

## HUMAN FLOURISHING

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Hope, in a Christian sense, is love stretching itself into the future.

When I hope, I expect something from the future. But I don't hope for everything I expect. Some anticipated things—like a visit to the dentist—I face with dread, rather than welcoming them in hope. “I speak of ‘hope’,” wrote Josef Pieper in his *Hope and History*, “only when what I am expecting is, in my view, *good*.”<sup>1</sup> And yet, even all good things that come my way are not a matter of hope. I don't hope for a new day to dawn after a dark and restful night; I *know*, more or less, that the sun will rise. But I may hope for cool breezes to freshen up a hot summer day. In our everyday usage, “hope” is, roughly, the *expectation of good things that don't come to us as matter of course*.

Christian faith adds another layer to this everyday usage of “hope.” In *Theology of Hope* Jürgen Moltmann famously distinguished between optimism and hope. Both have to do with positive expectation, and yet the two are very different. Optimism has to do with good things in the future that are latent in the past and the present; the future associated with optimism—Moltmann calls it *futurum*—is an unfolding of what is already there. We survey the past and the present, extrapolate about what is likely to happen in the future, and, if the prospects are good, become optimistic. Hope, on the other hand, has to do with good things in the future that come to us from “outside,” from God; the

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Pieper, *Hope and History: Five Salzburg Lectures*, transl. David Kipp (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 20.

future associated with hope—Moltmann calls it *adventus*—is a gift of something new.<sup>2</sup> We hear the word of divine promise, and because God is love we trust in God’s faithfulness, and God brings about “a new thing”—aged Sarah, barren of womb, gives birth to a son (Genesis 21:1-2; Romans 4:18-21); the crucified Jesus Christ is raised from the dead (Acts 2:22-36); a mighty Babylon falls and a New Jerusalem comes down from heaven (Revelation 18:1-24; 21:1-5), more generally, the good that seemed impossible becomes not just possible but real.

The expectation of good things that come as a gift from God—that is hope. And that is love, too, projecting itself into our and our world’s future. For love always gives gifts and is itself a gift; and inversely every genuine gift is an expression of love. At the heart of the hoped for future, which comes from the God of love, is the flourishing of individuals, communities, and our whole globe. But how is the God of love, “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist” (Romans 4:17), related to human flourishing? And how should we understand human flourishing if it is a gift of the God of love?

### *Human Flourishing*

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<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, transl. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991). For a brief summary see also Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: On Christian Eschatology*, transl. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 25.

Consider with me a prevalent contemporary Western understanding of human flourishing, how it differs from some previous understandings, and what its consequences are.

*Satisfaction.* Many people in the West today have come to believe—to feel in their gut, might be a colloquial but more accurate way of putting it—that a flourishing human life is an experientially satisfying human life. By this they don’t mean only that the experience of satisfaction is a desirable aspect of human flourishing, so that, all other things being equal, people who experience satisfaction flourish in a more complete way than people who do not. Energetic and free of pain, for instance, we flourish more than enveloped in sadness and wracked with pain (even if it may be true that pain can be a servant of the good and exhilaration can be deceptive). Though some ancient Stoics believed that one can flourish equally well on the torture rack as in the comfort of one’s home, most people from all periods of human history have thought that experiencing satisfaction enhances flourishing.

In contrast, for many in the West, experiential satisfaction is what their lives are all about. It does not merely enhance flourishing: it defines it. Such people cannot imagine themselves as flourishing if they do not experience satisfaction, if they don’t feel “happy,” as the preferred way of expressing it goes. For them, flourishing *consists* in having an experientially satisfying life. No satisfaction, no flourishing. Sources of satisfaction may vary, ranging from appreciation of classical music to the use of drugs, from the delights of “haute cuisine” to the pleasures of sadomasochistic sex, from sports to religion. What matters is not the source of satisfaction but the fact of it. What justifies

an activity or a given life-style or activity is the satisfaction it generates—the pleasure. And when they experience satisfaction, people feel that they flourish. As Philip Rieff noted in *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* some decades ago (1966), ours is a culture of managed pursuit of pleasure, not a culture of sustained endeavor to lead the good life, as defined by foundational symbols and convictions.<sup>3</sup>

