt. “I was like, ‘What do I do?’” But after three days, she realized that all she needed to do was “just meet them where they are at,” and “then within another day, I was like, ‘I love this!’”

“Social work saved my faith,” Caroline put bluntly. “I was raised with a very conservative American white Jesus,” and becoming a social worker helped with “undoing a lot of the bad theology I learned growing up.” From studying social work, she began to see

how society impacts the trajectory of our lives, and how your social location impacts your life. And yet the circles I ran in and the church and with my kids’ school would always equate social location to God’s intervention or God’s – not blessing – but somehow, it was ordained by God. And I was like, ‘No.’ That absolutely does not work for me anymore.

In her work, however, Caroline sees God’s presence “all the time.” This has followed from the “undoing a definition of what I thought was God.” As Caroline tells me, “What

we think is good is sometimes not good, and things that we think are messy and ugly and wrong are part of good happening...it's Spirit in everything – it covers everything.”

Every month, she works with people who have killed others while drunk driving. As a teenager, she would have been the first to condemn them (“They need to go to prison for the rest of their lives!”). But now, she sees, “they made a poor choice, but they’re still a human.” Her revised Christianity causes her to lead with the conviction that “every single human being is inherently worthy of love, belonging, affection, resources...no matter who they are, that’s my basis for how I see people.” Thus, she can be

ok with the fact that just because we don’t see the finished product, doesn’t mean that it’s not happening, or doesn’t mean that God’s big enough to cover that. Especially when you’re dealing with people who have been involved in criminal activity and everyone wants to judge them. Like I don’t have to hang onto that. There’s something bigger that I can rest in.

Later in the interview, she adds to this theme,

if I truly embrace what my faith is about, which is we’re all made in the image of God and the Spirit of God’s desire is for everything to be made right, for suffering to be flipped upside down – that everything we are exposed to, that happens to us, that there’s hope that it can be flipped. So, I feel like that hope, yeah, it’s sustaining in this work.

As Caroline’s understanding of God has changed, so has her prayer. She tells me, “I used to think that prayer was about me changing the heart of God. ‘You just got to pray, and somehow’ – and now I really see...the way that I was raised to pray was a form of control. So, if I can pray, somehow I can control the outcome. Or manipulate God to do what I want.” Caroline understands prayer differently now:

I’ve been instructed to pray, so I pray. It’s a communion. It’s sometimes formal, but it’s more of a stance. It’s more of a presence, of this ongoing communion.... it’s an awareness, a presence, acknowledgement that God’s in this...I want good things for my patients and their families and myself and my children and my

husband and the world and people we love. So, it's more of a yearning than this formality. But I would say it's very real though and very, very much a critical factor to how I do social work. That mindset. Which I think also helps with caregiver fatigue. It helps with boundaries. It helps with letting go. It helps with like this isn't about me. And it's not all the time about the patient. There's something bigger going on. And I can just do what I can do, and then I got to let it go.

Later, she reiterates this point. She no longer understands "prayer as control" but now "prayer as letting go." Prayer has become "a stance" that reminds her "this is not about me, that I want good for this person, that God wants good for this person, and so I can be confident and rest in that."

This confident rest contrasts, however, with what she often sees in social work.

When she first entered the field, she noticed,

the social workers who were twenty-six-ish and had just come out of school, they felt like they could save the clients, the patients. There was just this real visceral reaction to injustice, like it was on us to fix the problem. And it was a weight that would be carried that would cause extreme burnout really quick. And I think that's something that we all have to be mindful of... we can't save anyone. We can only help as best we can... we do the best we can with the resources that we have. And then we have to let it go.

Caroline prays at work to express her longing for God's action, for God to do what is beyond her own powers. She also prays to acknowledge that God is indeed already acting. This twofold movement of asking for divine care past the boundaries of human agency and also discerning particular instances of that care parallels Katie's own descriptions. Caroline adds for us, however, a further theological specificity to her account of prayer. As she explains it, prayer is communion, not a theurgic device for controlling God and history. While she used to pray to "manipulate" God, now she prays because she has been instructed to. Returning to our discussion in Chapter One, Caroline does not identify the authoritative agent behind this instruction, but we may infer that

agent is God, mediated perhaps by scripture or a religious leader. Either way, she prays irrespective of whether and how it works.

Here again, Barth's thought resonates. Barth also grounds prayer in divine command. God desires the human request, and this alone provides prayer's basis.⁹⁵ Like Caroline, Barth too indicates that the typical debates regarding petitionary prayer's efficacy distract from prayer's true rationale.⁹⁶ Prayer realizes another good, what Caroline calls "ongoing communion" and what Barth calls friendship with God. "In prayer," Barth writes, the human creature becomes "the friend of God, called to the side of God and at the side of God."⁹⁷ This friendship unfolds through communication. Caroline tells God her desires for her patients and the world. She interprets her "yearning" and offers it to God, unveiling herself in God's presence and making intimacy possible.⁹⁸

Moreover, Caroline asks God to bring about goods both within and beyond her powers. As she puts it, "I want good things for my patients and their families and myself

⁹⁵ As Barth writes, "The real basis of prayer is man's freedom before God, the God-given permission to pray which, because it is given by God, becomes a command and order and therefore a necessity." *CD III.4*, 92.

