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## **Chapter 4: Enacted example in the spiritual life**

[This chapter is an excerpt from the author accepted manuscript of my book:

*Spiritual Traditions and the Virtues: Living Between Heaven and Earth* (Oxford University Press, 2020).]

### **1. Introduction**

In the course of this volume, we have been considering the nature of the spiritual life and of the goods at which it is aimed. In Chapter 1, we explored the idea that spiritual goods can be grounded in a relationship of congruence between a person's world-directed thoughts, desires and behaviour and their metaphysical context. In Chapter 2, we examined how a practice that aims at securing such congruence can be deemed good, and even praiseworthy, from the vantage point of a person who does not share the metaphysical presuppositions of the practice, and how this truth bears on the practical rationality of the spiritual life. And finally, in Chapter 3, we discussed how our perception of the everyday world can be assessed for congruence with metaphysical context, and how a rounded account of a person's spiritual practice needs to take into account, therefore, not only their thoughts, desires and behaviour, but also their world-directed experience.

In the current chapter, I am proposing to extend this understanding of the nature of spiritual goods by reflecting further on the contribution of bodily practices to the spiritual life. We can take as our starting point a text from Raimond Gaita, in which he speaks of the moral significance of enacted example. In the course of the discussion, I hope to show how the metaphysical and experiential vocabularies that we examined in the last chapter can be supplemented by a further way of recording progress in the spiritual life, one which appeals to bodily demeanour. I shall propose that bodily demeanour provides a further source for context-relative or hybrid goods, to be distinguished from the examples of those goods that

we reviewed in earlier chapters. If that is so, then our account of the infused moral virtues will need to be extended in this further respect, so as to accommodate the possibility that not only world-directed experiences but also bodily comportment can be more or less adequate relative to our metaphysical context. In brief, then, this chapter aims to develop an argument that runs parallel to the argument of Chapter 3, but now the focus of our enquiry will be bodily practice, rather than experience of the everyday world. Let us begin by setting out Gaita's example, and considering some respects in which it resembles Thomas Aquinas's account of neighbour love. Granted those parallels, we will then have a basis for building on the example to deepen our understanding of the infused moral virtues, and neighbour love in particular.

## **2. Raimond Gaita on the role of enacted example in the moral and spiritual life**

In his book *A Common Humanity*, Raimond Gaita recalls his experience as a seventeen-year-old of working as an assistant on a psychiatric ward in a Melbourne hospital. He notes how he was impressed by the 'nobility' of a number of the doctors on the ward, who spoke of the 'inalienable *dignity* of even those patients'.<sup>1</sup> He then recounts an episode which led him to a radically new assessment of his moral relation to the patients. This is how Gaita records the scene, and the emergence of his new insight:

One day a nun came to the ward. In her middle years, only her vivacity made an impression on me until she talked to the patients. Then everything in her demeanour towards them – the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, the inflexions of her body – contrasted with and showed up the behaviour of those noble psychiatrists. She showed that they were, despite their best efforts, condescending, as I too had

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<sup>1</sup> Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love & Truth & Justice* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1999), p. 18, Gaita's emphasis.

been. She thereby revealed that even such patients were, as the psychiatrists and I had sincerely and generously professed, the equals of those who wanted to help them; but she also revealed that in our hearts we did not believe this.<sup>2</sup>

This text, and Gaita's interpretation of it, intersects with a number of the themes that we have been exploring in earlier chapters. Let us draw out some of these connections now.

Gaita goes on to represent the example of the nun as an instance of what he calls 'the impartial love of the saints'.<sup>3</sup> And by this expression, it is clear that he intends to refer to the virtue that is known more conventionally by the name of 'neighbour love'. Hence he writes for example that:

Because of the place the impartial love of saints has occupied in our culture, there has developed a language of love whose grammar has transformed our understanding of what it is for a human being to be a unique kind of limit to our will.<sup>4</sup>

Here Gaita locates the example of the nun within a wider cultural and linguistic tradition, and that tradition is, I take it, the theological tradition that has spoken of neighbour love as a kind of other regard that is universal in scope, so that it extends to all human beings on the same basis, whether they be afflicted individuals, such as the patients on the psychiatric ward, or possessed of the full range of normal human capacities. By calling the love with which he is concerned 'impartial', Gaita indicates that he is intending to set his account within this larger tradition of thought. Moreover, Gaita's further commentary on this example coheres with several other features of the ideal of neighbour love as we have understood it here, notably

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>3</sup> For his use of this expression, see for example *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

the idea that such love is not the product of some process of habituation but, as Aquinas would put the point, 'infused'. For example, Gaita notes that:

It would be no fault in any account of ethics if it failed make fully intelligible what the nun revealed, for she revealed something mysterious.

And he continues:

Seeing her ... I felt irresistibly that her behaviour was directly shaped by the reality which it revealed. I wondered at her, but not at anything about her except that her behaviour should have, so wondrously, this power of revelation. She showed up the psychiatrists, but if I were asked how, exactly, then I would not elaborate on defects in their character, their imagination, or in what would ordinarily be called their moral sensibility.<sup>5</sup>

So in Gaita's view, the 'noble psychiatrists', who spoke so eloquently and sincerely of the patients' dignity, were not lacking in any of the conventional moral virtues. So despite their failings, Gaita is not inclined to withdraw or qualify his thought that the psychiatrists are 'noble', for they are in their way the epitome of a certain kind of human goodness. But even so, the nun's conduct shows that they fall short of another kind of standard, one that lies beyond the imagining of even a well formed 'moral sensibility'. In the spirit of Aquinas, it is tempting to gloss these thoughts by saying that the psychiatrists do not lack any of the 'acquired' moral virtues – any of the virtues that standardly make up a 'moral sensibility' or 'character', and for which we can be held responsible, to the extent that we are capable of instilling these virtues in ourselves by our own efforts, via the relevant processes of habituation. But even so, the psychiatrists' conduct, although not their 'character', proves to

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

be defective, when laid alongside another measure of excellence, one that lies outside our conventional moral scheme.

In the first of the passages I have just quoted, Gaita develops a related line of thought when he notes that we should not expect any system of ethics to be able to ‘make fully intelligible’ what the nun revealed, because what she revealed is ‘mysterious’.<sup>6</sup> Again, this thought fits very readily with Aquinas’s treatment of the infused moral virtues, and with neighbour love considered as such a virtue. For Aquinas too, no conventional, secular mode of ethical reflection can hope to bring into clear focus the goods at which neighbour love is aimed, and to which it thereby bears witness. Why? Because those goods are only evident, in full, from the vantage point of a revealed or theological conception of human possibilities, and will therefore fail to appear in any purely philosophical account of human beings and the conditions of their flourishing.

Moreover, Gaita writes that in observing the nun’s behaviour, his attention was drawn in the first instance not to her, but to what she revealed – and only to her in so far as her behaviour had this revelatory power.<sup>7</sup> Once again, this claim could be made of the infused moral virtues,

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, Gaita later expressed regret at his use of the word ‘mystery’ in this context, on the grounds that the term might invite the conclusion that ‘there are deep mysteries for deep people to marvel at’: Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (London: Routledge, 2nd edition, 2004), p. xxxi. Gaita notes in this same passage that his interest is in what is ‘necessarily mysterious’, rather than mysterious ‘because our epistemic or other cognitive powers are limited’. In this discussion, I have tried to be clear that his concern is indeed with the necessarily mysterious.

<sup>7</sup> See too Gaita’s comment that: ‘in another person such virtues and the behaviour which expressed them would have been the focus of my admiring attention. I admired the

to the extent that they are not the product of human striving. Just because they cannot be instilled by human effort, any attempt to understand the infused virtues ought to direct our attention away from the human agent in whom they are manifest, and towards the values to which that agent is responsive, whose motivational pull elicits her conduct.

It is natural to suppose that the idea of ‘infused’ virtue had its origins in certain kinds of experience – perhaps most obviously in experiences of passivity such as those that John of the Cross describes, though not necessarily in experiences of that particular intensity and emotional valence. In such experiences, the person will have a sense of themselves as being moved by an agency that is not their own. And in so far as that agency seems to lead them into newly productive relations with other human beings, and into a newly enlivened perception of the everyday world, then it would be natural for the theistically inclined person to suppose that the agency in question is ultimately of divine origin. In the last lecture, we saw how experiential and metaphysical kinds of vocabulary can be integrated within an account of progress in the spiritual life. And speculatively, we might suppose that the relationship between these two vantage points consists, in part, in experiences of passivity helping to generate and then to inform, in this kind of way, the notion of infused virtue.

