Book Section:
Wynn, MR (2017) How To Think of Religious Commitment as a Ground for Moral Commitment: A Thomistic Perspective on the Moral Philosophies of John Cottingham and Raimond Gaita. In: Kvanvig, J, (ed.) Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion. Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion, 8 . Oxford University Press , Oxford, UK , pp. 313-342. ISBN 9780198806967

https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198806967.003.0014

How to think of religious commitment as a ground for moral commitment: a Thomistic perspective on the moral philosophies of John Cottingham and Raimond Gaita

1. Introduction

John Cottingham has argued that certain traits that are widely considered ideals of character will only count as virtues granted the truth of a religious worldview or 'background of significance', so giving those with the relevant moral commitments a reason for subscribing to theism. Writing from an atheistic or perhaps agnostic perspective, Raimond Gaita has proposed that the language of religion provides a useful aid for the moral imagination, by allowing us to occupy a possibly fictional vantage point from which certain truths about our fellow human beings, and the claims they make upon us, become newly salient. In this paper, I aim to show how Thomas Aquinas's category of infused moral virtue can be used to extend and integrate the work of these influential authors, so as to produce a further, broadly based account of the relationship of religious and moral commitment.

Since they set out their respective positions relatively briefly, I shall begin by expounding and at points sympathetically elaborating upon the views of Cottingham and Gaita, in order to present each approach in its strongest form. I shall then consider how each can be further developed by appeal to Thomas Aquinas's account of the goods that are the object of the infused moral virtues. I begin with Cottingham's case.

2. Interpreting Cottingham's case

In his book Why Believe? John Cottingham has argued that various widely acknowledged ideals of character – notably those of hope, humility, gratitude, and wonder or awe – fit very readily within a theistic conception of human beings and their metaphysical context, but can be subsumed only with some difficulty, if at all, within rival metaphysical schemes.[1] It is an implication of Cottingham's account that many of our contemporaries subscribe to a conception of the virtues that derives from the predominantly theistic culture of former centuries, from which 'our' culture (the culture of early twenty-first century, urban, western people) has arisen. And our culture, on this view, exhibits a kind of incoherence, for while many of us no longer count ourselves as theists, we have retained our allegiance to various ideals of character whose natural home conceptually is within a theistic worldview; and collectively we have failed to notice that in these respects our moral commitments have come adrift from our worldview.[2]

---

[1] See Why Believe? (London: Continuum, 2009). Cottingham has also argued that the categorical form of some moral norms fits best within the context of a theistic worldview. See, for example, his essay 'The Source of Goodness', in H. Harris, ed., God Goodness and Philosophy (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), Ch. 2. But for present purposes, I am going to concentrate on his claim that certain familiar ideals of life are best understood in theistic terms.

[2] Of course, this general thesis is familiar from other contexts. See for example Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue (London: Duckworth, 2nd edition 1985), and Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Twilight of the Idols, or How to Philosophise with a Hammer', in Friedrich Nietzsche, The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, tr. J. Norman, ed. A. Ridley and J. Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 153-230.

I am going to take as one example of this line of argument Cottingham's proposal that hope as an ideal of character makes good sense given a theistic worldview and not otherwise. Once again, it is worth recalling that his discussion of this point forms part of a larger case that extends to other virtues, such as humility and gratitude. Here is an excerpt from his account of hope:

> 'O Israel, trust in the Lord,' says the Psalmist, 'for in him there is mercy, and in him is plenteous redemption.' Or again, 'I hope for the Lord; my soul doth wait for him; in his word is my trust.' [Ps. 129[130]: 5-7] ... [T]here is no proper placeholder for these traits in classical virtue theory. On the contrary, one of the characteristic features of ancient Greek thought, both in Aristotle and in the tradition he inherited, was a distinctly sober, not to say gloomy, awareness of how often hopes can be disappointed, of how easily human life can be overturned, even for the most virtuous and prosperous, by the swings of fortune. 'Call no man happy until he is dead', ran the proverb, etched deep into the mindset of most of the philosophers and poets of classical antiquity. But the cry of Job, 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him' [Job 1: 4] or St Paul's 'neither height nor depth nor ... things present nor things to come ... shall be able to separate us from the love of God' [Rom. 8: 38], express something quite outside the range of this classical fatalism: an indomitable determination to trust and to keep hope alive, to 'hope against hope', as Paul put it in his letter to the Romans [Rom. 4: 18].[3]

[3] Why Believe?, pp. 154-5.

Although the hope that interests Cottingham here is clearly God-directed, he is not making the superficial point that hope in the biblical or theistic God is not evident in classical traditions. He is referring to a certain demeanour in life, a certain confidence in how things turn will out, or at least a certain confidence in how we can receive events, however they turn out; and if classical culture does not exhibit this sort of confidence, this is not trivially because Aristotle and others did not have the concept of, let alone believe in, the biblical God, but because their worldview does not invite this sort of confidence in the way things will turn out, or in how events can be received however they turn out. In the remainder of this essay, I shall read the notion of 'hope' in this way.[4]

So Cottingham's case turns in part on a cultural observation: look at non-theistic cultures, and you will find that they simply do not think about, or at least do not recognise as an ideal, the kind of trust that is considered normative for human beings in biblical traditions. Of course, making this case in full would be a challenging task: it would require reviewing not only the cultures of the Greco-Roman world but any number of other cultures as well, to show that the confidence in question is found in, and only in, theistic societies – along with societies such as our own, which derive from a theistic culture, even if they are not themselves uniformly theistic. Even if this

---

[4] Of course, some strands of classical culture, notably Stoicism, include the idea of a divine, providential ordering of events. To the extent that these traditions reproduce relevant elements of the biblical worldview, then Cottingham would, I take it, allow that there is nothing to prevent them regarding hope in his extended sense as a virtue. Aristotle himself believed that there was a God, but this is not a God with knowledge of the world, let alone one who exercises providential care of the world. So for present purposes, I shall not count Aristotle as a 'monotheist'.

sort of cross-cultural generalisation were possible, we would still want some account of what it is in the worldview of theistic cultures that enables such hope, and what it is in the worldview of non-theistic cultures that prevents its emergence, to assure ourselves that we are dealing here with a relevant causal or conceptual connection. So as presented here, Cottingham's case is not meant to be conclusive: it is intended simply to shake us into a recognition that the traits that many of us count as virtues have not been considered as virtues in other cultures. And on this basis, he is inviting his reader to ask: mustn't there be something distinctive about our culture (or the earlier cultures from which our culture's values derive) that will explain why this conception of the virtues should have flourished here but not elsewhere?

Alongside this case from cultural observation, Cottingham has a further line of argument, which aims to establish that this cultural correlation does indeed rest on a conceptual connection. In the recent philosophical literature, there have been various attempts to construct secular counterparts for traditional theistic virtues such as hope. Cottingham finds these accounts unpersuasive, and takes their failure as further evidence of the integral connection between theistic assumptions and the kind of hope that is exemplified in the biblical narratives. Here, for example, is his summary of Erik Wielenberg's search for a secular counterpart to the theistic ideal of hope in his book Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe:

> The central theological virtue of hope, maintained in the face of radical vulnerability and the ever-present human tendency to buckle under external misfortune or internal weakness, becomes for Wielenberg a confidence in the power of science to ameliorate our lot (including by pharmacological means),

pointing us towards 'the upper limits of justice and happiness' that 'remain to be discovered'.[5]

From Cottingham's point of view, the difficulty for a Wielenbergian conception of the human condition is not, of course, that it cannot ground any kind of trust or hope. It is possible after all to have a well-grounded hope in the capacity of the sciences to effect fundamental change in human lives in various respects. For Cottingham, the difficulty is, rather, that this hope is very far from the encompassing, life-sustaining kind of confidence that is depicted in the biblical texts that we noted just now. It is worth recalling that there are many secular commentators who would side with Cottingham on this issue, and grant that from a naturalistic point of view, our attitude to the human condition should be, at root, one of deep pessimism and even despair. Bertrand Russell and William James (who, if not a secular commentator, is not writing as an orthodox monotheist anyway) would be obvious examples.[6] So in these ways, drawing both on cultural history, and on recent ventures in avowedly secular ethics,

---

[5] Why Believe?, p. 157. The quotation is taken from Erik Wielenberg, Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 139.