⁹⁶ According to Barth, "there can be no place for all the pious and impious arguments against the permissibility and possibility of asking prayer. What does it matter that God is all-knowing and all-wise...when it is the all-knowing and all-wise God Himself who commands us to come to Him with our requests?" *CD III.4*, 96.

⁹⁷ Barth, *CD III.3*, 286. "The grace of God to sinful man is that He encounters him as the hearing God; that He calls him...to the intimacy and boldness of a friend" (285-286).

⁹⁸ In *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, Winner writes, "Friendship is a good that can come from petition, precisely because God has drawn us into conversation with God about our desires, and when we state our desires, we are offering intimacy with our desiring and vulnerable selves" (83). Moreover, Thomas Aquinas adds, "a petition is like the interpreter of desire," where "we unveil our mind in His presence." *ST II-II.83.1*, reply 1 and reply 2.

and my children and my husband and the world and people we love.” While working towards some of these goods are within the scope of her ability, others are not, and so she asks God to act. Barth identifies this as a central feature of prayer: “again and again longing for [God] and for what He alone can give.”⁹⁹ In praying, then, Caroline imagines the world as it could be, succored by God. The present world contains deficiencies which only God can remedy.¹⁰⁰

While Caroline does not detail the “good things” for which she yearns, other participants offer their litanies, especially for clients: for basic needs, for healing, for love, for reconciliation.¹⁰¹ Sometimes they are in a position to support these goods, but often they cannot guarantee their full realization. For example, one social worker describes her prayers for her psychiatric patients this way:

Mostly I pray for them to not come back to the hospital...I pray that they’ll have support in the community – good honest support. I’ll pray that their needs are met in the way that they need, and that God gives them hope when they need it the most...And I just pray for their overall wellbeing.

This participant looks towards a patient’s future, after the conclusion of her professional care. A painful reality awaits many of her discharged patients – homelessness, unemployment, and recommitment – about which she can do little. And yet, she petitions

⁹⁹ Barth, *CD III.4*, 87.

¹⁰⁰ Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life*, 13. Mathewes invokes Augustine at this juncture: “‘the whole life of a good Christian is a holy longing,’ for we seek a goal unattainable in this world,” 13. In addition to diagnosing the world, Caroline’s hunger also suggests something about human creatures. As Rowan Williams notes, a human being is “a creature animated by desire, whose characteristic marks are lack and hunger.” “Politics and the Soul: A Reading of the *City of God*,” *Milltown Studies* (1987), 69.

¹⁰¹ Aquinas explains that charity requires that we pray for our neighbors. He cites Chrysostom on this point: “Necessity binds us to pray for ourselves, fraternal charity urges us to pray for others: and the prayer that fraternal charity proffers is sweeter to God than that which is the outcome of necessity.” *ST II-II.83.7*.

God to do something. Andrew Prevot describes the potency of this act: “prayer lets desire speak to the full extent that it can and thereby enables us to envision maximally desirable possibilities for thought and life that both include and transcend what we have the capacity to achieve on our own.”¹⁰² Thus, Caroline and others ask for divine action, knowing that ensuring the wellbeing of service-users and the world, while it includes her efforts, also stretches beyond them.

As Caroline asks for God’s action in the world, she also acknowledges that God is already acting. She describes her prayer as “an awareness, a presence, acknowledgement that God’s in this,” caring for her patients and the world at large. Beyond Caroline’s own efforts and those of her patients, “there’s something bigger going on,” Caroline insists.

Despite Caroline’s insistence on God’s presence, however, she cautions against attributing certain features of life to divine agency. While Katie identifies God’s action in “very teeny-tiny things,” Caroline warns against ascribing social location to God’s will. To do so would be a mistake, Caroline thinks, because it implies that God approves of injustice. Race, class, gender, and geography are associated with inequitable access to

¹⁰² Prevot, *Thinking Prayer*, 328. In particular, prayer can disclose goods that otherwise cannot be approximated, revealing “yearnings of the human spirit that only God can finally satisfy” (27). Prevot continues, “These aspects of the blessed life are such that no merely secular theory or practice could ever hope to approximate them. Prayer discloses them as nothing else can. One might consider, for example, the hope in resurrection and justice for the dead, the confidence that one is definitively loved despite the hatred of the world, the promise that sins will be forgiven and that even the most horrifically damaged relationships will be mended, and the unshakable joy that comes from an ever-deepening friendship with God. In the absence of prayer, these goods seem illusory, and, as a result, the full scope of historical and eschatological goodness is left unacknowledged...To pray rightly is to understand that, in the final analysis, divine peace alone will suffice” (27).

