Flourishing in philosophical and religious morality

Ethics, religious or secular, seeks to answer the question, ‘How should one live?’ (by ‘secular ethics’ I mean here simply an approach to understanding the moral life that does not depend upon any revelation) – both seek to offer an account of how to live well, and thus of how to flourish. As is the case in secular ethics, we find in religious ethics many different accounts of flourishing (most prominently we find accounts focusing upon duty or upon virtue, especially upon love; we do also find consequentialist views, although I will not consider these here). In comparing philosophically informed versions of secular and religious ethics, we may find many shared concepts, and a good deal of normative agreement. We will also find many differences. The most important, the most basic, of these seems to me to be this: in secular ethics the answer to the question concerning how one should live will be grounded in consequences, or in human nature, or in rational imperatives, or in a social contract; in religious ethics, or at any rate in many versions of religious ethics, the answer will be grounded in a Person, or in the nature of the relationship between each human person and a Divine Person or Persons.

We read in Plato that ‘the good, then, is the end of all endeavour, the object on which every heart is set’ (Plato 1987: 505e). We hear an echo of this, but an echo with a foreign strain, when we read in Augustine, ‘Lord … you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you’ (Augustine 1961, I.1). And when we read, ‘You follow close behind the fugitive and recall us to yourself in ways we cannot understand’ (ibid. IV.4), we know we are in a different moral world. In a secular morality, you may pursue the Good, but need have no fear, or hope, that the Good will pursue you. You may write a book about the Good, but not one addressed to the Good, as Augustine’s Confessions is addressed to God. The Good has become God, an Idea a Person, and this changes everything.1 The religious believer may turn to a secular master for help in many ways, but he must first of all respect what he hears from his divine master: ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me’, ‘If you would enter life, keep the commandments’, ‘You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect’.2

C.S. Lewis nicely captures the experience of one transitioning from a secular to a religious morality. At the time he started his career at Oxford, he was deeply under the influence of the idealism of Bradley and Bosanquet. Reaching a point at which he made a sincere effort to live
out the moral requirements of his philosophy, he found he needed to have ‘continual conscious recourse to what I called Spirit. But the fine, philosophical distinction between this and what ordinary people call “prayer to God” breaks down as soon as you start doing it in earnest. Idealism can be talked, and even felt; it cannot be lived’. And as he pursued this course,

As the dry bones shook and came together in that dreadful valley of Ezekiel’s, so now a philosophical theorem, cerebrally entertained, began to stir and heave and throw off its grave-clothes, and stood upright and became a living presence. I was to be allowed to play at philosophy no longer. … But now what had been an ideal had become a command; and what might not be expected of one? … Total surrender, an absolute leap in the dark, were demanded. … In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms.³

Many, perhaps most, of the moral concepts and judgments Lewis had previously accepted would remain more or less intact in his new view of living well; yet for all that, the nature, purpose, even the feel of the moral life would be radically changed. He had encountered a Person who, he now believed, was the ground of all that is, and all that should be; of course this would affect his whole outlook on reality, and in particular on how he should live. And this sort of experience is common in religious conversions – how could it not be?

So while there may be much ground shared between religious and secular ethics, we must recognize that there will also be radical differences. In what follows, I will first seek to motivate four requirements (not to say the only four) that religion imposes upon conceptions of morality and flourishing. Next, I will briefly outline how deontological conceptions of flourishing can meet these requirements. Then I will turn to the eudaimonistic conception of flourishing as virtue or as the perfection of nature, taking Aquinas as a representative of this view. Here I will look at a number of weighty objections to the claim that this conception of flourishing can meet the four requirements, and show how an advocate of this conception could effectively respond. Finally, I will look at the bearing of some empirical studies upon the question of the relationship between religion and flourishing.

Three points before proceeding. First, while I will maintain that moralities of duty and virtue are both viable from a religious perspective, I will focus largely on the morality of virtue – I shall do so because the claim that it is compatible with a religious outlook is more controversial, for reasons I shall adduce. Second, it would be highly foolish to write about the religious outlook on flourishing; it would be impossible to write about all religious outlooks in a limited space. I will be concentrating on a range of Christian perspectives, and this for two reasons: One is that Christianity is the religion that has been most influential upon Western moral thinking; the other, it is the only religion I would dare to write about. I mean no disrespect to adherents to other faiths by this concentration – quite the reverse. I believe that much of what I say may accord with what adherents to other faiths would say, but leave that to others to judge. Third, it will become clear that the general religious perspective on morality I am taking here is of a traditional sort. I assume that we do not approach religious teachings with our moral views already complete, and reject the ‘hard sayings’ of the former in the light of the latter. Rather, if we are religious, and if our best understanding of religious teachings (and I do not mean by this simply the result of a uniformly literal reading of Scripture, nor do I mean to deny that secular learning can help shape that understanding) does yield up hard sayings, then these, however hard they may be, are to be accepted as regulative for our moral views – otherwise, we risk
Four requirements religion imposes on our conceptions of flourishing

How religious morality will differ from secular will depend, of course, upon how the divine Person is conceived and experienced. In Christian tradition, God is experienced in many ways, central among them as a loving Father, and also (in Christ) as a brother. But I am going to focus on certain other, seemingly more challenging, aspects of the experience of the divine – the experience of God as, e.g., the Holy One of Israel, as the Lord of Hosts. Complementing such ‘creature-consciousness’ is the experience of ‘the holy’ as ‘that which commands our respect … ‘Tu solus sanctus’ is rather a paean of praise, … The object of such praise is not simply absolute might, … but a might that has at the same time the supremest right to make the highest claim to service, and receives praise because it is in an absolute sense worthy to be praised. … it is recognized as possessing in itself objective value that claims our homage’ (ibid. 51–52).

