From Field to Forest? Exploring Limits of Virtue Theory

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(draft paper for conference on
'Varieties of Virtue',
Oriel College, Oxford, 6-8 January 2015)

1 Introduction: Mapping an ethical-spiritual terrain

I'll introduce what I want to explore in this paper by reference to three symbols through which Charles Taylor tries to capture what he sees as Iris Murdoch's distinctive contribution to Anglophone moral philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century. Murdoch, Taylor suggests, helped to release the discipline from the 'corral' - that is to say, from confinement to questions about *what it is right to do,* especially in terms of one's obligations to others - and to move it out to the 'field', where more expansive questions emerge about *how it is best to live.* Taylor's deeming of this move as an *advance* for ethical theorising relates to his strictures on deontological and utilitarian perspectives and his sympathy with a conception of ethical life as defined by aspirations for a full human flourishing which would be unachievable without the exercise of a range of different virtues. But Taylor sees Murdoch's work as *also* exemplifying a *further* move: out of the corral, to be sure, but beyond the field too - and yonder into the 'forest'. This term symbolises a place in which flourishing, as the overarching good or ultimate end of human living, which frames the horizon of the field, may be relativised or even renounced. This shift would occur through an opening in ethical life to the possibility of a radical self-transformation through responsiveness to *what can most fully inspire one's love* – when this is a supremely high good that is irreducible to a rich or flourishing life (and might indeed lead one voluntarily to endure suffering or even death). My purpose in the paper is to examine what might be involved in a moral topography that makes space for 'forest' as well as field and, more particularly, to examine the implications for how virtue is be understood if the forest is acknowledged as defining the ethical horizon of some people who, as it were, enter and explore it - if it does not indeed form a more or less unexplored hinterland of all human ethical experience.

I need, first, to elucidate the meaning of 'forest', the perhaps evocative image but hardly perspicuous concept that I have introduced to commence the discussion. In Taylor's own terms, it may be best to begin with the more tractable ground of the field and to notice that some construals of what lies there are more conducive than others to allowing the forest to be accessed or even to come into view. The field is the area in which people seek to live rewarding or fulfilled lives in the light of some more or less explicit conception of what it is for a human life to flourish or go well (which,

without annulling their duties to others, provides the wider context within which these duties have meaning and force). What Taylor calls the 'life goods' that constitute or conduce to flourishing may be many and varied, including the enjoyment, for example, of a happy family life, purposeful and reasonably well remunerated work, solid friendships, a range of interests and pastimes, or devotion to a political or other cause. But let us agree that key among life goods is a set of personal qualities, comprising most importantly such virtues of character as courage, truthfulness, justice, generosity, and temperance - qualities that are not indeed separable from but rather already embodied in and required by any kind of family-life, work, friendship or political commitment that has any likelihood of proving genuinely fulfilling. What makes these life goods *good* or how are we to understand the flourishing that they comprise? A significant element of any Aristotelian answer to this question will invoke the notion of the function (*ergon*) of a specific kind of being, understanding the flourishing of any being of that kind as occurring to the extent that it fulfils this function well, whether (with some analogical likeness to a knife or a lawnmower), it be a dog, a starling, a cherry tree, a rhodo-dendron - or a human being. We might call this element 'naturalistic' in the sense that it cleaves to the biological order of living things and appeals to empirical regularities amenable to any third person observer, while not discounting of course that human beings are animals to which language and reasoning are natural. Not only is this element Aristotelian (in the sense that a strong basis for it is to be found in Aristotle's own texts and that it has featured prominently in recent work in 'virtue ethics' inspired by those texts); it also has strong claims for inclusion in any convincing account of the ethical life of humans. It is not an element, however, that is likely to lead us to posit anything that is gestured to by the symbol of the forest.

