

Saints and Saintliness¹

JOHN COTTINGHAM

'The greatest saints ... show themselves, and there is no question; every one perceives their strength and stature. Their sense of mystery in things, their passion, their goodness, irradiate about them and enlarge their outlines while they soften them. They are like pictures with an atmosphere and background; and placed alongside of them, the strong men of this world and no other seem as dry as sticks, as hard and crude as blocks of stone or brickbats.' (James 1960 [1902]: 364)

1. Understanding sainthood

There are a number of potential difficulties that beset the philosophical study of sainthood. To begin with, the concept of sainthood is integrally connected with questions about morality and how we should live; indeed arguably the concept of sainthood (like many religious concepts) can only be adequately understood within a framework that gives primacy to this moral dimension. This may present an obstacle to the proper philosophical discussion of sainthood, given the compartmentalized nature of much contemporary academic philosophy, where the 'ethicist' and the 'epistemologist' often pursue very disparate agendas. Yet if we leave the confines of academic specialisms and start to look at how human life is actually lived, it becomes clear that our cognitive grasp of reality, what we know and understand of the world, often depends in crucial respects not just on what the world is like, but also on what *we* are like: how our sensibilities are cultivated and attuned, what we pay attention to, what distractions and temptations we have learned to set aside, how earnestly we persevere in the quest for sincerity and integrity, and how our perceptual powers are refined through experience— including the painful experience of sacrifice and suffering. The saint seems to be a paradigm case of someone for whom the process of interior moral transformation has reshaped their perception of the world and their grasp of reality. So although the focus of the present volume is an epistemological one, it will be important for the purposes of this chapter not to construe 'epistemological' in too circumscribed a way; for the life of the saint may turn out to be a life in which the epistemic and the ethical aspects are inseparably fused.

The remarks of William James in our opening epigraph suggest as a starting point for inquiry the idea that the great saints can be recognized by certain shining qualities whose value is manifest to all. Yet here a second potential difficulty presents itself, namely that it is far from obvious that there is as much of a consensus on the relevant praiseworthy qualities as James supposes. For in judging the value of sainthood, the theist may wish to employ standards that may appear debatable or questionable to those who reject the theistic framework. Moreover, standards of value, methods of inquiry, and the extent of religious allegiance in a given society, are all factors that are liable to change over time; and in this connection it is remarkable how much the cultural landscape has altered since William James presented his *Varieties of Religious Experience* at the start of the last century. In one way James saw his own empirical methods as very 'modern' and radical: he proposed, in his chapter on saintliness, to 'measure the worth of a religion's fruits in merely human terms of value' (James 1960 [1902]: 322)— something he clearly felt might ruffle the prevailing religious sensibilities of the time. But in spite of that, his attitude to sainthood, as is clear from our opening epigraph, was often very positive; and his general tone is one of open-minded interest and broad respect for many aspects of the religious outlook. By contrast, the 'naturalist revolution' (Leiter 2004: 2-3), which has increasingly swept through philosophy at

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the start of our own century, accords scant respect to theistic ideas and frameworks. For the most part, the moral concepts relevant to sainthood that figure so prominently in the theist's worldview— sacrifice, grace, redemption, purification, blessedness, and so on— tend to be ignored as irrelevant to an acceptable moral philosophy.

There are a number of possible responses to this problem. Philosophers and theologians who are believers could perhaps resolve to discuss the topic of sainthood only amongst themselves, answerable only to 'the criteria of the Christian community' (to adapt a phrase of Alvin Plantinga from a slightly different context; Plantinga 1983: 77), or to some other explicitly religious standard. But in so far as the typical theist is committed to the religious worldview not just as an academic exercise but as something that is believed to irradiate and give value to all aspects of human life, he or she will surely want to reach out and attempt to communicate beyond the circle of co-religionists. So if sainthood is to be more than an esoteric notion that is ignored in the secular academy, the religious philosopher will want to discuss it in a way that at least may allow the sceptic or the non-believer to glimpse why it might be an epistemically and morally interesting notion, irrespective of whether or not it is finally accepted. This kind of 'bridge-building' approach is the one that will be adopted in what follows,

A further, and rather different, problem that arises for anyone who wishes to take saints and the saintly life as a topic for philosophical inquiry is that the very enterprise may seem presumptuous. For what academic writer, indulging in the luxury of airing his or her views from the comparative comfort of the study or the campus office, has a right to talk about the interior life of those who devote their lives to God? A possible response here is that in any inquiry into a distinctive form of human life there will always be a risk of a gap between the life of the inquirer and the life of the individual or group being studied, but this is not to say that no attempts can be made to narrow the gap, albeit in a small way. If we grant (as Wittgenstein suggested), that is necessary to attempt in some way to enter a form of life if we are to aspire to understand it (Wittgenstein 1958: Part I, § 23), then this implies something important about the appropriate methods of inquiry for studying notions like sainthood. The habits of thought developed by philosophers of religion often predispose them to look at things in a fairly abstract and theoretical way, focusing on the analysis and evaluation of propositions, the truth or falsity of beliefs espoused by religious adherents, and the degree to which those beliefs are supported by argument and evidence. All this is perfectly valid, and valuable; but a proper philosophical understanding of religious phenomena requires us to take account of much more. To be religious is not just to subscribe to certain doctrines, it is to follow a certain way of life and to take up certain commitments. Perhaps most importantly, it has always been understood as a *learning* process, or a process of training or *askesis*, as the Greeks called it. It is a discipline that involves not just the theoretical acquisition of knowledge, but a structured programme supported by rules and practices.