*Love of God and Universal Solidarity.* Contrast contemporary Western culture and its implicit default account of human flourishing with the two dominant models in the history of the Western tradition. Fifth-century church father, Augustine, one of the most influential figures in Western religion and culture, represents well the first of these two accounts. In his reflections on the happy life in his major work on *The Trinity*, he writes: “God is the only source to be found of any good things, but especially of those which make a man good and those which will make him happy; only from him do they come into a man and attach themselves to a man.”<sup>4</sup> Consequently, human beings flourish and are truly happy when they center their lives on God, the source of everything that is true, good, and beautiful. As to all created things, they too ought to be loved. But the only way to properly love them and fully and truly enjoy them is to love and enjoy them “in God.” Now, Augustine readily agrees with what most people think, namely that those are happy who have everything they want. But he adds immediately that this is true only if they want “nothing wrongly,”<sup>5</sup> which is to say, if they want everything in accordance with the character and will of their Creator whose very being is love. The supreme good

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<sup>3</sup> See Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 232-261.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, XIII, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, XIII, 8.

which makes human beings truly happy—in my terminology: the proper content of a flourishing life—consists in love of God and neighbor and enjoyment of both. In the *City of God*, Augustine defines it as a “completely harmonious fellowship in the enjoyment of God, and each other in God.”<sup>6</sup>

Around the eighteenth century, a different account of human flourishing emerged in the West. It was connected with what scholars sometimes describe as an “anthropocentric shift”—a gradual redirection of interest from the transcendent God to human beings and their mundane affairs and a birth of new humanism. This new humanism was different “from most ancient ethics of human nature,” writes Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*, in that its notion of human flourishing “makes no reference to something higher which humans should reverence or love or acknowledge.”<sup>7</sup> For Augustine and the tradition that followed him, this “something higher” was God. Modern humanism became exclusive by shedding the idea of human lives centered on God.

And yet, even as the new humanism rejected God and the command to love God, it retained the moral obligation to love neighbor. The central pillar of its vision of the good life was a universal beneficence transcending all boundaries of tribe or nation and extending to all human beings. True, this was an ideal which could not be immediately realized (and from which some groups, deemed inferior, were de facto exempt). But the goal toward which humanity was moving with a steady step was a state of human relations in which the flourishing of each was tied to the flourishing of all and the flourishing of all tied to the flourishing of each. Marx’s vision of a communist

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<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, XIX, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 245.

society, encapsulated in the phrase “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his need,”<sup>8</sup> was historically the most influential and most problematic version of this idea of human flourishing.

In the late twentieth century another shift occurred. Human flourishing came increasingly to be defined as experiential satisfaction (though, of course, other accounts of human flourishing remain robust as well, whether they derive from religious or secular interpretations of the world). Having lost earlier reference to “something higher which humans should reverence or love,” it now lost reference to universal solidarity, as well. What remained was concern for the self and the desire for the experience of satisfaction. It is not, of course, that individuals today simply seek pleasure on their own, isolated from society. It is also not that they don’t care for others. Others are very much involved. But they matter mainly in that they serve an individual’s experience of satisfaction. That applies to God as well as to human beings. Desire—the outer shell of love—has remained, but love itself, by being directed exclusively to the self, is lost.

*Hope.* One way to view the three phases in the conception of human flourishing—love of God and neighbor, universal beneficence, experiential satisfaction—is to see them as a history diminution of the object of love: from the vast expanse of the infinite God, love first tapered to the boundaries of the universal human community, and then radically contracted to the narrowness of a single self—one’s own self. A parallel contraction has also occurred with the scope of human hope.

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, in *Essential Writings of Karl Marx* (St. Petersburg, FL: Red and Black, 2010), 243.