Gaita’s example of the nun, and the interpretive framework within which he situates the example, points to an additional possibility. Perhaps the idea of infused virtue has its origins not only in our experience of our own agency, but also in our experience of the agency of

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psychiatrists for their many virtues – for their wisdom, their compassion, their courage, their capacity for self-sacrificing hard work and sometimes for more besides. In the nun’s case, her behaviour was striking not for the virtues it expressed, or even for the good it achieved, but for its power to reveal the full humanity of those whose affliction had made their humanity invisible’: *A Common Humanity*, p. 20.

others, when that agency takes broadly the form that Gaita has described in this text. In brief, in so far as the agency of another human being seems to reveal some quality that is not evident from the vantage point of a 'rule of human reason' (to put the point in Aquinas's terms), or to reveal something that is 'mysterious' from the perspective of conventional moral thought (to put the point in Gaita's terms), or in so far as the agency of another human being seems to suggest a deficiency in the conduct of even 'noble' human beings, or of human beings who seem to be in secure possession of the 'acquired' moral virtues, then we might find ourselves moved to suppose that this agency testifies to the possibility of another kind of virtue, one that is answerable to a transcendent order, rather than the immanent order that is tracked epistemically by our 'rules of reason' and motivationally by the habits of thought and feeling that constitute the acquired moral virtues.

This connection between Gaita's account of the nun's conduct and the idea of infused moral virtue is all the more striking in so far as the seventeen-year-old Gaita was, presumably, not familiar with that idea. So if Gaita has succeeded in recording the impressions of his seventeen-year-old self, then we should suppose that his remarks do not derive from any prior acquaintance with the notion of infused moral virtue. Rather, they suggest that, quite independently of any familiarity with that notion, our experience of another person's agency can lead us into a cluster of concepts that are closely connected to the concepts that constitute the idea of infused moral virtue, in the ways we have just noted.

In the last chapter, we considered the relationship between metaphysical and experiential vantage points on the spiritual life. Gaita's example points to the possibility of another kind of connection – this time, between metaphysical and behavioural vantage points upon the spiritual life. Specifically, we might suppose that there is a connection between the idea of infused moral virtue and our experience of another's agency, where that agency is expressed in a particular kind of bodily demeanour, such as that exhibited by the nun. I have been



suggesting that this association may run from the observation of another's agency to the category of infused moral virtue, but more plausibly, we might suppose that the relationship has been, historically, one of mutual influence, like the relationship between metaphysics and experience that we explored in the last chapter.

So here we have an initial reason for extending the thesis that we developed in the last chapter: for a rounded conception of the nature of the spiritual life, we need to employ not only metaphysical and experiential vantage points – where the second concerns my experience of my own agency and of the everyday sensory world – but also a behavioural vantage point, where this further perspective concerns my experience of the agency of other human beings. I shall return shortly to this question of why the behavioural vantage point is required for a proper conception of the spiritual life, but first let us think a little further about Gaita's example of the nun.

I have been setting out some of the affinities between Gaita's reading of the conduct of the nun and Aquinas's conception of neighbour love, but these two narratives also seem to differ in some respects. Let us consider these points of apparent difference next.

### **3. Gaita on the priority of enacted example over world view**

I have noted how Gaita's account of the 'mysteriousness' of what is revealed in the nun's conduct resembles in certain respects Aquinas's understanding of neighbour love considered as an infused virtue. However, there are other features of Gaita's discussion that cannot be assimilated to Aquinas's scheme quite so readily. Take, for example, the following passage, where Gaita is in effect giving a further gloss on the idea that what the nun revealed was not just contingently – relative to his particular vantage point, say – but essentially 'mysterious'.

Whatever religious people might say, as someone who was witness to the nun's love and is claimed in fidelity to it, I have no understanding of what it revealed

independently of the quality of her love. If I am asked what I mean when I say that even such people as were patients in that ward are fully our equals, I can only say that the quality of her love proved that they are rightly the objects of our non-condescending treatment, that we should do all in our power to respond in that way. But if someone were now to ask me what informs my sense that they are *rightly* the objects of such treatment, I can appeal only to the purity of her love. For me, the purity of the love proved the reality of what it revealed.<sup>8</sup>

Here Gaita quite explicitly denies that what is disclosed in the nun's conduct can be understood, and justified, by reference to any deeper story about the nature of things. In particular, Gaita clearly takes the fittingness of her conduct to be evident independently of any account of our metaphysical context.<sup>9</sup> In this respect, Gaita's approach resembles Hadot's position, as described in our opening chapter: Hadot also maintains that we can simply see the goodness or appropriateness of a way of life independently of any reference to metaphysical context – and for this reason, he thinks, we can fix our fundamental evaluative commitments first, before raising the question of what picture of the world would be motivationally most productive in enabling us to enact those commitments. Somewhat similarly, Gaita seems to be saying that we can just see that certain kinds of conduct are fitting, quite independently of reference to a metaphysical, or any other, context. To the extent that his position has this character, then Gaita's understanding of the 'impartial love of

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21, Gaita's emphasis.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, Gaita notes that the nun herself might well have offered a 'theological or metaphysical story about the people to whom she responded with a love of such purity', but adds that: 'My assent to what her love revealed did not ... depend on my acceptance of an hypothesis about the grounds of that love': *ibid.*, p 20.

the saints', or what we might call 'neighbour love', appears to be very different from Aquinas's view, since the latter account of the goodness of neighbour love turns, I have been suggesting, on the idea that the practice is congruent with our metaphysical context.

What should we make of Gaita's stance on this point? I shall suggest that in a number of respects he and Aquinas remain of much the same mind, notwithstanding the distinction I have just noted. First of all, as Gaita presents the matter, it is clear that at the time of his encounter with the 'noble' psychiatrists, and before he had witnessed the nun's behaviour, his younger self was already fully persuaded that the patients had an 'inalienable dignity'. And as he says, before he had witnessed the example of the nun, he already 'sincerely professed' that the patients were fully 'the equals of those who wanted to help them'. Given this background, it would be natural to suppose that what the nun reveals to Gaita is not so much the general truth that these patients are his equals – he already believed that much, before her arrival on the ward – but what it takes to enact this truth in bodily terms. On this reading, Gaita's 'just seeing' that her conduct is right is a matter of his seeing that the ideal of full equality can be enacted (and perhaps only enacted) in a bodily demeanour of this kind. And since he is already committed to the ideal of fully equality, he thereby grasps the appropriateness of her conduct.

Of course, this may sound like a rather deflationary view of Gaita's insight, when laid alongside his talk of 'mystery' and 'revelation', but it seems consistent with his own description of events. What the nun 'reveals' on this account is the particular quality of embodied presence that will enable a human being to enact the idea of our common humanity in their relations with afflicted human beings such as the patients on the ward. This reading of Gaita's insight does not seem to stand in any tension with Aquinas's account of neighbour love. On this view, his insight simply specifies what it takes to live according to the ideal of neighbour love, under conditions such as those that obtain on the psychiatric ward.

Let us examine now a reason for thinking that the two accounts, in fact, converge in one important respect, despite Gaita's apparent hostility to any attempt to ground the appropriateness of the nun's example in metaphysical considerations. It is clear that Gaita's insistence on the mysteriousness of what the nun reveals is connected with his refusal to see her conduct as responsive to any feature of the world that can be specified independently of that conduct. And in turn, his stance on this second point is connected, I take it, to the fundamental moral commitment that he is exploring in his book. Gaita does not want to concede that the nun's conduct is appropriate because properly responsive to some quality  $x$  in the patients, where  $x$  can be identified independently of any reference to her practical relation to them. Why? Because, I suggest, he fears that such an account will invite a two-step approach to our moral relations with others: first of all, we are to determine whether a given individual has the relevant quality  $x$ , and then, and only then, will we be in a position to judge whether or not that individual is entitled to our moral regard and the associated practical concern. Gaita's objection to this reading of the basis of our moral relations to others is, I take it, that it risks fixing on a property that is possessed by some human beings but not others – and accordingly, it risks excluding some human beings from full membership of the moral community. And the presiding theme of his book, as indicated in its title, and the focal truth that is revealed in the example of the nun, is precisely that we all of us share 'a common humanity'.

