Hope and the Virtues[1]

JOHN COTTINGHAM

1. Introduction: hope and the rise of secularism

Let me start with a scenario familiar from the disaster movies *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon*,[2] but one that is by no means consignable to the realm of Hollywood screen fiction, since it could well happen, and given enough time is even likely to happen. An enormous asteroid is detected hurtling towards us at colossal speed, and astronomers predict that it will unavoidably collide with the Earth within a year, and that the speed and size of the impact will be enough to extinguish all life on the planet. The combined nuclear and other technological resources of humanity are wholly insufficient to divert it. Would it make sense, in such circumstances, for someone who is fully apprised of all the relevant facts to say: "I hope it doesn't collide with the Earth." Not if the *Oxford English Dictionary* is to be believed, for it defines hope as "expectation of something desired; desire combined with expectation"; yet it seems that no one, given the evidence, can have any expectation that the impact will not occur. But perhaps the OED is just wrong to link hope with expectation in this way. Could not someone fervently hope that the Earth will escape the collision, "hope against hope", as the famous Pauline phrase from the letter to the Romans (4:18) has it, even while at the same time expecting and vividly anticipating the impact?

Nevertheless, in a certain way the writers of the OED may have a point. Although in the scenario described someone could indeed say, without misusing language, "I sure hope the impact doesn't happen", nevertheless, given the rock solid nature of the data (no pun intended) and the inevitability of the impact, such an expression of hope seems idle, rather like Wittgenstein's cog wheel that's not connected to anything.[3] It seems to come down to not much more than: "It would be really good if it didn't happen; I really, *really* wish it wouldn't happen (but unfortunately it's going to)." One can perhaps express this as a hope, but the hope is utterly futile. Parodying Kant, one might say that hope without any real expectation is empty.[4]

Does religious belief alter this in any way, for example by making a difference to what can reasonably be expected in such cases? Some defenders of religion will certainly be inclined to give an affirmative answer. They may believe, for example, that God, notwithstanding the laws of physics, could miraculously intervene and alter the path of the asteroid. Thus Alvin Plantinga writes:

> There is nothing [in classical physics] to prevent God from changing the velocity or direction of a particle, or from creating, *ex nihilo*, a full-grown horse. Energy is

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[1] This is a draft of a paper given at Thirty-Fifth Annual Philosophy of Religion Conference, Claremont Graduate University, California, February 2014; the definitive version of the paper was published in Ingolf Dalferth and Marlene Block (eds), *Hope* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), pp. 13-31.

[2] Both released in 1998. After this paper was written, I came across an interesting (though very different) philosophical application of this kind of "doomsday scenario", in SAMUEL SCHEFFLER, *Death and the Afterlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[3] Cf. LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations* [*Philosophische Untersuchungen,* 1953] (Oxford Blackwell, 1958), I, §§132, 270.

[4] Cf. IMMANUEL KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason* [*Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, 1781, 1787], transl. N. Kemp Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1929), B57: "thoughts without intuitions are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind".

> conserved in a closed system; but it is not part of Newtonian mechanics of classical science generally to declare that the material universe is indeed a closed system. (How could such a claim possibly be verified experimentally?) … In short, there is in classical science no objection to special divine action.[5]

And in any case, Plantinga goes on to argue, classical physics has now been replaced with quantum mechanics, where

> the laws are probabilistic rather than deterministic. Given a quantum mechanical system, for example a system of particles, these laws do not say which configuration will in fact result from the initial conditions, but instead they assign probabilities to the possible outcomes. Miracles (walking on water, rising from the dead, etc.) are clearly not incompatible with these laws. (They are no doubt very improbable; but we already knew that.)[6]

I don't want to go into the details of Plantinga's arguments here, but simply to cite him as a representative of a certain kind of "hardline" traditional theism, according to which it would be perfectly reasonable to hope for (and devoutly expect) a miraculous divine intervention in this type of "deep impact" scenario. And such hope for deliverance in the face of such dire impending peril would, on the kind of traditional religious picture now being considered, be not just reasonable but virtuous: it would manifest the kind of behaviour and the kind of disposition that the devout believer *ought* to manifest. It would be a kind of offshoot of religious faith, or a close concomitant of it, as indeed is implied by St Paul's linking of Abraham's hoping against hope with his *faith* in the Romans passage, and his coupling of faith and hope in the famous trio of theological virtues set out in his first letter to the Corinthians.[7]

But can hope in the type of situation we are considering really be virtuous? The traditional theist, as we have just suggested, can make a case for this: hope for deliverance in this situation will be the right response for the devout believer, one which satisfies the OED definition of hope, being a fervent desire for a happy outcome, coupled with a faith-based expectation of a miraculous intervention. Yet there is a problem— perhaps not a philosophical one, but a cultural one. The psychological and ethical outlook of the traditional theist here may perhaps be a coherent one, but it seems to achieve coherence at the cost of retreating into a hermetically sealed worldview that to everyone outside will seem wholly outlandish. To the majority of thinkers subscribing to the secularist outlook that has become the prevailing orthodoxy in in Western Europe and is rapidly gaining ground even in hitherto more religious North America, the idea of miraculous divine intervention just lacks any real purchase; what is more, a similar scepticism seems to be widespread even among modern "progressive" theologians, many of whom plainly believe either that the age of miracles is past, or that it never really existed in the way implied by the ancient biblical stories.[8] Granted, a theistic philosopher like Plantinga may

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[5] ALVIN PLANTINGA, "Divine Action in the World"; from a Synopsis of a *Ratio* conference paper, published in J. Cottingham (ed.), *The Meaning of Theism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 111-120, at 114-5.