life's goods, and thus, such an attribution would suggest divine approval of injustice. On the contrary, Caroline believes in a God who desires to make everything right.¹⁰³

In this, Caroline shares a theological sensibility with Augustine. Augustine too counters the human tendency to link prosperity with divine approval. There is no straightforward calculus between temporal goods and human merit, Augustine thinks. However, Augustine goes one step further than Caroline. He insists that the “absurdity” of present outcomes is “salutary” for Christians, cautioning them against the disordered pursuit of temporal goods and against shame in adversity.¹⁰⁴ Caroline only comments on the abuses of such beliefs, not their benefits. She rejoins Augustine, however, in insisting that despite this painful disjuncture, human beings can still rely upon God's justice. As she puts it, “everything we are exposed to, that happens to us...there's hope that it can be flipped...Just because we don't see the finished product, doesn't mean that it's not

¹⁰³ Another participant offered a parallel theology in the context of providing therapy: “There's an awful lot of people who come and tell me dreadful things, and they say, ‘Oh it was God's will.’ Or they say, ‘Everything happens for a reason.’ And I just have to speak to that because yeah, things happen for a reason, and some of them are pretty rotten. And they're not God's will, and ‘It is not the will of the Father than any of these little ones should perish.’ And so I very much try to help people understand what it means that this is a fallen world. And that things happen here that are not God's will, that there are many other things operant. Our free will, the free will of other people, disease, death, random stuff. Natural laws like gravity keep us on the planet but if a baby falls out the window, it's not such a great law. I mean, so I try to help people understand, and people come with these questions. For me, I have come to that there are about three things you can count on, only three. One is that God is in it with us. Two is that he understands everything that we feel, and that it's really important to be honest about what we feel, because God's truth comes in where we are, not where we're supposed to [be]. And the third one is he is at work to redeem whatever dreadful thing happens. Dreadful things are going to happen, but you can count on he's at work to bring real lasting good out of the worst bad. And that's my platform for life.”

¹⁰⁴ Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. William Babcock (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2012), 1.8 at 8. “God willed the temporal goods and evils of this life to be common to both [the righteous and unrighteous], so that we would neither avidly desire goods which we see that the evil also possess nor shamefully avoid evils by which the good are also very often afflicted.”

happening.” Caroline hopes in God’s action, transforming evil into good, even though it cannot be seen with human eyes. Throughout the *City of God*, Augustine makes an analogous point: “His purpose may be hidden, but it can never be unjust.”¹⁰⁵ While God’s efforts are inaccessible to human senses now, God will conclude this obscurity at the final judgment, when the perfect justice of all that God has done will be revealed.¹⁰⁶

Caroline’s confidence in God’s judgement relieves her of judging those who arrive on the trauma floor. Even if they are gang members, drunk drivers, or heroin addicts, her “basis” for seeing people is that they bear God’s image and are “inherently worthy of love, belonging, affection, resources.” As they are, she accepts them, even as she also trusts in God’s healing work. Thus, she also hopes for their transformation through the ministrations of God’s Spirit, although she cannot see this “finished product,” namely, the people that they will become. This rejection of judgmentalism returns us to Chapter Two, a feature of paternalism identified by Martha and others. Caroline gives further theological credence to their insistence: God alone can see into people’s future; God alone has access to all the data needed for judgment. Instead of presuming on her superior judgment, Caroline’s part is to love and affirm human worth.

Caroline’s hesitation to judge also extends to her judgments about God’s presence and moral value. While she insists that the “Spirit is in everything,” she thinks her ability to distinguish the particulars is unreliable. As she explains, “What we think is good is

¹⁰⁵ Augustine, *The City of God*, 4.17. Later, Augustine offers similar equations: “the most hidden and most just judgment of God” (3.1) and “his just, if hidden, judgment” (21.13).

¹⁰⁶ Augustine, *The City of God*, 20.2 at 392; 20.27 at 439. There is an ironic element to final judgment: Jesus “will judge most justly, even though he himself was most unjustly judged.” *The City of God*, 20.19 at 422.

sometimes not good, and things that we think are messy and ugly and wrong are part of good happening.” Thus, Caroline adds an epistemological modesty into Katie’s recognition of God at work. While Katie emphasizes the diminutive stature of divine sightings (“very teeny-tiny”), Caroline highlights their provisional character. Barth agrees: glimpses of God are always vulnerable to error and “in need of correction.”¹⁰⁷

Paul Griffiths also develops this point,

because our cognitive and affective faculties are damaged, as everything is *post lapsum*, we can rely with confidence neither on our judgments about what glory’s traces are and where they are to be found, nor on our judgments about where and how hell’s nothingness is most fully foreshadowed. Trying to discriminate the two in particular scenes is difficult. . . It is hard, though not impossible, to say; and we are often wrong in what we think about it.¹⁰⁸

The human ability to identify instances of God’s presence is limited, even as assurances of it prove so valuable.