Now Taylor's own conception of what we meet in the field of ethics gives a strong role to what he calls 'strong evaluation'. As ethical agents, we cannot avoid making discriminations, with regard to actions, feelings, desires and states, in terms of qualitative distinctions between what is worthy, weighty, admirable and deserving of emulation, on the one hand, and what is discreditable, trivial, base, or to be shunned on the other; it is such discriminations that most crucially form our self-understandings and thereby constitute our identities as persons. These 'strong' discriminations have a binding character that is absent from the 'weaker' preferences and aversions of what may be our actually occurrent desires: commanding our admiration and assent, they warrant, if necessary, the redirection and reshaping of these desires. As life goods, the virtues, are paradigm examples of what we evaluate strongly in this Taylorian sense. But it is a key point in Taylor's analysis that in order to understand adequately the goodness of life goods - and accordingly of virtues - we must also factor in what he calls 'constitutive goods', which are 'features of ourselves, or the world, or God, such

that their being what they are is essential to the life goods being good.'[1]. While lying for the most part in the background of our moral awareness, constitutive goods are those realities that matter most to us, most deeply move us or most fully evoke our love - thereby inspiring and empowering us to live out, in our or doing and being, the virtues that they inform and animate. Knowledge and love are reciprocally linked here. Articulating a constitutive good - in which philosophical discourse cannot displace narrative depiction of paradigm figures or appreciative attention to examples and, in any case, can itself make sense only in the context of background understandings and acquired habits - can serve to strengthen our attachment to it. But, no less, appreciating and being attached to what is good about a good 'can be an essential condition of making finer discriminations about what it means to realize it'[2] (which relates to Aristotle's claim that while the deliberative and discriminatory powers of *phronesis* direct our actions, these powers themselves presuppose an overarching and abiding commitment to the goods towards which they direct us).

In relation to Aristotle, specifically, Taylor's analysis points to our being animals with *logos* as the constitutive good of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. There is something about the status of this reality of being a logos-bearing animal that deserves to compel our greatest respect, even awe, and to inspire us to realise it most fully in our actions and lives. A concept in the *Ethics* that would then come to the fore - as in some respects even more important than *ergon* - is *to kalon*. This term, whose primary meaning (in Liddel and Scott) is 'beautiful' or 'fair', is usually rendered in translations of the *Ethics* as the 'noble' or 'fine'. A strongly evaluative notion in Taylor's sense, it is explicitly distinguished by Aristotle from the pleasant and the useful and points to the quality of a virtuous action as being worthy of being done for its own sake - that is to say, as a component of a higher, more noble way of life: to be done 'for its own sake' is to be done 'for the sake of the noble, since this is the end aimed at by virtue'.[3] A purely naturalistic account of Aristotle's ethical thought that sees virtue as contributing to human flourishing, where this flourishing is seen as the functional realisation of inborn capabilities akin to what can be identified in other animals when they are in rude good health, misses something essential in this thought. It misses precisely that element to which the use of *to kalon* should draw out attention, that is to say, an element of intrinsic, compelling value - compelling because a failure on our part to respond to it would show us up as lacking in the most essential ethical sensitivity. If Aristotle's own sense of the exalted dignity of a human being as a *zoon logon*

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[1] Charles Taylor, 'Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy', in Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker eds. *Iris Murdoch and the Search for the Human Good* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 12
[2] Taylor, 'Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy', 14.
[3] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, lll, 7, 1115b11-14.

echon can be taken as the constitutive good of his ethical writing, we should perhaps balance this thought with two other complementary considerations. First, relative to the highest beings - such as god and the heavenly bodies - our status is incomparably lower; or rather it is as high as it is precisely because we ourselves have a share in the godly through our being endowed with *logos* and *nous*, the 'divine spark' in us.[4] And, second, Aristotle's own sense of nature as applied to living beings which do not possess *logos* or *nous* is imbued with a sense of awe - as is demonstrated in this famous passage from one of his biological works:

> We must not recoil … from examination of the humbler animals. Every realm of nature is marvellous: and just as Heracleitus is said to have spoken to the visitors, who were wanting to meet him but stopped as they were approaching when they saw him warming himself at the oven - he kept telling them to come in and not worry, 'for there are gods here too' - so we should approach the inquiry about each animal without aversion, knowing that in all of them there is something natural and beautiful" (*phusikon kai kalon* ??) [*Parts of Animals*, 645a, 15-24]).