[6] PLANTINGA, "Divine Action", 117.

[7] 1 Corinthians 13.

[8] "The traditional conception of miracle is irreconcilable with our modern understanding of both science and history." JOHN MACQUARRIE, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1966), 226-7. "Whatever the Hebrews believed, we believe that biblical people lived in the same causal continuum of space and time in which we live, and so one in which no divine wonders transpired

triumphantly show that miraculous divine intervention is theoretically or logically possible, or not strictly incompatible with what science can show, but none of this is likely to have the slightest effect on the outlook of the majority of educated citizens of the developed world. For them, once the trajectory of the asteroid, and the impossibility of our diverting its path, has been established, then we know with complete certainty that it is going to impact; and for someone to say in the face of this "I hope it won't" will be a mere *flatus vocis*, an empty piece of verbiage. For how can entertaining such a hope be possible, let alone virtuous, when there is no prospect of its being justified? Somewhat as Anthony Kenny has argued in the case of faith, namely that it is not a virtue but a vice if it is held onto in the absence of proper evidence,[9] so one might say that hope in such a case would simply be the wrong response: there are times when the virtuous course is simply to face reality. As Aristotle said, when death is certain it is the mark of a courageous man to give up hope of preserving his life and abandon the belief he will be saved.[10] On this view, when the impending reality is terrible and unavoidable, there may be a place for many authentic virtues— courage, patience, endurance, steadfastness— but no place for hope.

Such a position need not deny that hope may be a good thing when there is still a slim chance of survival. In the case of people cast adrift in an open boat, there appears to be some evidence that those who keep up their hopes of being rescued are more likely to survive the rigours of cold and hunger than those who despair. And similarly for those undergoing serious and risky operations. So here there is a case for saying that a hopeful disposition in such conditions is good, and therefore virtuous in so far as it makes a contribution to human flourishing. But a slim chance is not the same as no chance. And in our imagined asteroid scenario, where the chances of any terrestrial life surviving the impact are nil, it seems hard to find any scope for the legitimate exercise of hope.

It is clearly not for me to lay down what a proper religious response would be in such circumstances. But let me just briefly add that I don't think there is anything in the theistic and more specifically Christian worldview that says one should never resign oneself to the inevitable, or that one must always continue hoping for deliverance in such a scenario. What is more, construing prayer as a mechanism that avert can disaster when other scientific measures have failed might well be not so much an example of true faith as an instance of what Mark Johnston has called "servile idolatry and spiritual materialism."[11] Spiritual materialism involves retaining our ordinary selfish desires (for security, comfort, and so on) and trying to get them satisfied by manipulating supposed supernatural forces; idolatry is similar, placating the gods to get what we want. Authentic spirituality by contrast, must address the "large-scale structural defects in human life"— arbitrary suffering, aging, the vulnerability of ourselves and our loved ones to time and chance and, ultimately, death. The religious or redeemed life, Johnston argues, is one where we are *reconciled* to these large-scale defects.[12] Although there are aspects of Johnston's arguments that may be questionable, I think he is on to something important about how authentic spirituality differs from superstitious spiritual materialism. Authentic spirituality is concerned with moral transformation and redemption, not with supernatural short cuts that you can call on to get what you want. If this is right, the implication for cases like the deep impact scenario is that there may be limits to the scope of authentic religious hope, at least as far as averting the collision is concerned.

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and no divine voices were heard." Langdon Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology and the Travail of Biblical Language", *The Journal of Religion* (1961), 185. Sources cited in PLANTINGA, "Divine Action", 113.

[9] ANTHONY KENNY, *What I Believe* (London: Continuum, 2006), 59-60.

[10] ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics* [*c.* 325 BC], Bk III, Ch. 6, 1115a35.

[11] MARK JOHNSTON, *Saving God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). 51.

[12] JOHNSTON, *Saving God,* 14-17.

Before we move on, a further point to note about this doomsday scenario, and the possible responses to it, is that they illustrate a kind of standoff or impasse that is I think fairly typical of the polarization over religion in our contemporary philosophical culture. In the secular philosophical community, where religion has lost its hold, many elements of the traditional religious mindset (such as belief in miracles) appear perverse or irrational; while on the religious side, theistic philosophers and theologians defend their position in terms which may be intellectually sophisticated, but which rely on metaphysical elements (such as anomalous divine intervention) which are paradigmatic of the kind of notion that the secularist cannot accept. And the result is that both sides go their separate ways, with no real communication having taken place. This pattern is one that seems to me typical of many current debates about religion. Another paradigmatic example concerns responses to the problem of evil, where the secularist takes the large quantity of undeserved suffering in the world to be a decisive reason for rejecting theism, while certain theists defend their position by explicitly appealing to an afterlife where the suffering will be made good. But again, though this latter kind of solution might appeal to traditionalist fellow-believers, it will, to the secularist, totally lack purchase or persuasive power, because it invokes precisely the kind of metaphysical element (survival of death) that they cannot possibly accept. So we are left with a standoff, or a dialogue of the deaf.