[6] See for example Bertrand Russell in his essay 'A Free Man's Worship' (1903) reproduced in L. Pojman, ed., Ethical Theory (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 4th edition 2001), pp. 606-10. Russell sets out his naturalistic assessment of our circumstances at the very beginning of his essay, noting for example how 'Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving'. He continues: 'Only within the scaffolding of these truths [such as the lack of any providential ordering of events], only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.' James's position on this question is evident from his treatment of the regenerative power of religious conversion: see The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1910 [1902]), Lectures IX and X.

Cottingham aims to show that in surrendering a theistic worldview, we are also relinquishing, if only we see matters clearly enough, various humanly important attitudinal possibilities.

Cottingham's case on these matters is to be read at least in part, I take it, in metaphysical terms: it is because they lack the requisite metaphysical commitments that Wielenberg and others find themselves unable to produce secular counterparts for traditional theistic virtues such as hope. This construal of Cottingham's general position is perhaps more easily justified for his remarks on humility rather than hope. In the case of humility, he says for example that: 'Religious language offers a ready expression for this complex framework of affective and cognitive responses [those involved in being a humble person].' And he adds by way of explanation: 'Man is not self-creating.'[7] So it is the believer's conception of God as the source of being, among other things, that provides the ideal of humility with a secure conceptual home, and ensures that the trait constitutes a fitting response to the nature of things. While I shall not rehearse his case, Cottingham is struck here, once again, by the contrast between Christian and Aristotelian perspectives, and the distinction between, for instance, the person of Christian humility and Aristotle's 'great-souled man'.[8]

At other points, Cottingham's case seems to be focused more on particular theistic practices, such as the practice of grace before meals, rather than, directly, the metaphysical commitments that are distinctive of theism, as in this passage:

---

[7] Why Believe?, p. 153.

[8] For Aristotle's account of the great-souled man, see Nichomachean Ethics, Book IV.

> in the absence of morning prayer, one will simply get up in the morning and start the day; in the absence of a habit of saying Grace, one will simply pick up the knife and fork and start eating. These, and many other differences in habitual patterns of behaviour and affective response, often give us a more significant indicator of the differences between atheism and theism than if we focus on abstract metaphysical claims.[9]

In this text, the accent is upon habits of feeling and action, understood somewhat in distinction from metaphysical commitments. But I take it that Cottingham's thought is that these habits embody or in some way derive from distinctively theistic metaphysical claims, so that the habits remain dependent on a theistic metaphysic, even if that metaphysic is not asserted in the 'abstract'. Even if I am mistaken on the exegetical question of whether Cottingham is to be read in these terms, the case that I am sketching is of independent interest, not least because, as I have noted, something like it has been endorsed by various secular philosophers. The case can, then, be discussed simply on this basis. But for the remainder of the paper, I will attribute it to Cottingham, allowing that there is a degree of exegetical uncertainty on this point.

So far, Cottingham has proposed that there is an integral connection between, for instance, commitment to hope as an ideal of character and theism. He is also of the view that his secular interlocutor will, most likely, agree that hope, humility and other such traits are genuine virtues. And he feels able, therefore, to put to his interlocutor this choice: you can keep your value commitments by continuing to regard hope and

---

[9] Why Believe, p. 164.

humility, for example, as virtues, but in that case you have good reason to be a theist; or you can keep your naturalism, but in that case, you have good reason to give up your value commitments. Here is one representative passage in which he develops this challenge:

> the naturalist faces a dilemma here. On the one hand, it is hard to deny that there is something admirable about this ethic of hope and trust. And the value is something we seem to recognize not just on a prudential level… Over and above such utilitarian considerations, most of us have a strong intuitive sense of something splendid, something moving, about the human being weighed down with misfortunes and difficulties, who nevertheless manages to keep alive the radiance of hope, as is done in the straining yet resonant self-exhortation at the end of Psalm 43: 'Why are thou cast down, O my soul, and why are thou disquieted within me? Hope in God for I shall yet praise him who is the health of my countenance, and my God.' [Ps 42] The position so far reached, then, is that these so-called theological virtues are ones which many or most of us, almost irrespective of religious persuasion or its absence, can intuitively recognize as admirable and valuable. And hence, short of biting the bullet and suppressing such intuitions, the naturalist has to construct some secular analogue for these virtues, which will allow them to be preserved as ethically desirable traits of character. But I have suggested that this will not be easy, without a suitable framework in which to locate them…[10]

---

[10] Why Believe?, pp. 155-6.

So Cottingham is presenting the naturalist with this dilemma: you recognise hope (in the relevant, broadly defined sense that Cottingham has delineated) to be an ideal of life; and yet there is no naturalist framework that will allow us to display why hope is rightly regarded as an ideal of life, or that will underwrite the practices that are required for the nurturing of hope in human communities; so you face a choice between giving up your naturalism, and giving up your commitment to hope as an ideal of life.

Cottingham presents the case I have been discussing relatively briefly, and does not attempt to defend it at any length from objections. So there remains a question about how his argument might be developed, and perhaps strengthened, in the face of objections. I turn to this question next.

3. Elaborating on Cottingham's argument

In this section, I shall introduce two objections to Cottingham's position, and consider how his case might be extended, or on certain points re-affirmed, so as to meet these objections.

It might be said that Cottingham's argument depends on an equivocation in its reading of the key claim that 'hope is a virtue'. As Cottingham says here: 'most of us have a strong intuitive sense [that there is] something splendid' in the ideal of hope. And in keeping with this observation, we could take the claim 'hope is a virtue' in a purely descriptive sense: on this reading, what is being asserted is simply that many of us take hope to be a virtue. But Cottingham's argument surely depends, the objector may continue, on a normative reading of the claim 'hope is a virtue', according to which

hope is rightly taken as an ideal of character. We can after all explain the fact that people believe that hope is a virtue by noting that they believe that there is a God, or stand within a culture whose values derive from a predecessor culture in which people believed that there is a God. It is only if hope is rightly believed to be a virtue that Cottingham has given us reason to conclude that there is a God, and not simply that people believe, or once believed, that there is a God.

In brief, God's reality is required not to secure the socio-cultural truth that many people believe hope to be a virtue, but only to secure the normative truth that hope is indeed a virtue. So doesn't Cottingham's case appeal to the plausible claim that many people take hope to be a virtue, while it actually requires the different and not properly substantiated claim that hope is rightly thought to be a virtue? To put the matter otherwise, doesn't Cottingham commit something like the error that many commentators have associated with J.S. Mill's argument in Chapter IV of Utilitarianism when he slides, so it is alleged, from a descriptive to a normative reading of the claim that 'happiness is desirable'?[11]

[11] See Mill's comment: 'the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it. … No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness': John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, ed. George Sher (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001), Ch. IV. Mill moves here from the claim that happiness is in fact desired to the claim that it is 'desirable', where the latter claim may be read either descriptively ('happiness is capable of being desired') or normatively ('happiness ought to be desired').

This objection invites us to think about the role of socio-cultural generalisations in Cottingham's argument. These generalisations can be assigned two roles in the discussion. Cottingham is inviting the naturalist to endorse each of these claims:

[1.] Hope (of the relevant kind) is a genuine virtue (rather than simply a trait that is taken by many to be a virtue).