This observation has direct relevance for the understanding of saints and saintliness, since it points us towards the disciplines of spirituality (including prayer, fasting, meditation and the like), which are, in many traditions, absolutely central to the saintly life. The term 'discipline' comes from the Latin verb *discere*, 'to learn'; but the learning envisaged here is not merely intellectual but also moral. The goal is to *change*, to set aside the spurious goals of self-enrichment, and to grow in wisdom and love of the good. And for this reason, the 'conversion' at which spiritual practices have traditionally been aimed, and to which the saint aspires, is not conceived as something that can be completed on a particular day, or even over a single season, but is thought of as a lifelong process. Thus the Rule of St Benedict, dating from the first century AD, speaks of a *conversatio morum*, often translated 'conversion of life', a continuous reshaping and renewal of one's whole character and way of life. Reflecting further on this conception of sanctity as the goal of a lifelong journey may do something to mitigate

the apparent presumptuousness referred to a moment ago— the presumptuousness of the philosopher or theologian who ventures to scrutinize and evaluate the phenomenon of saintliness while pursuing the often very worldly career of a contemporary professional academic. For if sainthood is not so much a finally achieved state as the goal of a long and continuous process, it becomes easier to see it as not something wholly set apart from the normal, but as having some relation to the ordinary struggles and failings of the rest of us.

This brings us to a final issue in this introductory trawl of problems relating to the concept of sainthood, namely the relation between the saintly and the normal human life. As commonly used, it is clear that the term 'saint' is taken to refer to someone who is far advanced on the path of holiness. And this is why saints are revered both as exemplars, and also as people whose lives and witness contribute importantly to the spiritual development of more ordinary mortals. As Austin Farrer eloquently put it:

Nature is tested by masterful violence, but if God is to be known, it is by humble obedience, and by patient waiting for Him ... No one has the spirituality to prove anything absolutely, and the spirituality of the ordinary believer is negligible equipment compared with that of the saint. What is received on authority must be proved in action, and yet it is never so proved that it could not be proved more The religious mind, incapable of proving faith in seventy years of imperfection, adds the years of others to its own and extends experiment by proxy (Farrer 1957: 90, cited in MacSwain 2013: 156).

Saints, in short, are important to the ordinary believer both morally, because they inspire us, and also epistemically, because their lives provide authoritative evidence for the truth and value of the theistic outlook that we might find hard to access directly (compare Zagzebski 2012). Farrer's suggestion is not just that the saints are examples for us to imitate, but also that their training and devotion may have put them in a position to experience personally aspects of reality that ordinary mortals may only glimpse dimly and sporadically. Sainthood can be thought of, in Farrer's terms, as an 'extension' of an experiment that for most of us has to remain incomplete; their moral and spiritual growth has allowed them to discern dimensions of reality that others may simply take on faith.

Nevertheless, despite the undoubted special status of sainthood in these respects, it is worth noting that there is also an enduring strand in the Judaeo-Christian tradition which insists that the call to embark on the long road of moral transformation is one that is addressed to all— often, perhaps especially, to sinners and those who lead ordinary flawed human lives (see Jeremiah 31:9; Hosea 14: 2-5; Luke 5:32; Mark 2:17; Matthew 9:13). This connects with the point just made about the saints being in an epistemically superior position, able to discern aspects of reality which others glimpse very imperfectly. The saint may admittedly have something of the authority and status of an expert, as Austin Farrer implies in the above quotation, but it is not clear that the resulting knowledge is 'transmittable' in quite the way expert scientific knowledge is (where, for example, the layperson may say he knows about structure of the atom because he takes on trust the knowledge of the professionals). For if the religious call is addressed to all, it will not be enough for us simply to receive the wisdom of the experts; each of us is required to strive as best we may to advance at least some way along the road they trod, so as to set about purifying and enriching our knowledge of the good and starting to bring our lives into conformity with it. So although the historical study of saints and sainthood will, quite legitimately, focus on those outstanding exemplars who are conventionally depicted with haloes and who have 'St' in front of their names, part of what gives the philosophical and theological study of saintliness its appeal is precisely that it is *not* a category that is impossibly far removed from 'ordinary' human life, but one that can, if the theistic outlook is correct, be integrated into a coherent framework designed to apply to all.

2. *The value and scope of the saintly life*

The idea just broached, that the goals of the saintly life may be ones that are in principle applicable to all, or at least to be aspired to by all, may strike some as objectionably counter-intuitive. In her much anthologized article 'Moral Saints', Susan Wolf makes the following observation:

Given the empirical circumstances of our world, it seems to be an ethical fact that we have unlimited potential to be morally good, and endless opportunity to promote moral interests. But this is not incompatible with the not-so-ethical fact that we have sound, compelling, and not particularly selfish reasons to choose *not* to devote ourselves univocally to realizing this potential or to taking up this opportunity. (Wolf 1982: 435; emphasis supplied)