Now such standoffs seem to me regrettable, not least in the present case, where we are thinking about hope. For the concept of hope, as it figures in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, has an ethical and psychological richness that seems to me eminently worthy of attention by moral philosophers, irrespective of their religious allegiances or lack thereof, but which is liable to be ignored if the focus of discussion is immediately shifted to a metaphysical confrontation about the coherence of notions such as divine intervention. What I propose, then, in the rest of this paper, is to approach the virtue of hope, as it appears in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, from what may be called a *psycho-ethical*, as opposed to a metaphysical, perspective— that is, by trying to bring out how it is located in an understanding of the human condition that even the most adamant secularist ought to find illuminating. To lead into this, it will be useful to take a brief look at the concept of hope as it figures in the Classical Greek culture of the pre-Christian period, before moving on to the kind of account found in the Jewish and Christian scriptures.

2. Classical versus biblical treatments of hope

Hope does not appear in the Aristotelian list of the virtues, the influence of which on subsequent moral philosophy was of course enormous. Aristotle does mention hope, but his remarks about it are somewhat sketchy, and mostly occur in the context of a discussion of virtues like courage; and (as noted above) Aristotle thinks that exercising courage properly sometimes requires hope to be given up. It is true that hope is related to confidence, generally thought to be a good thing, but in pointing this out Aristotle distinguishes confidence from courage proper, which involves a due fear of, or appreciation of, danger.[13] Hope, Aristotle seems to be saying, may be useful on occasions, but it is not always a virtue; and indeed he adds that a hopeful disposition is something that varies through life, being more characteristic of youth than age. "Young people are hopeful: nature warms their blood as though with excess of wine; and besides that they have as yet met with few disappointments."[14] Hope here appears as symptom of youthful

[13] ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk III, Ch. 7. For a careful discussion of the relationship between confidence, courage and hopefulness in Aristotle, see G. Scott Gravlee, "Aristotle on Hope", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 38 (2000), 461-477.

[14] Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Rhetoric* [*c.* 335 BC], Bk II, Ch. 12.

inexperience rather than a settled component of ethical virtue. Overall, then, the impression to emerge from Aristotle as regards hope's contribution to the good life appears to be a somewhat mixed one.

A rather different take on the value of hope comes from a far more ancient Greek source, the myth of Pandora's box, recounted in Hesiod (whose writings probably date from the seventh century BC). The maiden Pandora opens the box or jar, a gift from Zeus, which he has craftily fashioned out of revenge for Prometheus's theft of fire from the Gods. When the jar is opened, all manner of sickness and toil and misery is let loose upon the earth, but "only hope remained, in a secure place under the rim of the jar, and did not fly out."[15] The notable point here is that hope is found inside the jar of tribulations: it is seen as an accompaniment to trouble, and perhaps a partial antidote to it, or at least a consolation prize. It is something that stays with us, something to hold on to when things are bad.

As often with the Greek myths, we find that a universal message about the human condition is disclosed here. Life, even for the luckiest, is full of setbacks, and when troubles come we need something to encourage us, to stop us giving up. Hope, in short, encourages us to look for "light at the end of the tunnel", to focus on the possibility of our getting through present difficulties and perhaps even reaching better times. This suggests that hope is something to be valued and cultivated. And indeed parents encourage their children to "keep at it", not to give up; although they may not consciously think of it this way, what they seem to be doing here is instilling hopeful dispositions in their offspring. All this already makes hope share many of the features of Aristotle's virtues: a disposition of character, acquired and fostered by training and habit, which can contribute to a flourishing life. On the "Pandora" model, hope does not contribute to flourishing in quite the direct and positive way that Aristotelian virtues like friendliness or generosity do, but in so far as it helps us not to be overwhelmed by trouble, it seems to be a valuable part of the virtuous agent's character. And though Aristotle himself does not go down this route, it seems that one could even plausibly see hope as exhibiting the triadic structure typical of the Aristotelian virtues, flanked by corresponding vices of excess and defect— where a lack of positive expectation characterises the vice of despair, while an excessively positive outlook would indicate an unreasonably persistent expectation when the most sensible course would be to give ground. Moreover (as Scott Gravlee has ingeniously argued), some degree of hope for the future seems necessary if any rational deliberation whatsoever of an Aristotelian kind is to take place; and hence hope could be seen as a necessary condition for the exercise of any virtuous Aristotelian disposition.[16]

When we move on several centuries to Paul's writings (from the middle of the first century AD), we find that his letter to the Romans preserves the general "Pandora" link between hope and dealing with trouble. Paul tells his readers that tribulation or stress (*thlipsis*) leads to endurance (*hypomenē*), and endurance brings about a testing of character (*dokime*), and this in turn produces hope (*elpis*).[17] In terms of the exact order of the psychological processes involved, what comes first and what leads to what, this is not perhaps very happily expressed— isn't hope better thought of as a *catalyst* for endurance rather than the end product?— but I think the general Pauline thought is clear enough, and on one interpretation could plausibly be paraphrased as follows: when stress and tribulation come, they are a kind of test to be endured, and in getting through the test we

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[15] HESIOD, *Works and Days* [*Erga kai Hēmera*, *c.* 700 BC], lines 69-105.
[16] GRAVLEE, "Aristotle on hope," 473.
[17] ἡ θλῖψις ὑπομονὴν κατεργάζεται, ἡ δὲ ὑπομονὴ δοκιμήν ἡ δὲ δοκιμὴ ἐλπίδα (*hē thlipsis hypomonēn katergazetai, hē de hypomonē dokimēn, hē de dokimē elpida*); Romans 5:3.

deploy and further strengthen the virtue of hope.