And

[2.] Hope can only be a genuine virtue if the biblical worldview or something relevantly like it is true.

Socio-cultural generalisation is relevant to both these claims. Cottingham reasons: if we find that hope is taken to be a virtue in theistic cultures, and in cultures which have grown out of theistic cultures, and not otherwise, doesn't this give us an initial reason for thinking that there is a deep-seated connection between commitment to theism and commitment to hope as a virtue? Here socio-cultural generalisation is used to support [2.]. I don't find any illicit slide from the descriptive to the normative case here. The thought is just that if people in theistic cultures (and cultures that derive from theistic cultures) take hope to be a virtue, and people in other cultures do not, then this provides an initial reason for supposing that a theistic worldview is in some way presupposed in the idea that hope is a genuine virtue. So this association gives us prima facie reason to endorse [2.].

Socio-cultural generalisation can also be introduced to support [1.]. But here it functions as an appeal to the reader, who is being asked to locate themselves within the relevant generalisation. In other words, the reader is being invited to recognise that, like many others in 'our' culture, they too believe that hope is a genuine virtue. So here again there is, I think, no slide from the descriptive to the normative case: the reader is being called upon to recognise that they are already committed to the idea that hope is a genuine virtue; they are not being drawn into a transition from the thought that many people take it to be a virtue to the thought that it is a genuine virtue. So Cottingham is not really arguing for [1.] at all, but appealing to an already established consensus on this question, and inviting his reader to locate themselves within that consensus.

Let's suppose that Cottingham is right to think that he has presented a prima facie case for [2.]: hope can only be a genuine virtue if the biblical worldview or something relevantly like it is true. And let's also suppose that his addressee stands within the relevant socio-cultural generalisation, so has an 'intuitive sense' (to use Cottingham's form of words) that hope is a genuine virtue. If the addressee is also a naturalist, what should she say at this point?

The naturalist might respond by saying: having rehearsed Cottingham's argument, I have come to see that, while I remain a naturalist, I cannot retain my belief that hope, of the relevant kind, is a virtue. She might then conclude that her 'intuitive sense' that hope is a genuine virtue is nothing more than a cultural artefact, which derives from her upbringing within a theistic culture or a culture with roots in earlier theistic traditions. The naturalist who is persuaded by Cottingham's dilemma will have good

reason to respond in this way if she takes herself to have powerful reasons for favouring naturalism. But we might wonder: hasn't Cottingham given the naturalist a reason of some sort, even if not a very powerful reason, for supposing that theism is true, given her initial 'intuitive sense' that hope is indeed a virtue?[12] Elaborating on this question will allow us to put a second objection to Cottingham's case.

In support of the idea that Cottingham's case has supplied such grounds, it might be said: in general, our initial attitude towards our 'intuitive sense' of how things stand should be one of trust or 'credulity': in such cases, the burden of proof surely rests on the person who doubts what we find ourselves intuitively inclined to believe.[13] If that is so, then the naturalist's intuitive sense that hope is a virtue ought to be given some initial weight. And while other considerations may in the end prove overriding, this intuitive sense does give the naturalist who accepts the terms of Cottingham's dilemma a reason for thinking that theism is true.

---

[12] This is to ask whether Cottingham's case has any epistemic force. So far as I can see, this is not a question that Cottingham puts directly to himself, and for present purposes, I bracket the question of whether he intends his case to be read in these terms. It is clear that Cottingham does intend to present the secularist with a forced choice between certain moral commitments and their naturalism. But this train of thought does not of itself commit him to a view about whether the naturalist should treat her moral commitments as providing support for the truth of theism. Whatever the correct exegesis here, I hope the ensuing discussion will establish that these issues are of some interest in their own right.

[13] This principle, or others rather like it, has been defended by many philosophers. See for example Richard Swinburne, The Existence of God (Oxford: Oxford University Press, second edition, 2004), Ch. 13.

In response to this proposal, it might be objected that, on Cottingham's account, there is nothing in the experience of hope, or in features of the world that are accessible to the senses, to mark out hope as a virtue. For whether or not hope is a virtue depends, on his account, upon our metaphysical context: the confidence that is a mark of biblical hope would not be appropriate, in his judgement, if naturalism were true; indeed, in such circumstances hope would presumably count as a vice, since it would then be an ideal of life that is incongruous with its metaphysical context. This suggests that if we are to have a reliable 'intuitive sense' of whether or not hope is a virtue, then our cognitive faculties will need to be attuned in some relevant way to the truth or otherwise of theism; since it is the truth or otherwise of theism that fixes whether or not hope is a virtue. But we might ask: why suppose that we are capable of any such attunement?

If theism is true, then perhaps we have some reason to attribute to human beings such a capacity. Perhaps God wants our intuitive judgements concerning which traits are virtues to track the truth, because God wants us to lead good lives, and for this reason confers upon us the requisite cognitive powers? This is not to say that we need to be explicitly aware of the connection between the existence of God and hope's status as a virtue; it may be, for example, that God gives us simply a disposition to grasp unreflectively that hope is a virtue. Such a disposition, conferred on this basis, will of course be truth-directed. But if, on the other hand, we take naturalism to be true, then why would we suppose that we have an 'intuitive sense' of which traits are virtues that is responsive to our metaphysical context, so that its verdicts track the truth or otherwise of naturalism? Again, such a sense need not involve any explicit awareness of the connection between naturalism and the moral status of a given trait, nor need it

involve any explicit awareness of whether naturalism is true. But if its verdicts on these matters are to be trustworthy, then those verdicts will need to track the truth or otherwise of naturalism, if it is the truth or otherwise of naturalism that fixes whether or not a given trait is a virtue. In fact, the objector may continue, if naturalism is true, and if our cognitive capacities are to be explained in evolutionary terms, then we surely have good reason to deny that we have any such intuitive sense of which traits count as virtues. After all, evolutionary theory has nothing to say about any such sense; and this is as it should be, because what connection could there be between an appreciation of which traits count as virtues, where this appreciation at least indirectly tracks the truth or otherwise of a large scale metaphysical hypothesis (that is, naturalism), and 'fitness' understood in evolutionary terms?[14] Here we have a second objection to Cottingham's case, when it is read in epistemic terms.

This objection does not imply that in general we cannot argue from an 'intuitive sense' that P to some conclusion Q, on the grounds that Q is a condition of the truth of P. The proposal is just that if such an argument is to be persuasive, then it cannot be the case that the falsity of Q would imply the unreliability of the 'intuitive sense' that P. For if the case were to have that character, then in taking our intuitive sense of

---

[14] Alvin Plantinga has raised the question of whether evolutionary naturalists have an account of the development of our cognitive faculties that is consistent with their claim to know that evolutionary naturalism is true. Here, we are concerned with a related debate, but our particular focus is the question of whether naturalism is consistent with our capacity to know certain moral truths, when the ground of those truths is understood along the lines that Cottingham proposes. A solution to the difficulty that Plantinga has posed need not amount to a solution to the difficulty that we are considering. See Alvin Plantinga, Warranted Christian Belief (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 227-40.

these matters to be reliable, at the outset, we will have begged the question in favour of Q: for this sense will only be reliable if Q. To take the case in hand, if naturalism is true, then we should not be disposed to trust the findings of any 'intuitive sense' we may have concerning whether hope, in Cottingham's sense, is a virtue. And in that case, we can't very well construct an argument for theism that assumes the reliability of our intuitive sense that hope is a virtue. So here is a reason for doubting whether the considerations adduced by Cottingham give the naturalist a reason, not even a weak reason, for supposing that theism is true.