This risk of placing some individuals who are biologically human outside the moral community can be avoided at a stroke, we might suppose, if we refuse to admit that there is any quality  $x$  that can be identified independently of the conduct of figures such as the nun, and used to justify that conduct. So Gaita's insistence on 'mystery' is, to this extent, fundamentally a moral rather than some kind of phenomenological claim: it is a way of articulating the idea that the nun's conduct cannot be justified by reference to any notional

property  $x$  (where, once again, that property can be identified independently of her conduct, and can therefore stand as the ground of its appropriateness), rather than directly a report on the quality of his experience. It is because it cannot be so grounded that the nun's conduct is 'mysterious': if her conduct is not evidently a response to some independently identified quality, then it cannot be rendered intelligible, and justified, by reference to any such quality.

So we might take Gaita to be saying that the nun's regard for the patients, rather than tracking their moral worth, where that worth holds independently of her regard, in some way constitutes that worth. And how might that be possible? One answer would run: for an individual to be fully a member of the moral community just is for them to stand in an enacted relationship of equality when in the presence of a saintly figure such as the nun. In support of this account, we might note that if an individual were not to stand in such a relationship when in the presence of such a figure, then the idea of their full equality with other human beings would appear to be somewhat empty: if they are not capable of standing in an enacted relationship of equality under these most propitious of conditions, when in the presence of someone such as the nun, then the idea that they are fully members of the moral community seems merely theoretical, and not capable of being exemplified in practical terms, not even under even the most favourable of circumstances.

If on the other hand, they were to enter into an enacted relationship of equality under these conditions, then there is some basis for saying that they are rightly considered fully members of the moral community, even if there is no one in their current social context who shows them, or is even capable of showing them, such regard. Why? Because in this case there is a morally significant feature of the individual which sets them apart from, say, rocks and socks or even plants and ants, in so far as these latter kinds of thing will never stand in an enacted relationship of equality, not even when in the presence of a figure such as the nun. So there is some reason to adopt this account of what it is to be fully a member of the moral community,

and if we do, then it will follow straightforwardly that the nun's conduct towards the patients on the ward, understood as Gaita understands it, will establish, and so 'reveal', that they are fully the equals of other human beings. This is one way of reading Gaita's comment that: 'For me, the purity of the love proved the reality of what it revealed'<sup>10</sup>, where the import of this comment is, I take it, that the nun's conduct of itself settles the question of the moral worth of the patients, independently of reference to any further standpoint.

Of course, it is not difficult to think of moral theories that endorse precisely the stance to which Gaita is objecting, by making the moral worth of an individual contingent upon their possession of some capacity, such as the capacity for rational choice, or the capacity to feel pleasure and pain, or to flourish in certain ways, where such properties turn out to be exemplified by some but not all human beings.<sup>11</sup> As we have seen, Aquinas's account of the scope of neighbour love is not vulnerable to this objection: for Thomas, the appropriateness of neighbour love is not grounded in an individual's possession of some empirically discernible quality; instead, it depends on a future truth concerning human beings' life with

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<sup>10</sup> For a fuller account of Gaita's stance on these matters, it would be helpful to consider the work of his doctoral supervisor, R.F. Holland, and in particular his essay 'Is Goodness a Mystery?', reproduced in Holland, *Against Empiricism: On Education, Epistemology and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), Ch. 7. Gaita's example of the nun could be read as an illustration of the position that Holland develops in this paper. But I shall not take up these questions here.

<sup>11</sup> See for instance Gaita's comment: 'Later, reflecting on the nun's example, I came to believe that an ethics focused on the concept of human flourishing does not have the conceptual resources to keep fully amongst us, in the way the nun had revealed to be possible, people who are severely and ineradicably afflicted': *A Common Humanity*, p. 19.

God or, more modestly, upon the possibility of our one day sharing in that life, granted our present circumstances. So to this extent, Aquinas is committed to ‘mystery’ in rather the sense that Gaita is: for both, neighbour love is universal in scope, and for both, this is partly because it is not founded upon any empirically discernible property in human beings, so that it is for each of them, in this respect, mysterious.

However, while Aquinas’s account does seem to issue in the kind of moral commitment that Gaita is defending, and to resemble Gaita’s in refusing to ground human worth (of the kind relevant to the practice of neighbour love) in any empirically discernible property, it seems clear that Gaita would not endorse it. He would no doubt say that on Aquinas’s view, the appropriateness of the nun’s regard for the patients, or in general of neighbour love, is still a function of some quality that can be specified independently of the showing of such love – albeit that this is not now an empirically discernible quality, such as the capacity to feel pleasure and pain, for example, but the property of one day sharing in the life of God in the beatific vision. From Gaita’s perspective, Aquinas’s position still runs the risk, then, of excluding certain human beings from the scope of neighbour love. And if we are not universalists about salvation, and if we ground the appropriateness of neighbour love as shown to a particular individual in the truth that that individual will one day share in the beatific vision (rather than simply in their having the capacity to do so, relative to their present circumstances, or relative to our epistemic vantage point), then we should conclude that Gaita’s idea of a common humanity will indeed be impossible to sustain.

However, we might defend Aquinas from this line of questioning by noting that Gaita’s own position leaves open the possibility that some individuals who are biologically human will even so fall outside the moral community. On Gaita’s account, such individuals are fully members of the moral community to the extent that they stand in an enacted relationship of equality, or would do so in relevant circumstances. On this approach, the scope of neighbour

love turns out to be contingent upon the capacity of human beings, and figures such as the nun, to extend such love to their fellows. By contrast, Aquinas's position depends, in effect, upon the capacity of God to extend the love of charity or friendship to human beings – since on his account, a human being is entitled to the regard of neighbour love providing that they will share in the beatific vision, or at least, providing that they are capable of participating in the beatific vision given their present circumstances, where their sharing in that vision is directly a consequence of God's love for them.

If faced with the choice between these two ways of developing the idea of a common humanity, or the idea that every individual who is biologically human is fully a member of the moral community, one of which is grounded in a truth concerning the range of human love, and one of which is grounded in a truth concerning the range of divine love, then we might well prefer the second approach. Why? Because the divine love is after all, by definition, a perfectly inclusive love, freed from any of the constraints that can restrict and warp human love. In sum, we might say that Aquinas and Gaita share the same sort of commitment to 'mystery': for both of them, the appropriateness of our love of other human beings is ultimately grounded in the fact of their being loved, rather than in their possession of a property which can be specified entirely independently of that love, and which serves to justify the love. It's just that for Gaita, this is a human, saintly love, while for Aquinas it is a divine love.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> There is of course an extended theological debate about these matters, which in its modern form begins with Anders Nygren's text *Agape and Eros: Pt. 1, A Study of the Christian Idea of Love*, tr. A.G. Hebert (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1932). But we do not need to be drawn into that literature here.



Let us turn to one further feature of Gaita's handling of his example. While Gaita is insistent that the nun's example does not admit of a metaphysical or any other kind of grounding, he is also clear that so far as there is a vocabulary or way of talking that will allow us to articulate what she reveals, that vocabulary is religious, and specifically it is one that involves the idea of divine parental love. Hence he writes that:

I doubt that the love expressed in the nun's demeanour would have been possible for her were it not for the place which the language of divine parental love had in her prayers.<sup>13</sup>

Or again, generalising from this case, he comments:

For us in the West, the claim that all human beings are sacred is the one that bears most directly on the question of how to characterise the nun's behaviour. Only someone who is religious can speak seriously of the sacred, but such talk informs the thoughts of most of us whether or not we are religious, for it shapes our thoughts about the way in which human beings limit our will as does nothing else in nature.