Wolf's conclusion is that common sense morality suggests that sainthood is an 'unattractive or otherwise unacceptable' ideal (Wolf 1982: 427). Her argument is partly based on the thought that devoting oneself *entirely and completely* to agapeic goals such as feeding the hungry or healing the sick would necessarily involve the sacrifice of countless other valuable but more personal activities, like 'reading Victorian novels' or 'playing the oboe'. Put that starkly, it may seem that the defender of the saintly ethic could simply retort that that true compassion requires us to bite the bullet and sacrifice these agreeable activities. But Wolf's underlying point is a more interesting one: although no one item in the long list of rewarding activities of this kind could be singled out as a necessary ingredient in a well-lived life, nevertheless 'a life in which *none* of these possible ingredients of character are developed may seem to be a life strangely barren' (Wolf 1982: 441). In short, the perfectionist ethic implied by the saintly ideal, for example in Christ's injunctions to 'be perfect', or to 'sell all you have and give to the poor' (Matthew 5:48 and 19:21; Luke 18:22; Mark 10: 21), is charged with being harshly incompatible with any reasonable idea of what makes a human life fruitful and fulfilling.

It is instructive in this connection to contrast the saintly Christian ideal with the more 'down-to-earth' Aristotelian approach to the well-lived life. Generosity, like all moral virtues, is for Aristotle a mean between two flanking vices of excess and deficiency. So in the Aristotelian perspective, to take concern for others to the point of selling all you have and giving to the poor is *not* to earn extra points on the virtue scale: it is to go 'over the top' and slide down towards the vice of excess. Excessive self-giving, in Aristotle's scheme of things, would miss the mark of virtue by sacrificing too much, just as, on the other side, refusal to give anything would miss the mark by displaying too little regard for others. To be sure, selfish tight-fistedness may for the Aristotelian be ethically worse than excessive giving; for an Aristotelian virtue is not always exactly equidistant from its flanking vices of excess and deficiency. But the fact remains that the Christian saint who gives up *all* for others is, to the Aristotelian way of thinking, lacking in that balanced sense of moderate self-esteem that is necessary for a fulfilled human life (Aristotle 325 BC, Bk 2, Chs 6 & 7; Cottingham 1991).

We thus have a long and powerful strand in Western ethical thought, still vigorously at work today, that seems to run directly counter to the Christian ethic of saintly self-sacrifice. This strand allows a privileged or protected area for legitimate self-concern and personal flourishing, and sets limits on how much an individual can or should be expected to give up for others. How far, then, should our own understanding of saintliness be responsive to this tradition?

One possible response, an uncompromisingly critical one, would be to dismiss the whole concept of saintly self-sacrifice as, in the words of the philosopher John Mackie, the 'ethics of fantasy' (Mackie 1977: 129-34). On this view, partly reflected in the arguments of

Wolf referred to above, the Christian injunction to give up all for others is both psychologically and ethically suspect: it not only verges on being impossibly difficult to adopt, given certain deeply ingrained human impulses towards self-referential concerns, but, from an ethical point of view, appears incompatible with an enormous range of ordinary, intuitively quite legitimate, human pursuits (Cottingham 1983: sec. 2). This kind of objection can be linked to the ‘argument from integrity’, developed by Bernard Williams in connection with his well-known critique of utilitarianism. This latter ethic is often construed as requiring us to subordinate our own interests entirely to the goal of maximizing global utility; but, as Williams points out, it seems doubtful whether I could function as a human being at all unless my own individual pursuits and preferences were allowed some special weighting in my deliberations. It seems that I would disintegrate as an individual if I were obliged to drop any activity or project in which I was engaged whenever another project presented itself whose contribution to the general utility was marginally greater. Were such the case, it seems that I would have no real character— there would be no distinctive pattern to my life. I would simply be, in Williams’s phrase, a cog in a ‘satisfaction system’ which ‘happened to be near certain causal levers at a certain time’ (Williams 1981: 4).

These debates over impartiality versus self-preference, which have loomed large in contemporary philosophical literature, prompt one to ask how far the Christian ideal of saintliness is really to be lumped together with the kind of global impartialism and impersonalism found in certain utilitarian and other secular ethical outlooks. It is certainly true that Christian ideals like that of the brotherhood of man (based on the idea of God as father of all) invite us to reach beyond the particularities of tribal and national allegiance, towards universal justice and respect for all humanity. Moreover, in interpreting the command to love one’s neighbour as oneself, Christ’s parable of the Good Samaritan invites us to regard as a ‘neighbour’ anyone in dire need or distress— an idea, as Nicholas Wolterstorff has recently shown, that has deep roots in the Hebrew bible, for example in the injunctions found in the Prophets and the Psalms to care for the ‘quartet of the vulnerable’—orphans, widows, the impoverished, and resident aliens (Zechariah 7: 9-19; Isaiah 1:17; Psalm 147:6; Wolterstorff 2008: 76). But in reflecting on these Scriptural insights it is important to notice that the Judaeo-Christian ethic by no means outlaws all partialities or special relationships; on the contrary, the duty of loyalty to family is enshrined in the ten commandments (Exodus 20:12), and Christ is depicted in the Gospels as having close personal ties (for example, to his mother, to the ‘beloved disciple’ who was special to him, and to the family of Lazarus (see John 19: 25-7; John 11:35). If we take these examples into account, it seems a distortion to see the Christian saint as required to forswear all partialistic concerns and commitments in favour of complete impersonal detachment. Arguably, the love for one’s fellow creatures that forms the core of the Christian message is a love that is initially manifested not in some impersonal and detached concern for ‘humanity in general’, but rather in the committed relationships which we forge with those whom we encounter in our individual lives (this point is developed in Oderberg 2007).