Nothing in these Pauline remarks so far seems radically out of tune with the classical or Pagan view of the value of hope. Granted, hope does not actually figure in Aristotle's list of virtues, as we have already observed; but we have also noted that it seems to have a strong affinity with the Aristotelian virtues, being a disposition fostered by habit, which can contribute to flourishing. So perhaps the Pauline account can be harmonized with the Pagan tradition so as to give a message that all can accept, irrespective of their religious allegiances— a message about the ethical significance of positive expectations in a worthwhile human life. The message, combining Paul with our amalgam of Aristotelian teaching and the Pandora myth, might be expressed as follows: human life is full of difficulties, but these in the end can strengthen us; by hopefully reaching forward, straining towards a positive outcome which we determinedly keep in our sights, we can finally win through.

This kind of interpretation of Paul's teaching on hope would see him as occupying a certain amount of common ground with classical virtue ethics. It would also preserve a kind of continuity with the natural law tradition, later to be elaborated by Aquinas and others. Oversimplifying somewhat, the general idea of this tradition is that Christian moral teaching is to be anchored in what reflective reason and common-sense observation tells us about human nature and the good for humankind. It is admittedly true that in Paul and other New Testament writers, hope is linked with faith, and the latter virtue seems to take us beyond natural ethics into a very specifically theological domain. But, if I may coin a phrase, there is theology and theology.[18] There is theology of a grand metaphysical, "top-down" kind, that puts all the weight on claims about divine nature and divine action, and there is theology conducted from the "bottom-up", as it were, which looks at things initially from the point of view of our human weakness and need for redemption. If we look at one of the most often quoted texts which make the link between faith and hope, it is certainly possible to construe the theology either way, but it seems to me that the most illuminating construal will be the latter, more humanistic, one. The passage comes from the letter to the Hebrews, where we are told that "faith is the support of what is hoped for and the test of things not seen".[19] The Greek word *hypostasis*, which I here render as "support", is sometimes translated "substance"— faith is the "substance of things hoped for". But that makes it sound, to my ear, far too theologically settled and solid. *Hypostasis*, rather, is in its original Greek meaning a *prop* or *support*.

How can faith be a support? Well, as I have argued in several places elsewhere, an act of faith or trust can often be *epistemically facilitating*: it puts us into a mode of receptivity or "porousness" (to use Martha Nussbaum's term), thereby opening us up to the possibility of perceiving evidence that, if all goes well, will later confirm the appropriateness of the original trust.[20] By having faith in a friend, by trusting them, you may, if all goes well, come closer to them, and in this process of letting down your guard you may start to discern qualities that could not have been perceived from a position of cautious detachment, but which retrospectively reinforce the validity of the trust. Faith or trust (*pistis*, in Greek) can also be *motivationally facilitating*— it can encourage us in the pursuit of something worthwhile that is not yet in our grasp; the close psychological link with hope and human flourishing is here self-evident.

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[18] Cf. MOLIÈRE *Le Médécin Malgré Lui* [1666], Act I, scene 5: "*il y a fagots et fagots.*"

[19] ἔστιν δὲ πίστις ἐλπιζομένων ὑπόστασις, πραγμάτων ἔλεγχος οὐ βλεπομένων (*estin de pistis elpizomenōn hypostasis, pragmatōn elenchos ou blepomenōn*). Hebrews 11:1. The author of the letter to the Hebrews is generally reckoned not to be Paul.

[20] See JOHN COTTINGHAM, *The Spiritual Dimension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Ch. 1. Cf. MARTHA NUSSBAUM, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 281-2.

Faith is also described in our Hebrews passage as the *test* (in Greek *elenchus*) of things not seen. The term in question is again often translated in a way that makes everything seem very solid and settled— "the evidence" or "the certainty" of things unseen; and here the sceptic can simply insist that there is no such evidence or certainty. But *elenchu*s in Greek is a challenging, open-ended process, like the *elenchus* that Socrates made famous— a probing inquiry, a reaching forward.[21] So linking all these points together we arrive at the idea of faith and hope as an expectant reaching forward: an "elenchus", not, to be sure in the Socratic spirit of critical inquiry, but rather as a test, like an assayer's thrusting of a piece of iron into the fire that will either destroy it or temper and refine it so as to make it stronger.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul says that "hope does not *put us to shame* (*kataischunei*), because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who is given to us."[22] Again, many translations seem have the effect of making this all very secure and settled, by rendering it "hope does not *disappoint* us". This latter reading suggests to my ear that theistic hope always gets what it wants— an idea that smacks of the "spiritual materialism" that we looked at in section one, that is to say, invoking divine action as a short cut to getting a favourable outcome. Rather, the authentic religious thought in Paul's letter seems to me to be that the believer need not be *embarrassed* to retain hope, will not be *shamed* out of keeping up his or her hope in the face of adversity. And why? Because of the love "poured into our hearts"— that is to say because of an interior moral change that now sees avoidance of danger and the desire for self preservation as less important that holding fast to the good.

I offer these interpretative suggestions not as a presumptuous attempt at biblical exegesis (in which as a mere philosopher I can claim no special expertise), but partly to suggest that there is much in the New Testament teaching on hope that does not have to be viewed exclusively and entirely through the lens of an explicitly "high", or "top-down", theological metaphysics. To avoid misunderstanding, I am certainly not proposing some kind of "demythologizing" reduction of the text; it would be a travesty to try to read Paul in a way that filters out all references to God and the Holy Spirit. What I am suggesting, rather (picking up the point made at the end of section one), is that the New Testament writers on hope are less concerned with a miraculous divine intervention that guarantees all will turn out well, than with the authentic spirituality that seeks moral transformation and redemption.