In the book *The Real American Dream*, written at the turn of the millennium, Andrew Delbanco traced the diminution of American hope. I am interested in it here because America may be in this regard symptomatic: it would be possible to trace an analogous diminution of hope in most societies or their elites, which are highly integrated into globalization processes. A glance at the book's table of contents reveals the main point of his analysis. The chapter headings read: “God,” “Nation,” “Self.” The infinite God and the eternal life of enjoying God and one's neighbors (at least some of them!) was the hope of the Puritans who founded America. American nationalists of the nineteenth century, notably Abraham Lincoln, transformed this Christian imagery, in which God was at the center, into “the symbol of a redeemer nation.” In the process, they created a “new symbol of hope.”<sup>9</sup> The scope of hope was significantly reduced,<sup>10</sup> and yet there still remained something of immense importance to hope for—the prospering of the nation which itself was a “chosen people,” called upon to “bear the ark of the Liberties of the world,” as Melville put it.<sup>11</sup> In the aftermath of the 1960s and 1980s, as a result of the combined hippy and yuppie revolutions, “instant gratification” became “the hallmark of the good life.” It is only a minor exaggeration to say that hope

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<sup>9</sup> Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 77.

<sup>10</sup> The claim that the scope of hope was reduced when it was directed away from God and toward the nation can be contested. Delbanco himself maintains that the national ideal is lesser than God. In his review of Delbanco's book, Richard Rorty protests: “Why, one can imagine Whitman asking, should we Americans take God's word for it that he is more vast than the free, just, utopian nation of our dreams? Whitman famously called the United States of America “the greatest poem.” He took narratives that featured God to be lesser poems—useful in their day, because suitable for the needs of a younger humanity. But now we are more grown up” (Richard Rorty, “I Hear America Sighing,” *New York Times Book Review* [November 7, 1999], 16). The dispute about which dream is bigger—the dream of a nation or of God—must be decided in conjunction with the question of whether God in fact exists or not. For only under the assumption of God's non-existence can God be declared lesser than the nation, however conceived.

<sup>11</sup> Melville, *White-Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War* (1850), ch. 36.

was reduced “to the scale of self-pampering.”<sup>12</sup> Moving from the vastness of God down to the ideal of a redeemer nation, hope has narrowed, argues Delbanco, “to the vanishing point of the self alone.”<sup>13</sup>

Earlier on I noted that when the scope of love diminishes, love itself disappears; benevolence and beneficence mutate into the pursuit of self-interest. Something similar happens to hope. This is understandable if hope is love stretching itself into the future of the beloved object, as I have suggested at the beginning of this text. So when love shrinks to self-interest, and self-interest devolves into the experience of satisfaction, hope disappears as well. As Michael Oakeshott rightly insisted, hope depends on finding some “end to be pursued more extensive than a merely instant desire.”<sup>14</sup>

*Unsatisfying Satisfaction.* Love and hope are not the only casualties of placing the experience of satisfaction at the center of human striving. As many have pointed out, satisfaction itself is threatened by the pursuit of pleasure. I don’t mean simply that we spend a good deal of our lives dissatisfied. Clearly, we are dissatisfied until we experience satisfaction. Desire is aroused, and striving begins, goaded by a sense of discontentment and pulled by the expectation of fulfillment until satisfaction is reached. Dissatisfied and expectant striving is the overall state, fulfillment is its interruption; desire is eternal, satisfaction is fleetingly periodic.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Delbanco, 96, 103.

<sup>13</sup> Delbanco, 103.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Oakeshott, “Political Education,” in Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), 48.

<sup>15</sup> Offering a particularly bleak version of this point, Arthur Schopenhauer writes that in human existence, there is only “momentary gratification, fleeting pleasure conditioned by wants, much and long suffering, constant struggle, *bellum omnium*, everything a hunter and everything hunted, pressure, want,



More importantly, almost paradoxically, we remain dissatisfied in the midst of experiencing satisfaction. We compare our “pleasures” to those of others, and begin to envy them. A fine new Honda of our modest dreams is a source of *dissatisfaction* when we see a neighbor’s new Mercedes. But even when we win the game of comparisons—when we park in front of our garage the best model of the most expensive car—our victory is hollow, melancholy. As Gratiano puts it in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, “All things that are, are with more spirit chased than enjoyed.”<sup>16</sup> First, marked as we are by what philosophers call self-transcendence, in our imagination we are always already beyond any state we have reached. Whatever we have, we want more and different, and when we have climbed to the top, a sense of disappointment clouds the triumph. Our striving can therefore find proper rest only when we find joy in something infinite. For Christians, this something is God.