This last point has important implications for the structure of the saintly life. Reflecting on the extreme psychological difficulty of self-abnegation and self-sacrifice has led some critics to suppose that the ethic of saintliness is one we may admire from a distance, but which for the mass of mankind is far beyond what can be reasonably adopted into a feasible blueprint for the good life (I once took this view, in Cottingham 1991: 815-6). But as David Oderberg has persuasively argued, there are considerable costs involved in separating off saintliness as a special moral category in this way. ‘How can morality consist of a set of [partialistic] norms for the mass of mankind yet be overlaid by an ideal that is completely *at odds* with what those norms require? It is to place the saint in a wholly different species of agent, as though she were not *one of us*— an exemplar for mankind’ (Oderberg 2007: 60). In short, if the Christian outlook is to provide a coherent model for human life, it seems that we

must find a way of *integrating* the saintly ideal exemplified by Christ's life into a pattern for living to which we can all, in principle, aspire. This means that there must be no *radical* discontinuity (as there is in much contemporary secular ethics) between the life that is required of us as ordinary human beings, and the kind of life that exemplifies saintliness.

To explore this further, we need to delve deeper into the psychodynamics of the saintly life. For although saints are especially admirable people, they are not plausibly understood as strange beings governed by higher than ordinary standards of action, or obeying more than ordinarily compassionate and outgoing rules of conduct. Instead, the saint is better understood as someone subject to ordinary human weaknesses and temptations, yet one whose epistemic situation is progressively transformed and purified so that they start to understand themselves and their relation to their fellow humans in a new light. This in effect brings us back to the point made in section one about the integral connection between the moral and the epistemic dimensions of sainthood. Saints are not just those whose conduct rises above the norm; they are those whose epistemic powers (of discernment, of understanding, of perception) have undergone a transformation. And if the message of grace in the Gospels is true, this is transformation that all of us, however flawed, can in principle dare to aspire to.

3. *Saintliness and transformation*

Although Christian ideals such as sanctity of life generally receive scant attention in the contemporary academic world, there is a wealth of philosophical discussion of conduct that goes beyond what is normally expected or required. In particular, the moral category of the 'supererogatory' has generated a very considerable philosophical literature (see Heyd 2012), and this category is often loosely linked with saintliness, following J. O. Urmson's seminal article 'Saints and Heroes', which was mainly about supererogation (Urmson 1958). The origins of this category can be traced back to the middle ages, for example in Aquinas's discussion of the distinction between 'precepts' (*praecepta*), which are commandments to be obeyed by all, and 'counsels' (*consilia*), which concern what is good and recommended, but not strictly required (Aquinas 1266-73, I-IIae Qu.108, art. 4 and II-IIae Qu.184, art. 3). The basic idea has its roots in St Paul, who, for example, recommended chastity, but allowed that it might not be suitable for all (I Corinthians 7:25); in the Gospels, moreover, we find Jesus telling the rich young man 'if you want to enter life, keep the commandments', but adding that if he wants to be perfect, he should sell all his possessions for the poor (Matthew 19: 16-22). The nature and scope of the supererogatory became a subject of fierce dispute between Catholic and Protestant theologians following the Reformation (see Heyd 1982: ch. 1).

For present purposes, however, we may simply note that the Christian ideal of saintliness in some respects seems to subvert the standard distinction between what is morally required and what is 'above and beyond the call of duty'. In conventional morality, I have a duty not to harm others, but (with certain qualifications) I am not normally required to help them, and I am certainly not required to love them. But if we consult the Fourth Gospel, we find the following striking command issued by Jesus to his disciples, during his long discourse on the eve of the Passion: 'A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: as I have loved you, that you also love one another.' (John 13:34) The Greek word translated as 'commandment' here is *entolē*, the term normally used in the Septuagint Greek version of the Hebrew Bible to translate *mitzvah*, plural *mitzvot*, the commandments given by God to the Israelites via Moses. So not only the solemn context (the night of his betrayal and arrest leading to his death), but also the specific terminology-of-command used by Christ, make this saying pregnant with authoritative force. The disciples are solemnly enjoined to love one another.

If commands flowing from God generate moral obligations, then the inference from this (given certain premises of the Christian faith about the status of Christ) will be that the

disciples of Christ were placed under a moral obligation to love one another. Indeed, assuming that this saying of Christ was meant to apply not just to those actually present at the time, but to disciples of Christ generally, it will follow that *all* Christians are under an obligation to love one another. And a further short step, if we combine this with other teachings of Christ such as the parable of the Good Samaritan, will take us to the conclusion that all followers of Christ are under an obligation to show love to any fellow human being in need. The upshot is that Christian ethics makes obligatory or required what in many other ethical systems is thought of as at best supererogatory— loving one's fellow human being. Loving every fellow human, even one's enemies (Matthew 5:44), is normally taken to be the hallmark of a saint; but the above reasoning suggests that in the Christian conception we are all called to be saints in this sense.