From this compact description of the experience of the holy, which Otto derives from the sacred writings of a range of religious traditions, we can differentiate four elements important to religious life: fear of (awe before) God, obedience to God, love of God above all else, and denial of self. To the extent that this description of religious experience is taken to be veridical with respect to human and divine nature (to the extent that the divine does possess ‘objective value that claims our homage’ and so forth), these four elements will be normative for religious life. And in Christian tradition it is taken to be veridical, on the basis of Scripture, the testimony of saints and mystics, and philosophical argument. Thus we can understand these elements to impose requirements upon, at least, any Christian morality – Christian morality must accord central roles to fear and love of God, obedience to God, and denial of self. Of course, these are not put forward as the only requirements religion imposes upon flourishing – also prominent (and more clearly related to other aspects of God’s personality, if I may so put it, such as God as Father) are requirements to love one’s neighbour as oneself, to love one’s enemies, to pursue holiness, to practise certain virtues, and so forth. But these are the four on which I focus, due to their so clearly distinguishing religious from secular morality, and their seeming so problematic for any eudaimonistic view of flourishing.

Now, while any Christian moralist must meet these four requirements, my assumption will be that she is allowed substantial freedom regarding how she meets them (what is the exact nature of the fear of God, what order is there among the requirements, etc.). Depending upon her religious tradition, there may be exegetical or traditional grounds for reducing this freedom (for holding, e.g., that subordinating love to obedience, as Ockham seems to do, is mistaken); but this issue is one I shall not take up here. So Christian morality, as Christian, must meet these requirements; as morality, it must give an account of living well – of flourishing. Our next questions are, how do the requirements shape the accounts of flourishing? And, is holding a eudaimonistic ethic of flourishing as perfection of nature consistent with meeting them?

Flourishing as obedience

A deontological approach to flourishing (living well by reliably and whole-heartedly performing one’s duty) may seem well placed to address these requirements. But some deontological theories
will not serve. A neo-Hobbesian social contract theory, according to which morality is invented in order to serve the interests of each party to the contract, will not do, for the obvious reason that there is no role for God in such a theory. The same goes, for the same reason, for many neo-Kantian deontological theories. Even if we look at instances of these theories that do reserve some significant role for God – e.g., those of Hobbes and Kant themselves – there is the problem that both allot (in very different ways, of course) too central a role to the self. In Hobbes, although we find claims related to the requirements of fear of and obedience to God, it is self, not God, that is loved above all else (and there is little place for self-denial). And even though Kant says that moral precepts can be understood as divine commands (see Kant 1998: 99), they should not be obeyed because they are divine commands, or because of Who God is; they must, if following them is to be of moral worth, be self-legislated. The centrality of autonomy to Kant’s moral theory renders it incompatible with the four requirements – to obey God because His commands ratify what we already legislate for ourselves is not really to obey God.

Deontologically inclined religious moralists have instead usually looked to one or another version of divine command theory. Such theories of course place a premium upon obedience to God, but typically obedience is actually not the foundational element – it is usually recognized that some explanation of why we should obey God is needed.

One possibility is to base obedience to God upon the fear of God – perhaps in a crude way (God will send us to Hell if we don’t obey …), or perhaps in what seems to me the more interesting and plausible way of construing fear of God as awe before the divine majesty and recognition of our utter dependence upon God as the creator and sustainer of all that is. Either way, such an approach could then go on to meet the requirement to love God by appealing to divinely revealed commands to do just that. The requirement to deny self is also easily met: God could command us to act in ways that are contrary to the perfection of human nature, and in ways that frustrate our deepest desires – the command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, on one plausible reading, is a good example of both. What does flourishing now look like? Living well must be understood as the fulfilment of one’s duties, and as including all and only such attainment of natural goods, and natural goodness, as God should choose to command. This sort of divine command theory could find support in certain elements of Otto’s analysis of religious experience, in numerous Scripture passages (including, e.g., parts of the Book of Job), and in a plausible (although contestable) reading of William of Ockham’s moral theory. It is no doubt open to a number of objections, but it certainly exemplifies one way a religious morality could give an account of living well that meets the four requirements upon which we are focusing.

There is, however, a quite different sort of divine command theory, one that grounds the requirement to obey God upon the love of God, which love is called for because God is Goodness itself. On this view, living well consists essentially in loving God for His own sake, and therefore obeying Him. Fear of God will now chiefly take the form of what the medieval tradition called ‘filial fear’, the fear of offending and distancing oneself from a good and beloved Father. And all of us, like Abraham, must deny ourselves at least in the sense of being ready to set aside our heart’s desires and to forego flourishing (in the sense of perfection of our nature) should God so will it. This (to my mind much more attractive) sort of divine command theory can meet the four requirements, and can also find support in Otto’s analysis of religious experience and in Scripture. Its basic idea, that of founding obedience upon love, has been developed in a number of sophisticated and powerful ways. Perhaps its classic statement is that of the Blessed John Duns Scotus, a statement that has recently been adopted and developed by John Hare; Robert Adams’s ‘modified divine command theory’ offers another, and quite different, variation on the basic idea (see Scotus 1997, Hare 2000, and Adams 1999). These versions of divine command theory are much less susceptible to criticism than are those that
ground obedience upon fear; in particular, they offer plausible ways of answering the worry that divine command theory makes God out to be an arbitrary tyrant. An advocate of this sort of divine command theory may well also be in a position to say that the most central aspect of the perfection of our nature – the perfection of our will, in loving goodness for goodness’s sake, loving God for God’s sake – is indeed of the essence of a flourishing compatible with the four requirements of religious morality. The rest of it, well, it must be laid at God’s feet, to be taken up again only at His command.

