Back to Virtue

I am grateful to John Perry for his deft and illuminating review, which nudges in productive ways at the unity and shape of the story I have told in *Putting on Virtue*. In brief, Perry reads my book as a defence of Christian eudaimonism against charges of hypocrisy. He judges the defence to be a success, but suggests that I am conflating two distinct issues, only one of which is helpfully construed as hypocrisy. As a result of this conflation, I end up including topics and thinkers which don't properly belong under the same umbrella, and failing to do justice to those that do. I overlook the significance of the journey metaphor for Augustine's construal of pagan virtue, and so miss some of his most valuable resources for coming to terms with the character of all virtue *in via*. Furthermore, while Luther might appear to be the villain of my narrative, Perry argues that in fact he hardly deserves a place in it. Luther's rejection of eudaimonism is so complete that he doesn't really contribute at all to an ongoing conversation about it; his real concern is justification, with an unfortunate spillover into the foreign territory of ethics. It is Hume, Perry proposes, who is the proper villain, undermining the eudaemonist tradition by unashamedly setting aside the task of differentiating objective goods from subjective goods.

Following the shape of Perry's review, I want briefly to comment in turn on Augustine, Luther and Hume. First, though, a word about the project as a whole. *Putting on Virtue* does assume that some kind of Christian eudaimonism is defensible. I did not, though, understand my enterprise in the book to be a defence of Christian eudaimonism. Had I so construed it, I think the results would be considerably less satisfactory than Perry suggests. In other words, there is more work to be done on that score. Nor is hypocrisy the framing category of analysis, such that if the various issues to which I attend fail to be analysable in terms of hypocrisy, the unity of the whole comes into question. It is understandable enough that a reader might take hypocrisy to be such a category, given the book's opening sentences. But while some of the concerns and puzzles I take up in the book are helpfully construed in terms of hypocrisy, its overarching theme is anxiety over acquired virtue.

In brief, *Putting on Virtue* seeks to make sense of one of the core features of moral reflection from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries: the suspicion that social formation and habituation in virtue result in a mere semblance of virtue, a semblance which in fact conceals and entrenches

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human pride. This anxiety over acquired virtue can in some respects be understood as an inheritance from Augustine, but in its anti-eudaimonism and its hostility to human agency as such, it is distinctively modern. I strive to show how problematic this anxiety concerning habituation was both for Christian moral reflection (Luther, Puritan thought, Jansenism) and for emerging secular forms of moral thought, whether these embraced or repudiated hyper-Augustinianism (Rousseau, Hume, Kant). I also seek to identify and retrieve, from Erasmus and the early Jesuit dramatic tradition, resources for a positive account of virtue as simultaneously acquired through mimetic action and infused through divine grace. This account avoids setting human and divine moral agency over against one another, is optimistic about ordinary moral formation, and is generous also towards pagan virtue. It thus resembles in significant respects recent accounts of Christian virtue as performative, but without the ecclesiocentrism or even fideism which often characterises these accounts.

The revival of virtue ethics has made it possible for aspects of Christian ethics, which had seemed to be handicaps in the context of the dominant modern moral theories, to be heralded instead as advantages. Both the intelligibility and the concrete particularity of Christian ethics have been easier to articulate in the context of the revival of virtue ethics. At the same time, the ethics of virtue have too often become a weapon in a war against modernity. While welcoming the discourse of virtue, I wished to underscore how suspect it has often been for Christian thinkers and how significant the theological ramifications of coherently retrieving such a conception. Modernity does not mark a time 'after virtue' – it is Hegel and Wittgenstein who have led us back to virtue – and the discourse of virtue is not best understood as a better way of distancing church from world.

Perry argues that 'the most important Augustinian metaphor for assessing pagan virtue is not the actor (*hypocrites*) but rather the journey gone astray'. 'Misguided love' is helpfully seen as a delay on a journey; 'I may perceive my true home in a qualified sense, but not know the best route to get there'. Now I find this indeed to be a fruitful suggestion, which allows for creative rapprochement both with Thomas' distinction between proximate and ultimate goods and with Erasmus' depiction of pagan and Christian alike as embarked on a journey the end of which we do not yet fully grasp. But I am not convinced that Augustine himself construes pagan virtue in this way. *De Doctrina Christiana* speaks specifically to development in the Christian life, and Augustine's treatment of inadequate biblical interpretations cannot, I think, be so easily extended to his understanding of pagan virtue (indeed, Brian Harding in *Augustine and Roman Virtue* has recently reminded us of the fact that Augustine's critique of pagan virtue is quite precisely a critique of

Roman virtue). The heart of Augustine's case against pagan virtue, developed in the *City of God*, is that even the most superior pagan virtue is pervaded by a fatal flaw, that of pride. Virtuous pagans, even when they rise above the pursuit of honour, order all things to self; they take pride in virtue as their own achievement and so fail to acknowledge the dependency of their agency and the giftedness of their virtue. If they are on a journey, they are going backwards, facing exactly the wrong direction, towards self rather than God; they are not merely meandering around the countryside. There are certainly resources in Augustine for constructing other 'Augustinian' construals of pagan (or secular) virtue. Among the most fruitful is Augustine's account of the legitimacy of the heavenly city's use of earthly peace towards our true final end, since this permits us to say that the end of earthly peace can be a proximate good taken up and directed towards our final good. Augustine himself, though, immediately takes away with one hand what he has given with the other – any order achieved in the soul or society which does not serve God is not genuine order. When it comes to the question of the historical legacy of Augustine's critique of pagan virtue, it is his analysis of the way in which pagan virtue utterly fails to be what it claims to be which must be kept in view, and which is reflected and intensified in early modern anxieties over acquired virtue.