Second, we feel melancholy because our pleasure is truly human and therefore truly pleasurable only if it has meaning beyond itself. So it is with sex, for instance. No matter how enticing and thrilling it may be, it leaves an aftertaste of dissatisfaction—maybe guilt, but certainly emptiness—if it does not somehow refer beyond itself, if it is not a sacrament of love between human beings. It is similar with many other pleasures.<sup>17</sup>

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need and anxiety, shrieking and howling, and this goes on in *secula seculorum* or until once again the crust of the planet breaks” (*The World as Will and Representation*, transl. [?] [New York: [?], 1969], II, 354).

<sup>16</sup> Scene VI

<sup>17</sup> This observation fits with one of the central conclusions of the Grant Study—a study of well-adjusted Harvard sophomores begun in 1937, which, after more than 70 years of following its subjects, remains one of “the longest running, and probably most exhaustive, longitudinal studies of mental and physical well-being in history.” In an interview in 2008, its long time director, George Valliant, was asked,

When we place pleasure at the center of the good life, when we de-couple it from the love of God, the ultimate source of meaning, and when we sever it from love of neighbor and hope for a common future, we are left, in the words of Andrew Delbanco, “with no way of organizing desire into a structure of meaning.”<sup>18</sup> And for meaning-making animals as we humans ineradicably are, surd desire to satisfy self-contained pleasures will always remain deeply unsatisfying.

### ***Accounts of Reality, Conceptions of Flourishing***

For the sake of the fulfillment of individuals, the thriving of communities, and of our common global future, we need a better account of human flourishing than experiential satisfaction. The most robust alternative visions of human flourishing are embodied in the great faith traditions. It is to them—and the debates between them as to what human flourishing truly consists in—that we need to turn for resources to think anew about human flourishing. In the following, I will suggest contours of human flourishing as contained in the Christian faith (or rather, one strand of that faith).

### ***Centrality of Human Flourishing***

Concern with human flourishing is at the heart of the great faiths, including Christianity. True, you cannot always tell that from the way faiths are practiced. When surveying their history, it seems on occasion as if their goal were simply to dispatch people out of this world and into the next—out of the veil of tears into heavenly bliss

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“What have you learned from Grand Study men?” His response was that “the only thing that really matters in life are your relationships with other people” (Joshua Wolf Shenk, “What Makes Us Happy?” *The Atlantic* [June 2009], 36). Applied to the question of satisfaction, this suggests that relationships give meaning to pleasure; pleasure hollows itself out without them.

<sup>18</sup> Delbanco, 103.

(Christianity), out of the world of craving into nirvana (Buddhism), to give just two examples. And yet, for great religious teachers, even for the representatives of highly ascetical and seemingly otherworldly forms of faith, human flourishing has always remained central.

Take Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, one of the greatest Sufi Muslim thinkers, as an example. “Know, O beloved, that man was not created in jest or at random, but marvelously made and for some great end,” he begins one of his books. What is that great end for a being whose spirit is “lofty and divine,” even if its body is “mean and earthly”? Here is how Ghazali describes it:

When in the crucible of abstinence he [man] is purged from carnal passions he attains to the highest, and in place of being a slave to lust and anger becomes endowed with angelic qualities. Attaining that state, he finds his heaven in the contemplation of Eternal Beauty, and no longer in fleshly delights.

These lines come from the introduction to Ghazali’s book which is all about “turning away from the world to God.” As a consequence you may not think that it is about human flourishing. And yet its title is *The Alchemy of Happiness*.<sup>19</sup> Precisely by talking about turning away from the world to God and purging oneself from carnal passions, the book is about flourishing, in this world and the next.

Or take one of the greatest Jewish religious thinkers, Moses Maimonides. At the beginning of *The Guide of the Perplexed* he writes that the image of God in human

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<sup>19</sup> Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, transl. Claud Field ([?]: Dodo Press, [?]), xii.

beings—that which distinguishes them from animals—is “the intellect which God made overflow into man.”<sup>20</sup> To underscore this point, Maimonides ends his work by stating that intellect is “the bond between us and Him.”<sup>21</sup> True human perfection consists

in the acquisition of the rational virtues—I refer to the conception of intelligibles, which teach true opinions concerning divine things. This is in true reality the ultimate end; this is what gives the individual true perfection, a perfection beonging to him alone; and it gives him permanent perdurance; through it man is man.<sup>22</sup>

The nature of ultimate reality, the character of human beings, the meaning of their lives, and the most worthy of their pursuits all cohere. The whole religious system is connected with human flourishing.