On a more mundane level, I am also proposing that it is helpful to look for insights in the text that are consistent with what might be called "natural philosophical reflection" on the human predicament— reflection that is likely to yield broadly similar results across different ages and cultures. Thus Thomas Aquinas, writing well over a millennium after Aristotle, was able to take over much of the Aristotelian framework for virtue precisely because a great deal of what Aristotle had said, about courage or generosity, for example, or about friendship, struck a common chord that continued to resonate many centuries later— as indeed it still does today. Our human needs, and our human capacities as social animals, and the essential vulnerability of human life, mean that there will be dispositions and traits of character that have a clear and recognizable place in any plausible blueprint for human flourishing; and we would no more expect dramatic variations here from age to

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[21] The Greek term *elenchus* originally means a testing, or, in forensic contexts, a cross-examination, and hence is naturally applied to Socrates's probing of the views of his interlocutors in the Platonic dialogues.

[22] ἡ δὲ ἐλπὶς οὐ καταισχύνει, ὅτι ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐκκέχυται ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ἡμῶν διὰ Πνεύματος Ἁγίου τοῦ δοθέντος ἡμῖν. (*Hē de elpis ou kataischunei, hoti hē agapē tou Theou ekkechutai en tais kardiais hēmōn dia Pneumatos Hagiou tou dothentos hēmin*); Romans 5:6.

age than we would if we were discussing physical, as opposed to moral, wellbeing. Thus if we were to consider the virtues connected with personal hygiene, say, or maintaining a healthy diet, or taking the right amount of exercise, then it will be reasonable to expect that these are going to be pretty much the same in the twenty-first century AD as they were in the fifth century BC.[23]

We can see a vivid example of how the absence of hope damages flourishing by looking at A. E. Housman's self-conscious rejection of hope in the following poem:

> I to my perils
> Of cheat and charmer
> Came clad in armour
> By stars benign.
>
> Hope lies to mortals
> And most believe her,
> But man's deceiver
> Was never mine.
>
> The thoughts of others
> Were light and fleeting,
> Of lovers' meeting
> Or luck or fame.
>
> Mine were of trouble,
> And mine were steady;
> So I was ready
> When trouble came.[24]

The verses are clearly an expression of malaise, a kind of self-pitying retreat into apparent self-sufficiency that is rooted in fear of vulnerability: the poet is "clad in armour", and glumly congratulates himself at the end of the poem that he was at least "ready when trouble came." But as so often in Housman, the rejection of grace, the bitter refusal of the gifts of life, is pervaded by a deep melancholy. Anything like Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, in this frame of mind, is sadly out of reach. Certainly, the poet has managed to avoid being "put to shame": by rejecting hope he has ensured that no one can point the finger at him and sneer when things turn out badly. But the poem is a fine one, one with universal reach, precisely because it cries out, in spite of itself, for the redemptive power of love— for the joy and hope "poured into the heart" for those who are prepared to open themselves to the risks of giving themselves to others.

3. Eleonore Stump and the "radical divergence" thesis

The results of the previous section provide some support for what may be called a universalist or reconciliationist account of hope— one that stresses the continuities between the ethical insights about hopefulness found in secular and religious traditions.

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[23] Nor should we assume, by the way, that practising such virtues has become any easier over time. Personal hygiene may be easier with modern plumbing, but keeping a balance between calorie input and expenditure may be harder where there is a snack dispenser in every corridor, and you can travel long distances without ever having to walk or ride a horse.

[24] A. E. HOUSMAN, "I to my perils", in *More Poems* [published posthumously, 1936], no 6, repr. in *Collected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956), 166.

Against this, however, Eleanore Stump has recently suggested that there is a fundamental disparity between a typical religious account of virtue and what we are likely to find in secular accounts. More specifically, she has vigorously challenged a common reading of Aquinas, which sees him, in his account of moral virtue, as "little more than Aristotle baptized."[25] To be sure, Aquinas does recognize the Aristotelian virtues, like courage, temperance, justice and so on; but St Thomas's view, according to Stump, is although these are *called* virtues, they do not count as real virtues, or virtues in the proper sense, since "it is possible to have all of them and still not be a moral person."[26]

The rationale for Stump's position has to do in large part with the *origin* of the virtues. The Aristotelian virtues (as she correctly points out) are essentially dispositions of character, acquired by the right childhood training, and reinforced by repeated practice. You become generous by being taught to perform generous acts as a child, and by continuing to do so until it becomes second nature, a spontaneous outflowing that reflects an instilled propensity of character. Notice (though Stump does not put it this way) that this implies a theory of the virtues that is self-sufficient and naturalistic: it does not require any theistic or other metaphysical assumptions (at least as far as the possession and practice of the virtues is concerned): they are in principle within the power of any normal human being to acquire through purely human means (though of course the contingencies of economic and social circumstance mean that not every human being will be lucky enough to have enjoyed the right kind of upbringing as a child).