Even as Caroline warns against confident attributions of moral value indexed to the Spirit’s action, we have also seen how she makes a judgment: social location does not result from God’s will. Caroline cannot accept the political and social implications that follow from such an affirmation. Hence, even though such judgments remain provisional, some are necessary. O’Donovan puts it this way: “to live in the world as a Christian is to be forced to make painful and difficult discernments between the work of the Spirit and of the Antichrist.”¹⁰⁹ Moreover, Griffiths clarifies the ethical stakes: Christians are to “nurture and love” those occasions in which God manifests Godself in

¹⁰⁷ Barth, *CD III.3*, 23.

¹⁰⁸ Griffiths, *Decreation*, 314.

¹⁰⁹ O’Donovan, *Entering into Rest*, 96.

repairing the world, while resisting those instances where the world's damage is intensified: "In doing these things we are agents in the devastation."¹¹⁰ Both Griffiths and O'Donovan think that these skills might be cultivated, while always fallible. As Griffith explains, "The ability to make such discriminations is a kind of virtue with intellectual and affective components, and like all such things it needs to be trained and nurtured over time."¹¹¹ O'Donovan also identifies two requisite characteristics for this task: a person must learn to long for God's presence and "give thanks for it when they find it."¹¹² Caroline too yearns for God to act in history and expresses her gratitude that this is also already the case. Taken together, then, Caroline's prayers remind her that God is present but often in ways that she cannot understand or know.

Caroline also understands this hope in God's action as an antidote to paternalism and exhaustion. Many of her young co-workers endow the profession with a salvific mission. They think it is their responsibility to "save" clients and "fix" injustice, she explains. Other participants note these salvific aspirations as well. Amy from Chapter Three recalled the message she received at graduate school as, "This is social work, and it's great, and it's going to save the world." However, as we have already detailed in Chapters Two and Three, such expansive moral demands exceed human capacities. As Caroline observes, assuming the "weight" of this responsibility produces "extreme burnout really quick." Thus, when social workers presume to fix and save, they take on

¹¹⁰ Griffiths, *Decreation*, 314.

¹¹¹ Griffiths, *Decreation*, 314. Griffiths adds, "Even when well developed, it is not free of error" (314).

¹¹² O'Donovan, *Entering into Rest*, 97. "God's presence," O'Donovan continues, "will be known by those who have learned to long for it, and to give thanks for it when they find it," 97.

moral burdens that are not only inappropriate but also far heavier than a person can bear.¹¹³

Charles Taylor too describes the way in which the modern commitments of universal benevolence and justice are susceptible to “slid[ing] into something trivial, ugly or downright dangerous and destructive.”¹¹⁴ These efforts to advance human flourishing and eliminate suffering, Taylor thinks, lack sufficient moral sources to sustain them, resulting in withdrawal, paternalism, and aggression.¹¹⁵ As a remedy, Taylor suggests a turn to spirituality as fueling unconditional love and the *imago Dei*.¹¹⁶

While Caroline affirms both of these tenets, she takes a step further by invoking divine care. She rejects a program of this-worldly salvation: “We can’t save anyone... We do the best we can with the resources that we have, and then we have to let it go.” This letting go, however, is not abandonment. Rather, it entrusts people and the work left undone into God’s unlimited care: “God wants good for this person, and so I can be confident and rest in that.” Thus, like Roger and Katie, Caroline insists that social workers ought to assist service-users to the full extent possible (“we do the best we can”).

¹¹³ In *Finite and Infinite Goods*, Adams observes that to assume an obligation for the whole world is to accept “a responsibility to which both our cognitive and our executive capacities are disastrously unequal” (299). Moreover, Luke Bretherton adds that such “[o]verinvest[ment] in this-worldly projects of salvation” is also idolatrous. *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of A Common Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 216.

¹¹⁴ Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” in *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture*, ed. James L. Heft (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 34.

¹¹⁵ Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” 32-33. “Before the reality of human shortcomings, philanthropy – the love of the human – can gradually come to be invested with contempt, hatred, aggression. The action is broken off or, worse, continues but is invested now with these new feelings, becoming progressively more coercive and inhumane” (32).

¹¹⁶ Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” 35.

But there is also a limit to these efforts, originating in available resources and finite human capacities. At this limit, divine action alone can realize certain goods – including salvation, however conceived. Human creatures cannot secure their own lives.¹¹⁷ Thus, while Caroline’s efforts may contribute to the healing of the world, they do so only modestly, looking always to the primacy of God’s commitment to humanity.