And he continues:

If we are not religious, we will often search for one of the inadequate expressions which are available to us to say what we hope will be a secular equivalent of it. We may say that all human beings are inestimably precious, that they are ends in themselves, that they are owed unconditional respect, that they possess inalienable rights, and, of course, that they possess inalienable dignity. In my judgement, these are ways of trying to say what we feel a need to say when we are estranged from the

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<sup>13</sup> *A Common Humanity*, p. 22.

conceptual resources we need to say it. Be that as it may: each of them is problematic and contentious. Not one of them has the simple power of religious ways of speaking.<sup>14</sup>

In these texts, Gaita's stance may seem to resemble Hadot's: like Hadot, he seems to be suggesting that a religious or philosophical 'discourse' can be introduced to support a way of life, and that the motivational efficacy of the discourse need not be tied to the conviction that it is, in all its detail, true. (Gaita's own position is after all agnostic, if not atheist.)

However, I don't detect in Gaita any counterpart for Hadot's thought that the world view articulated in the discourse is radically provisional – so that it is always open to being revised and updated, depending on shifts in the intellectual culture of the age. The connection that Gaita finds between theistic ways of talking, especially in so far as they involve the idea of divine parental love, and our capacity to acknowledge discursively the worth of human beings, and to act on that worth, seems to run much deeper than that. This is perhaps because Gaita takes the commitment to our common humanity to rest most fundamentally on the thought that all human beings are intelligibly the objects of love (whether or not they are in fact shown such love); and in turn, he may well think that the language of divine parental love is the surest buttress we have for the plausibility of the idea that all human beings are intelligibly the objects of love.<sup>15</sup> (Even saintly love, we might suppose, can fail, given familiar constraints on human beings' sympathies and powers of attention.) If this is the right

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> See Gaita's comment that: 'We would not find it even intelligible, I think, that we have obligations to those whom we do not love unless we saw them as being the intelligible beneficiaries of someone's love. Failing that, talk of rights and duties would begin to disengage from what gives it sense': *ibid.*, p. 26.

way to read Gaita, then once again his position bears a striking resemblance to Aquinas's: for both authors, the language of divine love is of fundamental importance for our capacity to represent to ourselves, in storied terms, the deep significance of human lives.

It might be said that there remains one rather important difference, since Gaita is committed simply to the intelligibility of the thought that human beings are loved by God, whereas Aquinas is committed to the truth of this thought. Let us think a little further about this point of distinction.

In the course of our discussion in this volume, we have been developing the idea that certain fundamental spiritual goods, what we have been calling hybrid goods, depend for their possibility on metaphysical context. But when considering Aquinas's treatment of neighbour love, I suggested that it would be a mistake to suppose that, on his view, we are to begin with a characterisation of our metaphysical context, considered independently of any reference to human lives, and move from there to a conception of the good life, where the goodness or fittingness of that life is taken to follow from its congruence with the metaphysical context. This approach overlooks the fact that on standard accounts, and on Aquinas's own account, religious faith – understood as assent to a body of metaphysical teaching – is voluntary. On some such approaches, I have proposed, what elicits the person's assent to a particular metaphysical story is not simply the evidence that can be assembled in its support, but the fact that the truth of that story would significantly extend and deepen the range of goods that can be realised in a human life here and now. For instance, to revert to an example that we have discussed at some length, if we human beings will one day participate in the beatific vision, then in our relations to one another here and now, we can realise a profound good that we could not otherwise realise, namely, the good of a life that is congruent with this truth concerning our shared future.

If all of this is so, then the assent of faith is not in the first instance to the truth of a world view, and only then to a way of life that is seen to be appropriate relative to this metaphysical scheme; it is instead an assent to the metaphysics and way of life considered in combination. This suggests, once more, that Gaita's position and Aquinas's are not so far apart as might at first seem. On the reading I have just suggested, Gaita's account turns on the intelligibility of the thought that God loves all human beings. A position which starts not from the mere intelligibility but the evident truth of that thought, and moves from there to the idea of a common humanity, would stand in very direct contrast with Gaita's approach so understood. But Aquinas's view is not to be identified with this second position, and seems, rather, to occupy a middle ground between these two: it is not the evident truth, nor the mere intelligibility of the idea of divine parental love that matters, but the idea that the relevant hybrid goods, which will obtain if the doctrine holds true, are worth pursuing, even in the face of uncertainty about our prospects of success. In this way, Aquinas's account respects, I take it, one key emphasis in Gaita's discussion, namely, the thought that our moral commitments have a measure of autonomy relative to our metaphysical commitments, and are not to be seen, therefore, as mere byproducts of a view of the world that is formulated in value-free terms. But these are matters to which we can return in more detail in Chapter 6.

To conclude this phase of our discussion, let us note briefly one final point of convergence between Gaita's position and Aquinas's. While Gaita suggests that he did not need to invoke any metaphysical scheme to see the appropriateness of the nun's example, since the 'purity of her love' was of itself enough to establish the appropriateness of her conduct, it seems he would agree that *if* we were required to pair metaphysical schemes with ideals of life, where the first serve to ground the second, then the idea of divine parental love and the ideal of neighbour love would be a particularly apt pairing. And it also seems to follow from his account that neighbour love would not readily form part of any other such combination,

because of its integral connection to theistic categories of thought, and notably the idea of divine parental love. If all of this is so, then while Gaita is no Thomist, his position on the relationship between theistic categories and the love of the saints can be inserted fairly straightforwardly within a broadly Thomistic story concerning the nature and grounds of neighbour love as an ideal of life.

#### **4. Bodily demeanour and spiritual traditions**

We have been exploring various parallels between Gaita's account of the nun's example, and its role in sustaining the idea of our common humanity, and Aquinas's discussion of neighbour love, with particular reference to the connection between Gaita's insistence that the nun's conduct is 'revelatory' or discloses a 'mystery' and Aquinas's thought that neighbour love is answerable to a 'divine rule', rather than a 'rule of reason'. I want to think a little more closely now about the significance of Gaita's example for the question of how a person may come to be inducted into a spiritual tradition.

It is notable that on Gaita's account, the nun's revelation is communicated in her 'demeanour' towards the patients – what matters is 'the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, the inflexions of her body'. So it is implied in Gaita's discussion that bodily demeanour can be integral to the handing on of a particular moral or spiritual ideal, and it is natural to ask how, more exactly, it is able to play this role.

It is not clear whether Gaita hears anything that the nun says to the patients; and in any case, it is not, it seems, what she says, but the 'inflexions of her body' that reveal to Gaita the full equality of the patients with other human beings. Moreover, Gaita's insight is not readily recorded in verbal terms, it seems. So far as we can tell, he is committed to the thought that the patients are fully his equals before he has seen the nun, as well as after: it is just that he now has a deepened appreciation of what is signified by those words. We know in general

terms what kind of bodily demeanour Gaita has in mind. We know that the nun cannot be ‘talking over’ the patients, as we sometimes put it, or talking at or down to them: we know that her bodily demeanour cannot take the form that is typical of that kind of encounter. But it is significant that Gaita does not try to spell out more exactly what is involved, and we might wonder why that is. Of course, he can describe the nun’s demeanour in generic terms – as, say, behaviour that connotes respect. But what strikes him as ‘revelatory’ in the nun’s manner is presumably the way in which through this particular stretch of bodily movement, she succeeds in acknowledging the humanity of the patients, or in recognising their status as fully her equals. It is having seen this particular, gesturally specific enactment of the ideal of the patients’ equality with the rest of us that Gaita comes to the conclusion that, despite their best efforts, he and the psychiatrists have in fact treated them with condescension.

On this view, even small variations in, say, the inclination of the head, or the set of the mouth, will result in a significantly different interpersonal meaning. And given the constraints on our powers of description, it is hard to see how we human beings could convey, in verbal terms, the character of such an ensemble of gestures – understood simply as a set of movements that can be plotted according to their spatiotemporal coordinates – at the level of detail that would be required to fix their moral sense. Moreover, even if we could describe in the requisite detail the inflexions of the nun’s body – the particular inclination of her head, and so on – at a particular moment, the sense of her gesture at that moment will be a function of a larger context which is itself comprised of earlier such movements, both her own and those of the patients. And given even small variations in this larger context, this inclination of the head will bear a different interpersonal meaning. So for these reasons, it is not surprising that Gaita does not attempt to set down in verbal terms the particular quality of the nun’s bodily presence, considered simply as a set of spatio-temporal movements. In brief, he does not attempt to do so because it is not possible for him to do so.