In response to this objection, we might say that Cottingham's claim that hope is a virtue should be read rather differently. Compare the case where I say that it is better to be sitting restfully than running flat out in a state of terror. Of course, this ranking will vary once we start to build in context. If a hungry tiger is approaching me, then it may well be better for me to be running flat out in a state of terror than to be sitting restfully. But the preference in question is to be read as the claim that considered in themselves, the state of sitting restfully is to be preferred to the state of running flat out in a state of terror. There is I take it some sense in such judgements. And similarly we might take 'hope is a virtue' to affirm that in itself, and bracketing context, hope is to be preferred to rival demeanours in life, such as those favoured in the Greco-Roman world. Perhaps it is in this sense that hope is superior to contrary traits, so that it is, as Cottingham urges, 'admirable'?

This response does engage with the objection that our intuitive sense of whether or not hope is a virtue is not to be trusted if naturalism is true. After all, the evolutionary origin of our cognitive apparatus is entirely compatible, I take it, with our being able

to judge reliably that sitting restfully is to be preferred other things being equal to running flat out in a state of terror; and why should we not suppose that the evolutionary origin of our cognitive powers is similarly compatible with our being able to judge reliably that hope in Cottingham's sense is to be preferred, on the same context-free kind of basis, to the gloominess of the Greeks? However, while this manoeuvre saves Cottingham's argument from the objection, it also means that the claim 'hope is a virtue' no longer supports the claim that theism is true. Why? Because the claim 'hope is a virtue' is now being read context-independently, so that its truth is no longer tied to the truth of theism. And accordingly, our reasons for thinking that hope is a virtue, when the claim is interpreted in this way, are no longer reasons for thinking that theism is true.

We could develop another response to the objection by building in context. For example, we could compare these four scenarios: (a.) being a hopeful person when theism is true; (b.) being a hopeful person when theism is false; (c.) being a gloomy person (or exhibiting some other trait contrary to hope) when theism is true; and (d.) being a gloomy person when theism is false. We might then take the claim that hope is a virtue to amount to the claim that scenario (a.) (being a hopeful person when theism is true) is in itself a better scenario than any of (b.) to (d.) in themselves, bracketing out any other information about the character of these scenarios. Here we have a context-laden reading of the claim that hope is to be ranked above contrary traits. And again, we might suppose that there is nothing in an evolutionary account of the development of our cognitive faculties that would prevent us from being able to make such a judgement reliably.

However, this reading of the claim that hope is a virtue is also incapable of providing the basis of an inference to theism. For on this reading, to say that hope is a virtue is to make a claim about which of various possible scenarios is optimal; it is not to be committed to a view about whether this optimal scenario in fact obtains. So (a.) may indeed be the best of these scenarios; and this truth may allow us to give some content to the claim that hope is superior to contrary traits, and therefore a virtue. But the fact that (a.) is a theistic scenario gives us no reason to think that theism is in fact true; it tells us only that if the optimal scenario were to obtain, then theism would be true.

In sum, it is not clear that Cottingham's discussion provides the naturalist with a reason for thinking that theism is true. If the claim that hope is a virtue is taken to mean that hope is a virtue relative to our actual metaphysical context, then the naturalist should refuse to grant that we have a reliable 'intuitive sense' that this is so. Alternatively, we could read the claim that hope is a virtue in context-independent terms (abstracting from context, hope is to be preferred to contrary traits) or in context-laden terms of the kind we have considered (hope granted the truth of theism is to be preferred to all the alternative pairings of traits and worldviews). The naturalist can grant that we can make these discriminations reliably; but allowing that hope is a virtue in these senses does not determine whether hope is properly an ideal of character in our metaphysical context, and so does not provide the basis of an argument for theism.

So this second objection to Cottingham's case, when that case is read epistemically, has, I think, some force. Nonetheless, our willingness to judge that hope is a virtue in the context-laden sense may still be of some interest, if our intention is to develop a

pragmatic, rather than epistemic, case for theism. I shall come to that question shortly, but first of all, let us turn to another account of the relationship between religious and moral thought.

As we have seen, on Cottingham's view, certain moral commitments – notably, to take our focal example, commitment to hope as an ideal of character in our world – call for a religious 'framework of reference' if they are to be coherent. To put the point in traditional terms, I need to subscribe to the truth of some story about God's providence if my commitment to hope as an ideal of life, in our universe, is to be coherent. Raimond Gaita's work points to another, rather different way of formulating the idea that religious narratives and moral commitments are mutually implicating. In the next section, I set out the main elements of Gaita's approach, and consider its relationship to Cottingham's discussion. I shall then argue that both accounts can be constructively extended, and integrated, by reference to Thomas Aquinas's category of infused moral virtue.

4. Interpreting Gaita's account of the relationship between moral and religious thought

Gaita's discussion of the relationship between moral and religious commitment is marked by his profound scepticism of the capacity of moral theory to serve as a source of moral insight. For Gaita, rather than theory, the sources of deep moral understanding are the enacted witness of moral exemplars, and a vocabulary for talking about human beings that is fundamentally religious in content. Let's see how he develops these themes.

In his book A Common Humanity, Gaita describes an episode from his youth, when he was working as an assistant on a psychiatric ward. One day, a nun came to the ward, and in seeing her demeanour in the presence of the patients – 'the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, the inflexions of her body' – he takes himself to have acquired a deepened understanding of the sense in which the patients are, in moral terms, his equals.[15] Before witnessing the nun's conduct, Gaita would have said, in all sincerity, that the patients were his equals. But her enacted, bodily example, rather than anything she says, shows him that until now, he did not believe this 'in his heart'. Her example 'reveals', he says, the full equality of the patients with himself and all other human beings, so disclosing our 'common humanity'.[16]

Gaita evidently thinks that it is possible to arrive at this insight into the full humanity of another human being, even an afflicted human being such as the patients on the ward, without first of all committing oneself to a religious worldview. And he is clear that his own recognition of the equality of the patients depended simply on the nun's enacted example: it did not require any prior, explicit commitment to a religious or any other worldview. (Indeed, although Gaita does not say so, I take it that his

---

[15] Raimond Gaita, A Common Humanity. Thinking About Love & Truth & Justice (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1999), p. 18.

[16] The example is developed in A Common Humanity, pp. 18–19. Gaita relates the example of the nun to other themes in his moral philosophy, and confirms its central place in his thinking, in the second edition of his book Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004). See especially the Preface, pp. xii-xxi. Gaita's sensitivity to the role of examples in informing a moral perspective is also evident in his autobiographical work Romulus, My Father (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1998).

religious stance at that time, as in later life, was agnostic or atheistic.) In this respect, Gaita's position resembles Cottingham's: for Cottingham too, it seems, it is possible to grasp the appropriateness of certain ideals of life – such as the appropriateness of hope as an ideal of life, in our world – without first of all adopting, explicitly, a theistic perspective. It is for this reason that it is possible, on his account, to start with the recognition that hope is an ideal of life, and to move from there to a commitment to theism. However, by contrast with Cottingham, Gaita does not think that reflective endorsement of the value judgement with which he is concerned (the judgement that these patients are fully his equals) calls for the introduction of a theistic 'framework of significance'. In fact, he maintains that the truth about human beings that is revealed in the nun's behaviour is incapable of being supported by any framework whatsoever. He remarks:

> 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 on 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 senses that they are <u>rightly</u> the objects of such treatment, I can

> appeal only to the purity of her love. … I allow for no independent justification of her attitude.[17]

So for Gaita, the example of the nun, and of others like her, reveals a moral truth to which we have no independent access, and their conduct therefore plays an indispensable role in our moral thought.[18]

However, while Gaita differs from Cottingham in supposing that there is no need to ground, nor even is there any possibility of grounding, moral truths in religious or metaphysical terms, his position turns out to be strikingly similar to Cottingham's in a further respect, because like Cottingham he thinks that the language of religion is vital for the articulation of the most basic of our value commitments. Consider for example these remarks:

> 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

---

[17] A Common Humanity, pp. 21-2. Gaita's position on this point is clearly related to the thought of his doctoral supervisor, R.F Holland. See especially Holland's essay ''Is Goodness a Mystery?', Against Empiricism: On Education, Epistemology and Value (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), pp. 126-142.