In combating views of ethics that limit its remit to right action - and to forms of proceduralist reason that drastically foreshorten the kind of practical reasoning actually operative in our ethical lives - Taylor is seeking to take us out of the 'corral'. But his account of the field that I have just briefly reviewed may leave us better placed to see how openings lead from field to forest. This account seeks to bring into relief not only what a person does but also what she *is* and what she *loves*. Aspiration - a certain kind of stretching or being stretched, one might say - is essential to ethical awareness and the pattern of living bound up with it.[5] '*Fullness*' is a term that Taylor uses to characterise what we are attracted to as ethical agents - a fullness that comes through love of constitutive goods and a greater realisation of the life goods that they constitute.[6] The issue that would then arise is

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[4] 'But such life [i.e. of contemplation] would be too high for man; for it is not insofar as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him…But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, to think of mortal things but must so far as we can make ourselves immortal and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us.' *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 7, 1177b26-1178a2.

[5] The language here has recognisably Nietzschean resonances ('man is a rope stretched between beast and *Ubermensch*' - Zarathustra). With Aristotle - and despite the differences between them (dramatised e.g. by MacIntyre in *After Virtue*) - Nietzsche has been an important figure, notably for Bernard Williams, in the critique of 'morality' that has accompanied the emergence in recent decades of different versions of 'virtue ethics'.

[6] Here the language may seem all too recognisably Christian: 'fullness of life' is a key expression in the New Testament (e.g. at John, 10, 10) and 'calling' has a long history especially with regard to consecrated religious lives - as Taylor himself illustrates by reference to the role of its transposed use by seventeenth century Puritans in bringing about the 'affirmation of ordinary life' that he sees as such an important backdrop to the priority given in modern moral theory to issues of benevolence and justice (see *Sources of the Self*, Pt lll). A recent book, interestingly parallel to Taylor's work - akin to it in the kind of 'vertical tension' that it writes into ethical life but markedly different from it in outlook and tone- is Peter Sloterdijk's *You Must Change Your Life* (Trans. Weiland Hoban. Cam-

whether we might be moved by some constitutive goods that could destabilise what we ordinarily think of as life-goods - and indeed have the power to draw us beyond life itself. If this were the case then we would have made a transition, or crossed a kind of boundary, significant enough to make sense of the idea of passing from field to forest.

What is it to be 'beyond' life in the sense intended here? Well, it is is not enough that one's sense of what constitutes a worthy life should stretch beyond consideration of one's own good, motivating one to concern and action for the good of others - even if these others be remote from one's immediate milieu and even (as might be the case for those with deep ecological commitments) from one's own lifetime. Indeed, it is not enough even if this concern should lead one to suffer and die on behalf of others - for such heroic privileging of the lives of others over one's own could still cleave to the primacy of life, or at least human life, itself. It is the denial of this primacy - and more precisely, when this denial takes the form of an acknowledgement, indeed a full-hearted love, of some supreme good other than life - that one is in the forest. This acknowledgement involves a displacement of the self, the kind of radical reorientation of a person's identity characteristic of a religious 'conversion', as in a Buddhist's shift from self to 'no-self' (*anatta*) or a Christian's submission to God expressed in the words 'Thy will be done'. The self thus constituted - by attachment to a transcendent Good, an attachment that involves a real renunciation - is not the same self as the one for whom a flourishing life in the field constitutes the ultimate ethical end. This is not to say that flourishing in the 'field' sense and all the recognisable challenges of ordinary ethical life are suspended. Rather, at least in the cases of the two historical 'religions' just mentioned, they reappear in transfigured form. 'In Christian terms, if renunciation decenters you in relation to God, God's will is that humans flourish, and so you are taken back to an affirmation of this flourishing, which is biblically called *agape*. In Buddhist terms, Enlightenment does not just turn you from the world; it also opens the floodgates of *metta* (loving kindness) and *karuna*(compassion).'[7]

In the remaining two sections of the paper, I will, first, try to speak about the forest in a rather different way than Taylor does in the paper on Murdoch that I have so far been adverting to. There he performs a kind of cartographical exercise, offering as it were an aerial view of the three different terrains that he identifies (corral, field, forest). Here I shall attempt to get closer to the ground on which people make their way with perhaps no demarcated boundaries clearly visible, while factor-