When read in this way, Gaita's example points, I think, to a larger truth that is of some importance for our appreciation of spiritual traditions. In the last chapter, we explored the idea that for a rounded understanding of the ideal of life of a given spiritual tradition, we need to have recourse to two vantage points, and the correlative vocabularies: those of metaphysics and experience. Gaita's example suggests that for a full understanding of a given moral or spiritual ideal, a further vantage point, though not perhaps a further vocabulary, is also required, namely, the vantage point of enacted example.

This further dimension of understanding cannot be simply read off from the first two. It cannot be read off from any metaphysical narrative, because even if we see that a given metaphysical narrative establishes that we ought to relate to others as our neighbours, it is another matter to see what particular bodily demeanour is required for the enactment of this ideal. And the idea that there is a deep disjunction between the sincere verbal profession of a given set of moral ideals, abstractly specified, and an appreciation of what it takes to enact those ideals is, I take it, at the core of Gaita's example of the nun. (This is, of course, the condition of the doctors, and of his pre-conversion self, in this example.) Moreover, even if we have first-personal experience of relating to others in this way, or can describe what it feels like to enact the relevant moral ideal, it is a further matter to grasp the associated bodily demeanour. After all, the nun in Gaita's example does not, presumably, represent to herself a particular quality of demeanour in purely mental terms, and then resolve to act accordingly. Rather, her bodily relation to the patients is directly an expression of her regard for them, rather than being the product of any process of ratiocination. (Compare the case where you view a video recording of your conduct in a certain setting: it can, of course, be a surprise to see from this third personal vantage point what your bodily demeanour looks like, however familiar you may be with what it felt like to act in that way.)

Once more, one fundamental reason why we cannot understand what bodily demeanour is required to realise the ideal of our common humanity, or other such ideals, independently of witnessing the enactment of the ideal is that this insight cannot be recorded in verbal terms. Why not? Because, once again, the relevant inflexions of the body constitute a spatio-temporally extended gestural gestalt, which resists description at the level of mere bodily movement, since even small variations in these movements can make for large variations in interpersonal meaning, relative to a given interpersonal context, which itself comprises a set of such finely tuned movements of the body.<sup>16</sup>

In sum, understanding a spiritual tradition depends partly upon familiarity with the concepts that are required to define the world view of the tradition, partly upon relevant first-hand experience of what it is like to inhabit the tradition (which in turn enables a grasp of the phenomenal content of the concepts that are required to describe what it is like to participate in the tradition), and partly upon an encounter with individuals who live out paradigmatically the tradition's core values. We could put this point by saying that if we are to understand the

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<sup>16</sup> If we follow one standard reading of Aristotle's treatment of the matter, then we will say that in general we need to defer to exemplars if we are to know what the good human life amounts to. See for instance his comment that 'Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e., the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it': *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. W.D. Ross, revised J.L. Ackrill and J.O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), Book II, 6. Here, I am suggesting that we need not only to defer to the exemplar, but to have first-hand experience of them, to the extent that their example cannot be communicated in verbal terms. I am grateful to Simon Oliver for helpful discussion of this point.



way of life propounded by a spiritual tradition, we need both a first-personal vantage point on that way of life (whereby we can apprehend what it is like, experientially, to live according to the tradition's core values), and also a third-personal vantage point (whereby we can grasp, through witnessing the enacted example of figures such as the nun, what kind of bodily demeanour is appropriate to the tradition's core values). In Gaita's example, the nun has the first kind of vantage point, and Gaita himself the second. Or we might perhaps put the point, rather differently, by saying that for a rounded appreciation of a spiritual tradition's ideal of life, we need a first-personal vantage point (such as the nun's), a third-personal vantage point (such as Aquinas offers, through his metaphysical depiction of the nature and ends of the spiritual life), and also a second-personal vantage point (here supposing that if we are to appreciate the example of figures such as the nun, then we will need to see their conduct as the embodiment of an I-Thou relationship, so that the insight will count in that sense as second-personal).

There is arguably one other thing that Gaita learns from the nun's example: not only what it takes to enact the ideal of a common humanity, but also the significance that this value can hold in a human life. Suppose we imagine another kind of rational creature, whose mode of embodiment is very different from ours; and suppose that this creature is also committed to the ideal of full equality between members of its kind. Let us assume, in addition, that this creature has a relatively limited gestural range, and that the ideal of full equality can be embodied in interactions between creatures of this nature only rarely. Their bodily encounters standardly connote, let us suppose, neither respect nor disrespect, but are simply neutral in this regard, for the reason that the inflexions of their bodies lack the expressive depth and nuance of human facial and gestural movements.

The ideal of equality would play a very different role in the life of such a creature from the role it plays in our lives. This ideal makes a pervasive claim upon human beings: given the

expressive depth of the human bodily form, we are at risk of failing to treat our fellow human beings with due respect in each of our interactions with them, and equally in each of those interactions, we have the opportunity, at least in principle, to behave in ways that connote, in bodily terms, regard for the other person as fully our equal. So the ideal of equality has a particular significance in the lives of human beings that it need not have, it would seem, in the lives of rational creatures whose embodiment takes a different form. And perhaps this too is part of the insight that Gaita wins in his observation of the nun: part of what Gaita is describing is, arguably, his shocked recognition of the significance of the ideal of equality in a human life, and how easy it is to fall into forms of behaviour that connote not respect but condescension or some other attitude that falls short of respect.

So far in this chapter, we have been exploring two ways of drawing out Gaita's example of the nun: first, by noting some points of resemblance between Gaita's handling of this example and Aquinas's account of neighbour love, and secondly by examining the implications of the example of the nun for the idea that for a rounded appreciation of the character of a given spiritual tradition, we need to supplement metaphysical and experiential accounts of its nature with an understanding of the bodily demeanour that is appropriate to the tradition's core values. To conclude this chapter, let us return to the theme of spiritual goods, and consider the relevance of bodily demeanour for the constitution of hybrid goods in particular.

### **5. Bodily demeanour and spiritual goods**

In the first chapter of this volume, we examined the idea that the goodness or appropriateness of some spiritual practices consists, at least in part, in their being existentially congruent with their metaphysical context. In Chapter 3, we extended this account, by noting how it is not only bodily practices (such as habits of food consumption) that can be assessed for adequacy relative to a given metaphysical context but, in addition, our world-directed experience. It

seems plausible to suppose, for example, that if a Christian is to practise abstinence, then it is not only their consumption of food that needs to take the right form, but also their experience of food, and the other objects of the bodily appetites, so that they experience food and these other objects in ways that befit their relationship to God. Having considered in recent pages various way of connecting neighbour love, as Aquinas understands it, and Gaita's example of the nun, it is natural to wonder whether we can further extend Aquinas's account of neighbour love, and the other infused moral virtues, by taking bodily demeanour to be more or less congruent with our metaphysical context. Let us turn to this matter now.

Religious communities are commonly concerned to regulate the disposition of the body in worship and other devotional contexts. There are also, of course, iconographical traditions which take a keen interest in the representation of the posture and facial expressions of figures of acknowledged sanctity, such as the Buddha and Christ. Or again, we might think of depictions of the annunciation, and the attention to the inflexions of Mary's body that is evident in a picture such as Botticelli's Cestello Annunciation.<sup>17</sup> It is worth distinguishing this kind of interest in the comportment of the body from the kind that we encountered in our discussion of neighbour love in earlier chapters.

If I am to treat someone as my neighbour, then in relevant circumstances, I need to show them beneficence; and in standard cases, beneficent action will require that I move my body appropriately. For instance, love of neighbour may require me to offer someone a drink, and to do that I may need to extend them a cup of water. Here, the movements of my body turn out to be appropriate, relative to theological context, in so far as they are morally efficacious. But the interest in the body that is evident in, for instance, depictions of the annunciation does

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<sup>17</sup> For an illustration of the painting, see: <https://www.virtualuffizi.com/the-cestello-annunciation-by-sandro-botticelli.html>, accessed 28 January, 2019.

not seem to be of this kind, where the focus is upon the beneficial consequences of my action. In the case where I hold out a cup of water, there is no interest in the body as such: all that matters is that its motions should secure the desired moral outcome. By contrast, in his representation of the annunciation, Botticelli's interest is evidently in the gracefulness that is displayed in the inflexions of Mary's body: it is the gracefulness of her demeanour relative to the relevant theological context that marks out her response as fitting. Here, and similarly in depictions of, say, Christ or the Buddha, attention is fixed not on the body's role in bringing about good outcomes, but on its capacity to register directly, in bodily terms, the significance of a religious context. Let us mark this distinction by talking on the one side of 'behaviour' and on the other of 'bodily demeanour'.

