Transfiguring Love

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1. Introduction

In this essay I want to build on John Cottingham's suggestion that we need an epistemology of involvement (or receptivity), as opposed to an epistemology of detachment, if we are to properly understand the world in religious terms.[1] I will also refer to these as 'engaged' and 'disengaged' stances.[2] I will seek to show how the spiritual practice of an 'active' or 'engaged' love is integral to the sort of epistemology of involvement through which we come to a religious understanding of the world.[3] Such an understanding is one that gives proper recognition to the sacred or reverence-worthy character of the world. I will discuss how a religiously-inflected language of love and the practice it informs can *transfigure* the world for us and enable its sacred or reverence-worthy character to come into view (supposing it is there in any case). I will also seek to show how this is connected to a process of spiritual formation (or *Bildung*).

2. Love Seeking Understanding

To help illustrate what is at issue here, I want to begin with a discussion of two main characters in Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*: viz., Ivan Karamazov, the rationalistic atheist, and Father Zosima, an Elder in the local Orthodox monastery and the spiritual mentor to the youngest Karamazov brother, Alyosha. The difference between the two epistemologies is depicted well in the contrast between these two characters: Ivan represents an epistemology of detachment, while Zosima represents an epistemology of involvement or receptivity.

It would be a mistake to say that Ivan represents a stance of *pure* detachment as he is in fact pulled between engaged and disengaged stances. Consider this beginning portion of his conversation with Alyosha, which is part of the philosophical core of the novel:

> "[…] Though I do not believe in the order of things, still the sticky little leaves that come out in the spring are dear to me, the blue sky is dear to me, some people are dear to me, whom one loves sometimes, would you believe it, without even knowing why; some human deeds are dear to me, which one has perhaps long ceased believing in, but still honors with one's heart, out of old habit. […] Such things you love not with your mind, not with logic, but with your insides, your guts […]. Do you understand any of this blather, Aloshka, or not?" Ivan suddenly laughed.
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> "I understand it all too well, Ivan: to want to love with your insides, your guts – you said it beautifully […]," Alyosha exclaimed. "I think that everyone should love life before everything else in the world."
>
> "Love life more than its meaning?"
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> "Certainly, love it before logic, as you say, certainly before logic, and only then will I

[1] *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[2] I borrow these terms from Charles Taylor.

[3] I make no strong distinction between 'spiritual' and 'religious' and often use these terms interchangeably. For more on this see my '*Homo Religiosus*: Does Spirituality Have a Place in Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics?', *Religious Studies: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 51:3 (2015): 336–7.

> also understand its meaning […]."[4]

The claim that we must love life 'before logic' in order to understand its meaning is a key claim that we will be exploring here. But Ivan is clearly skeptical.

As mentioned, he is pulled between engaged and disengaged stances. The engaged stance is a natural mode for human beings as we live day-to-day as purposive agents engaging in activities and with objects or persons that are experienced as significant to us. We can see the naturalness of this stance in Ivan's remarks above about the things that are dear to him in spite of his doubts about an objectively meaningful order. However, the disengaged stance is also natural to human beings.[5] It often arises in the face of experiences that are jarring, disconcerting, bewildering, or otherwise problematic, where we are forced to step back from our engaged mode of experience and reflect upon the nature and significance of this experience.[6] This disengaged stance, it must be emphasized, is not something to be shunned. Indeed, it is an integral part of what is most admirable in our humanity. In particular, it is connected to our capacity for and inclination towards the philosophical life, which begins from this kind of stepping back in the face of puzzlement, where one then seeks out a more encompassing view of things that can hopefully make sense of his or her experience. As Aristotle famously remarked: 'It is because of wonder [or puzzlement] that human beings undertake philosophy, both now and at its origins', and they do so in order to no longer feel 'at a loss' in the world.[7] As becomes clear, Ivan is certainly someone who is 'at a loss' in the world.

The most significant problematic experience that Ivan encounters is that of horrendous evil and suffering. More specifically, Ivan is deeply moved by the terrible suffering inflicted upon innocent children by adults, and he goes on to describe to Alyosha a number of such cases, which are from actual newspaper stories collected by Dostoevsky. Ivan remarks:

> I want to see with my own eyes the [deer] lie down with the lion, and the murdered man rise up and embrace his murderer. I want to be there when everyone suddenly finds out what it was all for. All religions in the world are based on this desire, and I am a believer. But then there are the children, and what am I going to do about them? That is the question I cannot resolve […]. [If] everyone must suffer, in order to buy eternal harmony with their suffering, pray tell me what have children got to do with it? It's quite incomprehensible why they should have to suffer, and why they should buy harmony with their suffering. […] [If] the suffering of children goes to make up the sum of suffering needed to buy truth, then I assert beforehand that the whole of truth is not worth such a price. […] [They] have put too high a price on harmony; we can't afford to pay so much for admission. And therefore I hasten to return my ticket.[8]

Here Ivan can be seen as challenging standard theodicies (i.e., defenses of God's ways in the face of evil and suffering), such as the 'free will defense' and the 'soul-making defense', by questioning whether free will, soul-making, or some higher harmony is really worth the price of

[4] *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (New York: Everyman's Library, 1990 [1880]), 230-1.