An obvious objection to this conception is based on the maxim that 'ought' implies 'can'. The actions of a 'minimally decent Samaritan', to use Judith Jarvis Thomson's phrase (Thomson 1971) may be within the reach of all of us; giving a cup of water to a thirsty beggar is one thing, but *loving* them is surely not within our voluntary control, so cannot be a duty (except perhaps for a very rare kind of person who is constituted differently from the rest of us). To respond to this objection we need to take into account the idea broached towards the end of the previous section, about sainthood involving a progressive epistemic transformation. The teachings of Christ include an account of a final judgment separating the 'sheep' and the 'goats', where those who failed to reach out to the hungry or homeless or prisoners are told by the King: 'whatever you did not do for one of the least of these my brothers, you did not do for me.' (Matthew 25: 45). A long tradition of subsequent Christian teaching enjoins us to 'see Christ in the stranger'. And what this seems to imply is *not* that in the search for perfection the saint should grit his teeth and try to find a repulsive ragged beggar somehow 'loveable' in a sentimental way, but rather that he or she should start to see something authentically Christlike in the very humanity and vulnerability of the human being now in front of him.

There are two ways of construing this transformed or purified state to which the saint must aspire. One is that the kind of moral improvement envisaged consists simply in faithful obedience to the commands of Christ to feed the hungry, visit the sick and so on— in other words, that the saint is a person who changes volitionally so as to be willing to conform his actions to what is divinely required *just because* it is divinely required. But a more plausible interpretation is suggested by the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, namely that 'the person who loves become more and more intimate with the commandment, becomes at one with the commandment' (Kierkegaard 1985: 375-376). This is convincingly glossed by Stephen Evans as the claim that 'a person ... who is perfected in love ceases to experience that call to love as a duty' (Evans 2013: 86).

If we follow up the implications of this idea, it seems promising to construe the process of being 'perfected in love' as a kind of shift of *perception*. Instead of being viewed as belonging to a despised category that invites neglect or exclusion (the 'scrounger', the 'welfare recipient'), the person in need starts to be seen as a human being like myself, with whom I might easily have changed places, had things gone differently. The aspiring saint's eyes are progressively opened to this crucial dimension of human interchangeability, as it were; things start to be seen less as a matter of my being disturbed or importuned by you, and more a matter of potential mutuality and reciprocity. It is this dimension that seems to be underlined elsewhere in the teachings of Christ. Having commanded his disciples to love one another, Christ immediately adds a kind of gloss: '*as I have loved you*, that you also love one another'. And when, much later in the discourse in Chapter 15, he recapitulates the command, we once again find not just a bald instruction, but the same closely associated reciprocal clause: 'this is my commandment, that you love one another *just as I have loved you*.' (John 15: 12). One could read this as merely an adverbial comparison— 'love one another in the same

way, or with the same degree of concern'; but it seems much more plausible to read it as a reason that that *grounds* the command, or comes very close to doing so. It is significant that earlier on in the same discourse we have the episode of the washing of the feet (with which the Mandatum is still closely associated in the Church's liturgy for Holy Thursday), and here again we have exactly the same reciprocal link: 'If I your master and teacher have washed your feet, so too you ought to wash one another's feet.' (John 13:14).

How does the aspiring saint come to see that we must love one another? According to the suggestion proposed here, it is by having his or her eyes open to the fact that whether we like it or not we are bound in relations of reciprocity— this is the very essence of what it is to be human. I am not an isolated autonomous independent figure who can dole out benefits either to myself or to others as I see fit, on the basis of my lordly assessments of the requirements of 'practical reason'; on the contrary, I need the love and concern of others every day of my life, from birth to death. And once I recognize my dependency, and the fulfilling and healing power of the loving action of another towards me, I cannot but recognize that I am bound to reach out in a similar way to others who need my care. This is surely the force of Christ's demonstrating his love for the disciples in the foot-washing, and of his subsequently *directly associating his own love for them* with his appeal to the disciples to love each other. Although it is phrased as a commandment, it is in fact a piece of *teaching*, a guiding towards the rational enlightenment that discloses the unavoidable reasons-based imperative of love, grounded in the objective facts of human dependency and mutuality (Cottingham, forthcoming 2014).

Of course it is one thing to grasp this intellectually and another to absorb it so deeply that it infuses one's entire outlook and relationships with others. If the path to sainthood is a long and hard one, then the achievement of purity in life must be a matter of degree, and some have no doubt undergone more radical transformations in this respect than others. But the key point for present purposes is that progress along this path requires not just 'moral fibre'— virtues (valuable though they are) like determination, perseverance, steadfast adherence to duty— but a constantly deepening perception of the meaning of what it is to be a vulnerable human being, and a resulting lifting of the veils that cut us off from 'the least of these my brothers and sisters.' (Matthew 25: 40). The change, in short, is not just a change in behaviour but in *knowledge*: what was before occluded about the status of my fellow humans and my relation to them comes plainly into view, as something that I now know and understand in its full significance.

4. *Saints versus heroes*

'Saints' are coupled with 'heroes' in the title of the influential philosophical article already mentioned (Urmson 1958); and in some of the more dubious products of today's popular culture the two terms appear to have become virtually interchangeable. In a recent advertisement for one of the computer war-games that have become worryingly ubiquitous we find the following: 'Saints and Heroes, the Unit Pack for *Total War*: honed by years of relentless training and tempered in the fires of battle, these elite warrior units excel in their fields, and stand head-and-shoulders above their rank-and-file brothers.' Banal though these phrases are, they recall a type that has been widely admired and looked up to from ancient times, the strong man or champion who excels in 'greatness'. Yet if we revert to our opening epigraph by William James, it is clear that he would have rejected any such lumping together of 'saint' and 'hero', since he sharply distinguishes saints from the 'strong men of the world.' For all their power and seeming strength, James seems to suggest, heroes are curiously flat figures, lacking the psychological depth and true moral stature of the saint.