Flourishing as perfection of nature

The phrase ‘flourishing as perfection of nature’ should put us in mind of the eudaimonistic virtue ethics of Aristotle and his many followers, one of the most prominent of whom is St. Thomas Aquinas. It may seem odd to ask whether Aquinas’s moral teaching is Christian, but despite his standing as doctor of the Church and his vast influence upon Christian (chiefly, but by no means only, upon Catholic) moral thinking, it is a fair question. There are strong prima facie grounds for thinking that a broadly Scotistic approach is the best a Christian moralist who seeks to honour the four requirements catalogued above can do with respect to the perfection of our nature. First, it may seem clear that the love of God, or at least the love of God above all else and for His own sake, is incompatible with eudaimonism. Second, it may seem even clearer that fear of and unconditional obedience to God, together with denial of self, must be seen by a eudaimonist as an instance of what Christine Swanton calls ‘hyperobjective vice’. Finally, and most clearly of all, it may seem, denial of self is incompatible with perfection of one’s nature as a goal.

Doubtless, many versions of eudaimonism would not serve the religious moralist well. Some are self-centred or even egoistic, and will not be able to respect the requirement to love God above all else. The most influential version ever formulated, that of Aristotle himself, is not, I think, susceptible to that particular charge, but it nevertheless is to be conceded that Christian eudaimonism will, in important respects, not be Aristotelian. While the Christian may, with Aristotle, conceive the perfection of our nature as some sort of union between man and God, both God and man, and thus also their union, are understood quite differently. God is active, creating and sustaining, commanding and bestowing grace, and is always ‘pursuing the fugitive’; man is made in the divine image but fallen (both great and wretched, as Pascal has it), sunk below his created station, yet offered redemption and called to a union with God beyond his natural capacities. Of all this, Scotus and Ockham are well aware, but of course Aquinas is too. We can perhaps best see how flourishing as perfection of nature is consistent with meeting the four requirements, by looking at how Aquinas’s eudaimonistic ethic does meet them. This I will facilitate by responding to the three worries raised above, in turn.

The first is easily enough disposed of. Aquinas holds that rational creatures naturally love God, the universal good, more than they love themselves (‘from natural love angel and man alike love God before themselves and with a greater love. Otherwise, if either of them loved self more than God, it would follow that natural love would be perverse, and that it would not be perfected but destroyed by charity’9). Now, it is true that human beings sometimes sacrifice themselves for others they love, or for a cause they hold to be just, or indeed, in the case of martyrs, for God. But such acts are comparatively rare, and the claim that loving God (or any good understood to be greater than ourselves) more than we love ourselves is natural (rather than a, perhaps meritorious, violent act of self-sacrifice) may seem excessively optimistic. I think Aquinas would agree, so long as we are speaking of human nature as we find it. But that nature, he thinks, is fallen. As such, it bears what tradition regards as the ‘four wounds of nature’: ignorance, malice,
weakness, and concupiscence (Aquinas 1981, Ia-IIae, qu. 85, art. 3). These wounds, a removal of the proper ordering of our faculties resulting in tendencies toward ignorance of what is truly good, and toward willing what we know to be evil, explain why it is difficult (seemingly against our nature) to love the good (and ultimately God) for its own sake. Given the doctrine of Original Sin, we can see how one can consistently hold that the love of God above all else perfects our nature, even while it may involve (psychological) violence toward oneself. (As this may suggest, the falleness of our nature will be important also in speaking to the requirement to deny oneself.)

What of the worry that fear of and unconditional obedience to God, together with denial of self, must be seen as an instance of what Christine Swanton calls ‘hyperobjective vice’? Swanton describes this as a vice that involves adopting a totally wrong (distorted) perspective. It is a state which is not a properly human objective standpoint. Specifically, it is not true on my view that the more detached one is from one’s personal position in the world, one’s human character, and so on, the more (virtuously) objective one is. (Swanton 2003, 183)

One form this vice takes is self-effacement, in which state one ‘overplays the demands of the world’, and ‘abases oneself before a “Master”, by comparison to whom one is contemptible’, or even a ‘miserable sinner’ (Swanton 2003: 187–88, and see 188n21, where she refers to St. Teresa of Avila’s Life). I should note that Swanton’s criticisms target neither religious objectivity alone, as she also mentions Colin McGinn’s notion of a ‘cosmic perspective’ from which human concerns seem not to matter much (ibid. 181), nor religious objectivity as such (but only a ‘certain perspective of God’). But Swanton’s point must be reckoned with, since this perspective of God (as a Master before Whom one is to abase oneself etc.) is precisely the one we are concerned with here. At any rate, the God Whom we must fear and absolutely obey, and for Whose sake we must deny ourselves, sounds like a Master before Whom one is to abase oneself. If the four requirements call for self-effacement, and if this self-effacement is a vice, then honouring the four requirements would seem to be vicious and thus incompatible with flourishing as the perfection of nature.