Thus, Caroline’s praying “stance” makes possible appropriate forms of action. As she puts it, knowing that “God is in this” serves as “a critical factor” in how she practices social work, helping with “caregiver fatigue,” “boundaries,” and “letting go.” Given her belief that “God wants good for this person,” her assistance can observe appropriate limits. She need not try to guarantee service-users’ wellbeing through grasping for control. This would be an illusion anyway. She is not the master of history. Caroline need not strongarm her yearnings into reality alone. God is with us, Caroline insists, echoing Israel’s hope.¹¹⁸ Or as Barth puts it, God has made the human cause God’s own.¹¹⁹

Thus, when assisting someone, Caroline can only play her part as best she can, knowing that God is maximally committed to her patients. Through praying, Caroline can release her grip: “I can be confident and rest in [God who wants good for her

¹¹⁷ I am grateful to Gerald McKenny for this point. As Jerry teaches his students, if God is dead, then human beings are left to secure their own existence, and this is an infinite liability.

¹¹⁸ cf. Is 7:14, Mt 1:23.

¹¹⁹ “The subject-matter, origin and content of the message received and proclaimed by the Christian community is at its heart the free act of faithfulness of God in which He takes the lost cause of man, who has denied Him as Creator in so doing ruined himself as creature...God has made Himself man with us, to make our cause His own, and as His own to save it from disaster and to carry it through to success.” Barth, *CD IV.1*, 3, 15.

patients].” Stanley Hauerwas summarizes this approach: “We can rest in God because we are no longer driven by the assumption that we must be in control of history, that it is up to us to make things come out right.”¹²⁰ Thus, Caroline’s prayers usher her into an expression of human agency, at once resolute in acting for the neighbor’s good and cognizant of its limits.¹²¹ Put differently, her prayers moderate but uphold Caroline’s action, galvanizing her to carry on within appropriate bounds.¹²² Prevot agrees: prayer acts on a vision of Christian hope, “prais[ing] the liberating work of the triune God, while asking humanity to play its own finite but indispensable part.”¹²³

Alongside this prayer-funded action is also its periodic cessation. Thus, Caroline can rest and “let go” in grateful acknowledge that “God is in this,” even if she cannot always say precisely how. Resting opens occasions for thanksgiving but also prepares for the work ahead.¹²⁴ As O’Donovan notes, “The signs of God’s working may be recognized and enjoyed, but they must also be made the ground for tackling the next

¹²⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 87.

¹²¹ In *Thinking Prayer*, Prevot writes, “prayer both empowers humanity and importantly reveals the limits of human power,” 26.

¹²² Barth writes, “[Prayer] may and must be the perennial undertone, basis and support accompanying and upholding all other human actions. It is certainly true that fundamentally it can never be broken off, that we fall from grace if we cease to pray, that whatever is not done in prayer certainly cannot be well done before God.” *CD III.4*, 89.

¹²³ Prevot, *Thinking Prayer*, 26.

¹²⁴ As O’Donovan notes, “‘Resting,’ yes, for there are opportunities for thanksgiving, when we pause, reflect, and look back, but the resting is always a preparation for the challenges ahead.” *Entering into Rest*, 88.

frontier of decision and action.”¹²⁵ So too, Caroline leaves work at work, confident that the “Spirit is in everything,” only to return after the lunch hour, after a night home, after vacation, to meet with another trauma patient. In the present age, this prayerful rest is only a proleptic pause, an anticipation of the great and final rest.¹²⁶ Thus, even in the resting, Caroline continues to yearn for the divine gift.¹²⁷

Conclusion

Retrieving prayer in an account of the moral life faces critical challenges. Modern thinkers denounce prayer as illusory, irrational, and irresponsible. Christian ethicists neglect prayer, and theologians warn of its susceptibility to distortion. Yet my participants pray nevertheless, suggesting its potency for reuniting talk about God and the good life. Through petitionary prayer, they ask for divine assistance, especially when faced with decisions that exceed their knowledge. As Roger tells us, determining appropriate interventions and predicting outcomes when working with people, “it’s not that easy to quantify.” Thus, they transform moral deliberation into a spiritual exercise.

Moreover, even when they do their best, my participants cannot guarantee positive outcomes for service-users, so they appeal to God’s providential care. This is

¹²⁵ O’Donovan, *Entering into Rest*, 88. O’Donovan continues, “With further signs come further demands, never free of risk, for ‘To whom much is given, of him will much be required’ (Luke 12:48).”

¹²⁶ Barth writes, “In the supreme sense to pray is to observe a Sabbath rest from all one’s cares, even the best.” *CD III.4*, 88.

¹²⁷ Otherwise, O’Donovan warns that rest can become a Pelagian deception, a presumptuous retrospection that fails to look towards “future demands and dangers.” *Entering into Rest*, 88-89. To make this point, O’Donovan discusses the prayer of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:9-14) and Augustine’s treatment of it in Sermon 115.2. For Augustine, O’Donovan notes, the Pharisee is the “archetypal Pelagian...he gave thanks but failed to ask, ‘as though there was nothing he would wish to be added’” (88).

not an abandonment of responsibility, however, but an effort to moderate it in light of their capacities. They are not God, they insist, and to think otherwise is to risk the traps of paternalism and exhaustion. As Katie illustrates, glimpses of God's present action give courage for continuing in their work, even in the face of discouragement. God is acting now, in their midst, and so they can do the part that God has given them, trusting in God's larger work.