Stump now proceeds to argue that in the Christian tradition, as articulated by Aquinas, things are very different. Not only is the list of virtues augmented— in addition to what one might call the "purely human" virtues of wisdom, justice, temperance and courage, there are the three "theological" virtues of faith, hope and love; but also, and most importantly, the *genesis* of the virtues on this augmented list is quite different. So although they may in some cases have the same names as the Aristotelian virtues, they are no longer acquired by childhood training, or any such natural process, but have to be "infused"— that is, according to Thomas they require grace in the form of divine action which infuses them into the will of each person (though without compromising the freedom of the will). Indeed, the complete story turns out to be even more markedly theological and non-naturalistic. Stump explicates it in terms of what she sees as a multi-layered structure in Thomistic virtue theory. Underpinning the surface layer of socially acquired virtues is the second layer of divinely infused virtues; and beneath this again is a third and deeper layer. The fully virtuous person, as Aquinas conceives it, is one whose life manifests the "seven gifts of the Holy Spirit", described in Isaiah, namely "wisdom and understanding, counsel and courage, knowledge and piety, and the fear of the Lord".[27] What is more, Aquinas in his

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[25] The phrase is Jean Porter's, in J. PORTER, "Right Reason and the Love of God: The parameters of Aquinas' Moral Theology", in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas,* ed. Rik van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 167-191. Stump also cites her essay "Virtues and Vices", in *The Oxford Handbook to Thomas Aquinas,* ed. Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[26] ELEANORE STUMP, "The Non-Aristotelian Character of Aquinas's Ethics: Aquinas on the Passions", *Faith and Philosophy* 28 (2011), 29-43.

[27] *Summa theologiae* [1266-73], IaIIae (First Part of the Second Part), Qu. 68, art. 1. The list is based on the prophecy in Isaiah: "And the spirit of God shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the sprit of counsel and of strength, the spirit of knowledge and godliness, and the spirit of the fear of God." (Isaiah 11: 2-3, following the Septuagint version (LXX), which lists *sophia, sunēsis, boulē, ischys, gnōsis, eusebeia … phobos theou*.) The seventh and last gift (which in most versions occurs in a fresh sentence in verse 3) may originally have been intended as simply a gloss on the sixth (piety), but the doctrine of the sevenfold gift (*septiformis munus*) became enshrined in

full account of the virtues also draws on the list of twelve "fruits" of the Spirit spelt out by St Paul (in the letter to the Galatians), namely "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance".[28]

In respect both of its origins and of its structure, then, the framework of the life of virtue starts to look very different in the Christian theory of human flourishing from anything found in the Pagan world.[29] The richer and deeper Christian account supersedes the Aristotelian account according to Stump, subsuming and augmenting the list of virtues and transforming the character of what is subsumed; and in consequence of this, even the virtues that appear on both the pagan and the Christian lists (such as courage or generosity) hardly count as the same, except nominally.

I have to confess to being pulled in two directions in my response to Stump's position here. There is a great deal, both here and in many of her other writings, that seems to me highly illuminating, and the emphasis she places (following Aquinas) on the spiritual gifts and fruits of Christian virtue chimes in with the connection I have been trying to bring out earlier in this paper— the connection between authentic spirituality and moral transformation and redemption. But nevertheless it seems to me that there are (on the face of it) some rather troubling questions that need to be asked about Stump's "radical divergence thesis", as it may be called— the idea of a complete gulf, a metaphysical gulf, one might say, between Christian and Pagan virtue. Are we really to suppose that the pagan can be virtuous in name only, or that he or she cannot exemplify, for example, true courage, or true hope, that title being reserved only for the Christian? If so, this seems a counter-intuitive and morally somewhat repugnant view. Certainly it would be repugnant if it were to encourage the Christian believer to declare smugly to his secularist cousin: "I am saved; I enjoy the gifts of the Spirit, so only I and my co-religionists can have *true* courage or *true* hope." Part of the repugnance we feel here may be a matter of the tactlessness of such a declaration (those who consider they enjoy a richer and deeper kind of virtue, would surely do better not to boast about it). But quite aside from that, the view we are considering seems inherently counter-intuitive. The pagan, or in modern terms the atheist, facing danger bravely and risking his life for his comrades in a just war, seems a paradigm case of a courageous soldier. Or again, Nelson Mandela, enduring twenty-seven years of imprisonment on Robben Island without despairing of an eventual end to apartheid, seems a paradigm of hopefulness. Simply on the description so far provided of the conduct in such cases, the criteria for the relevant virtues (one feels inclined to say) are just satisfied, and that is all there is to it; one does not have to wait on any metaphysical doctrine about divinely infused virtue, or the gifts of the Holy Spirit, before declaring that such a person is genuinely courageous or hopeful: he manifests grade A virtue, perfectly pukka virtue— not merely virtue in name only.

A possible response to this would be to make a distinction between the claim that the action of God, or the Holy Spirit, is necessary for true virtue, and the claim that the

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the tradition which Thomas follows. The Vulgate text reads: "*Et requiescet super eum spiritus Domini, spiritus sapientiae et intellectus, spiritus consilii et fortitudinis, spiritus scientiae et pietatis. Et replebit eum spiritus timoris Domini.*"

[28] *Fructus autem Spiritus est caritas, gaudium, pax, longanimitas, bonitas, benignitas, fides, modestia, continentia*; Galatians 5: 22-3, Vulgate.