[5] I am using 'natural' here in a 'second nature' sense of the term; see discussion of this below.

[6] See Heidegger's distinction between 'ready-to-hand' and 'present-to-hand' in *Being and Time*.

[7] *Metaphysics* II, 982b12–18; this translation is from Martha Nussbaum in *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge University Press, 2001 [1986]), 259.

[8] *The Brothers Karamazov*, 244–5.

the horrendous suffering inflicted upon innocent children. Dostoevsky himself thought this challenge is unanswerable in detached, rationalistic terms alone, and so instead he sought to address it, as we will see, on an engaged, existential plane through a depiction of the life and teachings of Father Zosima.[9]

What is important to observe at this point is that Ivan's own response is that of recoiling from evil and suffering and separating himself from involvement with the world, i.e., 'returning his ticket'. Accepting for argument's sake that there is a God, Ivan remarks: 'It's not God that I do not accept, you understand, it is this world of God's, created by God, that I do not accept and cannot agree to accept'.[10] Without being able to understand the justifying 'logic' of the world, Ivan is unable to love and embrace it fully. In other words, the failure to comprehend this justifying logic or meaning from a detached, rationalistic scrutinizing standpoint (combined with a deep sense of injustice) has an undermining effect on what he loves and on what he might love.[11] Thus, he ultimately sides with the disengaged stance in putting 'logic' before love.

Zosima takes the opposite stance. His two fundamental teaching are that 'life is paradise', even in the face of great evil and suffering, and we are 'responsible to all for all', which requires an engaged or 'active' love – i.e., affective identification with others, a profound appreciation of their intrinsic love-worthiness, and wishing and, where appropriate, pursuing good for them – that both helps us to see how life already is paradise and enables us to more fully realize this paradise. Thus, whereas Ivan recoils from evil and suffering and ultimately privileges a disengaged stance, Zosima privileges an engaged stance through exemplifying a path of *re-engagement* as the only route to living meaningfully in the face of evil and suffering, even if one is not able to fully make sense of it.[12]

I speak of privileging an engaged stance, but it is important that there should be an ongoing dialectic between engagement and disengagement. While philosophy begins with reflective disengagement from our pre-reflective mode of engagement with the world, it should not remain in the disengaged stance but should return to an engaged mode in a more reflective way by attending to the 'space of reasons' (or domain of meaning) that arises for us in our purposive engagement with the world and which is enriched by a more nuanced conceptual framework (I will return later to discuss the role of language in opening our eyes to this domain of meaning). Here we try to articulate the nature and significance of this engaged experience and what seems required for making sense of it. For instance, we can attend to our experience of

[9] See the letters appended to *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. C. Garnett, rev. R. E. Matlaw (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976 [1880]), esp. at 757–62.

[10] *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Pevear and Volokhonsky, 235.

[11] With regard to what Ivan says he loves (the sticky leaves, some people, etc.), Alyosha asks: 'How will you live, what will you love them with? […] Is it possible, with such hell in your heart and in your head?' (*The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Pevear and Volokhonsky, 263).

[12] Charles Taylor writes: '[One] of Dostoyevsky's crucial insights turns on the way in which we close or open ourselves to grace. The ultimate sin is to close oneself […]. We are closed to grace, because we close ourselves to the world in which it circulates; and we do that out of loathing for ourselves and for this world. […] Dostoyevsky […] gives an acute understanding of how loathing and self-loathing, inspired by the very real evils of the world, fuel a projection of evil outward, a polarization between self and world, where all the evil is now seen to reside. […] Dostoyevsky's rejectors [such as Ivan] are "schismatics" […], cut off from the world and hence grace. […] What will transform us is an ability to love the world and ourselves, to see it as good in spite of the wrong. But this will only come to us if we can accept being part of it, and that means accepting responsibility' (*Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989], 451–2). See also C. Guignon, 'Introduction', *The Grand Inquisitor: with related chapters from* The Brothers Karamazov (Indianapolis: Hackett 1993). Both Taylor and Guignon have influenced my interpretation of Dostoevsky here.

objective moral values, i.e., moral values that stand independent of our desires as things with which we ought to be concerned. We might argue that such experience of objective moral values presupposes a moral teleology at work in the universe, and we can then inquire into whether such a worldview is ultimately believable. If it were not, then this would have a deflationary effect on our moral experience. Something similar might be said for spiritual experience.