[18] Gaita does defend, and not just assert, the idea that there is 'no independent justification of the nun's attitude', but his argument on this point is not directly relevant to our concerns. For discussion of his case here, see Mark Wynn, 'The Moral Philosophy of Raimond Gaita and Some Questions of Method in the Philosophy of Religion', New Blackfriars, Vol. 90 (2009), pp. 639-651.

> shapes our thoughts about the way in which human beings limit our will as does nothing else in nature. 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 judgment these are ways of trying to say what we feel a need to say when we are estranged from the 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 the religious ways of speaking.[19]

Despite their difference on the question of whether some of our fundamental value commitments require, or even permit, the underpinning of a theistic metaphysics, in this text Gaita sounds very like Cottingham. Just as Cottingham maintains that there is no secular way of talking that will serve as a substitute for religious ways of talking if we want to articulate with any authority the idea that hope is a genuine virtue (see again his critique of Wielenberg), so Gaita suggests that there is no secular way of talking (employing notions such as dignity, rights, respect, and preciousness) that we can substitute for the language of religion if we want to articulate with any depth the thought that, whether we be psychiatric patients or philosophers, we all of us share a common humanity.

---

[19] A Common Humanity, p. 23.

Gaita's stance on this point becomes clearer if we recall that on his view, we are sensitised to the moral importance of other human beings above all in so far as we see them in the light of someone's love. In this spirit, Gaita notes that: 'One of the quickest ways to make prisoners morally invisible to their guards is to deny them visits from their loved ones, thereby ensuring that the guards never see them through the eyes of those who love them.'[20] It is for this reason that the love of parents is so important for Gaita, since parental love is defined by the ideal of unconditionality, and can therefore light up the moral reality of human beings who might otherwise seem un-lovable. But even parental love sometimes fails, and it is in the nature of the case restricted in its scope. And it is more fundamentally, therefore, Gaita explains, the example of figures such as the nun that sustains our commitment to the common humanity of all human beings, or to the idea that all of us, regardless of our particular traits or attributes, are intelligibly the objects of someone's love.[21] But the love of figures such as the nun – the love of people Gaita calls saints – is not simply a natural endowment of certain individuals, he insists. It is instead a cultural achievement, made possible by particular ways of speaking, and associated disciplines of thought and feeling.

It is at this juncture that Gaita appeals to the language of religion, and in particular the language that represents God's love as a special kind of parental love: one that does not fail, but extends reliably and impartially and unconditionally to all human beings. The nun's capacity to act as she does is a product, for Gaita, of her participation in a relevant cultural tradition – and it depends in particular on her formation in the

---

[20] A Common Humanity, p. 26.

[21] A Common Humanity, p. 24.

discipline of seeing other human beings as the objects of God's unfailing parental love. As Gaita says of the nun's saintly love and of parental love:

> Both forms of love are unconditional but they are not unconditioned. Their existence depends upon certain practices and customs as much as it informs them, and also upon certain facts of the human condition. Neither is universally an ideal amongst the peoples of the earth, and even in cultures such as ours where they are (or have been) celebrated, people's hold on them is often fragile. They are, I believe, dependent upon one another. 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 parental love had in her prayers.[22]

Here again, Gaita's stance sounds very much like Cottingham's, albeit that Gaita is concerned with love and Cottingham with hope and other virtues distinct from love. In the language of religion, Gaita is saying, we have a way of representing all human beings as the objects of an unwavering parental love, and therefore as fully our equals; and we do not have a secular discourse that might serve as a satisfactory substitute for the presentation of this same insight. And the example of figures such as the nun, he seems to claim here, depends in the end upon the enabling power of religious thoughts, and especially the thought of God's universal parental love.

Allowing for these similarities, Gaita's formulation of the idea that our moral thought depends upon the language of religion has a rather different cast from Cottingham's

---

[22] A Common Humanity, p. 22.

rendering of this idea. Gaita is not supposing, it seems to me, that anyone who grasps, in any depth, the common humanity of human beings must be familiar with the language of divine parental love. And he is certainly not suggesting, as Cottingham seems to be, that the fully reflective person who subscribes to the ideal of saintly love, or some other relevant ideal of life, is required to use the language of religion devotionally. Gaita is clear, for example, that there can be secular saints, and he does not think of this position as in any way unstable, or as inviting completion in the form of religious commitment.[23] Nonetheless, Gaita does seem to be affirming that it is because our culture has emerged from theistic cultures that we have the idea of a common humanity; and he seems to be saying that it is only in so far as at least some of us continue to use the language of divine parental love prayerfully that this ideal will continue to be presented to us authoritatively in the lives of 'the saints'. So it seems to be an implication of his position that if theistic forms of thought and spiritual discipline were to disappear from our culture altogether, then we would with time lose our grip upon the idea that we all of us share a common humanity.

It is noteworthy that for Gaita, it is not theological discourse that is important in sustaining the practice of figures such as the nun. It is, rather, religious stories and

---

[23] On this point, Gaita's position is reminiscent of Pierre Hadot's account of the philosophical schools of the ancient world, such as Stoicism and Epicureanism. According to Hadot, these schools introduced various ways of representing the universe (think for instance of Epicurean atomism) not fundamentally because they took themselves to have evidence for the truth of these worldviews, but because they believed that the worldview would provide a spiritually helpful focus of thought. See Pierre Hadot, Philosophy as A Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault, tr. M Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), Ch. 11.

anthropomorphic representations of the divine life that play this role. In this sense, it is the religious imagination, and not fundamentally abstractly discursive forms of religious thought, that is integral to the enduring vitality of our moral understanding. He puts the point thus:

> Philosophers and theologians are, for reasons that go deep in their disciplines, inclined to say that the language of prayer, anthropocentric and often poetic, merely makes moving and therefore psychologically accessible to less than perfectly rational beings, things whose intellectual content is more clearly revealed in the abstract deliverances of theological and philosophical theories. I suspect that the contrary is closer to the truth – that the unashamedly untheoretical, anthropocentric language of worship has greater power to reveal the structure of the concepts which make the nun's behaviour and what it revealed intelligible to us.[24]

Given his account of the example of the nun, we should expect Gaita to take this view. He has proposed that the nun differs from the psychiatrists who work on the ward, and from Gaita himself in his 'pre-conversion' state, not fundamentally in what she says (it's not apparent, in fact, that Gaita hears anything of what she says on her visit to the ward), but in her bodily demeanour towards the patients. It is, then, enacted example that is the source of deep-seated moral understanding. And if there is to be a divine counterpart for the nun's enacted example, then it will presumably be found in closely observed narratives of what God or the gods have done in their

---

[24] A Common Humanity, p. 23.

relations with human beings, and not in abstract, doctrinal claims about God's relation to the world.