[29] It should also be noted that there are items in the Aristotelian list of virtues (*megalopsychia* or "great-souledness", for example, that have no place the Christian vision of the good life; and conversely, there are Christian virtues (humility for example) that make little or no sense within the Aristotelian framework. I have explored some of the reasons for this in J. COTTINGHAM, "Partiality and the Virtues", in R. Crisp (ed.), *How Should One Live? Essays on the Philosophy of Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 57-76.

subject's *belief* in such action is necessary for their having true virtue. The latter claim would run afoul of the experience most of us surely have of knowing morally admirable atheists and agnostics, who seem every bit as virtuous, if not more virtuous, than many Christian believers. The former claim, that the infusing work Holy Spirit is, as a matter of fact, active in all cases of genuine human virtue, *whether the agents are aware of it or not,* avoids such a counterintuitive consequence. One is reminded here of the theologian Karl Rahner's influential notion of "anonymous Christians"— those who are redeemed by the saving work of Christ, even though because of their cultural or historical circumstances they may not profess any Christian allegiance, and indeed may belong to other faiths.[30]

This line of response, however, still does not entirely dissolve the worry that appears to beset the Thomistic theory (as interpreted by Stump) of a radical gulf between true (Christian) virtue and "natural" (Pagan) virtue. The worry is not just that we know that atheists can be as or more virtuous than believers, but also that what *constitutes* the virtue is surely *nothing more or less than the relevant set of (natural) propensities to act and react in certain ways* (in the case of courage, for example, being disposed to endure danger at the right time, or, in the case of hope, preserving a positive expectation in the face of adversity). It seems plausible to say that these good-making properties are "there already", as it were, to be observed in the natural human world: thus, the virtue of hope *consists in* or *is constituted by* the relevant dispositions and decisions, irrespective of whether there is a God, and certainly irrespective of whether or not God redeemed us in the person of Christ, or bestows the sevenfold gifts upon us in the person of the Holy Spirit.

One could perhaps say here, on behalf of the Aquinas/Stump position,[31] that the purely natural Aristotelian account of virtue is correct and adequate as far as concerns the human world, but that the Thomistic view of the role of the Holy Spirit makes the additional metaphysical claim that virtuous conduct depends (as indeed all existent things do) on the action of God. Drawing an analogy between science and ethics, one might say that it is possible to give a perfectly adequate account of science in purely natural terms (referring to gravity, for example, or quantum theory, or whatever) without any reference to divine action; and that the Christian theist should be quite prepared to accept this on its own terms— though of course he or she will want to add the further, metaphysical, claim that all the relevant natural events and interactions are brought into being or sustained by God. In other words, God is not invoked to explain the nature of any given physical process, but, as Herbert McCabe once put it, simply makes the metaphysical difference between the

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[30] See KARL RAHNER, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions" [notes of a lecture delivered on 28 April 1961], in J. Hick and B. Hebblethwaite (eds), *Christianity and Other Religions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), Ch. 3, esp. p. 75; repr. in M. Peterson et al., *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* (2nd edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 549ff. I was reminded of this helpful parallel with Rahner's work in discussion with Eleonore Stump. See also J. Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Ch. 8, §5. For some of the background to the Rahner position, see the Second Vatican Council declaration, *Nostra Aetate* [1965]: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these [non-Christian] religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and teachings, which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men." The Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith Document *Dominus Jesus,* signed by its then Prefect, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Benedict XVI) and published with papal approval in 2000, was widely perceived as retreating somewhat from this universalism, towards a more traditionalist and exclusivist conception of salvation within the Church alone.

[31] I use this rather awkward label to avoid getting into the interpretative scholarly issue of the acceptability or otherwise of Stump's account of the Aquinas texts.

whole sequence existing and not existing.[32] And so it would be, *mutatis mutandis*, with ethics and with moral processes.

I do not think this is a complete solution of the problem at issue, but further discussion of this would take us too far off the purposes of the present paper. So let me instead move on to my final section, which aims to throw further light on the psychological and ethical nature of hope by reflecting a bit more on the relationship between hope and the other two members of the trinity of virtues described by Paul, namely faith and love.

4. Hope as related to faith and love

An obvious question to raise about Paul's celebrated linking of hope together with faith and love is whether he is merely constructing an aggregative list (a "shopping list", as it were) of three prominent virtues that happen to be involved in the Christian life, or whether are there some specific epistemic, psychological logical or ethical links which bind the trio together.

That the latter alternative is the preferable one has in effect already been implied by our earlier discussion at the end of section two, about how an act of faith and trust can be epistemically facilitating. By opening oneself up in a hopeful and trusting way, for example to a friend, one may become receptive and "porous" to evidence that might otherwise have been ignored, or never have become salient. Martha Nussbaum's deservedly admired discussion of this kind of process (already alluded to above) focuses on the case of receptivity to a literary text:

> This knowledge . . . [involves] *a deliberate yielding …* [Such a text] *enlists us in . . . a trusting and loving activity*. We read it suspending scepticism; we allow ourselves to be touched by the text, by the characters as they converse with us over time. *We could be wrong, but we allow ourselves to believe*. The attitude we have before a philosophical text can look, by contrast, retentive and unloving— asking for reasons, questioning and scrutinizing each claim, wresting clarity from the obscure . . . Before a literary work [of the kind described] we are *humble, open, active yet porous*.[33]

If this insight of Nussbaum's is accepted, it seems readily transferrable to the religious case. By giving ground, by moving away from a position of cold and detached scepticism, by allowing ourselves to trust, we may be opening ourselves to new kinds of experience that would otherwise have been closed to us. Nussbaum's conjunction "trusting and loving" is highly significant here, and is in some ways reminiscent of the thesis of the early twentieth-century Jesuit theologian Pierre Rousselot, who speaks of certain phenomena that can only be discerned with the "eyes of faith." The result is what he calls a "loving vision."[34] Love and trust are integrally linked.