While I want to set aside the negatively connoted term ‘abasement’, I think a kind of self-effacement is required in a religious morality. Recall Otto’s point about ‘creature-consciousness’ (and he cites in this context Abraham’s appeal to the Lord, which begins with describing himself as being ‘but dust and ashes’ (Genesis 18:27), and Peter’s ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord’ (Luke 5:8)). But this is not hyperobjectivity: It does not involve detachment ‘from one’s personal position in the world, one’s human character’; rather, it starts from precisely there, but now assesses that position in relation to the God Who has revealed Himself to the person. If an aspiring young power hitter were to meet, say, Henry Aaron, a certain degree of self-effacement – humility and respect, even a sort of awe, together with a great openness to counsel – would be entirely appropriate. It would reflect an objective appraisal of the situation. And with all respect to Aaron, in a meeting of creature and Creator, a much more radical form of self-effacement – a sense of unworthiness, fear, and obedience – would be called for, and called for by, again, an objective appraisal of the situation.

Now as Swanton says, proper objectivity is best seen as an aspect of practical wisdom, and practical wisdom best seen as operating in and through the virtues of character (Swanton 2003: 179). It is thus instructive to note that Aquinas’s eudemism recognizes as virtues traits tending toward self-effacement before God: First, he recognizes the (non-Aristotelian) virtue of humility, which denotes ‘in the first place man’s submission to God’ (Aquinas 1981, Ila-IIae, qu. 161,
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art. 2, AD 3); Aquinas goes on to note with approval Augustine’s linking of humility to poverty of spirit and the gift of fear, understood as reverence for God. The humble man, he says (ibid. qu. 161, art. 1, AD 1), is ‘inclined to the lowest place’ – here he too cites Abraham’s recognition that before the Lord he is ‘but dust and ashes’ (worth noting, though, is his point that inclination to the lowest place can be vicious, if for example a man ‘compares himself to senseless beasts’ (here he is citing the forty-eighth Psalm); creature-consciousness, for Aquinas, must remain objective about what sort of creature one is, namely a rational one made in the divine image). Second, Aquinas recognizes obedience as a virtue subordinate to justice – justice is the virtue whereby one renders to each his due; obedience is the aspect of justice whereby one renders what is due to one’s superior. And, ‘all wills, by a kind of necessity of justice, are bound to obey the divine command’ (ibid. qu. 104, art. 4). Obedience can be recognized as a virtue, as an aspect of the perfection of human nature, when we keep in view that humans are essentially in relation to others (we are social animals). Part of being good is being good as a citizen under political rulers, a son or daughter under parents, a creature under the Creator. All of these relationships call for some degree of self-effacement; the last, if God and man are anything like what Aquinas thought, for a great degree (although again, not so great a degree that one equate oneself to ‘senseless beasts’). Humility, reverent fear, and obedience can indeed express ‘objectivity in virtue’, and thus can be seen as contributing to flourishing as the perfection of nature.

What of the requirement to deny oneself? Right after first predicting His Passion, Jesus says that one wishing to be His disciple must ‘deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will gain it’ (Matthew 16:24–25). A Christian account of flourishing, of living well, is, clearly, accountable to Christ’s own teaching on how to live. The question here, of course, is how one pursuing flourishing as the perfection of nature could claim to be at the same time following the requirement to deny oneself.

I want to approach this question by first investigating the relationship between living virtuously (pursuing perfection) and self-restraint (one form of denying oneself). Augustine, famously, portrays the life of virtue as a constant struggle: temperance must battle temptation, courage fear, and so forth (see Augustine 1998, XIX.4). Now although Aquinas adopts Augustine’s definition of virtue (see Aquinas 1981, Ia-Iae, qu. 55, art. 4), he also adapts it, and arguably his understanding of virtue is more Aristotelian than Augustinian. But of course Aristotelian virtue is ‘second nature’, and if one is virtuous, one acts well not only reliably, but also with ease and pleasure. ‘Virtue’ as a struggle seems really to be just continence, a step on the way to virtue, but not virtue itself (indeed ‘self-restraint’ is not a bad translation of Aristotle’s enkrateia, or Aquinas’s continentia). The image of the flourishing agent that seems to come into focus is one of a person living a fully integrated life, acting well and enjoying it, brimming with psychological health and well-being, a poster-child for happiness studies textbooks. But, where is the self-denial? What cross is there for this person to bear?

But this image needs adjustment, even for Aristotle. For one thing, he allows that acting well can be a struggle even for the virtuous. The brave person, e.g., does feel fear, and although he will endure death or injury when it is noble to do so, he will always find it painful, and find the loss of his good life most regrettable (Aristotle 1999, III.7, 9). So there must be some degree of self-restraint even in the virtuous. Furthermore, Aristotle recognizes that rational argument will not move people of less than virtuous character to act well; law, which ‘has the power that compels’, is needed (ibid. X.9). Now if we recognize that the virtues can be possessed in varying degrees, then there will be those who are virtuous, and thus no longer need pervasive external legal compulsion to motivate acting well, but who nonetheless must compel themselves – must restrain unruly fears or desires that still come to the fore in very difficult situations.
This possibility is an implication of the recent trend in virtue ethics that sees ‘virtue’ as a ‘threshold’ or ‘satis’ concept, such that there is an ideal of perfect virtue that is rarely if ever attained, and actual agents are accounted virtuous if they approximate closely enough to the ideal (see Swanton 2003; Russell 2009). For, if one is virtuous by approximating to an ideal one falls short of, one must still be subject to some temptations to stray, and thus one must exercise some self-restraint. I think Aristotle recognizes degrees of virtue, and thus something along the lines of this recent trend. However that may be, a Christian eudaimonist can recognize this, and Aquinas certainly does, holding that a virtuous agent may be better inclined to the act of one virtue than to that of another; and that of two virtuous agents one may be more inclined to the act of some virtue than is the other (see Aquinas 1981, Ia-IIae, qu. 66, art. 2, response and ad 2). This means that at least some virtuous agents will be less than perfectly inclined to the acts of at least some virtues, and this means that at least some self-restraint, some level of self-denial, can be part of the life of virtue.