Thomas Aquinas's account of neighbour love invites us to suppose that a person's thoughts, feelings, attitudes and desires, and in the relevant sense behaviour, are all open to assessment as more or less adequate relative to theological context. But his discussion, and standard treatments of the idea of neighbour love, do not, so far as I can see, touch on this further way in which a person's dealings with the world may turn out to be appropriate relative to theological context. So by introducing the notion of bodily demeanour, we can, potentially, identify a further kind of hybrid good, in addition to those that are involved in Thomas's account of the infused moral virtues.

There is some discussion of related matters in the philosophical and theological tradition. For instance, C.S. Lewis remarks that the 'new' humanity of Christians is evident in their bodily demeanour, suggesting that: 'Their very voices and faces are different from ours; stronger, quieter, happier, more radiant.'<sup>18</sup> While he does not address the point directly, it seems clear that Lewis takes this transformation in the bodily appearance of Christians to be appropriate

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<sup>18</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow: William Collins, Sons & Co., 1944), p. 186.

not as a means to effecting some change in the world, but because this is a way of registering in bodily terms the sense of the Christian theological narrative: if a person subscribes to that narrative, then it is only right that they should greet the world, in bodily terms, in this spirit of quiet radiance.

Bodily comportment seems to play a similar role in other contexts, where it is the significance of an interpersonal context, rather than, directly, some metaphysical conception of the nature of things, that is acknowledged appropriately in the person's bodily demeanour. For instance, famously, bodily comportment, in the sense that concerns us here, is integral to Aristotle's account of the rightly 'proud' or great-souled man. As he says: 'a slow step is thought proper to the proud man, a deep voice, and a level utterance.'<sup>19</sup> Here too, a certain bodily demeanour is taken to be appropriate not because it is apt to bring about good outcomes, but as a way of registering the significance of the relevant context: the 'great-souled' man is a person of superior accomplishments, and in his bearing, he enacts this truth about his capacity to manage his affairs on his own terms, and free from dependence on others. And of course, Gaita's discussion of the nun and her relationship to the patients also invites this sort of reading. As we have seen, what arrests the young Gaita's attention is 'the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, the inflexions of her body'. Gaita comments that the nun's comportment towards the patients revealed their 'full humanity', and for him too, it seems that it is the movements of the body themselves, and their appropriateness

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<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), Book IV, 3.

relative to context, rather than their tendency to bring about good outcomes, that is the focus of interest.<sup>20</sup>

It is not too difficult to multiply examples of this kind. In Chapter 2, following Aquinas's discussion of infused temperance, we considered the ways in which a person's consumption of food and drink may be congruent with their theological context. And by extension, it seems reasonable to suppose that the bodily gestures relevant to the consumption of food can be judged as appropriate to the ideal of abstinence not only in so far as they involve ingesting food of the right kinds and the right amounts, but also in so far as the gestures themselves exhibit the requisite kind of grace. Snatching at food, for example, even if it involves no violation of the requirements of abstinence with respect of the kind or amount of food consumed, could still breach those requirements, in so far as this comportment is not properly attuned to the significance that food should hold given our theological context.<sup>21</sup> My

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<sup>20</sup> Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity*, p 18. We might be inclined to say that Gaita takes the bodily demeanour of the nun to be appropriate as an acknowledgement of the moral status of the patients. But that way of putting the matter would not be faithful to the strand of his thought which represents this sort of response as, at least in part, constituting the 'common humanity' of human beings, rather than simply recognising it. Given his indebtedness to the work of Wittgenstein, we can be confident that when writing about the nun, Gaita was mindful of Wittgenstein's remark that 'the human body is the best picture of the human soul': *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), II, iv.

<sup>21</sup> Aquinas notes that gluttony concerns both 'the food we eat, and the eating thereof', and under the second heading, he comments that 'inordinate concupiscence is considered as to the consumption of food: either because one forestalls the proper time for eating, which is to eat "hastily", or one fails to observe the due manner of eating, by eating "greedily"' (ST 2a2ae.

references to worship, and depictions of the saints or of a scene such as the annunciation, may have suggested that the interest of spiritual traditions in bodily demeanour extends only to certain special individuals, or to rather restricted domains of thought and action. But as the case of food consumption indicates, and as the examples I have drawn from Lewis, Aristotle and Gaita confirm, ideals of bodily comportment can, in fact, be applied very readily in our everyday relations with the material world, and other people, where those ideals derive, once again, from the relevant relations of congruence.

In sum, we can elaborate on Aquinas's account of the goods of the infused moral virtues by supposing that a person's demeanour, as well as their behaviour, can be deemed more or less adequate relative to their theological context. In our discussion in Chapter 3 of hybrid goods involving experience, I suggested that some such goods will be aesthetic goods. And it is natural to suppose that some hybrid goods involving bodily demeanour will also have an aesthetic character. Let's take again Botticelli's depiction of the annunciation. Here, the inflexions of Mary's body constitute a fitting response to the relevant theological context, that is, the context that is presented to Mary in the angel's address. And the resulting hybrid good has, it seems, inherently an aesthetic dimension. Why? Because the appropriateness of Mary's demeanour is in part a matter of its being a graceful acknowledgement of the angel's address. Of course, from a purely secular point of view, it will also be evident that her demeanour is graceful. But in this scene, there is, in addition, a further kind of beauty, one which cannot be identified independently of reference to the relevant theological context. Why? Because this kind of beauty arises in so far as the disposition of Mary's body presents a graceful response to that context.

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148. 4). Here we find the beginnings of an account of how a person's manner of eating can be spiritually significant, and not only the amount and kind of food that they consume.

As we saw in Chapter 3, In his discussion of the goals of the religious way of life, Richard Swinburne notes how certain activities which will count as aesthetically valuable independently of reference to any theological context (activities such as ‘beautifying the universe’ and displaying ‘artistic creativity’) can acquire an additional dimension of goodness once we introduce a theistic context – for granted such a context, these activities will be able to realise further goods, such as the good of satisfying an obligation to God as our benefactor, which could not otherwise obtain.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, in the case of the annunciation scene, as in the case of the hybrid goods involving experience that we considered in the last chapter, it seems that the additional good that arises in relation to the relevant theological context is itself aesthetic. It is not just that the gracefulness that is evident in Mary’s enacted response to the angel’s address will be additionally good if there is a God – say, because it will then satisfy an obligation to God, or in some way contribute to her friendship with God. Rather, we should say that if there is a God, then the inflexions of Mary’s body will realise an additional aesthetic good, because they will now count as graceful not only for the reasons that are evident from a secular perspective, but also considered as an acknowledgement of the theological context that is disclosed in the angel’s address.

So here is a further way in which we can extend Aquinas’s discussion of the goods of the infused moral virtues, namely, by recognising that bodily demeanour, and not only bodily ‘behaviour’, can stand in a relation of existential congruence to theological context. Allowing for the similarity in the character of the goods that are realised by bodily demeanour, on the one hand, and the appearance of the everyday world, on the other (to the extent that both kinds of good are inherently aesthetic hybrid goods), there remain some differences between these two cases. In the annunciation scene, the relevant beauty rests on the body’s agency: it

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<sup>22</sup> See Swinburne, ‘The Christian Scheme of Salvation’, pp. 304-5.



is as minded and purposeful, rather than simply as a set of movements, that the inflexions of Mary's body count as a graceful, and therefore beautiful, acknowledgement of the angel's address. By contrast, from the convert's perspective, the new-found beauty they find in the world, following conversion, does not appear to follow from anything they have done, but seems, on the contrary, to result from God's agency, at work in them. Moreover, in this case, the beauty that is encountered in the world is taken to be beautiful, at least in part, because translucent to the divine beauty. And there is no parallel for this relationship in the annunciation scene, where the beauty in the inflexions of Mary's body, although theologically grounded, can be identified independently of any reference to the divine beauty. So while the relevant value is aesthetic in character and has a theological structure in each of these cases, there remain some notable differences.