Prayer, however, does not guarantee that they will discern their limits rightly. The realities of human finitude and sin generate a range of constraints on moral agency. Katie again shows us the need for distinguishing between those limits which are to be welcomed and those which are to be resisted. As with God's calling and God's present action, human beings can also misinterpret their own capacities. Even with this risk, however, such discernments are unavoidable: they face overwhelming demands, and they must decide what they can do.

Finally, Caroline offers us one further window into a theology of prayer, which attunes the human creature to her limits in light of what God is doing. Despite Caroline's hope that the "Spirit is in everything," she also cautions against overly confident assertions about divine action. Here again, the human creature's best judgments remain provisional, as she feels her way forward in the work of love. Even so, Caroline releases her patients into God's care, for God to realize goods that she cannot bring about, and she observes periods of rest, trusting that God has taken up the human cause.

Thus, with prayer, the dissertation comes full circle. It began with God, charting how divine command propels many of my participants into loving their neighbor professionally. And so too it ends with God, as they ask God to do the very thing that

God has asked of them: to love their neighbors. They cannot fulfill God's command alone, and thus, they confess their limits and pray with the Psalmist, "Oh God, come to my assistance; Oh Lord, make haste to help me."¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Ps. 70:1.

Conclusion

Through offering snapshots into the moral and spiritual lives of Christian social workers, mediated through their own words, I have outlined a theological anthropology of moral agency and a phenomenology of its limits. Specified in the context of professional helping relationships, neighbor love takes on a peculiar form, complete with its own moral hazards. Despite my attention to these navigations, I have not offered ready answers for how to act. There is no shortcut that can bypass deliberation in particular places and times. Nevertheless, I have traced my participants' motivations for becoming social workers, their modes of situated practical reason and moral judgment, their confessions of uncertainty and regret, and their prayers. In doing so, I have illuminated the human creature pressed into the labors of love, responding to God's invitation and the demands of human need.

Despite the relative neglect of divine command theory in the academy, a significant majority of my participant become social workers, because God has called them to do so. Divine summons founds their moral agency; they decide and act in response to God's invitation. This command carries with it a moral obligation and can arrive in many guises, including scripture, divine locution, temperament, professional ethics, and the demands of human need. As Maria tells us, "Once you've really seen the needs that people have, I can't really just say, 'No.'" As my participants understand God to be directing them, they weigh overlapping sources of the command. Thus, they display an account of divine command that leaves room for moral deliberation, both in testing the command and in discerning an appropriate response. As Melissa shows us, prayer plays a central role in this work. Thus, a key contribution of this dissertation is to

recover the importance of divine command theory indexed to a prayer-infused practical reason.

In the ground cleared by God's call, my participants become social workers to love their neighbors professionally. But as they quickly find, this work is by no means straightforward. Paternalism and exhaustion threaten. They can damage others and themselves despite their best efforts at faithful action. Both of these malformations of love display a complex interweaving of structural pressures and individual moral flaws.

Paternalism names the perennial temptation of overstepping the professional social worker's appropriate role. Asymmetrical distributions of power and human pride provide the conditions for saving, fixing, and controlling. Over time, through observing their own failures and those across the profession, my participants develop moral criteria for spotting these distortions. They learn how they can use their professional power to enhance or diminish the agency of service-users, and thus, they counter paternalist temptations through moderating their own agency vis-à-vis service-users. Thus, my participants reconfigure the helping relationship along more equitable lines and scrutinize their use of power.

Social work's proper aim, my participants insist, is empowerment, underpinned by a relational account of human agency. Human beings need each other to develop their capacities, and social workers can fill in the gap when other supportive figures have failed. Rightly done, then, social workers can enhance the ability of service-users to decide and act for themselves. To do so, they must moderate their efforts at care through slow downing, listening, and collaborating to fit services with recipients' sense of what they need. Through limiting their own action accordingly, they cultivate humility and re-

center God as the agent of salvation. Social workers assist but do not save. These are limits welcomed and habituated over time, observed in light of others' dignity, their finitude and fallenness, and God's ultimate care. These limits stand in tension with others imposed from without, which hinder good care, including structural constraints, institutional pressures, and office politics. Insurance companies insisting on discharging patients prematurely do not tutor my participants in their appropriate limits but in the unjust systems of a fallen world and the need for shrewd advocacy on behalf of recipients. As Nancy and Jamie show, sometimes there is no good option for action, and moral failure follows.