5. Reviewing Gaita's case

What should we make of Gaita's discussion? His case depends in part on what is, surely, a plausible claim about the moral formation of human beings: for many of us, growth in moral understanding depends upon our exposure to the enacted witness of exemplary individuals. More controversially, Gaita is advancing a complex counterfactual socio-cultural claim: but for the presence in 'our' culture of the language of divine parental love, the very idea of a common humanity, in the sense that he intends, would never have emerged. That may be doubted. It has been urged, for example, that the stories of non-theistic religious traditions can secure our sense of the moral importance of our fellow human beings on the same sort of basis, and with the same sort of authority, as the idea of divine parental love.[25] But for our purposes, perhaps the most interesting of Gaita's proposals is the thought that we human beings are incapable of fashioning a purely secular, or purely theoretical, language that will serve as an adequate substitute, in our moral discourse, for image-laden, anthropomorphic religious ways of talking.

---

[25] For instance, Michael McGhee has argued that taking on a moral perspective requires an external vantage point upon the human condition. And while agreeing with Gaita that the language of divine parental love provides one way of assuming such a vantage point, he argues that the stories of, for example, Boddhisattva figures are just as capable of playing this role, and of sustaining thereby a concern for human beings as such. See Michael McGhee, 'Is Nothing Sacred? A Secular Philosophy of Incarnation', Philosophical Investigations 34 (2011), pp. 169-188.

It is hard to assess the plausibility of this claim. It is, Gaita seems to be saying, a deep truth of human nature that religious ways of talking have this capacity to structure our moral thought: there is no abstractly conceptual necessity that moral thought should be so structured, but given the sort of creatures we are (given that we culture-bound, image-bound, and story-bound kinds of creature) religious forms of thought are essential, he seems to be saying, for the enduring vitality of our moral thought. It may be that he thinks of this truth as relative not only to human nature, but also to the particular set of cultural traditions that has in fact evolved in human history. Perhaps Gaita would allow that, for all we know, there might in principle have been secular cultural traditions that could have played the role that is played in our cultural history by the language of divine love. But in the world as it is constituted, he seems to be saying, none of the secular cultural traditions that has in fact evolved is capable of playing this role.

And although he does not say so, perhaps Gaita also thinks that if a body of stories and images is to play this sort of role, then it cannot be constructed here and now, but has to be elaborated, and refined, along with associated literary, visual and musical traditions, across generations, if it is to exercise the deep imaginative pull of established religious forms of thought. So perhaps Gaita would allow that it may be just a contingent truth of cultural history that we find ourselves dependent on religious forms of thought in the way that he has suggested. But whatever he thinks on this point, it appears to be an implication of his position that this dependence runs deep: on Gaita's view, it would be futile, as well as, very likely, morally impoverishing, to seek some secular counterpart to religious traditions that could be substituted for them

with no loss of moral efficacy. Here again, his position has obvious affinities with Cottingham's.

So Cottingham and Gaita agree that religious categories have an important role to play in nourishing our moral thought. But on Cottingham's view, hope can only count as an ideal granted a theistic metaphysics, whereas for Gaita, whatever the metaphysical facts may be, a life that acknowledges a common humanity is to be preferred to a life informed by any contrary value. Religion is relevant on Gaita's scheme not because saintly love will only count as an ideal granted a theistic metaphysic, but because we are culture-bound, image-bound, exemplar-dependent creatures, and accordingly our capacity to apprehend the humanity of other human beings depends on our acquaintance with religious stories, and especially stories that speak of human beings as the objects of a universal, unconditional love. To this extent, the dependence of moral thought on religion is, for Gaita, more a matter of the imagination than of metaphysics.

6. Cottingham, Gaita and Thomas Aquinas's conception of infused moral virtue

Neither Cottingham nor Gaita intends to give a fully developed account of the relationship between moral and religious commitments. So part of my concern here has been to argue for a particular reading of their comments, and at points to expand on those comments in the light of potential objections. In concluding, I am going to consider how these accounts, read as I have read them, may be further extended, and at the same time integrated, so as to present a single overarching account of the

relationship between moral and religious commitment. For this purpose, I am going to read these accounts through the lens provided by Thomas Aquinas's notion of infused moral virtue. So I begin by briefly introducing this notion.[26]

Aquinas inherited from Aristotle the idea that there are acquired moral virtues, and from his theological forebears the idea that there are infused theological virtues.[27] Combining these approaches, he proposes that along with the acquired moral and infused theological virtues, there are also infused moral virtues.[28] The infused moral virtues aim not simply at this-worldly goods (such as the good of bodily health, which is the goal of acquired temperance), nor simply at other-worldly goods (such as the good of relationship to God, which is the immediate goal of the theological virtues), but at what we may think of as a hybrid kind of good, namely, our flourishing in relation to creatures, where the measure of that flourishing is provided by relationship to God. Hence infused temperance, for example, involves 'abstinence' from food, that

---

[26] I give a fuller account of the notion in my paper 'Between Heaven and Earth: Sensory Experience and the Goods of the Spiritual Life', in David McPherson, ed., Spirituality and the Good Life (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), forthcoming, 2017.

[27] See Aristotle, The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nichomachean Ethics, tr. J.A.K. Thomson, revised H. Tredennick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), Book II. The theological virtues of faith, hope and love are distinguished famously in 1 Cor. 13.

[28] The key text here is Summa Theologiae 1a.63.4, where Aquinas asks 'whether any moral virtues are in us by infusion'. See the Benziger Bros. Edition, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1947, available here: http://dhspriory.org/thomas/summa/index.html The example of consumption of food that I go on to give is developed here. A helpful account of Thomas's development of earlier traditions of thought can be found in John Inglis, 'Aquinas's Replication of the Acquired Moral Virtues', The Journal of Religious Ethics 27 (1999), pp. 3-27.

is, a pattern of consumption of food that is consistent with health of the body, but where the measure of right consumption is fixed by reference to relationship to God. Aquinas explains the relationship between the theological and infused moral virtues in these terms:

> The theological virtues are enough to shape us to our supernatural end as a start, that is, to God himself immediately and to none other. Yet the soul needs also to be equipped by infused virtues in regard to created things, though as subordinate to God.[29]

So, in brief, the infused moral virtues are concerned with our relations to 'created things' (so they share their subject matter with the acquired moral virtues), but 'as subordinate to God', so that the standard of success in these relations is provided not simply by reference to human nature, but in terms of relationship to God (so the infused moral virtues share their teleology with the theological virtues). Hence Aquinas takes neighbour love, for example, to be appropriate for us, because this way of relating to other human beings is fitting relative to the truth that we will one day share with them in the beatific vision.[30] So the good that is realised in the practice of

---

[29] Summa Theologiae, ed. T. Gilby (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964-74), Vol. 23, 1a2ae. 63. 3.

[30] See for instance this remark: 'As stated above (Q 23, Art. 1), the friendship of charity is founded upon the fellowship of everlasting happiness, in which men share in common with the angels. For it is written (Mt. 22:30) that "in the resurrection . . . men shall be as the angels of God in heaven." It is therefore evident that the friendship of charity extends also to the angels' (Summa Theologiae 2a2ae. 25. 10, ellipsis in the original, tr. Fathers of the English Dominican Province). Here Thomas grounds the appropriateness of love of the angels in a truth concerning our theological context, namely, our

neighbour love concerns, of course, our relations to creatures, but is grounded in our theological context, since it consists in the fittingness of those relations relative to theological truths, in this case, the truth that we will share with other human beings in the vision of God. In this sense, this is a hybrid good, one that consists in our relations to creatures being properly ordered to our relation to God.

Granted this account of the goods that are the object of the infused moral virtues, let us return first of all to Cottingham's discussion. Drawing on Aquinas's notion of infused moral virtue, we can think of Cottingham's case as an invitation to lead a life of hope, so as to realise a significant hybrid good, namely, the good of leading such a life in a theistic universe. The good that will then be realised can be considered as a Thomistic hybrid good for the reasons that Cottingham gives: if we do not inhabit a theistic universe, then it may be doubted whether hope will count as an ideal of life; but within a theistic universe, hope will constitute a fitting response to our theological context, and will thereby realise the good that consists in living congruently with that context. So as with other hybrid goods, this is a good that concerns not simply our relationship to the material order, nor simply our relationship to God, but our relationship to created things in so far as that relationship is fitting relative to our relationship to God.