## **6. The spiritual significance of art**

Given this account of the inherently aesthetic character of some hybrid goods, it is natural to consider what might follow for an appreciation of the spiritual importance of the arts – and especially those arts that are concerned in some way with the depiction of the human body. Let us turn now to two views on these matters that have been propounded in the recent literature in theological aesthetics. Having introduced these approaches, I shall then return to the broadly Thomistic understanding of aesthetic value that we have been sketching in this chapter, and consider how this account offers a rather different understanding of the relationship between aesthetic goods and theological commitments.

In the following passage, Jeremy Begbie is discussing the figure of Christ on the cross, and considering how even such a figure can be considered beautiful:

in and through this particular torture, crucifixion and death, God's love is displayed at its most potent. The 'form' of beauty here is the radiant, splendid form of God's self-

giving love. As Cardinal Ratzinger ... put it: 'in his Face that is so disfigured, there appears the genuine, extreme beauty: the beauty of love that goes to the end.'<sup>23</sup>

On this account, despite being twisted and distorted, the face of the crucified Christ is properly regarded as beautiful – indeed, it is to be reckoned as beautiful precisely in its twistedness, in so far as Christ's self-sacrificial love is made manifest in his disfigured appearance. Here, the notion of beauty is being moralised: even if a body is by conventional aesthetic standards an object of horror rather than aesthetic attraction, it can still be deemed beautiful, if it discloses the beauty of an edifying moral purpose. Ratzinger's comments suggest, indeed, that Christ's example does not simply illustrate the nature of true love, and true moral beauty, but serves as the paradigm case of such love, by providing the standard against which other examples are to be judged. Similarly, Begbie writes as follows of James MacMillan's representation of the events of Easter morning in his work *Triduum*:

The 'resolution' enacted in *Symphony: Vigil* neither effaces the harshness of the memories of the preceding days nor accords them any kind of ultimacy... Its beauty is anything but tidy; the forms overlap, material is scattered, dropped and picked up again...<sup>24</sup>

On Begbie's account, when measured against a Christological aesthetic standard, MacMillan's piece is aesthetically excellent, since it mirrors the ragged, 'untidy' kind of beauty that is evident in the New Testament account of the days leading up to Easter

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<sup>23</sup> Jeremy Begbie, 'Beauty, Sentimentality and the Arts', in D. Treier, M. Husbands, and R. Lundin (eds), *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts* (Downers Grove, ILL: IVP Academic, 2006), p. 63.

<sup>24</sup> Begbie, *ibid.*, p. 68.

morning. So here again, we are concerned with a moral ideal of beauty, which is realised primordially in the Jesus story – only in this case, that beauty is reproduced in musical rather than visual form.

Although he does not develop his example in these terms, it is natural to ask whether Gaita's discussion of the nun is open to being read in this same way. Gaita is evidently struck by the 'inflexions of the nun's body' and by 'her facial expressions' – and he appears to be fascinated by her comportment. We might infer, then, that he finds a kind of beauty, or aesthetic allure, in her conduct. And following Begbie's examples, we could understand this idea by supposing that a moral value, here the ideal of our common humanity, in some way shines through her gestures, so that they are perceived as morally beautiful.

So in Begbie's comments, we find one conception of beauty, and its spiritual import, to set alongside the Thomistically inspired account that we have been examining. Let's consider now a further account of these matters. In the following text, George Pattison is discussing a video installation which was located for a time next to the baptismal font of Durham Cathedral. The video, entitled 'The Messenger', depicts a naked man sinking down through a body of shimmering water, until lost from view, before returning gradually to the surface, so that his form comes slowly into focus once again. This cycle lasts about thirty minutes, and is then repeated. The artist, Bill Viola, was commissioned to produce the installation for this site, but did not intend his work to bear any specifically Christian doctrinal meaning. Pattison comments:

Although Viola himself is informed more by Buddhist than by Christian spirituality, the work projects itself almost effortlessly towards Christian appropriation precisely

because of its use of a language before language that is the primary matrix of symbolic formation and that is shared by Christian and non-Christian art alike.<sup>25</sup>

Pattison's suggestion is that when seeking to apprehend the religious import of an artwork, we should first of all appreciate the work simply for itself, by attending to its sensory qualities, and bracketing out any theological or other interpretive frame. When we approach the work in this mode, we are reliant upon what he calls in this passage, following an expression he has borrowed from the sculptor Antony Gormley, the 'language before language' of the body: it is in the body's preverbal, pre-discursive responses to the work that we apprehend its primordial meaning. In this case, the bodily impact of this sequence of images, of the man sinking through the water and then returning to the surface, produces in the viewer thoughts of drowning, of death and rebirth, and perhaps also of cleansing, independently of reference to any culturally specific interpretive lens. In these ways, according to Pattison, a work of art can communicate a meaning to us, non-verbally, and in that sense, it can function as a 'language before language'. Here, as for a number of the other examples that Pattison discusses, what is communicated in the work is the universal, bodily significance of the elemental constituents of the sensory world – in this case, water.<sup>26</sup>

According to Pattison, we are then to take a second interpretive step, by reading the work in terms of the categories of a particular cultural or religious tradition. To return to this same example, we can understand Viola's work by reference to specifically Christian categories, and the significance that water bears in the Christian rite of baptism, as an instrument of spiritual cleansing and rebirth. Pattison's suggestion is that the religious power of a work for

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<sup>25</sup> George Pattison, *Art Modernity and Faith* (London: SCM, 1998), p. 185.

<sup>26</sup> For a similar approach, see his treatment of, for example, Antony Gormley's sculpture *Sound II*, located in the crypt of Winchester Cathedral: *ibid*, pp. 182-4.

a given religious tradition is apparent when we consider how this second phase of interpretation relates to the first. When apprehended in terms of the language before language of the body, The Messenger discloses the elemental significance of water for creatures such as ourselves, and the work's specifically Christian import is then evident when this same scene is understood in terms of the categories of the Christian narrative of baptism. It is the directness of the fit between these two readings of the video, the prediscursive and the doctrinally articulated, that allows the work to speak, as Pattison says, 'almost effortlessly' into a specifically Christian cultural context. And in turn, the relative effortlessness of this communication indicates the spiritual suggestiveness or potency of Viola's work from a Christian point of view.

So on this account, works of art can contribute to the spiritual life by grounding spiritual ideals, such as cleansing and rebirth, in the life of the body, and its primordial sensitivity to the fundamental constituents of the sensory world, such as water. Or to put the point another way, Viola's work has a spiritual resonance because it sensitises us to the elemental significance of water for human beings, and thereby prepares the way for a deepened appreciation of the symbolic meanings of water when used in, for example, the rite of baptism.

We have now sketched three conceptions of the contribution of the arts and, more broadly, aesthetic values to the spiritual life: those of Begbie and Pattison, and the Thomistically informed perspective that I have expounded with reference to Botticelli's Cestello annunciation. As we have seen, these accounts share an interest in the spiritual and aesthetic significance of the human body. Let's consider next how each understands the relationship between spiritual and aesthetic values.

Begbie's account and the account we have been exploring by reference to Aquinas are alike in supposing that there is a kind of beauty in the human body can be discerned only from the vantage point of the relevant theological frame. On Begbie's account, that frame is provided by the story of Jesus, which generates a distinctively theological measure of aesthetic value, which in turn makes it possible to find a kind of beauty even in a twisted and distorted body, in so far as it is relevantly Christ-like. Here, the introduction of a theological frame has the effect of displacing more conventional measures of aesthetic excellence, which would yield a very different verdict in this case. The Thomistic account we have been considering differs on this point, since it retains conventional aesthetic categories such as gracefulness. On this approach, the theological frame does not challenge our established measures of aesthetic value, but instead provides a new and expanded context within which those measures may be deployed. For instance, in the Cestello annunciation scene, Mary's demeanour can be seen as graceful from a purely secular point of view, but appears as additionally graceful once we have introduced the relevant theological frame. So here the introduction of a theological perspective results in a deepening of the aesthetic judgement we would anyway be inclined to make, whereas on Begbie's approach, that perspective seems to overturn the aesthetic judgement we would otherwise make.