We have seen that for Ivan the perceived lack of a justifying 'logic' has a deflationary effect on what he loves. Ivan is also well-known for his view that God (or a theistic moral teleology) is needed for making sense of our experience of objective moral demands, as seen in his famous claim that if God does not exist, then everything is permissible. In the same context he also says that without belief in God and personal immortality 'there is decidedly nothing in the whole world that would make men love their fellow men'.[13] Interestingly, what is less known is that Zosima (who expresses Dostoevsky's viewpoint) thinks that the relationship first goes the other way: active love is important for coming to affirm a religious worldview. He says:

> Try to love your neighbors actively and tirelessly. The more you succeed in loving, the more you'll be convinced of the existence of God and the immortality of your soul. And if you reach complete selflessness in the love of your neighbor, then undoubtedly you will believe, and no doubt will even be able to enter your soul. This has been tested. It is certain.[14]

In fact, Zosima enjoins not just love of neighbor but also love of the whole world as a path towards coming to grasp and affirm a religious worldview:

> Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love.[15]

These are certainly striking claims, and it should be noted that Dostoevsky himself was never without doubt about a theistic worldview. As he said in a letter: 'I am a child of this century, a child of doubt and disbelief, I have always been and shall ever be (that I know), until they close the lid of my coffin'. And yet despite this, he says:

> God sends me moments of great tranquility, moments during which I love and find I am loved by others; and it was during such a moment that I formed within myself a symbol of faith in which all is clear and sacred to me. This symbol is very simple, and here is what it is: to believe that there is nothing more beautiful, more profound, more sympathetic, more reasonable, more courageous, and more perfect than Christ […].[16]

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[13] *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Pevear and Volokhonsky, 69–70.

[14] *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Pevear and Volokhonsky, 56.

[15] *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Garnett, rev. Matlaw, 298.

[16] *Selected Letters of Fyodor Dostoevsky*, trans. A. MacAndrew, eds J. Frank and D. I. Goldstein (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987 [1854]), 68. Elsewhere when discussing the powerful case for atheism that he gave through Ivan, Dostoevsky says: '[It] is not like a child that I believe in Christ and confess him. My hosanna has come forth from the crucible of doubt' (quoted in H. de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheistic Humanism*, trans. A. E. Nash, E. M. Riley, and M. Sebanc [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995 (1944)], 296).

The key idea in these passages is that there can be *epiphanic* experiences, facilitated by the practice of active love, where we come to see the world in a *new light*, i.e., as *transfigured* in religious terms: the world is seen as filled with meaning, or 'Logos'[17], where 'all is clear and sacred' and life is seen as 'paradise', where we 'perceive the divine mystery in things' or are convinced of God's existence (I set aside the issue of personal immortality here for reasons of space). Hence Alyosha says that we must love life 'before logic' in order to understand its meaning or its 'Logos'. There is a kind of intelligibility in the world that only comes into view when we are properly disposed and attuned to the world through an engaged standpoint of love. We miss this intelligibility if we remain at the level of detached, rationalistic scrutinizing (i.e., detached 'logic'). This is not to say that there is not a place for disengaged reasoning, especially for standing back and critically reflecting upon our engaged modes of experience and confronting challenges such as the problem of evil and suffering and seeking to make sure our beliefs are coherent. Here doubt often will be closely linked to the life of faith. As mentioned, there needs to be an ongoing dialectic between the engaged and disengaged standpoints. However, for most people it won't be merely because of disengaged reasoning that they come to affirm a religious worldview (e.g., by considering the standard philosophical arguments for and against God's existence); rather, it will involve an engaged mode of attunement and loving responsiveness. The religious path here is not just faith seeking understanding but also *love seeking understanding*, where such love helps to *transfigure* the world for us such that we can come to see the world in religious terms, i.e., where the sacred or reverence-worthy character of the world comes into view. Here we are also guided and sustained by those saintly persons or spiritual exemplars – Christ is the supreme exemplar for Dostoevsky, as we saw[18] – that are further along in this path of love than we are.

To better understand this religious path and the idea of a transfiguring love we need to consider now in more detail the sort of spiritual formation that makes it possible.