Moreover, while the categories of empowerment and fixing offer critical handrails for appropriately modulating their action, social workers find that matters quickly become more complicated when they support individuals who lack capacity for decision-making or are at-risk for harming themselves or others. What would be paternalist interference in one case suddenly becomes justified care in another. However, deciding whether or not these conditions sufficiently exist often rests with social workers too. This leaves them, in Lydia's words, "playing God," or as Jamie says, "playing judge and jury of someone's life." They are ever at risk of overstepping what is humanly theirs to do, and so they must continually attend to the limits of their own judgments and action. In the particulars, they must reason their way through these differences: between paternalism and care, between appropriate limits and unwelcome constraints. As Jamie and Laura show, prayer offers a critical resource for moral deliberation, as they confess their need for divine assistance.

Exhaustion too arises within the landscape of social service delivery. Social workers respond to boundless human need situated within complex social problems, all without adequate resources and burdened with increasing demands. Too often they face an impossible task, and the accumulated losses of the work cause them to despair, further undercutting their ability to act. As Amy tells us, on some days, she cannot get out of bed, she cannot send an email, she cannot do anything, and Nicole describes the existential pain of being overrun by the suffering of others. To prevent this collapse, social workers protect themselves through boundaries and self-care even as they indicate the moral ambivalence of these strategies. As Janeen shows, between the poles of indifference and anguish, there is no appropriate degree of sensitivity to suffering. Given the conditions in which social workers labor, moral failure follows. They cannot be fully attuned to all human need, and if they try, they experience the more profound incapacity of exhausted agency.

Because many of my participants have entered the work in response to God's call, this failure takes on a theological cast. A moral gap opens between God's command to love neighbors and their ability to do so. However, when God asks the impossible, in the guise of boundless human need crying out for succor, the solution is not to assume that human beings are up to the task. Exaggerating human capacities ultimately generates a profound exhaustion, damaging the social worker's own agency. In this breach, some of my participants turn to God to care for service-users when they cannot and to care for themselves. Amy "lets God," looking for divine action, and Maria finds consolation in God's sustaining help. God's call galvanizes her agency within its arduous assignment. Even so, Maria also periodically withdraws from her caring labor for restorative activities

and, centrally, rest in God through contemplative prayer. Thus, like paternalism, exhaustion too tutors social workers in their limits, as finite creatures dependent on God.

Finally, as our discussions of command, paternalism, and exhaustion culminate in prayer, so too does the dissertation. Despite modern suspicions of prayer as abandonment of action and its relative neglect in Christian ethics, my participants pray to discern the appropriate shape of neighbor love in particular contexts and to recognize their own limits. Otherwise, they are tempted to assume responsibilities beyond their capacities, which harms both themselves and others. They cannot heal or save service-users in their own power. Through prayer, however, they continue their engagement with service-users, even when they cannot act. God's care reaches beyond their own, beyond the incapacities of exhaustion and the restrictions they place upon themselves to prevent paternalism. In prayer, they attune to the reality of creaturely limits and moderate their efforts in light of their hope in God's action, both in themselves and in history. They persevere in doing the part God has given them, trusting that God's care encompasses the world. Thus, they model how talk about God and the good life come together in prayer, at the intersection of divine and human agency.

Together, these portraits display the synergistic and even inseparable nature of life in God and moral deliberation. Theology, ethics, and spiritual practice merge as my participants hear God's call to care for neighbors and must discern the appropriate shape of that love in real time. They also display how divine command and practical reason work together, again united in an ongoing concert of prayer. As God draws them into action, they encounter neighbors and their own limits. The moral hazards of paternalism and exhaustion tutor them in an array of constraints, arising from a mixture of finitude

and sin and variously expressed in complex social problems, employing agencies, interactions with service-users, and their own motivations. They must discern these differences for faithful action.

Thus, pressed to their limits, my participants learn their need for God. Failure tutors them. As they recognize their creaturely dependency, they are not relieved of responsibility. Rather, they recognize its finitude and, thus, stave off the moral dangers of exaggerating their capacities. Thus, they restrict their interventions to honor the agency of service-users; they acknowledge their limited knowledge in forecasting the future and in knowing all the particulars of others' lives. They habituate periodic withdrawals from work that overwhelms, to preserve their ability to act in the face of impossible tasks, even as they press against unwelcome structural constraints. Throughout, they pray for divine assistance – for God to help them do what God has asked them to, and for divine care to reach where they cannot.

How does prayer shape human agency beyond the sphere of professional helping relationships? This study marks only a beginning of retrieving prayer for the study of theological ethics. Historical episodes present themselves for future study, whether found in the prayers of enslaved people, the early labor movement, or contemporary environmental activism. Moreover, prayers uttered in the havoc of war or the silence of monasteries invite academic reflection. When people pray, wherever they are, they are doing theology, and they are doing ethics. Thus, calling upon God orients the moral life, situating the human agent between divine agency and the present necessities of loving neighbors.