James's insights here are prefigured in one of the most interesting reflections on the hero in Western literature, Tolstoy's portrayal of Napoleon. Noting how Napoleon was idolized in his time by many cultivated Russian aristocrats, even when their country was on

the point of being invaded by his forces, Tolstoy in his depiction of the retreat of the French army from Moscow allows us to see the underlying triviality and emptiness of the self-styled 'Emperor':

Napoleon, taking himself off home wrapped in a warm fur cloak and abandoning to their fate not only his comrades but men who (in his belief) were there because he had brought them there, feels *que c'est grand* ['what greatness there is in all this!'], and his soul is at ease... Greatness would appear to exclude all possibility of applying standards of right and wrong... And it never enters anyone's head that to admit a greatness not commensurable with the standard of right and wrong is merely to admit one's own nothingness and immeasurable littleness. For us, who have the standard of good and evil given us by Christ... there is no greatness where simplicity, goodness and truth are absent.' (Tolstoy 1966 [1869]: Bk 4, Part 3, Ch. 18)

Tolstoy's depiction of the 'great' hero Napoleon is sharply contrasted with the way he presents the Russian Commander-in-Chief Kutuzov. Superficially a not very prepossessing figure, elderly, awkward and somewhat infirm, widely ridiculed and criticized behind his back, Kutuzov is yet portrayed as one who is deeply motivated by compassion, and by a constant desire to minimize suffering and loss of life. As the French enemy retreats in disarray, desperately hungry and cold, he tells the troops: 'You see what they are reduced to: worse than the poorest of beggars. While they were strong we did not spare them, but now we may even have pity on them. They are human beings too, isn't that so, lads?' (Tolstoy 1966: Bk 4, Part 4, Ch. 6)

The famous (and nearly contemporaneous) philosophical reflections on heroism by Friedrich Nietzsche point in a very different direction, and provide a harsh critique of the Christian ideals of saintly compassion and concern for others that are extolled by Tolstoy. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche rails against compassion, and those moralists of the 'herd', who 'have an almost feminine inability to remain spectators, to let someone suffer.' The outlook of those who follow the Christian ideal is contrasted with the spirit of the 'new philosopher,' which will 'grow to such height and force that it feels the compulsion [for] a revaluation of values, under whose new pressure and hammer a conscience would be steeled, a heart turned to bronze' (Nietzsche 1966 [1886]: §§202, 203).

The two contrasting visions of the moral landscape presented here by Tolstoy and by Nietzsche diverge so radically that one might suppose that the choice between them is a matter of arbitrary or subjective preference, and that the decision to follow the path of sainthood, which on any account may often lead to great personal sacrifice, can be based only on faith, not on rational argument or evidence. But some of the epistemological results that have emerged in our discussion of sainthood suggest otherwise. If the saint is one who undergoes a progressive deepening or purification of his or her perceptions and sensibilities, then it seems reasonable to assume that, as that process continues, certain features of the landscape will become salient which might earlier have escaped attention. By contrast, in his scorn for the 'weakness' of the herd, Nietzsche's perception of his own status vis-à-vis that of others appears curiously blinkered. As Philippa Foot has observed, in looking down on 'inferiors', as Nietzsche did, Nietzsche lacks that deep sense that 'one is always, fundamentally, in the same boat as everyone else, and that therefore it is quite unsuitable for anyone to see himself as 'grand'' (Foot 1994: 9). Though Foot does not take up a Christian perspective, or invoke the dynamics of the saintly life, her insight here clearly links up with our previous suggestions about the way in which vulnerability and mutuality lie at the centre of the Christian moral ideal.

This point is developed further by Martha Nussbaum, albeit in a way that is presented in entirely humanist terms:

What should we think about a human being who insists on caring deeply for nothing that he himself does not control; who refuses to love others in way that open him to serious risks of pain and loss; who cultivates the hardness of self-command as a bulwark against all the reversals that life can bring? We could say, with Nietzsche, that this is a strong person. But there clearly is another way to see things. For there is a strength of a specifically human sort in the willingness to acknowledge ... the limits and vulnerability of one's body, one's need for ... friendship ... the willingness to form attachments that can go wrong and cause deep pain, in the willingness to invest oneself in the world...There is, in short, a strength in the willingness to be porous rather than totally hard, in the willingness to be a mortal animal living in the world. (Nussbaum: 1994, 160)

Both Foot and Nussbaum, though neither explicitly acknowledges it, could hardly have arrived at their views without being influenced, consciously or subconsciously, by the Judaeo-Christian ethical tradition that mistrusts worldly greatness, and points us towards the shifts of perception that can disclose the value of compassion. The underlying idea is that the more altruistic and compassionate viewpoint flows from purified perception, from a more discerning awareness of the human condition; and this in turn entails that the superiority of the saint over the hero is in part an *epistemic* superiority: the saint is vividly aware of aspects of the universal human predicament to which the grand but essentially self-oriented 'hero' is blind. But putting it in these epistemic terms, thinking of the saint as one who has better or more vivid awareness of the vulnerability he or she shares with others, in turn prompts a further question. Can the rejection of the 'heroic' model for human life, in favour of the openness to others that is characteristic of sainthood, be understood in entirely humanistic terms, as both the philosophers just mentioned seem to suggest? Is the theistic dimension of sainthood simply a piece of historical baggage that can be discarded, so that we could preserve the moral insights associated with it within the framework of an entirely secular worldview? Or is there something about the nature of sainthood that makes a theistic framework indispensable for understanding it? To this important question we may now turn in the concluding section of our discussion.