3. Spiritual Formation

Transfiguring love is an achievement. It is a matter of coming to see, appreciate, and affectively relate to the world and others differently than one had before; i.e., it is a matter of coming to see things in a new light.[19] Sometimes this happens in a sudden momentary experience, as with

[17] In regard to seeing the 'Logos' (or 'Word') in all things, Zosima remarks: 'Every blade of grass, every insect, ant, and golden bee, all so amazingly know their path, though they have not intelligence, they bear witness to the mystery of God and continually accomplish it themselves. […] All creation and all creatures, every leaf is striving to the Word' (*The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Garnett, rev. Matlaw, 273–4; cf. the prologue to the Gospel of John).

[18] Zosima says that we would be altogether lost without the 'precious image of Christ before us' (*The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Pevear and Volokhonsky, 320). The 'image of Christ', for Dostoevsky, represents the perfection of the saintly ideal of an all-embracing love and in a notebook he describes the image of Christ as an 'eternal ideal toward which man aspires and is bound to aspire according to nature's law' (*Dostoevsky's Occasional Writings*, trans. D. Magarshack [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997 (1864)], 305). It is in aspiring after and achieving this ideal – or at least approximating it – that our fulfillment is to be found: 'the greatest use a man can make of his personality, of the fullest development of his I, is in one way or another to destroy this I, to give himself up wholly to all and everyone, selflessly and wholeheartedly. And that is the greatest happiness' (306).

[19] As Mark Wynn has pointed out, this sort of transfiguration can involve two key changes in our sensory experience of the world: (1) 'a deepened sense of the significance of the sensory order considered as a whole', i.e., a general change in 'hue', and (2) 'a deepened sense of the differentiated significance of objects', i.e., specific changes in 'salience' ('Between Heaven and Earth: Sensory Experience and the Goods of the Spiritual Life', in *Spirituality and the Good Life: Philosophical Approaches*, ed. D. McPherson [Cambridge University Press,

Dostoevsky's own experience that he describes above. But it is often the fruit of a process of spiritual formation, which aims to effect an enduring change of being and vision.

To try explain this, I will develop upon John McDowell's account of *Bildung* – understood by him as ethical formation – which enables the recognition of ethical demands 'which are there in any case, whether or not we are responsive to them'. He writes:

> We are alerted to these demands by acquiring the appropriate conceptual capacities. When a decent upbringing initiates us into the relevant way of thinking, our eyes are opened to the very existence of this tract of the space of reasons. Thereafter our appreciation of its detailed layout is indefinitely subject to refinement, in reflective scrutiny of our ethical thinking.[20]

In short, this is a matter of acquiring a 'second nature', i.e., cultivated forms of action, thought, and sensitivity that enable these ethical demands to come into view. So what we need to consider is how a similar process of spiritual formation can enable a religious understanding of the world, i.e., a religiously-inflected account of the space of reasons (or domain of meaning), where the principal ethical-*cum*-spiritual demand pertains to giving proper recognition to the sacred or reverence-worthy character of things (i.e., 'the divine mystery in things').[21]

I am suggesting that this is centrally a matter of achieving a transfiguring love of the world in general and other human beings in particular. But this is no easy matter. As we see in Ivan's case, love for the world can be difficult given the way it often seems tragically 'out of joint'. Moreover, just as Ivan acknowledges natural affection for particular people, he also acknowledges natural revulsion with respect to those with physical or moral imperfections: 'If we're to come to love [such] a man, the man himself should stay hidden, because as soon as he shows his face – love vanishes'.[22] Alyosha responds by noting that Father Zosima has also said that 'a man's face often prevents many people, who are as yet inexperienced in love, from loving him'. For Zosima, the love of those who appear unlovable (or less lovable) – e.g., 'the sinner' – is 'the semblance of Divine Love and is the highest love on earth'.[23] However, such heights of love require experience and training (*askesis*):

> Brothers, love is a teacher, but one must know how to acquire it, for it is difficult to acquire, it is dearly bought, by long work over a long time, for one ought to love not for a chance moment but for all time.[24]

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forthcoming]; cf. M. Wynn, *Renewing the Senses: A Study of the Philosophy and Theology of the Spiritual Life* [Oxford University Press, 2013]).

[20] J. McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 82.

[21] See Fiona Ellis's *God, Value, and Nature* (Oxford University Press, 2014) for another attempt to develop McDowell's work in a theistic direction, especially with regard to a theistic account of second nature. She writes: 'we ourselves, qua natural beings, are already open to God. The supernatural […] is not a spooky superstructure, extrinsic or added on to a nature which is complete in itself. Rather, it is a quality or dimension which enriches or perfects the natural world. This grants us the right to allow that man can be inwardly transformed by God. And precisely because this transformation serves to enhance his natural being […] we avoid the implication that such divine action spells the destruction of man, severing any connection he might have with ordinary human life' (91). The account that I develop here can be seen as complimentary to Ellis's project.