Contemporary fellow Muslims or Jews might quarrel with al Ghazali’s or Maimonides’ account of human flourishing, most likely deeming them too ascetical or intellectual. Indeed many internal debates within a religious tradition concern the question just what is it that constitutes properly understood human flourishing. Christians might do so as well (though many Christian sages and saints have

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<sup>20</sup> Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, transl. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), I, 2 (p. 24).

<sup>21</sup> Maimonides, *The Guide*, III, 51 (p. 621).

<sup>22</sup> Maimonides, *The Guide*, III, 54 (p. 635). Though prevalent, this “intellectualist” reading of Maimonides’ account of human perfection has not remained unchallenged. For an alternative reading which emphasizes not just human apprehension of God but human love of God as well as human “return” to the world as a being transformed by the knowledge of God “to participate in the governance of one’s society according to the principles of loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment,” see Menachem Kellner, “Is Maimonides’ Ideal Person Austerely Rationalist?” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 76 (1/2002), 125-143 (quote on p. 134).

understood flourishing in strikingly similar ways<sup>23</sup>). They might also disagree with them about the best means to achieve it (noting especially the absence of Jesus Christ in their accounts). My point in invoking al Ghazali and Maimonides is not to offer a Christian assessment of their thought, though a respectful critical conversation among great faiths about human flourishing is important. It is rather to illustrate that the concern for human flourishing is central to great religious traditions, one of their defining characteristics.

Not so long ago human flourishing was also central to the institutions of higher learning in the West. They were largely about exploration of what it means to live well, to lead a meaningful life. They were less about how to be successful at this or that activity or vocation, but about how to be successful *at being human*. In my terms, they were about human flourishing. This is no longer so. In *Education's End* Anthony Kronman tells a compelling story of how the ideal of a “research university” and fascination with “postmodernism” in culture and theory colluded in making colleges and universities give up on exploring the meaning of life.<sup>24</sup> Today, he writes, “if one wants organized assistance in answering the question of life’s meaning, and not just the love of family and friends, it is to the churches that one must turn.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Indeed, it has been a widespread Christian *critique* of Islam in the Middle Ages and Renaissance that it is “founded on pleasure” as the Pope Pius II expresses in his letter to the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II (Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, *Epistola Ad Mahomatem II (Epistle To Mohammed II)*, ed. and transl. Alvert R. Baca (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 91.

<sup>24</sup> Anthony T. Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Kronman, p. 197.

As a self-confessed secularist, Kronman is critical of the way religious traditions go about giving answer to the meaning of life. He believes—wrongly, I think—that faiths are inherently inhospitable to responsible pluralism and always demand a sacrifice of intellect. As a person of faith, I think that a secular quest for the meaning of life is very likely to fail, and that the viable candidates for the meaning of life are all religiously based. But whatever position one takes in the debate between secular humanism and religious traditions, both share a concern for human flourishing and stand in contrast with a pervasive cultural preoccupation with experiential satisfaction in Western societies today.

### ***Fit***

Ghazali's *The Alchemy of Happiness* and Maimonides' *The Guide of the Perplexed* do not only illustrate the centrality of human flourishing to religious traditions. They also highlight one significant way in which religious accounts of human flourishing differ from the contemporary propensity to see flourishing as experiential satisfaction. The difference concerns a fit between how the world, including human beings, is constituted and what it means for human beings to flourish. The central chapters of Ghazali's book, for instance, deal with the knowledge of the self, of God, of this world, and of the next world.<sup>26</sup> To know what it means to reach happiness, you need to know who you are and what your place is in the larger household of reality—created and uncreated.

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<sup>26</sup> See Ghazali, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, 1-26.

In this regard, Ghazali is not unusual. As illustrated by Maimonides, most religions and most significant philosophies are based on the idea that there is a fit—maybe a loose fit, but some kind of fit nonetheless—between an overarching account of reality and a proper conception of human flourishing. And most people in most places throughout human history have agreed that there should be such a fit. They have done so mainly because their lives were guided by religious traditions. Let me flesh out this notion of a fit by stepping away for a moment from religious figures such as Augustine and Ghazali and looking briefly at two philosophers, one ancient and one modern: Seneca and Nietzsche.