What about hope? From the results reached already, it is clear, I hope(!), that there are similar connections. The kind of porousness and humility that Nussbaum talks about— "we could be wrong but we allow ourselves to believe"— is a trusting attitude to what is not already manifest, but which we *hope* will become manifest as a result of our trusting. A key analogy here is the personal relationship, where we allow ourselves to be vulnerable enough to embark on a commitment, even though we don't know it is going to work out, but merely hope so. The authentic hope we are talking of is not merely a cautious or

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[32] See HERBERT MCCABE, *Faith within Reason* (London: Continuum, 2006), 74-6.
[33] NUSSBAUM, *Love's Knowledge*, 281 and 282 (emphasis added).
[34] PIERRE ROUSSELOT, *The Eyes of Faith* ["Les Yeux de la Foi", *Recherches de Science Religieuse* Vol. 1(1910)], transl. J. Donceel (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990).

detached expectation or speculation, nor is it mere blithe optimism, but is a fervent aspiration, a committed exercise of trust..

All these connotations and echoes illuminate, it seems to me, the flavour of true hope as integrally linked to faith and love, as it is understood in the Christian tradition, and its Judaic roots on which Paul was so evidently drawing. He explicitly remarks here that, "everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope."[35] And indeed countless examples from the Hebrew Bible could be cited here, of which we may mention just two from the Psalms: "O Israel, *trust* in the Lord", says the Psalmist, "for in him there is mercy, and in him there is plenteous redemption." Or again, "I *hope* for the Lord; my soul doth *wait* for him; in his word is my *trust.*"[36] Notice incidentally, to pick up one of our main themes, that the hope expressed here is not one that looks for miraculous interventions or privileged short-cuts for the believer, but is a morally oriented reaching forward— the hope for "mercy" and "redemption".

How then do we resolve the question raised by Stump of how far this is continuous or discontinuous with naturalised or secularized ethics of a broadly Aristotelian cast? The answer, I think, needs to be articulated with some finesse. Secular philosophy, at any rate in its typical contemporary anglophone mode, is often informed by a methodology and an epistemology that privileges scientific language and modes of inquiry, and which therefore is deeply distrustful of notions such as faith. The watchword here is often taken to be David Hume's slogan— "a wise man proportions his belief to the strength of the evidence."[37] But the crucial question to ask here is what exactly is meant by "evidence". The science-modelled methodology that prevails in much contemporary philosophy of religion insists on requiring what Paul Moser has aptly called "spectator evidence"[38] — the kind of evidence that is, as it were, "there on the table", in a way that demands the acceptance of any detached and rational inquirer, irrespective of their personal or emotional commitments. But, we cannot fully understand the rationale for the virtue of hope in these terms; for hope is precisely not something justified by such evidence, but something that that keeps us reaching forward expectantly, in faith and love, towards what is not yet fully disclosed.

We can, I think, see the deadening effects of the modern scientistic template in the recent work of secular ethicists who have struggled to give full and convincing account of the virtue of hope; and this is partly, I think, a result of their being strangely blind to the psychological and ethical dynamic of hope as a trusting and faithful reaching forward in the face of radical vulnerability. Thus Erik Wielenberg, in his *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, analyses hope as 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".[39] Such cutting down of hope to mere rational optimism seems to me to incur the cost of making psychological and ethical profile of hope seem extremely thin. A judicious (but presumably revisable) positive estimate of what can be achieved by scientific advance seems a million miles away from the genuine hope that is

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[35] Romans 15:4.

[36] Psalm 130[129]:5-7.

[37] DAVID HUME, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* [1748], ed. T. L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Section X, Part I, fourth paragraph.

[38] PAUL MOSER, *The Evidence for God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 47. See also Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[39] ERIC WIELENBERG, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 139.

integrally linked to faith and love. Without going into whether or not such secular optimism is a worthy disposition to cultivate, it is not integrated, as the trio of Pauline virtues are, into a complex psychological story about self-scrutiny, moral growth through risk and suffering, and what the spiritual writers called *metanoia* (changed awareness). What Wielenberg has given us, I would suggest, is an essentially "static" component of the belief-system characteristic of the rational secular outlook; there may be nothing wrong with this, but what is left out, in the process of constructing the secular analogue, is almost every motivational and psychological aspect of the spiritual life that has made the traditional religious virtues intelligible and attractive to those who aspire to them.[40] As I have been trying to show, the moral and spiritual dynamic of true hope is a kind of loving reaching forward, to something not yet seen, something that is nevertheless trusted, on faith, because without that trust one would be cutting oneself off from the very possibility of the redemption that was originally sought.

As I argued in the earlier parts of this paper, there is nothing here that need be seen as radically inconsistent with our ordinary natural understanding of hope and its value in human flourishing. But what is perhaps added by the religious literature (as so often happens when we allow ourselves to make use of these resources instead of regarding them as philosophically off-limits) is a certain deepening of our understanding. Such deepened understanding, in my view, should not be thought of as superseding a naturalistic approach to the virtue of hope, but rather as enhancing and enriching it. For in the end, a religious worldview is not (as it is so often presented as being) an initial set of sensible naturalistic beliefs, with some weird, spooky, metaphysical doctrines tacked on like a baroque decoration. Rather its whole point and purpose, and what accounts for its enduring power, is that it is a transformative mode of understanding and living, one that generates new ways of knowing, richer psychological integrity, and a deeper moral sensibility. I think there is a general lesson here for the future of philosophy of religion, and how it needs to be much less cerebral and abstract, and much more pervasively informed by a properly developed moral psychology; but that is a story for another day.[41]

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[40] For more on this, see JOHN COTTINGHAM, *Why Believe?* (London: Continuum, 2009), Ch. 7.

[41] Part of this task is attempted in JOHN COTTINGHAM, *Philosophy of Religion: towards a more humane approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).