[22] *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Pevear and Volokhonsky, 236–7.

[23] *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Garnett, rev. Matlaw, 298.

[24] *The Brothers Karamazov,* trans. Pevear and Volokhonsky, 319.

> [Active] love is a harsh and fearful thing compared with love in dreams. Love in dreams thirsts for immediate action, quickly performed, and with everyone watching. [...] Whereas active love is labor and perseverance, and for some people, perhaps, a whole science.[25]

In this 'science' of active love we are especially guided, as suggested above, by saintly persons or spiritual exemplars, who are 'saintly' in that they are further along in the path of love and better approximate the ideal of a proper relationship in feeling and in action to the sacred or the reverence-worthy. Zosima is a fictional example of a saintly person (though Dostoevsky based his depiction of him on actual spiritual exemplars).[26] But we can also consider a recent non-fictional example, which is drawn from Raimond Gaita's work.

In *A Common Humanity*, Gaita discusses the behavior and attitude of a nun who came to visit a psychiatric ward at which he worked when he was seventeen, where the patients 'appeared to have irretrievably lost everything which gives meaning to our lives' and have qualities to which one might naturally feel revulsion. But Gaita says of the nun:

> [Everything] in her demeanour towards them—the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, the inflexions of her body—contrasted with and showed up the behavior of those noble psychiatrists. She showed that they were, despite their best efforts, condescending, as I too had been. She thereby revealed that such patients were, as the psychiatrists and I had sincerely and generously professed, the equals of those who want to help them; but she also revealed that in our hearts we did not believe this.[27]

Gaita is not religious in any conventional sense and yet he marvels at the power of the nun's love – as expressed through her demeanour – 'to reveal the full humanity of those whose affliction had made their humanity invisible'.[28] He acknowledges that the disciplines of her religious vocation 'were essential to her becoming the kind of person she was' and he doubts that 'the love expressed in the nun's demeanour would have been possible for her were it not for the place which the language of parental love had in her prayers': 'The nun almost certainly believed that the patients with whom she dealt were all God's children and equally loved by him'.[29] However, Gaita doesn't think that the quality of her love 'proves' her religious perspective; rather, it only

[25] *The Brothers Karamazov,* trans. Pevear and Volokhonsky, 58.

[26] Dostoevsky was well aware of the sort of critiques of purportedly saintly persons that find expression in Nietzsche's later writings and more recently in the work of Susan Wolf, Martha Nussbaum, and others, which claim that there is something other-worldly, life-denying, mutilating, strained, or otherwise harmful about saintly ideals. In *The Brothers Karamazov* the narrator remarks that ascetic practices, which are commonly tied to saintly ideals, are 'a double-edged weapon, which may lead a person not to humility and ultimate self-control but, on the contrary, to the most satanic pride – that is, to fetters and not to freedom' (trans. Pevear and Volokhonsky, 29). Moreover, in the character Father Ferapont, the great faster and keeper of silence, Dostoevsky provides an artistic portrayal of the kind of life-denying 'ascetic ideal' that Nietzsche critiques. But for Dostoevsky there is a valid saintly ideal (which includes certain ascetic practices as important for ethical and spiritual transformation; see 314), which is depicted in Father Zosima, and also in Alyosha, who is to live the saintly path outside of a religious order and in family life. For more on this issue, see my 'Nietzsche, Cosmodicy, and the Saintly Ideal', *Philosophy* 91(1): 39–67.

[27] *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 17–9.

[28] *A Common Humanity*, 20.

[29] *A Common Humanity*, 20–2.

proves that the patients are 'rightly the objects of our non-condescending treatment, that we should do all in our power to respond in that way'.[30]

To expect *proof* of a religious perspective here certainly seems like too much ask, since it is not clear that anything could offer a strict proof in this domain. Nevertheless, the way that the nun's love helps us to see the patients in a new, transfigured light can be a part of coming to affirm a religious *vision* of the world. In this case, it will be a matter of coming to see and affirm all human beings as sacred and as children of God. The phenomenology of the sacred here involves an experience of a normative demand that – to recall McDowell's phrasing – is 'there in any case, whether or not we are responsive to [it]'. Sacred or holy things are worthy of reverence and as such they place upon us absolute requirements of inviolability (i.e., barriers to action that ought never to be crossed) as well as duties to render assistance where appropriate.