While Begbie's approach starts from a theological frame, Pattison's account of aesthetic value invites us, as a first step, to set aside theological and other reference points, and to consider the artwork in terms simply of its import for the body. We might see this procedure as somewhat reminiscent of Aquinas's appeal, when discussing the virtues, to a 'rule of reason': after all, Pattison is proposing that, in the first instance, we are to understand the artwork solely on the basis of our humanity, and independently of any culturally, or theologically, specific frame of reference. However, Pattison is concerned with an assessment of the work that is, at first, simply bodily in character, rather than being ordered in discursive

or conceptual terms, and in this respect, his approach clearly remains distinct from that of Aquinas.

Once we have appreciated the work in these terms, Pattison suggests, we can then introduce, as a second interpretive step, a theological frame of reference. This move may sound rather like Thomas's account of the way in which the infused moral virtues build on the acquired virtues, rather than displacing them. But again, the two accounts are also significantly different. For Pattison, a work seems to count as theologically fruitful in so far as it introduces, via the first phase of interpretation, various humanly universal themes, such as death, birth, and bodily vulnerability, which can then be further specified in theological terms. Following our discussion above, we might add that a work can be more or less rich theologically, depending on the closeness of fit between these universal themes and the concerns of a given theological tradition. On this view, the theological significance of the work depends most fundamentally on its capacity to lead us into a conventional theological subject matter, through a set of thoughts that are elicited in the first instance by the work's pre-theoretical, pre-discursive impact upon the senses. For example, Viola's installation discloses the primal significance of water in human life, and thereby lends itself to theological appropriation, since theological perspectives on the import of water can be grafted onto this pre-discursive apprehension of its role in a human life.

So we should say that on Pattison's view, the introduction of a theological frame does not establish a new set of aesthetic values, but simply enables the further specification of various theologically suggestive themes that are elicited in our initial encounter with the artwork. That initial encounter will have an aesthetic focus in so far as it involves an appreciation of

the work in sensory terms and for itself, that is, independently of any framing narrative.<sup>27</sup> So to this extent, Pattison's narrative is concerned with aesthetic values, but once again, the introduction of a theological frame does not evidently deepen our appreciation of, say, water in aesthetic terms, but instead allows us simply to elaborate on the sense in which water is, for instance, a source of cleansing.

By contrast, on the broadly Thomistic view we have been exploring, the introduction of a theological frame will make a difference to our assessment of the work in aesthetic terms. To revert to our earlier example, once we have introduced the relevant theological context, we can find a new beauty in Mary's demeanour, as represented by Botticelli. So we could formulate the difference between Pattison's approach and the Thomistically informed perspective that we have been developing here by saying that on the first account, aesthetic values, of the kind that are evident from a secular vantage point, serve as a route into theological themes, whereas on the second account, theological themes serve as a route into aesthetic values which are theologically grounded and therefore not discernible from a secular vantage point.

In these ways, each of these approaches offers a set of recommendations for understanding the spiritual import of a work of art. Think, for instance, of any traditional depiction of the annunciation, say, Fra Filippo Lippi's picture that hangs in the National Gallery in London.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> For an account of why this sort of stance counts, for some traditions, as 'aesthetic', see Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Art and the Aesthetic: The Religious Dimension', in P. Kivy (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), Ch. 18.

<sup>28</sup> See

<https://www.nationalgalleryimages.co.uk/imagetails.aspx?q=NG666&ng=NG666&frm=1>, accessed 28 January 2019.



If we read this image in the style of Begbie, then we will take as our focus the resemblance between Mary's demeanour and the attitudes we might associate with the historical Jesus. For instance, perhaps we will take her downward gaze and slightly stooped figure to express a Christ-like humility, and to be beautiful for this reason. Or again, if adopting this reading, we might be struck by the way in which Mary's gestures give physical form to the sentiment expressed in her words when she remarks 'be it unto me according to thy word' (Luke 1:38);<sup>29</sup> and we might, therefore, see the disposition of her body as an anticipation of Christ's submission to the will of the Father in his passion and death. If, on the other hand, we follow Pattison, then we will bracket out any reference to theological context, and attend first of all to the play of shapes and colours on the canvas, and only then introduce theological categories, in order to elaborate on the themes that are suggested by the bodily impact of the work.<sup>30</sup>

By contrast with these other approaches, on the Thomistic account we have been considering, Mary's gestures are gracefully adapted to a particular theological context, and additionally graceful for that reason. Independently of that context, we could still see those gestures as beautiful by reference to the usual standards of aesthetic excellence, and perhaps as morally beautiful, in so far as they connote humility. But from this Thomistic perspective, it is only when we know the theological context within which Mary is acting, and know, for instance, the content of the angel's message, that we can grasp in full the beauty of these very gestures, and see how they bear a certain gravity, and exhibit a certain grace, as responses to this

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<sup>29</sup> Here I am following the King James Version of the text.

<sup>30</sup> Compare Pattison's treatment of Craigie Aitchison's *Crucifixion* 1994. Despite its overtly religious subject matter, he seeks to read the picture in the first instance independently of any theological frame: *Art, Modernity and Faith*, pp. 186-188.

particular theological context. So this approach occupies a middle ground between the others: it allows for a distinctively theological assessment of aesthetic value (here like Begbie), while at the same time affirming our conventional aesthetic standards (here like Pattison).

These three approaches to the spiritual significance of the arts need not be in competition with one another: as we have just seen, a given artwork can be read in all three ways, without falling into contradiction. And it may well be that some works will lend themselves more readily to one kind of construal, and others to another. Following on from our discussion in earlier chapters, what I hope to have shown here is that Aquinas's account of infused moral virtue is important not only for an appreciation of the spiritual significance of our world-directed thoughts, attitudes, behaviour and experience, but also for an understanding of the contribution of bodily demeanour to the spiritual life. Many spiritual traditions promise, at least implicitly, to bring their adherents not simply to a condition of right belief, and right experience, but to a state wherein their very bodies become transparent to a transcendent value. In this discussion, we have been trying to consider how that might be.

## **7. Concluding thoughts**

This chapter has had three broadly defined aims. First of all, I have tried to sketch a new vantage point on neighbour love considered as an infused virtue, to support the metaphysical and experiential perspectives on the virtue that we developed in earlier chapters. Aquinas does not consider what kind of bodily demeanour is required if the ideal of neighbour love is to be enacted by a creature with our particular kind of embodiment. And in the ways we have explored, Gaita's example of the nun allows us to provide at least a sketch of the relevant kind of demeanour, although not, of course, to represent that demeanour in all its gesturally specific detail. While some features of his example may be open to dispute, Gaita is surely right to suppose that there is a logical gap between, on the one hand, understanding the core values of a tradition, where those values are expressed in relatively generic terms, using

phrases such as ‘human dignity’ or ‘a common humanity’, and on the other, understanding the particular bodily comportment that is required for the enactment of those values. And to give a rounded account of the various dimensions of a given spiritual tradition, it is necessary, therefore, to allude not only to its world view, and the generic ideals of life that can be specified by reference to that world view, but also to the particular quality of bodily demeanour that is integral to the living out of the tradition in practical terms.

Secondly, I have tried to establish how it is possible for bodily demeanour to bear this sort of significance, by employing once again Aquinas’s account of the goods that are the object of the infused moral virtues – what we have been calling hybrid goods. As we have seen, while Aquinas does not consider hybrid goods of this kind, it seems that the theoretical structure that he develops can be invoked to understand not only the spiritual significance of our world-directed thoughts, desires, experience, and morally efficacious behaviour, but also the importance for the spiritual life of the disposition of the body, or what we have termed bodily ‘demeanour’, in distinction from mere behaviour.

Finally, I have tried to show how this appreciation of the spiritual significance of bodily comportment suggests a new perspective on the aesthetic dimension of the spiritual life, to set alongside familiar models of the kind advanced in the recent literature in theological aesthetics. Hence a further, related objective of the discussion has been to develop an understanding of the attractiveness, and in particular the aesthetic allure, of the saintly life.