5. Sainthood and the theistic framework

We began this chapter by noting the need for theological and philosophical discussion of sainthood to reach out, as far as possible, beyond the confines of the community of believers, in order to explore the psychological, ethical and epistemic dimensions of the phenomenon that should be of interest to all who are concerned to reflect on the human condition. Yet it is also clear that any attempt at a reductionistic or purely humanist account of saintliness would be seriously deficient. One could of course speak by extension of a 'saintly' person, meaning simply a very good or morally admirable person; but the connotations of the term 'saint' through the long history of Western thought and literature, together with the etymology of the term, which links it to the religious ideas of sanctity or holiness, locate its meaning firmly within a religious framework.

The accounts we have of the lives of many of the most famous saints stress the extent to which those lives were informed by mystical experiences and ecstatic visions of the divine, often as the culmination of long periods of prayer and self-mortification (the sixteenth-century mystic St Teresa of Avila is a paradigm case). It could perhaps be argued that such direct perceptual visions of the divine are just as important an element in sainthood, or even more important, than the more practically oriented moral and epistemic transformations we have mainly been focusing on in this chapter. Against this, however, it seems clear that such mystical experiences, though a common feature of the lives of many saints, cannot be either a necessary or a sufficient condition of sainthood. Ecstatic visions, however frequent and vivid,

could not qualify someone as a saint if their lives were morally dubious; and conversely, someone whose life was a true imitation of the self-sacrificial love of Christ could not plausibly be denied the title of a saint on the grounds that they had failed to undergo the kinds of experience Teresa underwent.

Another way in which the concept of sainthood appears to require its being located within an explicitly theistic outlook concerns the virtues that characterize the saintly life. The highly influential framework articulated by Thomas Aquinas for understanding the ideal Christian life owes much to Aristotle's theory of the virtues. This theory offers an account of the good life as manifesting both moral virtues (instilled by training and habit), and intellectual virtues (of practical wisdom and judgement) that ensure our conduct is rational and appropriate to the circumstances we encounter in life (Aristotle 325 BC: Book 2 and Book 6). No doubt the Christian saint will need to have these 'natural' virtues, both moral and intellectual; but Aquinas goes on to describe the special nature of the additional 'theological' virtues, faith, hope and love, which cannot be acquired by natural means alone, but need to be 'infused' by divine grace (Aquinas 1266-73: First Part of Second Part, qu. 63-5; cf. Stump 2011). More generally, if we reflect on the theistic framework for understanding the human condition, at any rate within mainstream Christianity, it becomes clear that the search for moral perfection is never conceived as something that could be undertaken entirely on our own initiative or simply from our own resources. Theism is committed to the idea not just of an objective morality and objective standards to which a good human life must conform, but, much more than that, of a goal for human life that is laid down by the loving creator who is the source of all goodness, and who calls each of us towards that goal and provides the grace enabling us to strive towards it.

Allowing room for the role of divine grace thus seems to be an essential requirement for any plausible account of sainthood. There is a long history of theological disputation about the precise extent of the role of grace, from positions which make sainthood entirely a matter of divine bestowal of grace, to those which emphasise the contribution made by the human agent; and it is beyond the scope of the present chapter to explore these debates here. But if we look at some of the earliest accounts of sainthood, the story is often one of dramatic divine intervention to transform a sinful life, the paradigm case of this being the sudden conversion of St Paul when a blinding light appeared to him on the road to Damascus (Acts 9: 1-19). Paul describes himself as having been the 'worst of sinners', on whom God poured 'more and more of his grace' (1 Timothy 14-16). On the face of it, the conversion account makes Paul entirely passive, literally struck down by divine action 'out of the blue'. But clearly the subsequent life of a convert should not be understood as a robotic or mechanical process— that would make it devoid of moral significance— but rather as a transformed human existence, bound up with an interior moral and spiritual regeneration. The conversion of St Augustine provides an interesting example here, since his own comments suggest that it did not happen without considerable resistance: he was extremely reluctant to abandon his former way of life (Augustine *c.* 398: Bk 1 and Bk 8). And this gives some support to the account of the role of grace that is offered by St Thomas Aquinas. For Aquinas, only when a person ceases to cling to past wrongdoing, only when their resistant will becomes quiescent, will there be room for an infusion of divine grace.