Gaita acknowledges that there is something lacking for the person who is moved by the nun's love but cannot accept her religious perspective, since he thinks that only a religious person 'can speak seriously of the sacred', though 'such talk informs the thoughts of most of us whether or not we are religious, for it shapes our thoughts about the way in which human beings limit our will as does nothing else in nature'. However, he thinks that the non-religious person will often have to find some not fully adequate substitute for the religious language of the sacred, such as that all human beings are 'inestimably precious', 'ends in themselves', 'owed unconditional respect', or 'possess inalienable dignity'. For Gaita, 'these are ways of trying to say what we feel a need to say when we are estranged from the conceptual resources we need to say it' and none of them has 'the simple power of the religious way of speaking'.[31]

I don't think it is entirely right to say that only a (conventionally) religious person 'can speak seriously of the sacred', since the language of the sacred can be used to describe that which is experienced as reverence-worthy (though we might say that to have such experiences is to be religious in a broad sense). But it does have religious connotations, and it can be one way of trying to capture a sense of 'the divine mystery in things'. I also think there are questions that arise here of whether the experience of a strong normative demand that these different terms seek to capture and reveal – whether it is the 'sacredness' of all human beings or their 'inestimable preciousness' or whatever else – can be adequately made sense of in a world that is devoid of any underlying moral or spiritual purposiveness. If the world is ultimately just the result of 'blind', mechanistic causes, i.e., if we are just what the cosmic cat coughed up, then does it really make sense to speak of strong normative demands which are 'there in any case, whether or not we are responsive to them'? The realization that one lacks such a justifying account (or 'logic') can have a deflationary effect. But at the same time, the fact that we do experience such strong normative demands, and that some of them seem best captured in the language of the sacred, can itself be a reason for coming to affirm a religiously purposive worldview.

Two related points should be emphasized here with regard to the foregoing exploration of spiritual formation and its significance. First, Gaita's discussion shows the importance of spiritual exemplars (or saintly persons) for helping us come to see the world, especially other human beings, in a new light. And we can think of other spiritual exemplars besides Gaita's nun who can also have this effect, such as Jean Vanier, Mother Teresa, Desmond Tutu, Sister Helen Prejean, and Maximilian Kolbe, not to mention many other less famous examples.[32]

[30] *A Common Humanity*, 21.
[31] *A Common Humanity*, 23.
[32] Many of these less known examples are 'ordinary' virtuous people who are not members of religious orders.

Second, Gaita's discussion shows the significance of specific religious language (or 'conceptual resources') and religious practices informed by such language for how we come to see the world, particularly with regard to what we see as love-worthy. We can add that religious works of art – e.g., paintings, music, poetry, novels, scripture, traditional prayers, etc. – also play an important role in shaping the conceptual resources that inform a religious vision of the world. We always love under some description (e.g., the object of love is seen as 'sacred', 'precious', 'a child of God', 'made in the image of God', etc.), and thus Gaita says (quoting Rush Rhees): 'there would be no love without the language of love'.[33] Moreover, in our culture this is related to saintly love: 'Because of the place the impartial love of saints has occupied in our culture, there has developed a language of love whose grammar has transformed our understanding of what it is for a human being to be a unique kind of limit to our will'.[34] In his account of *Bildung*, McDowell also discusses the significance of initiation into a particular language for opening our eyes to the space of reasons (or domain of meaning), since a language 'serves as a repository of tradition, a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what'. This does not mean that we should accept everything within a tradition, since for any living tradition there is a 'standing obligation to engage in critical reflection'. But the point is that in order to have access to the space of reasons and acquire 'the capacity to think and act intentionally, at all, the first thing that needs to happen is for [one] to be initiated into a tradition as its stands'.[35] The lesson for the topic at hand is that in order to come to see the world in religious terms (i.e., in terms of a religiously-inflected account of the space of reasons) one must be initiated (at some level) into a particular religious tradition, with its particular language and set of practices.

We have seen that active love is itself a key religious practice. But Gaita also shows how this can be connected to one's prayer life, particularly that which expresses the language of parental love (as in the 'Our Father'). In fact, he notes that there is a close connection between parental love and saintly love. Human parental love can also reveal the intrinsic preciousness of human beings, such as when a parent unconditionally loves a child who has become vicious.[36] Indeed, we can come to see other human beings, including vicious ones, in a new light when we think of them as somebody's child, and it can also be helpful to think of them as being once a vulnerable young child and to think of the particular circumstances of their upbringing (we might also think of the whole life-span, where we recognize them as fellow 'mortals'). But Gaita believes that in order to validate the idea that we should extend something like (but not exactly the same as) the partial, unconditional love of parents to all humanity we need the example of saintly love, which, at least in the theistic case, draws on the concept of parental love in seeing all of us as children of God who are equally and unconditionally loved by God.[37] This allows us to speak of the 'human family' and see our fellow human beings as 'brothers' and 'sisters'. Of course, we might try to find secular equivalents, such as the idea that 'we are all in it together', but these seem to lack the resonances and power of the religious idea of being children of God.[38]

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[33] *A Common Humanity*, 26.