It is worth recalling here that Cottingham is concerned with a kind of hope that is not directed simply at God, even if it depends for its appropriateness on the existence of God. After all, his secular interlocutor is supposed to be committed to a life of hope,

---

shared eschatological future; and he takes the same considerations to ground the appropriateness of neighbour love that is extended to human beings.

in the sense that is relevant to Cottingham's case, yet their hope cannot be directed, at least not explicitly, at God. Instead, hope, in this sense, involves, once again, our attitudes towards this-worldly events. Understood in these terms, hope realises a good of the same structure as the good that is realised, according to Aquinas, by abstinence: in each case, our thoughts, feeling and actions in our dealings with the material world turn out to be congruent with our theological context, and realise thereby a significant good.

We can elaborate on this case by returning to our earlier reading of the claim that hope is a virtue. Suppose we read this claim as the claim that of the following four scenarios, the first is the best, other things being equal: (a.) being a hopeful person when theism is true; (b.) being a hopeful person when theism is false; (c.) being a gloomy person (or exhibiting some other trait contrary to hope) when theism is true; and (d.) being a gloomy person when theism is false. This ranking reflects Cottingham's judgement that hope will only count as a virtue granted the truth of the theism: it is of for this reason that (a.) is to be preferred to (b.). And as we have seen, the secular person can trust their intuitive judgement that this ranking is appropriate, without thereby begging the question against secularism. Granted the ranking, we could represent Cottingham's case as an appeal to lead a life of hope, so as to realise scenario (a.), on the grounds that this is the best of the available scenarios. On his reading, this case provides a pragmatic justification for theistic commitment: we are to order our lives to realise goods that will obtain only if theism is true.

Of course, if we can't be sure that theism is true, then we can't be sure that in leading a life of hope we will realise (a.) rather than (b.). But in this respect, it may be urged,

this practical choice is no different from the many others we make when acting under conditions of uncertainty. What matters in these cases is having some prospect of realising a significant good; for when that good is indeed significant, then we can have good reason to aim at it, even if we cannot be certain of success. And similarly, if scenario (a.) involves a sufficiently great good, then will we not have a good reason to aim at that good, by leading a life of hope, even if we are uncertain of success?[31]

Let's think further about this case by reflecting on the ranking of scenarios (a.) to (d.). It may be said: even if the first scenario (of a life of hope in a theistic universe) is objectively the best – best, as it were, from the perspective of the universe – might it,

---

[31] The practical reasonableness of such a choice could be understood in the terms provided by William James in his classic treatment of the practical rationality of religious belief, 'The Will to Believe'. In James's terms, the realisation of (a.) involves a 'momentous' good. The choice here is also 'forced', in the sense that only a life of hope will give the person the possibility of realising (a.). We are also assuming, of course, that the choice is 'living': if a person is psychologically incapable of leading, say, a life of hope, then the choice of such a life will not be open to them. And lastly, the case also presupposes that epistemic considerations are not decisive, and following James we may wish to cast this idea in terms of the thought that the truth of theism 'cannot by its nature be settled on intellectual grounds' (Section IV). See William James, 'The Will to Believe' in James, Essays in Pragmatism (New York: Hafner Press, 1948), pp. 88-109. Aquinas's account of the rationality of faith has, I would say, a similar structure, at least implicitly. See for instance his insistence that faith is voluntary, rather than being the product of evidence or signs. Hence he writes: 'the act of faith is belief, an act of mind fixed on one alternative by reason of the will's command.' (Gilby, ed., Summa Theologiae 2a2ae. 4. 1) For the point that genuine, or 'formed' faith, is not produced by signs, see Aquinas's discussion of the faith of the devils in Summa Theologiae 2a2ae 5. 5. ad. 3.

even so, not be the best scenario for me?[32] Might I not realise a better outcome for me by leading a life of gloom (or a life involving some other trait that is contrary to hope)? It is hard to see how the claim that my being gloomy is better for me than my being hopeful could be maintained in the abstract. But an objector may urge that there is something in the character of our particular universe, or in my character, or in my location in our universe, even if this is a theistic universe, which means that my leading a life in which my attitude is fundamentally one of gloom rather than of hope is better for me. Or perhaps the objector will say that I should exhibit neither hope nor gloom as a fundamental life attitude, since it is best for me simply to respond to some situations with gloom and to others with hope, without either attitude becoming a generalised stance in life of the kind that Cottingham describes.

As have seen, Cottingham claims that in theistic traditions, there is broad agreement that a life of hope, rather than gloom, is fitting for a person regardless of their personal circumstances, and even in the face of considerable personal affliction. This claim is relevant to our objection, for if this consensus view is right, then when I lead a life of hope, in a theistic universe, my thoughts and actions and desires, so far as they are relevant to my hope, will be aligned with what is most fundamentally of value, whatever may be true of the details of my circumstances. And if that is so, then when I lead a life of hope, within a theistic universe, a very significant good will accrue to me, and not just to the universe. And while it may be true that other goods would accrue to me were I to give up my hope, how might those goods outweigh the

---

[32] Compare Guy Kahane's discussion of the question of whether the truth of theism would be good for human beings in his essay 'Should We Want God To Exist?', Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 82: 3 2011, Section VII.

good of a life that is congruent, in these respects, with the incommensurable good of the divine life?[33]

Alternatively, it may be objected that even if the first scenario is the best of the four, whether objectively or for me, the other scenario in which hope features may be much the worst outcome of the four for me – and if that is so, then should I not prioritise avoiding this outcome, and therefore choose gloom rather than hope? If we are concerned with a ranking that reflects simply the 'perspective of the universe', then arguably one of the non-theistic scenarios should be ranked lowest, since God's existence is, after all, on standard accounts, an unrivalled good. And from the point of view of the universe, perhaps my leading a life of hope in a non-theistic universe is a worse state of affairs, other things being equal, than is my leading a life of gloom in such a universe – since in the first case, and not in the second, my life fails to be aligned with my context (if Cottingham is right about these matters).

But even if this is the correct objective ranking, there is reason to concentrate not upon the overall good that is exhibited in these scenarios, but upon the good that is sensitive to my choices, since that is the only good over which I have control, and therefore the only good that is at stake in my choosing. And what is this good that is sensitive to my choice? On the approach we have been taking, this is the good of a life that is properly aligned with my context; and the corresponding bad will be a life that is misaligned with my context. So if we ask 'which choice should I be most concerned

[33] Thinking of the relevant good in terms of alignment with context, rather than simply, say, pleasant feelings, helps to show that the ranking reflects hope's contribution as an ideal of character, rather than on account of its securing benefits of another kind. My thanks to a reviewer for this point.

not to make?', we should answer: the choice which risks bringing about the worst misalignment of my life with its context. In (a.) to (d.) there are two scenarios where my life is misaligned with my context: (b.) when I lead a life of hope in a non-theistic universe, and (c.) when I lead a life of gloom in a theistic universe. Which of these failures of alignment is the worse, and therefore more to be avoided? Arguably, it is (c.). Why? Because here my life fails to be aligned not simply with the finite good of a non-theistic universe, but with the boundless good of the divine life. And this second kind of misalignment looks like a more radical falling short, because it involves a failure to properly acknowledge not simply a finite good, but the divine good. If that is right, and if my priority is avoiding bad outcomes, rather than bringing about good outcomes, then it seems that I should choose a life of hope. Why? Because only so can I be sure of avoiding the bad of a life that fails to be aligned with its divine context.