Seneca and the ancient Stoics (who have benefitted from something of a comeback in recent years<sup>27</sup>) coordinated their convictions about the world, about human beings, about what it means to live well, and about the nature of happiness.<sup>28</sup> They believed that god is Cosmic Reason, spread throughout creation and directing its development completely. Human beings are primarily rational creatures; they live well when they align themselves with Cosmic Reason. They are happy when, in alignment with Cosmic Reason, they achieve tranquil self-sufficiency and are not subject to emotions such as fear, envy, or anger, no matter what the outward circumstances might be. Thus, Stoic accounts of the world and of human flourishing cohere.

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<sup>27</sup> See

<sup>28</sup> For the purposes of this essay, I am following the discussion of Seneca and Stoics in Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Right and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 146-179).

My second example, Friedrich Nietzsche, was a modern thinker radically opposed not just to Christianity but also to the ancient Stoics.<sup>29</sup> Even he, an anti-realist thinker suspicious of all systems, seems not to have been able to abandon the idea of a fit between an intellectually responsible understanding of the world and what it means for human beings to flourish within that world. The whole Western tradition of morality should be rejected, he believed, not just because it is to blame if “man, as a species, never reach[es] his highest potential power and splendor.”<sup>30</sup> The Western tradition of morality is inappropriate primarily because it does not fit who human beings actually are. Contrary to the assumptions of Western moral traditions, human beings are (1) not free in their actions but governed by necessity, (2) not transparent to themselves and others in their motivations, but opaque, (3) not similar to each other and therefore subject to the same moral code, but each different. Conversely, Nietzsche’s own advocacy of the “will to power” of “higher humans” fits precisely these features of human beings and makes possible the maximization of the excellence of “higher humans.”<sup>31</sup> His “will to power” is simply the tendency of all beings—humans included—not just to survive, but to enlarge and expand—to flourish, so to speak, even at the expense of others. In a way completely different from the Stoics, Nietzsche’s account of human flourishing also fits his account of reality as a whole.

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<sup>29</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, transl. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Preface 6.

<sup>31</sup> This last point stands even if it is true that Nietzsche cannot give rational reasons for preferring his noble morality to Western slave morality because he did not believe that there are objective facts about what is morally right and what morally wrong. See Brian Leiter, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche-moral-political/>.



***Absence of Fit***

In contrast, those among our contemporaries who think that flourishing consists in experiential satisfaction tend not to ask about how this notion of flourishing fits with the character of the world and of human beings. The reason is not simply that, for the most part, they are ordinary people, rather than philosophers (like Seneca or Nietzsche) or great religious thinkers (like Augustine, Ghazali, or Maimonides). After all, over the centuries and up to the present, many ordinary people have cared about aligning their lives with the character of the world and of ultimate reality. No, the primary reasons have to do with the nature of the contemporary account of flourishing and the general cultural milieu prevalent in today’s Western world.

First, as I have noted already, satisfaction plays the key role in many contemporary accounts of human flourishing. Satisfaction is a form of experience, and experiences are generally deemed to be matters of individual preference. Everyone is the best judge of their own experience of satisfaction. To examine whether a particular experience fits into a larger account of the world is already to risk relativizing its value as an experience. If those who understand human flourishing as experiential satisfaction happen to be religious, their faith will shed its power to orient people, and will be reduced to a servant of experiential satisfaction—which is, as I noted in Chapter 1, a major malfunction of faith. From being revered as the “Creator and the Master of the Universe,” who by that very identity defines who human beings are and how they

should live, God is then transformed into something like a combination of “Divine Butler” and “Cosmic Therapist.”<sup>32</sup>

This sort of transformation of faith is in line with the pervasively anti-metaphysical tenor of contemporary Western culture. “In post-Nietzschean spirit,” writes Terry Eagleton, “the West appears to be busily undermining its own erstwhile metaphysical foundations with an unholy mélange of practical materialism, political pragmatism, moral and cultural relativism, and philosophical skepticism.”<sup>33</sup> In his book, *The Meaning of Life*, he notes that many contemporary intellectuals, unsurprisingly, tend to dismiss serious reflection on “human life as a whole as disreputably ‘humanist’—or indeed as the kind of ‘totalizing’ theory which led straight to the death camps of the totalitarian state.” In their view, there is “no such thing as humanity or human life to be contemplated”;<sup>34</sup> there are only various culturally conditioned and individually inflected changing life projects. If each person is an artist of her own life, aiming to achieve experiential satisfaction unconstrained by moral norms reflective of a common human nature, then it seems superfluous to ask how the stream of ever new artistic self-creations aimed at experiential satisfaction fit within the larger account of reality.