[34] *A Common Humanity*, 24.

[35] *Mind and World*, 125–6. For more on the 'constitutive' role of language in human life, see C. Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016).

[36] To love someone 'unconditionally', as I understand it, means that this love will not be undermined by what the beloved makes of his or her life. In the words of St. Paul, such love 'never fails' (1 Corinthians 13:8).

[37] *A Common Humanity,* 24.

[38] See, e.g., Bertrand Russell's remarks about being united in our 'common doom' in 'A Free Man's Worship'; a similar idea is also expressed in Albert Camus' *The Plague*. Of course, we might instead have what I dub the 'Jim

I would like to mention one other, related example here of a religious practice that can help to cultivate a transfiguring love. In Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*, the main character John Ames discusses the practice of keeping the Ten Commandments, with a particular focus on the commandment to honor one's parents. In a letter to his young son, Ames writes:

> There's a pattern in these Commandments of setting things apart so that their holiness will be perceived. Every day is holy, but the Sabbath is set apart so that the holiness of time can be experienced. Every human being is worthy of honor, but the conspicuous discipline of honor is learned from this setting apart of the mother and father, who usually labor and are heavy-laden, and may be cranky or stingy or ignorant or overbearing. Believe me, I know this can be a hard Commandment to keep. But I believe also that the rewards of obedience are great, because the root of real honor is always the sense of the sacredness of the person who is its object. In the particular instance of your mother, I know that if you are attentive to her in this way, you will find a very great loveliness in her. When you love someone to the degree that you love her, you see her as God sees her, and that is an instruction in the nature of God and humankind and of Being itself.[39]

Again, there is a kind of unconditional love enjoined here that seeks to emulate God's love, and thus to see people as God sees them. In this case, being attentive to one's mother so as to perceive her loveliness might involve, among other things, seeing her whole life context and not just her immediate role as mother, and seeing her as also a child of God. We can add that loving and honoring one's parents can be understood on analogy with love for God. Indeed, insofar as we are understood as children of God and God's love is seen as an unconditional parental love, we thus grasp God's love for us first through appreciating and responding to our parents' love for us, which at its best is unconditional, but which may in many ways be imperfect (as human love often is). So learning to love and honor our parents can train us for loving and honoring God. In other words, filial piety can also be seen as training for religious piety as one seeks to honor the sources of one's existence and appreciate the giftedness of life. As Robinson puts it through Ames, this is 'an instruction in the nature of God and humankind and of Being itself'.

4. Making Good or Making Goodness Manifest?

I want to conclude by considering a potential worry about the idea of *transfiguring* love. At one point in Gaita's discussion of the nun's saintly love he remarks that on her view, as he understands it, 'we are sacred *because* God loves us, his children', which suggests that God's love *makes* us sacred.[40] Or in Gaita's non-religious terms: we are 'inestimably precious' or 'possess inalienable dignity' *because* someone can love us in a 'pure' or 'unconditional' way. In *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor has suggested a similar thought in his discussion of a kind of 'seeing-good' where otherwise the goodness of something or someone is not readily apparent. Taylor says that this sort of 'seeing-good' is 'a seeing which also helps *effect* what it sees'.[41] Like Gaita, Taylor is especially concerned with the 'irremediably broken' and he thinks that

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Morrison response' and seek to get our 'kicks' in 'before the whole shithouse goes up in flames'; see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YSlXjrxqDOE (from The Doors, *The Greatest Hits*, Track 7).

[39] *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 139. I thank Kirstin McPherson for bringing this wonderful passage to my attention.

[40] *A Common Humanity*, 24; my emphasis.

[41] *Sources of the Self*, 449; my emphasis.

religious sources offer a more powerful and illuminating kind of seeing-good than non-religious or 'naturalist' sources (unlike Gaita, Taylor is a theist).[42] In particular, Taylor discusses the Christian idea of *agape*, which he says is

> […] a love that God has for humans which is connected with their goodness as creatures (though we don't have to decide whether they are loved because good or good because loved). Human beings participate through grace in this love. There is a divine affirmation of the creature, which is captured in the repeated phrase in Genesis 1 about each stage of the creation, "and God saw that it was good". *Agape* is inseparable from such a "seeing-good".[43]

Earlier Taylor says with regard to Genesis 1: 'The goodness of the world is not something quite independent from God's seeing it as good. His seeing it as good, loving it, can be conceived not simply as a *response* to what it is, but as what *makes* it such'.[44]