Appendix

Recruitment

To recruit participants in my study, I shared information about my study through my personal networks, the alumni network of a local seminary, and through a poster at a regional NASW conference on ethics. I also advertised in the NASW email newsletter distributed throughout the state. I also received referrals from participants. Finally, I restricted the study to people with social work degrees and have worked in a social-work capacity.¹

Interview Guides

I have included here two versions of my interview guide. The first version reflects those questions that I used for the first half of my interviews. After reviewing my data, I revised my questions for the second half, as recorded in “Version 2.”

Version 1

A couple brief questions:

- Would you mind sharing your age, gender, and race?
- How long have you been a social worker?
- What sort of certification or licensure do you hold?
- Do you have a specialization within the field of social work?

¹ According to one recent study, many people who jobs considered to be social work but without a degree in social work. Council on Social Work Education, “Profile of Social Work Workforce,” (2017), 4. Accessed at <https://www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=wCttjrHq0gE%3D&portalid=0>.

Social Work

Tell me about how you became a social worker.

Tell me about your current job.

How would you explain what social work is to someone who doesn't know?

Could you tell me about the difficult challenges you face at your work? // Describe some of the obstacles that you face in your work that keep you from helping people as you would like.

Tell me about difficult decisions you make at your work.

How do you address these obstacles? And/or make these decisions? What strategies do you use?

Tell me about an interaction with a client that remains with you — whether as a source of regret, hope, confusion, disappointment, etc.

Many social workers describe periods of burn out, compassion fatigue, or secondary trauma. Have you experienced any of those things? Would you mind telling me about them? [And how you coped?]

Christianity & Social Work

Tell me about how you understand the relationship of Christianity and social work.

Does being a Christian [and/or your beliefs about God] change the way that you're a social worker? If so, how?

Does being a Christian ever play into how you make difficult decisions [or address obstacles]? If so, how?

Tell me about how you think about God in relation to your work. [Do you ever perceive God to be in and/or active in your work? If so, how?]

Ethics & Social Work

The NASW Code of Ethics states: "Social workers also should be aware of the impact on ethical decision making of their clients' and their own personal values and cultural and religious beliefs and practices. They should be aware of any conflicts between personal and professional values and deal with them responsibly." Have you experienced conflicts between your personal and professional values? If so, how have you handled it? [Could you share an example?]

Tell me about your training in ethics. [Has this training been helpful in your everyday work?]

Is there anything we haven't talked about that you hoped we'd cover?

Version 2

Basic Information

- How long have you been a social worker?
- What sort of certification or licensure do you hold?
- Do you have a specialization within the field of social work?
- What is your religious affiliation?

Social Work

- Tell me about how you became a social worker. What drew you to social work?
 - Did being a Christian have anything to do with becoming a social worker?
- Tell me about your current job.
- How would you explain what social work is to someone who doesn't know?

The Difficulties of Social Work

- When you first started practicing social work, what was the most difficult thing about your job? Could you share an example?
 - Is this thing still difficult in your work today? If not, what has changed?
 - Are there ways that your employing agencies supports you in this? If so, how?
- Many social workers tell me about difficult decisions they have to make in their work. Do you find that you often have to make difficult decisions? How do you typically make these decisions?
- Some social workers tell me that occasionally past decisions stay with them – as a source of instruction or regret. Do you have past decisions that stay with you? Perhaps from early in your career?
- Some social workers describe periods of burn out, compassion fatigue, or secondary trauma. Have you ever had these sorts of experiences? How did they come about? And how have you coped with them?
- Some social workers talk about the importance of establishing [personal-professional] boundaries in their work. For others, this seems less important. Is this something that has been important to you?
 - How have your boundaries changed over your practice? How closely do you follow these boundaries?

Christianity & Social Work

- I'm really interested in understanding the relationship of Christianity and social work. For some people, Christianity and social work are closely related. For others, they aren't at all. How do you think about this (if you do)?
- Does being a Christian change the way that you're a social worker? If so, how?
- Some social workers tell me that prayer plays an important role in their work – whether during their workday or before or after it. Others don't talk about praying. What role does prayer play for you in your work, if any?
- How do you think about God in relation to your work? Do you ever see God in your work? If so, how?

Ethics & Social Work

- The NASW Code of Ethics states: "Social workers also should be aware of the impact on ethical decision making of their clients' and their own personal values and cultural and religious beliefs and practices. They should be aware of any conflicts between

- personal and professional values and deal with them responsibly.” Have you experienced conflicts between your personal and professional values? If so, how have you handled it? Could you share an example?
- Many social workers have to participate in regular ethics training for their licensures. Some find this helpful. Others do not. Do you have to participate in regular training in ethics? How do you think about this required training?

Concluding Questions

- Thinking back over your career [*especially if it's been long*], would you say that you have changed as a person and/or as a professional? If so, how? Could you tell me a story about that?
- Tell me about why you keep doing what you are doing. What gives you reasons for hope in your work?
- Is there anything we haven't talked about that you hoped we'd cover?

Closing with demographic questions >> Age, race, gender

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