In fact, Aquinas gives us grounds to think that some self-restraint is needed in the fields of all the virtues, and in the lives of all virtuous agents during earthly life. Commenting on St. Paul’s saying that ‘I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind’ (Rom. 7: 23), he maintains that as a result of Original Sin and the resulting deprivation of Original Justice, we are subject to the lex fomitis peccati, the ‘law’ of the tinder of sin. This deprives us of our proper dignity (Aquinas 1981, Ia-IIae, qu. 91, art. 6), and results in the four wounds of nature (ignorance, malice, weakness, and concupiscence) discussed above, wounds that weaken the subject of each of the cardinal virtues, and that are never fully healed in this life.

So, conceiving flourishing as the perfection of nature, a perfection to be attained by the acquisition and exercise of virtue, is consistent with a recognition that self-restraint, and thus some degree of denial of self, is endemic to earthly life (of course, a recognition of an inescapable need for self-restraint is not consistent with the idea that we attain perfection in this life, but Aquinas has already argued on other grounds that we cannot attain perfection in this life (see ibid. Ia-IIae, qu. 5, art. 3), and in any event no Christian need be put off by this). We can now turn to the question of whether a theory that conceives living well in terms of perfection of nature can do full justice to the requirement of self-denial.

This question is confronted directly by Jacques Maritain in his juxtaposition of the doctrine of St. Thomas with that of St. John of the Cross, who spoke of ‘nothing, nothing, nothing, even to leave one’s skin and all else for Christ’ (cited at Maritain 1932/1995: 352). As Maritain comments, ‘the best thing the creature can do is to cast himself off, rid himself of self, renounce his own proper operations and make a void within himself’, a void to be filled by God (ibid.). This is as strong a statement of the doctrine of self-denial as one could care to have. But as Maritain points out, St. John as a mystic is not speaking of the ontological order, but of the psychological: ‘His point of view is not that of the structure of our substance and its faculties: it is the point of view of our ownership of ourselves in the free use and moral exercise of our activity’ (ibid. 353). St. John, he says, knows well that grace perfects nature; the nothingness, the death, he calls for is not the destruction or denial of our created nature, but the death of self-surrender – the very thing called for by such virtues as humility and obedience. The surrender itself is virtuous, perfective of our nature as creatures; psychologically, it is experienced as death, as void rather than just as openness, as denial rather than fulfilment of the self, primarily due to our sinfulness. Commenting on St. John’s notion of the ‘night of the spirit’, Maritain writes,

To remove the human rust at the centre of the soul, must it not be made red-hot in the fire like an empty cauldron, and be in some manner destroyed and annihilated...
In this way do the passive purifications of the spirit remove the deep inveterate stains, as old as Adam, which are woven into our very selves …

(Maritain 1932/1995: 386)

It is our wounded nature, our sinfulness and especially Original Sin, that explains why the pursuit of the perfection of our nature can seem so ‘unnatural’, can, psychologically, involve violence toward our own nature, radical denial of the self. Yet what psychologically seems like the total surrendering of the self is at the same time virtuous activity; it is ‘to be in supreme act of attentive and loving immobility’ (ibid. 348); it is to direct one’s loving attention toward God. And let us note that this path of self-surrender is not all suffering and death; after all, although ‘whoever would save his life will lose it … whoever loses his life for my sake will find it’ (Mt. 16:25). The self-denying attention to God is often rewarded with the experience of love and joy (Maritain cites St. John’s sensory imagery of ‘wondrous fragrance and sweetness’; Maritain 1932/1995: 365–66).

Now, the point of the foregoing is not that a religious eudaimonist must be in all respects a faithful Thomist (such as Maritain was); the point is more to offer a ‘the actual proves the possible’ sort of defence of the idea that eudaimonism (understood as counselling the pursuit of flourishing as the perfection of human nature) can meet the four requirements that religion imposes upon moral theory. Of course I have not here defended the idea exhaustively, but it does at least seem that some of the strongest objections to the idea can be answered. In closing this section, it is worth noting that some of the moves made above may be of use to the religious deontologist as well. It is sometimes alleged, for example, that divine command theory is demeaning to human agents. But, if obedience to God is virtuous and thus consistent with the pursuit of human perfection, it is hard to see how it would really be demeaning. It can seem demeaning only to those infected with pride (i.e., to all of us).