What should we make of the claim that 'we don't have to decide whether [human beings] are loved because good or good because loved'? And what should we make of the more positive suggestion that a certain kind of love or seeing-good 'makes', 'effects', or 'brings about' the goodness (or sacredness) of someone or something?[45] I find such remarks problematic and thus worrisome insofar as they suggest that we are merely *projecting* some 'goodness', 'sacredness', 'preciousness', or 'love-worthiness' onto something or someone, where such properties are not *really* there in any case.[46] I think that we do have to take a stand on Taylor's disjunction: human beings are loved, or should be loved, *because* they are good, rather than being good because loved. In other words, we are responsive here to a normative demand for love that is 'there in any case, whether or not we are responsive to [it]'. This is not to deny that there is a place for a certain kind of 'making' or 'effecting', otherwise we would not speak of 'transfiguring'. What a particular religiously-inflected language of love and the practice it informs can 'effect' or 'bring about' is the *revelation* of goodness or sacredness. The point is epistemological rather than ontological: seeing-good here should not be understood as *making good* but as *making manifest* a goodness that is there in any case; i.e., as revealing an independent reality that is fit to be valued and loved in particular ways once we have acquired the relevant linguistic capacities and moral

[42] Taylor writes: 'The question […] is whether we are not living beyond our moral means in continuing allegiance to our standards of [universal] justice and benevolence. Do we have ways of seeing-good which are still credible to us, which are powerful enough to sustain these standards? […] Is the naturalist affirmation conditioned on a vision of human nature in the fullness of its health and strength? Does it move us to extend help to the irremediably broken, such as the mentally handicapped, those dying without dignity, fetuses with genetic defects? Perhaps one might judge that it doesn't and that this is a point in favour of naturalism; perhaps efforts shouldn't be wasted on these unpromising cases. But the careers of Mother Teresa or Jean Vanier seem to point to a different pattern, emerging from a Christian spirituality. […] I do think naturalist humanism defective in these respects – or, perhaps better put, that great as the power of naturalist sources might be, the potential of a certain theistic perspective is incomparably greater' (*Sources of the Self*, 517–8). Similarly, Gaita writes: 'reflecting on the nun's example, I came to believe that an ethics centered on the concept of human flourishing does not have the conceptual resources to keep fully amongst us, in the way the nun had revealed to be possible, people who are severely and ineradicably afflicted' (*A Common Humanity*, 18).

[43] *Sources of the Self*, 516.

[44] *Sources of the Self*, 449.

[45] See *Sources of the Self*, 419, 448–9, 454–5, 510, 512, 516.

[46] Both Gaita and Taylor seem to be otherwise committed to a realist account of value (as 'there in any case'), so their claims about making or effecting a certain kind of value seem odd in light of this.

and spiritual sensitivity. Moreover, the ontological claim regarding making or creating goodness itself seems dubious: while we can make or foster good things (e.g., a work of art, virtuous character, etc.) that instantiate or embody goodness (and such good things can be brought about through love), goodness itself does not seem to be the kind of thing that can be created, but rather it must be *discovered* or *apprehended*.

It might be objected that God is a special case, since, according to traditional theism, God creates the world *ex nihilo* and sees it as good. So perhaps God could also create goodness itself *ex nihilo*. We encounter here a version of the well-known 'Euthyphro dilemma' (derived from Plato's *Euthyphro*): Is something good because it is loved (or willed) by God, or does God love (or will) it because it is good? On the one hand, if we say something is good simply *in virtue of* being loved (or willed) by God, then this seems to make goodness *arbitrary*, as anything (including, e.g., murder) could be good so long as it is loved (or willed) by God. God's love then loses all intelligibility as it is seen as merely a brute fact rather than a response to something or someone's love-worthiness. On the other hand, if we say that God loves (or wills) something *because* it is good or love-worthy, then the concern is that this makes God *irrelevant* for morality, as goodness is independent of God's love or willing as something to which this love or willing responds. But I think a theist can take this second approach without thereby committing him or her self to God's irrelevance for morality. There are three main reasons for this. First, God creates the world *in light of* a perfect understanding of the good and as ordered towards realizing this good. Second, God perfectly exemplifies the good, such that we can say that God *is* good (or *the* Good). Finally, and most importantly for our purposes, God perfectly loves the goodness that is inherent in the world, including in humanity, and in doing so helps to *make manifest* this goodness to us. In other words, God's *agape* is the perfect instance of transfiguring love, and on this theistic picture we fully come to see the world in religious terms when we come to see and love the world as God does.[47]

[47] I thank Fiona Ellis, Jared Schumacher, and members of audiences at Heythrop College, University of London and the University of Notre Dame for helpful comments on early drafts of this essay.