My point is not that it would be impossible to offer a plausible interpretation of reality—“plausible,” I write, not “true”!—into which an account of human flourishing as

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<sup>32</sup> On God as Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist among American teenagers, see Christopher Smith, *Soul Searching*, p. 165.

<sup>33</sup> Terry Eagleton, “Culture & Barbarism: Metaphysics in a Time of Terrorism,” *Commonweal*, 136 (6/2009), 9.

<sup>34</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 35. For a parallel critique of the impact of post-modernism on the engagement with the question of the meaning of life in educational institutions of higher learning, see Kronman, *Education’s End*, 180-194.

experiential satisfaction could be nestled comfortably. My point is that many today would not care whether they live with or against the grain of reality. They want what they want, and that they want it is a sufficient justification for wanting it. Arguments about how their desires fit with the more encompassing account of reality—how they relate to “human nature,” for instance—are simply besides the point.

### ***Creator and Creatures***

It is a mistake—a major mistake—not to worry about how well our notion of flourishing fits the nature of reality. If we live against the grain of reality, we cannot experience lasting satisfaction, let alone be able to live fulfilled lives. That’s what the Christian tradition, along with other great religious and philosophical traditions, has always insisted. The great Christian saints, theologians, and lay leaders of the past believed that accounts of human flourishing had to cohere with ideas about God as the source and goal of all reality. But how should they be made to cohere?

At the very outset, we can eliminate one possible option. We cannot start with a preferred account of human flourishing and then construct an image of God to go with it, designing the fit between God and human flourishing the way we might look for a jacket to match our slacks. We would then be consciously enacting Nietzsche’s devastating critique of the emergence of Christian morality and Christian faith as a whole. According to Nietzsche, Christians had designed false beliefs about God in order to legitimize their preferred values. If we were to start with an idea of human flourishing and then “build” God to match our values, then the only difference between Nietzsche’s version and ours would be that Nietzsche’s dismissal of those values themselves as being perverse, as

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opposed to our upholding of them as healthy. More importantly, by constructing an image of God so as to fit already given notions of human flourishing, we would be enacting one of the most troubling malfunctions of faith—divesting faith of its own integrity and making it simply an instrument of our own interests and purposes.

Let’s return once more to Augustine. We may sum up his convictions about God, the world, human beings, and human flourishing in four brief propositions, tailored to highlight the relation of his position to that of Stoics, Nietzsche, and many of our contemporaries. First, he believed that God is not an impersonal Reason dispersed throughout the world, but a “person” who loves and can be loved in return. Second, to be human is to love; we can chose *what* to love but not *whether* to love. Third, we live well when we love both God and neighbor, aligning ourselves with the God who loves. Fourth, we will flourish and be truly happy when we discover joy in loving the infinite God and our neighbors in God.

For Augustine, convictions about God, human beings, and human flourishing all cohered. That’s the positive side of the fit: it specifies what is in, so to speak, when it comes to human flourishing. But the fit also specifies what is out. If we share Augustine’s convictions about God and human beings, we have to reject some interpretations of reality and some accounts of human flourishing. Consider once again, now from an Augustinian perspective, Stoic, Nietzschean, and contemporary Western accounts of flourishing.

If we believe that God is love and that we are created for love, the Stoic ideal of tranquil self-sufficiency will not do. Instead of caring for our neighbor’s well-being to the

extent that we care about leading our lives well, as Stoics did, we will care for our neighbors’ well-being—including their tranquility—for their own sake, not just our own. Our concern will then be not just to lead life well ourselves. Instead, we will strive for life to go well for our neighbors and for them to lead their lives well, and acknowledge that their flourishing is tied deeply to our flourishing.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, if we believe that God is love and that we are created for love, we will be disinclined to believe that the Nietzschean noble morality designed to further the excellence of the “higher humans” is a proper road to human flourishing. Compassion and help for those whose lives do not go well—for the vulnerable, the weak—will then be an essential component of leading *our* lives well.