Religion, flourishing, and some empirical studies

In this section, I want to ask first about the relationship between religion and two things connected with flourishing (welfare and moral conduct), and about the bearing of some empirical findings upon how we should understand this relationship; and second about the implications of evolutionary theory for the plausibility of the Christian eudaimonist’s dependence upon the doctrine of Original Sin. I am concerned with possible modus tollens arguments against religious conceptions of flourishing that meet the four requirements. The arguments’ form would of course be: if X, then Y; ~Y; therefore, ~X. Here, X serves as a placeholder for such claims as ‘Religious moral practice is compatible with flourishing in eudaimonistic fashion’, or ‘Religious conceptions (or eudaimonistic religious conceptions) of morality and flourishing are tenable’; and Y stands for such claims as ‘The successful practitioner of religious morality will be psychologically happy (since flourishing implies psychological happiness)’, ‘Religious devotion will promote the moral goodness of devotees’, and ‘We can accept the doctrine of Original Sin’. In the first case, I will deny the truth of the conditional; in the second, I will point out how hard it would be to prove (or disprove) the truth of the denial of the consequent of the conditional; in the third, I will show that the argument commits a fallacy of equivocation.

First, there is the matter of the relationship between religion and welfare or psychological happiness, which is usually understood to be connected in some close way with flourishing (eudaimonism would typically see welfare as an aspect, or a natural concomitant, of flourishing). There is a commonly held view that religious devotion tends to make people guilt-ridden, judgmental of self and others, and generally unhappy. No doubt it can do these things, although
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in point of fact religious devotion seems to be positively correlated with a sense of well-being (see e.g. Kenny and Kenny 2006). But how important is this correlation? It seems to me that almost the right attitude is struck by Lord Brideshead in his conversation with Charles Ryder as they clean out Sebastian’s rooms after he’s been withdrawn by his family from Oxford (due in large part to his drunkenness):

‘I believe God prefers drunkards to a lot of respectable people.’

‘For God’s sake’, I [Charles] said, for I was near to tears that morning, ‘why bring God into everything? … It seems to me that without your religion Sebastian would have the chance to be a happy and healthy man’.

‘It’s arguable’, said Brideshead. ‘Do you think he will need this elephant’s foot again?’

(Waugh 1945: 145)

I say ‘almost the right attitude’ because, as readers of Waugh know, Brideshead never strikes quite the right attitude toward anything. But, set his social ineptitude aside and note the point: he is unconcerned by the possibility that religious devotion may lead to psychological unhappiness; living well, from a religious perspective (here a very traditional Catholic one), does not centrally concern itself with one’s social respectability or with how good one feels about one’s life; devotion to God and neighbour are central (to be sure, Sebastian was not presently doing well on this head either); the rest is so much fluff. Something like Brideshead’s attitude properly follows from the acceptance of the requirement of self-denial, and it is clearly consistent with a deontological religious conception of flourishing (or indeed with, say, a Kantian one). Things are not quite so straightforward with a eudaimonist conception – given the connection between being virtuous and enjoying virtuous activity, we would expect a life of flourishing to be also a life of psychological happiness. So here is the modus tollens argument: If religious moral practice is compatible with flourishing in eudaimonistic fashion, then the successful practitioner of religious morality will be psychologically happy (since flourishing implies psychological happiness); but it is not the case that the successful practitioner of religious morality will be psychologically happy (there is no reliable link between such practice and such happiness); therefore, etc.

But here, the conditional is false – it is false not just for religious eudaimonism, but for eudaimonism generally. A eudaimonist can grant that in this life circumstances may be such as to separate the virtuous life from the enjoyment that naturally attends it; it may even be, in some cultural settings, that such separation is common – if so, that is simply a cross to be borne. Thus Philippa Foot, in her discussion of the ‘Letter Writers’ (German dissidents facing execution under Hitler’s regime), notes that in such circumstances what she calls ‘deep happiness’ is no longer a possibility even for the virtuous (see Foot 2001: 94–96); see also the discussion of Priam and the bearing of fortune on happiness in Aristotle 1999, I.9–10). And the Christian eudaimonist seems even better placed to account for the possible separation of virtue from enjoyment of life, for all the reasons considered above in the discussion of Maritain’s attempted reconciliation of St. Thomas and St. John of the Cross. The positive correlation between religious devotion and reported psychological happiness is a nice result for the religious moralist, but the plausibility of her moral theory is not dependent upon it, even if she is a eudaimonist.

The second point concerns the relationship between religious devotion and moral conduct. If Ryder had charged that ‘without your religion Sebastian would have the chance to be a good man’, an unruffled ‘It’s arguable’ would have been completely off the mark; the religious moralist holds that religion teaches us how to live well, how to flourish, and being a good person is of the essence of flourishing on both deontological and eudaimonist conceptions of religious morality (although of course the good person is differently conceived). In his Breaking
the Spell, Daniel Dennett maintains that religion does not do well in this task. Dennett has at the head of the chapter on religion and morality this well-known line from Steven Weinberg: ‘Good people will do good things, and bad people will do bad things; but for good people to do bad things – that takes religion’ (Dennett 2006: 279). Of course, no one thinks this is literally true – lots of things can lead good people to do bad things (a secular political ideology, for instance). But surely it contains a grain of truth – religious devotion can lead an otherwise good person into fanaticism, intolerance, or violence. Yet as Freeman Dyson notes in his review of Dennett’s book, there is a corollary: ‘And for bad people to do good things – that [also] takes religion’ (Dyson 2006). And while Dennett in effect admits this point in a generous moment (see Dennett 2006: 54–55), he insists that there is no evidence to support the claim that there is any significant positive correlation between religious affiliation and moral conduct in the American population as a whole (ibid. 279–80). So here is the argument: If religious conceptions of morality and flourishing are tenable, then religious devotion will promote the moral goodness of devotees; religious devotion fails to promote the moral goodness of devotees; therefore, etc. Now, as Dennett points out, work is ongoing in this field, and since the publication of his book, Arthur Brooks has made the case that there is a very significant positive correlation between religious devotion and moral conduct in at least one field, that of charitable giving (see Brooks 2007).