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bridge: Polity. 2013); Nietzschean and religious themes figure together in a compendious and often provocative discussion of what drives (and *should* drive) human beings, through 'ascetical' exertions in 'spiritual acrobatics', to feats of 'self-surpassing'.
[7] Taylor, 'Iris Murdoch and the Human Good', 21.

ing in also the temporal dimension of their experience - how, through vicissitudes of desire, or recurrences of disappointment, or engagement in various practices, they may find themselves on pathways towards or in the 'forest'. Having attempted this thicker description of an ethical-spiritual landscape in the next section, I will conclude in the following, final section with a brief reflection on how this description might refocus our conception of virtue. While I'm well aware of how strongly contestable is the ground to be covered here, my intention is not apologetical. More than three centuries ago Pascal wrote: 'People have contempt for religion; they hate it and fear it may be true. To cure this it is necessary to … show that it is attractive, lovable (*aimable*), so as to make the good wish that it were true; and then to show that it is true.' [8] To support 'a wish that it were true', rather than 'to show that it is true', defines the limit of my ambition in the rest of the paper.

ll: In the Forest

The forest is the place where one is drawn to a highest good beyond life - in the Christian case, which I shall mainly dwell on, a God who loves the world and in whose love we can aspire to share. But the very height of aspiration here unavoidably confronts us with the lowness of our achievement, with the distance separating us from this supreme good. In the light of this good, suffering in the world is made peculiarly manifest. The depradations of war and famine, apparently random natural disasters, human potential wasted or great need unmet, cruelty let loose on the innocent, oppressions and injustices unrectified and often even unrecognised: to be drawn to a good God is at the same time to be exposed in one's conscience to all this blighting of human life. But such exposure also confronts one with everything in oneself that obstructs or greatly limits one's capacity to meet the demand that it imposes or indeed to discern what, in one's own circumstances, this demand may be.

Adherence to any demanding ethical ideal is likely to be disturbing in this way. Perhaps in moments of special lucidity or experienced wholeness, one is more aligned with these ideals, more freely and fully disposed to respond to them. But such moments may be relatively fleeting and rare. For the rest, one is occupied with daily cares, finding challenge and satisfaction in ordinary responsibilities or tasks, especially in family and work - enough to distract from, though not entirely to extinguish, one's awareness of the more demanding call, which remains as a background source of accusation and unease. Embarking on a spiritual path brings this background more to the fore and thus entails

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[8] Quoted in Lucy Beckett, *Reading in the Light of Christ: Writings in the Western Tradition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006),13.

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encounter with the dark or shadow side of oneself (in the Christian tradition, the 'desert' rather than the forest symbolises the place of this encounter). That this shadow exists is not just due to an egregious failure in moral formation or an arrested state of psychological development. It is seen rather as the default or 'normal' condition of human beings, a normality that leaves us hampered in our ability to meet ethical-spiritual demands that we may still feel compelled by and unable to deny. Only at the summit of spiritual advance, in the lives of those who are truly holy, is this state of disability overcome so that, in the Christian case, they submit unconditionally to the promptings of an *agape* that has taken possession of their whole being.

It is the distance between such a saintly state and our ordinary condition that one sets out to traverse when one embarks on a spiritual path ('journey' and 'quest' are other traditional metaphors here); and given the scale and nature of this distance, the path is one of *transformation*. It will consist centrally of practices and disciplines that aim at an unmaking and remaking of one's character. 'Spiritual exercises' is the common expression here, used for centuries in religious communities (associated most easily but by no means exclusively with Ignatius Loyola), but with wider currency now in philosophy partly because of its centrality in Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. This book demonstrates the extent to which ancient philosophy, especially as practised in the Hellenistic schools, did not consist in 'teaching an abstract theory much less in the exegesis of texts, but rather in the art of living' - which, from Plato's *Phaedo* onwards, included most testingly the art of dying. Such practice of philosophy was primarily a therapeutics of the passions, especially of 'unregulated desires and exaggerated fears', which aimed at 'a profound transformation of the individual's mode of seeing and being.'[9] The spiritual tenor of Stoicism is characteristically different from that of Epicureanism: whereas the former emphasises rational sovereignty through the cultivated ability to limit one's care to matters one can affect and to regard those outside one's control from the perspective of an impassive cosmos, the latter encourages a more insouciant and joyful appreciation of the gifts of existence in each moment. But both schools initiated students into practical disciplines designed to increase vigilance and lucid self-presence in the conduct of life.