So here in outline is a way of applying Cottingham's discussion to the question of whether theistic commitment is rationally motivated, in practical terms. This approach turns on the idea that the goods realised by the traits of character that Cottingham discusses are like the goods that are realised by the infused moral virtues, understood as Aquinas understands them; that is, in each case, whether through the practice of a Thomistic virtue such as infused temperance, or through lived commitment to an ideal of character such as hope and humility, understood in Cottingham's terms, it is possible to realise a significant hybrid good, if we inhabit a theistic universe. Granted this parallel, then we can adopt a Thomistic reading of the connection between commitment to hope as an ideal of life and commitment to theism: we have good reason to commit ourselves to a life of hope, and therefore good reason to think of

such a life as an ideal, because we have thereby the prospect of realising a particularly profound hybrid good, namely, the good of a life that is aligned with a divine context. In this way, we can avoid the objections to the epistemic reading of Cottingham's case that we considered earlier, while building on his core insight that hope will count as an ideal of life only if theism is true. In brief, what this Thomistic reading of the case allows us to do is to take that insight as the basis for a practical project, namely, the project of realising the relevant hybrid good.

Let us consider now how the notion of infused moral virtue may be relevant to Gaita's discussion. As we have seen, Gaita thinks that religious stories, and especially the idea of God's universal and unconditional parental love, have played an important part in producing our conception of a 'common humanity'. However, Gaita also thinks that to appreciate the revelatory power of these stories, it is enough to hold the requisite thoughts in mind: there is no need to take them to be true. The notion of infused moral virtue allows us to expand on this typology, by identifying a further possibility, one which involves neither the thought that theistic stories are evidently true, nor the thought that they are to be treated simply as instructive fictions. Let us consider this possibility a little further. I shall begin by arguing that the notion of infused moral virtue enables us to read the example of the nun with new insight.

As we have seen, Gaita writes that he doubts '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 parental love had in her prayers'. He glosses this idea by supposing that the nun has been formed in the discipline of addressing God as parent in her prayers, and has, accordingly, become habituated to thinking of other human beings as the

objects of divine love, so that she is able to see the patients in the light of that love. Here, then, is one way of grounding moral motivation in religious thought. The notion of infused moral virtue points to another way of making this connection.

If we follow Aquinas's account of the rationale for neighbour love, then we should say that such love realises an important hybrid good, because it is appropriate relative to our theological context. We could put this point simply by recalling that, as Aquinas puts it, 'if we loved a certain man very much, we would love his children though they were unfriendly towards us'.[34] From this vantage point, what motivates the nun is not simply her character-grounded appreciation of the patients on the ward as loved by God, but also her understanding that in loving them, her actions will be congruent with her theological context, and specifically with her friendship for God. Gaita's examples of the nun and of the prisoners obscure this connection, because in these cases there is not evidently a question about Gaita's relationship to the nun, or about the guards' relationship to those who visit the prisoners: for instance, Gaita's new appreciation of the patients is informed by the nun's regard for them, but not by any thought of the relation in which he stands to her. But the parent-child relationship, which is central to Gaita's case, does standardly have this additional feature.

When I see my brothers and sisters in the light of my parents' love, I am moved to love them not only because I now see them in the light of someone's love, but also because I see them in the light of the love of someone to whom I bear a special relation. My love for my siblings is especially fitting given that it is my parents who

---

[34] Summa Theologiae 2a2ae. 25. 8, Benziger Bros edition.

love them. Why? Because if I love my parents, then it is appropriate for me to love what they love, as an expression of my love for them. In the same way, to revert to Aquinas's example, my love for a friend's children is a natural overflow of my love for the friend, because appropriate relative to the love that I bear the friend.

So Aquinas's discussion of neighbour love suggests an extension of Gaita's treatment of the nun's love. Both accounts involve the idea that in recognising God's love for our fellow human beings, we will thereby be motivated to love them ourselves. But Gaita's account turns simply on our seeing others in the light of God's love, whereas Aquinas offers a thicker description of the object of love: the other human being is to be seen not simply as the object of love, but as the object of the love of someone to whom I am bound in a special sort of relationship, since I am, in the theological sense, their child or friend.

So a Thomistic reading of the nun's conduct suggests a further connection between religious thought and moral motivation, by allowing us to see her behaviour as motivated by the prospect of realising a significant hybrid good. Once again, a person can be so motivated even if they do not think it overall likely that there is a God who stands to us in the relationship of parent or of friend, providing that they consider the relevant good a weighty enough good. This account allows us, therefore, to distinguish a further possibility, in addition to the two that figure directly in Gaita's discussion: a person may take the stories of divine parental love as simply a morally instructive fiction, or they may suppose that such stories are likely to be true, or if they take this further approach, they may commit themselves in practical terms to the

truth of such stories, without taking them to be evidently true, by seeking to realise various hybrid goods that would be realised were the stories to be true.

This Thomistic reading of the nun's story also captures a further feature of Gaita's account. We have seen that Gaita is resistant to the idea that the authority of the nun's example depends on the support of any metaphysical hypothesis. As he says, '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'. The rationale for his position here is in part the thought that if the appropriateness of the nun's behaviour were to depend on the evident truth of a metaphysical claim (for instance, the claim that God loves all human beings), then her example could be no more persuasive than the case in support of that claim, which is to say that our commitment to the appropriateness of her conduct would have to be, at best, rather tentative, and to fluctuate in accordance with fluctuations in the evidence for the relevant metaphysical hypothesis.

The account we have been developing provides another way of preserving this element of Gaita's account. For if the nun is motivated by the prospect of realising a hybrid good of the kind we have been discussing, then her conduct can be seen to be appropriate independently of any commitment to the thought that it is likely that there is a God who loves all human beings. In this case, what grounds the thought that her behaviour is appropriate is not fundamentally an epistemic judgement – the judgement that it is probable that there is a God – but a value judgement – the judgement that if there is a God, then her behaviour will realise a hybrid good of great worth. We might add that the judgement that this good is indeed of great worth is

presumably most readily sustained not in the language of creeds, but in the vivid celebrations of divine-human friendship that are to be found in religious poetry and story and song. So in these various respects, a Thomistic reading of Gaita's example of the nun can extend his position, while adhering to some of the fundamental insights that provide the basis for that position.

Conclusion

As we have seen, John Cottingham and Raimond Gaita both foreground the practical importance of religious thoughts. Hence Cottingham focuses upon religious practices, such as grace before meals, rather than doctrinal claims considered in the abstract, and Gaita sets aside creedal language in favour of morally motivating, anthropomorphic stories of God's relationship to human beings. The case we have been exploring allows us to combine these approaches, by understanding the connection between religious thought and practice that each seeks to draw in terms of the idea of hybrid goods, that is, goods of the kind that Aquinas introduces when explaining the teleology of the infused moral virtues. Cottingham's account of hope as an ideal of life, and Gaita's account of the nun, and of the authority of her example, can both be read with new insight in the light of the idea of hybrid goods. And accordingly, these accounts can be folded into the view that we have been developing here, according to which religious thoughts motivate moral practices by extending the prospect of hybrid goods, which will be realised should those thoughts be true. In these ways, I have tried to draw out, and then to bring together, two important strands in the recent moral philosophical literature. And in the process, I hope to have shown the enduring interest of the medieval concept of infused moral virtue, and to have produced an

account of the relationship of religious and moral commitment that will speak to the concerns of diverse philosophical traditions.[35]

[35] I am grateful for comments on drafts of this paper that I received at the Centre for Ethics and Metaethics, University of Leeds, and the Philosophy Department, The Open University. I would also like to thank two referees from the Press for their most helpful remarks.