I am in no position to summarize the trends in empirical findings or rule on their import; here I want to make just two closely related points. First, to grasp their import (to grasp whether they support the conditional’s consequent or its denial), one would need to look at the studies and their methods very carefully. For example, do they control for typical differences in the socio-economic status of, say, atheists and evangelicals? How do they determine who is ‘religious’ – is anyone who self-identifies as believing in God thereby religious? Must she attend weekly religious services, or self-identify as devout? What might be worrisome to the religious moralist would be a negative or insignificant correlation between devout religiosity and moral conduct, although even in such a case there would be many issues needing to be settled, one of which brings us to the second point: the interpretation of results typically, and probably unavoidably, will involve making some substantive and controversial moral judgments. For example, suppose that devout Catholics use contraception less frequently than non-religious people – is that a positive correlation between religious devotion and moral conduct or not? Again, when Dennett puts ‘contemplative monks’ on a par with ‘people who devote their lives to improving their stamp collections’ and says that ‘the best that can be said of them is that they manage to stay out of trouble’ (Dennett 2006: 306), he is clearly supposing that moral conduct must benefit society in a material way; that is moral conduct on his view. But on the monks’ view, contemplative prayer is an exemplary form of moral conduct. If God exists and is as Christian tradition says, surely the monks are right (and if He does not, the religious moralist will have much larger worries than statistical correlations). Which view should figure in interpreting results?

So, while the religious moralist may smile at Brooks’s findings and cringe at Dennett’s report that Christians fill our jails at a rate proportionate to their representation in the general population (Dennett 2006: 279), it seems clear that empirical studies all by themselves are not going to answer the question, Does religion contribute to living well? Too many philosophically and theologically contestable issues hang about the question to turn it over entirely to the social scientists.

Finally, in arguing that flourishing as the perfection of human nature could meet the four requirements, I had to draw fairly heavily upon the notion of Original Sin. But it might be thought that science, and in particular evolutionary theory, has done away with at least that...
doctrine. I do not think that is actually the case at all. There have been a number of interesting attempts to show the compatibility of evolution and various understandings of Original Sin, even wholly traditional ones (see e.g. Kemp 2011 and Mullen 2007). But suppose for the sake of argument that no such attempt succeeds, and that the progress of science really has rendered untenable belief in any historical Fall resulting from a first sin. In this case the modus tollens argument would run as follows: If a eudaimonist religious conception of morality and flourishing is tenable, then we must be able to accept the doctrine of Original Sin; it is not the case that we can accept this doctrine; therefore, etc.

But this argument does not succeed in derailing the religious moralist who relies on Original Sin to show how her notion of flourishing meets the four requirements, for it depends upon an equivocal use of the term, ‘the doctrine of Original Sin’. G.K. Chesterton once wrote that Original Sin is ‘the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved’ (Chesterton 1986: 217). Like many other of his striking turns of phrase, this one is hyperbolic, but has a sense in which it is clearly true. He does not mean that we can prove that Adam and Eve committed a first sin (what theologians call the peccatum originale originans); he means that it can be proven, or even just easily seen by looking around, that we are fallen, sinful by nature, as if bearing the stain of Original Sin (peccatum originale originatum) (see Kemp 2011 for further discussion of these two senses of ‘Original Sin’). This innate tendency to wrong-doing and vice (whether one wishes to call it sinfulness or not), and not a calamitous historical first sin, is all that the religious moralist is relying on here. And surely she is entitled to rely on it. Again, look around, listen to the news, study the statistics on crime or lying or adultery, or stay closer to home (I see ample proof of human sinfulness in myself). What is more, the evolutionary theory that is the source of the objection to Original Sin as peccatum originale originans may itself come to the rescue of Original Sin as peccatum originale originatum – for example, evolutionary psychology lends support to the idea that the seven deadly vices of Christian tradition are, due to our evolutionary heritage, quite ‘natural’ to us (see Chapman 2004). So, the conditional claim of the modus tollens argument is true only with respect to a weakened doctrine (embracing Original Sin only in the sense of peccatum originale originatum), while the denial of the consequent is true (on the grant I made for the sake of argument) only for the full-blooded traditional doctrine (which embraces both senses) – which is to say that the argument fails.

Conclusion

At the outset, I pointed out that the most important difference between a secular and a religious morality was that the latter, unlike the former, finds its ground in the relation between each human person and a Divine Person or Persons, and argued that such a ground leads to the recognition of four requirements any religious, and particularly any Christian, morality must meet: fear of God, obedience to God, love of God, and denial of self. I then showed how religious moralities of both deontological and eudaimonistic forms could meet these requirements, and how such commitments affect the shape of such moralities and their account of flourishing or living well – the former gravitate toward one or another sort of divine command theory; the latter toward a recognition that our (social) human nature finds its ultimate perfection only in a virtuous relationship with God. I also tried to indicate how advocates of one or another religious morality could respond to certain objections (e.g., the objection that fear and obedience exemplify ‘hyperobjective vice’, and objections based upon empirical studies). As a result, I hope it can be seen that various religious understandings of flourishing are coherent, plausible given their basic assumptions, and consistent with human dignity. Whether religious moralists should tend toward deontology or eudaimonism is an intramural debate, turning on further debates
about God’s nature and the nature of His freedom, which I have not tried to resolve here. Whether moralists should actually be religious, of course, is a further issue into which I have not delved deeply. It seems to me, though, not an issue to be resolved on moral grounds – there are no compelling moral objections to obedience to and fear of (awe before) God, and so forth. If God, God anything like the one conceived by religious tradition, exists, then religious moralists is just what we should be. 13