If Perry thinks I have not given Augustine enough credit, he suggests that I am not hard enough on Luther. Luther has abandoned eudaimonism, and so is no Augustinian. The former claim is true enough, but the latter does not follow. Luther belongs in the conversation, and is in relevant senses indeed an Augustinian. For he, too, is deeply concerned with properly acknowledging our dependence on God, even if he misconstrues the relationship between divine and human agency and so takes proper relationship to God to problematise human moral aspiration as such. This is not to say, though, that Luther is the villain of my story. I am not convinced that the story has either a hero or a villain. I identify different kinds of limitations and blindnesses in all of the figures I treat most positively – Augustine, Aquinas and Erasmus. In a nutshell, Augustine's treatment of pagan virtue is too totalising, while Aquinas' acquired/infused distinction is too tidy. Erasmus comes closest to valorisation only because the resources his thought offers for a mimetic account of Christian virtue have been underappreciated, but I also note the fact that these resources are suggestive rather than fully articulated and can all-too-easily be taken in a Pelagian direction. Similarly, since the task of adequately articulating a Christian account of virtue lies ahead of us, there is no point in looking for a villain to blame for having undermined or dismantled a now-lost treasure. What I do suggest is that two factors were

particularly important in making it difficult to sustain a Christian account of mimetic virtue: a failure to hold on to non-competitive understandings of divine and human agency, and the influence of a critique of eudaimonism and eventually of human moral aspiration itself as amounting fundamentally to self-love or egoism. In the early modern period, thinkers were faced with a problematic set of alternatives: either a Pelagian or semi-Pelagian affirmation of human agency, or an affirmation of divine grace as displacing human agency and with it pride and self-love.

While I'm not sure, then, that it is helpful to characterise Hume as the real villain, Perry is right that he represents, in a way which Rousseau and Kant do not, a decisive setting aside of the whole worry that acquired virtue is somehow corrupt or tainted. What I am most concerned to point out in my chapter on Hume is that this does not represent a return to Aristotle, who likewise lacks any such worry. For Aristotle – however problematic the assumptions which undergird his account of the magnanimous man – nevertheless possesses the resources to distinguish goods constitutive of the life of virtue from external goods, the satisfaction of subjective desires from the satisfaction which supervenes on virtuous activity. Hume can appeal only to the criteria of stability and consistency to order subjective desires. In his eagerness to exonerate natural virtue from the hyper-Augustinian tendency to trace in it an eternal regress of pride and hypocrisy, Hume takes a fateful step from the analysis of ethical reasons to the analysis of psychological causes. This really is a changing of the subject.

Putting on Virtue, then, is concerned to defend a Christian ethic of mimetic virtue, virtue acquired by being conformed to Christ and imitating virtuous human exemplars. This takes place in a process in which both divine and human agency are fully at work, as we are attracted by the beauty of exemplars in a way which energises our agency and ultimately are drawn into a process of being re-formed in the image of God in a way which fits us for common fellowship with God. Such a conception of the imitation of Christ is not in tension with individuality or authenticity, when these are properly understood in terms of the finite reflection of the infinity of divine perfection. Christ is for Christians the indefeasible exemplar, but the process of interpreting the exemplarity of Christ is never-ending. This understanding of the imitation of Christ makes intelligible, moreover, a Christian affirmation of true, if imperfect, secular virtues. These become possible when virtue is pursued for its own sake rather than for the sake of external goods, when those who seek virtue recognise in some fashion the dependent character of human moral agency, and when they are orientated towards proximate ends capable of being further directed towards our

ultimate final end of communion with God. It is a conception which should allow Christian ethicists to move beyond a preoccupation with Christian distinctiveness and identity while furthering recent emphases on the social formation of Christian virtue.

'The real test for Christian ethics', Perry rightly notes, 'is what to say next'. What shape ought Christian ethical formation to take in our pluralistic and rapidly changing world? One of the most important tasks facing us is powerfully to affirm – and actively to embody – the fact that Christian formation, formation for fellowship with God in Christ, is at the same time formation for service to the common good, a common good which today must be understood globally. Christian virtue does not thereby become merely instrumental to some secular end. Rather, a commitment to organising the structures and institutions of social existence in a way which conduces to the common flourishing of everyone is an integral aspect of Christian fidelity. For we are fitted for common fellowship with God only insofar as we are transformed into the kind of persons who can respond to the neighbour for her own sake, and neither for the sake of preserving our own virtue nor for the sake of shoring up tribal identities.

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