So the salvific action of God, on this view, is not something operating entirely in spite of us, like the power of gravity; rather, some minimal degree of voluntary change on the part of the subject is necessary for grace to do its further work (for a compelling account of this process, see Stump 2010: 165-7, drawing on Aquinas 1266-73: First Part of Second Part, qu.9). A secular analogy which some may find helpful here can be drawn from the world of psychotherapy: often individuals will be 'blocked' from perceiving certain truths about their behaviour, so that they find it impossible to change damaging perceptions and patterns of conduct. The result is that they appear locked into a destructive way of life that they are

unable to break out of. Only when they are prepared to acknowledge their vulnerability and accept help, opening themselves to the often painful process of analysis, will the damaging projections start to be lifted. The process cannot be accomplished unaided; but equally there is need for an initial act of cooperation on the part of the subject for the healing process to get underway. Once again, both in this psychotherapeutic analogy, and in the religious idea of the operation of divine grace, we can see the intimate fusion of epistemic and moral components in the progress towards growth and healing.

The idea that there is an unavoidably theistic element in any acceptable account of sainthood is reinforced by considering the interior character of the saintly life. As described in countless biographies about the saints, and in many of the writings they themselves have left, the saintly life is not merely one of doing good; it is a life conceived as a 'journey of the mind towards God' (*Itinerarium mentis in Deum*) to quote the title of St Bonaventure's famous work: a life sustained and formed by the disciplines of spirituality, such as prayer, fasting and meditation. Paul urges his followers to 'pray without ceasing' (1 Thessalonians 5:17), and the life of Christ, for Christians the pattern of holiness, is described in the Gospels as one not just of self-sacrificial action, but of constant prayer (Mark 1: 25; Matthew 14: 23; Luke 6:12; John 17: 1-26). Prayer is often construed in our modern secular age as a primitive and superstitious attempt to gain benefits that would be better obtained by scientific methods (for example praying for a cure instead of consulting a doctor). But many scriptural and later sources suggest that its primary function is to bring the person praying closer to God. Christ is described in the Gospels, particularly the Fourth, as being at one with the Father; his status, for Christians, is of course unique, but it will be characteristic of all those we consider to be saints that they will aspire to ever closer identification with God and with the good, and in this sense the life of the Christian saint will be an 'imitation of Christ' (*imitatio Christi*), to quote from the title of a famous devotional text and handbook of spirituality from the fifteenth-century writer St Thomas à Kempis. Recapitulating a long theological tradition, Kempis aims to guide his readers along the path to 'consolation and peace,' 'submission,' 'purity of mind,' 'the joy of a good conscience,' 'putting up with discomfort,' 'gratitude for the grace of God,' and 'taking up the Cross' (the phrases quoted are some of the headings from Book II of Kempis c. 1420).

Though this captures much of what is widely understood as belonging to the saintly life, the account of Kempis has been criticized as laying too *much* stress on the interior dimensions of sainthood. The twentieth-century theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar had Kempis specifically in his sights when he objected that 'the love of God can only be fulfilled if it expands into the love of neighbour' (Balthasar 2001: 103). A possible resolution of this tension between the 'interior' and 'exterior' dimensions of the saintly life may perhaps be effected if we reflect further on the epistemic aspects of the 'conversion of life' referred to earlier (see above sections 1 and 3). The kind of conversion of life at which the saint aims is not just a matter of adopting certain spiritual practices and disciplines; nor is it simply a change in beliefs or in the theological doctrines that are espoused. Rather, it involves a fundamental epistemic shift, a shift in the way the world is perceived, and the way I view myself in relation to others. To borrow an observation of the theologian Sarah Coakley from a somewhat different context:

What shifts ... is not merely the range of vision afforded over time by the interplay of theological investigation and ascetical practice, but the *very capacity to see*. What is being progressively purged ... is the fallen and flawed capacity for idolatry, the tragic misdirecting of desire. One is learning, over a lifetime— and not without painful difficulty— to think, act, desire, and *see* aright. (Coakley 2013: 19-20)

For those who progress sufficiently far in this daunting task, there is, according to Christian doctrine, the hope of final blessedness. What this may mean in terms of the afterlife is no doubt a matter of revelation rather than rational determination; but there is a long tradition going back to the Gospels and to St Paul which speaks of the final vindication of those who suffer for righteousness' sake, and of the incorruptible crown awaiting the saints in heaven (Matthew 5: 12; I Corinthians 9:24-5). However that may be, it is worth noting, as we bring this survey of saints and saintliness to a close, that construing the rewards of sainthood in *purely* eschatological terms would be to leave out something vitally important from the theistic picture of sainthood. The 'blessedness' of which the Gospels speak is surely not an external incentive offered to bolster an otherwise counter-intuitive picture of the way life should be lived. On the contrary, if, as the theist maintains, we are created by a source that is itself pure love, if we are made in that image, then our deepest fulfilment will lie in realizing that love in our lives. However imperfectly we may be able to pursue it, love must be the key to meaningfulness in the lives of each of us. Self-interested goods may be, as far as they go, authentic goods; but in the absence of love, as St Paul's famous analysis in the first letter to the Corinthians tells us, they simply lose their significance and their pursuer becomes merely a 'sounding gong', or a 'tinkling cymbal' (I Corinthians 13:1; see Cottingham 2012, esp. section 4). The acknowledged saint is one who carries that love to degree of devotion and self-sacrifice that fills most of us with awe. But every human being, if the theistic vision is true, is called to advance as far as may be along that path. For our lives, on this vision, are not blank slates to be filled in as we happen to choose, but are governed by a cosmic teleology: like it or not, we are oriented towards a final supreme end—the good whose principal nature is love. The saintly life is one that grasps, in thought and action, where true human blessedness lies.

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