Notes
1 It is worth noting that the part of the Catechism of the Catholic Church that deals most extensively with morality is not called ‘On Human Flourishing’ or ‘The Moral Life’; it is called ‘Life in Christ’, and contains such statements as this: ‘The moral law is the work of divine Wisdom. Its biblical meaning can be defined as fatherly instruction, God’s pedagogy’ (#1950).
2 Quotations from Exodus 20:2–3, Matthew 19:17, and Matthew 5:48, respectively. All Scriptural quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version.
3 Lewis (1956: 226–29). Lewis, like Augustine, experienced his conversion partly in terms of being a fugitive pursued to the ground.
4 It is a commonplace of Christian tradition (although it is not universally held) that natural reason unaided by revelation can know many truths, including moral truths (thus the respect, even deference, paid by the Christian theologians of the high middle ages to the philosophers of ancient Greece and of the Jewish and Islamic traditions). This might seem to present a problem for the claim above that revealed truths are regulative with respect to morality – what if revelation conflicts with a moral truth known by reason? It is, however, another commonplace of the tradition that this cannot actually happen. What can and does happen is that what seems to be a deliverance of reason conflicts with what seems to be a deliverance of revelation. In some such cases, resolution is reached; in others, conflict drags on; but in all, patience, study, charity, and (from the religious moralist) prayer for guidance are needed.
5 And this sort of experience is not lacking in the New Testament; see e.g., Matthew 17:1–9.
6 I cannot here do justice to Otto’s rich analysis of religious experience, but want to note that what I am calling ‘fear of God’ is not best understood as anything like ‘fear of a tiger’; Otto prefers terms such as ‘dread’ and ‘awe’ (see Otto 1917/1950, chapter IV). And relevant to ‘love of God’ is his discussion of how Christ revealed that ‘the Holy One of Israel’ is also ‘our Father’ (ibid. 83–84).
7 For relevant Scriptural passages, see for example: Fear of God: ‘The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight’ (Prov. 9:10). Obedience to God: ‘If you would enter life, keep the commandments’ (Matthew 9:17). Love of God: ‘you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’ (Deuteronomy 6:5; cf. Matthew 22:36–40). Denial of Self: ‘If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me’ (Matthew 16:24). These brief references, without context and comment, are not put forward as ‘proof texts’; I believe the authority of the four requirements within (at least) Christianity is widely enough recognized that a reminder of them, rather than a proof, suffices.
8 For an interesting recent discussion of filial fear, see DeYoung (2012) (which focuses upon Aquinas’s take on such fear).
9 Aquinas (1981, Ia, qu. 60, art. 5). That grace perfects rather than destroys nature is a Thomistic axiom laid down, e.g., at Ia, qu. 1, art. 8, AD 2.
10 Readers interested in this subject might begin by consulting Paul (2005) (a study supportive of Dennett’s contentions), Moreno-Riaño et al. (2006) (a methodological critique of Paul’s study), and Haidt (2012), Chapter 11 (which contains arguments for a fairly general positive correlation between religious practice and moral conduct).
11 Another issue concerns Robert Adams’s point that ‘the Holy has rough edges’ (here he is building on Otto 1950), and that the behaviour of saints may often seem ‘bizarre’ or ‘unnatural’ (Adams 1999: 52–53). Ratcheting down from saints to just plain good people, it does not seem implausible to suggest that there may be many good religious people with rough edges, where the rough edges tend to show up in statistical surveys while the core goodness does not (the ‘hooker with the heart of gold’, like Sonia Marmeladov in Crime and Punishment, for example). Still another issue arises from the fact that Christianity is ‘a religion for sinners’ (see Dyson 2006) in the sense that devotion to it is especially attractive.
to the desperate seeking help, the guilt-ridden seeking reform. If that is so, it could be the case that Christians perform no better than nonbelievers according to the measures of a study, while still being the case that their religious devotion has often led to dramatic moral improvements. Of course, it could turn out that a closer look would make things even worse for the religious moralist. My present point is just that such a closer look is necessary, whatever it would reveal.

12 Here is a worry though: Suppose that it is granted that our nature is to some degree ‘fallen’ (in the sense that most or all of us are to some degree inclined to vice) but not granted that there was an actual, historical Fall. In that case, how could it be held that the striving to overcome such ‘natural viciousness’ via self-denial and so forth is a striving to perfect our nature, rather than to overcome it? Here I can only hint at a response: As Michael Thompson has argued, the nature of a living thing is not determined by how most things of that kind are; it is determined by how that form of life survives, propagates, and generally does its thing – ‘although “the mayfly” breeds shortly before dying [that is its nature], most mayflies die long before breeding’ (Thompson 2008: 68); thus it may also be that although ‘the human’ is virtuous [that is its nature], most (even all) humans have tendencies that conflict with virtue, and any human can attain virtue (and thus perfect her nature) only through struggle and self-denial.

13 I wish to thank my colleague, Mathew Lu, for valuable comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.