Finally, if we believe that God is love and that we are created for love, we will reject the notion that flourishing consists in being experientially satisfied. Instead, we will believe that we will be experientially satisfied when we truly flourish. When is it that we truly flourish? When is it that we lead our lives well, and our lives are going well? We lead our lives well when we love God with our whole being and when we love neighbors as we (properly) love ourselves. Life goes well for us when our basic needs are met and when we experience that we are loved by God and by neighbors—when we are loved as who we are, with our own specific character and history and notwithstanding our fragility and failures. Echoing Augustine’s comment on the contrast between Epicurean and Christian visions of happiness, instead of our slogan being, “Let us eat and drink”

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<sup>35</sup> I owe the idea that human flourishing consists formally in a combination of life being lived well and life going well to Nicholas Wolterstorff (*Justice: Right and Wrongs* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008], 221).

(or a more sophisticated version of the same that privileges “higher pleasures”), it should be “Let us give and pray.”<sup>36</sup>

### ***Loving God, Loving Neighbor***

What I have written about the relation between God and human flourishing is but a theological echo of two central verses from the Christian Scriptures: “God is love” (1 John 4:8) and “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). In conclusion, let me apply this notion of human flourishing, together with its undergirding convictions about God, to the proper functions of faith in human life.

As I have noted in Chapter 1, every prophetic religion, including the Christian faith, has the following two fundamental movements: the ascent to God to receive the prophetic message, and the return to the world to bring the received message to bear on mundane realities. Both movements are essential. Without ascent, there is nothing to impart; without return, there is no one to impart to.

Most malfunctions of faith are rooted in a failure to love the God of love or a failure to love the neighbor. Ascent malfunctions happen when we don’t love God as we should. We either love our interests, purposes, and projects, and then employ language about God to realize them (we may call this “functional reduction”); or we love the wrong God (we may call this “idolatrous substitution”). Return malfunctions happen when we love neither our neighbor nor ourselves properly; when faith either energizes and heals

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<sup>36</sup> Augustine, *Sermons*, 35.

us but does not shape our lives to our own and our neighbor’s benefit, or when we impose our faith on our neighbors irrespective of their wishes.

The challenge facing Christians is ultimately very simple: Love God and neighbor rightly, so that we may both avoid malfunctions of faith and relate God positively to human flourishing. And yet, the challenge is also complex and difficult. Let me highlight three aspects:

First, we need to *explicate* God’s relation to human flourishing with regard to many concrete issues we are facing today—from poverty to environmental degradation, from bioethical issues to international relations, from sex to governing. Without showing how Christian notions of God and human flourishing apply to concrete issues, these notions will remain vague and inert, with little impact on the way we actually live.

Second, we need to *make plausible* the claim that the love of God and of neighbor is the key to human flourishing. For centuries, non-believers have not just called into question God’s existence, but railed against God’s nature, against the way God relates to the world, and consequently against theistic accounts of how humans ought to live in relation to God. Sometimes it feels as if they would not have minded God existing if they could have just believed that God is good for us. And this just underscores how difficult it is to make plausible to non-believers the connection between God and human flourishing. For the notion of what is “good for us”—and not just the existence and character of God—is highly contested.

Finally, maybe the most difficult challenge for Christians is to actually *believe* that God is fundamental to human flourishing. And it is not sufficient for us to believe it as

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we might believe that there may be water on some distant planet. We must believe it as a rock-bottom conviction that shapes the way we think, preach, write, and live. Charles Taylor tells the story of hearing Mother Theresa speak about her motivation for working with the abandoned and the dying of Calcutta. She explained that she did the hard work of tending them because they were created in the image of God. Being a Catholic philosopher, Taylor thought to himself, “I could have said that, too!” And then, being an introspective person and a fine philosopher, he asked himself, “But could I have *meant* it?”

*That*, I think, is today’s most fundamental challenge for theologians, priests and ministers, and Christian lay people: to *really mean* that the presence and activity of the God of love, who can make us love our neighbors as ourselves, is our hope and the hope of the world—that that God is the secret of our flourishing as persons, cultures, and interdependent inhabitants of a single globe.