These disciplines, if only because of their sanction in the western philosophical tradition, are useful reference points here. But at least three important differences between them and the Christian ones under consideration here may be noted. First, the idea of renunciation has a force in Christianity that

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[9] Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. Ed. Arnold I. Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 83. Hadot points to the affinities, though also marked differences, between his work and that of Foucault in the latter's late writings on ethics. Other comparable work in Anglophone philosophy is Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

it does not have in Stoicism. The Stoic ethical ideal, although in many respects deeply ascetical, does not entail abandonment of anything that can really be regarded as good: what one has to leave behind is properly to be deemed base, trivial, or unworthy of a being endowed with the sovereignty of *to logistokon* or *to hegemonikon*. Required by Christian non-attachment, by contrast, is the surrender of genuine goods - so that there is real conflict between the full-hearted love of God and one's human flourishing; were it otherwise, conversion could not count as *renunciation,* since nothing valuable would have been given up. Precisely because human flourishing is good and willed by God, it is reaffirmed, on the other side of conversion, the fundamental act of consent expressed as 'Thy Will be done'. And this consent is lived out in a commitment to the flourishing of others and ultimately, in partnership with God, to 'repairing the world' (or '*tikkun olam*', the Hebrew expression that Taylor invokes in making this same point).[10] The commitment is manifest in the lives of saintly persons (in perhaps all the great world faiths) as it is in various ways throughout the history of Christianity. It is related too to the central mystery of the Incarnation - God entering history in fully human form - and to the fact that Christian hope is not in the immortality of the soul so much as the resurrection of the body. And the contrast here reflects a deep divergence between Christianity and the whole Socratic tradition in Greek philosophy, a divergence dramatically illustrated in the deaths of the two foundational figures: Socrates facing this final ordeal with supreme composure, his rational sovereignty intact - to the point where it was scarcely an ordeal at all - and Jesus enduring and protesting a brutal, agonising death, deserted rather than surrounded by his friends.

The second respect in which the practical disciplines of Hellenistic schools differ from those enshrined in Christian spirituality relates to their primary role as edification: in them *un*making seems relatively dispensable from the intended *re*making. Rigorous discipline and ever renewed attention are indeed necessary, and building positive habits involves dealing with refractory passions - but with no great emphasis on a central feature of Christian asceticism: the sense of one's own personal crookedness, that is to say one's seemingly boundless capacity for evasion, rationalisation and self-deception when faced with the demands of the higher good to which one has, or supposes that one has, committed oneself. A closer parallel here perhaps lies in contemporary depth psychology and especially in psychoanalysis, which requires the patient not just to confront instinctual material but also to acknowledge and work through his own deeply entrenched resistances to, and defences against, doing so truthfully and with integrity (so that it requires, correspondingly, a great deal of strategic intelligence and hermeneutic sensitivity on the analyst's part in her task of 'outwitting'). This is perhaps not very different, at least in some respects, from the 'purgative' element or the '*via*

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[10] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press), 17.

negativa' - often involving a 'dark night of soul' - that is inseparable from religious practice, especially the practice of prayer. Alasdair MacIntyre, in whose work St. Augustine and Freud have long been central figures - especially because of their respective concerns with 'the transformation of desire' and 'the complex connections between desire and knowledge'[11] - offers a striking formulation of analogy here. In a chapter on Augustine in his most recent book, he introduces Freud as a figure 'whose account of sexuality and religion in some respects is an inversion of Augustine's'. But the inversion is so close that it allows this intriguing parallel:

> For both Augustine and Freud there is someone before whom and to whom one talks, so that in the end one's prevarications and concealments and self-justifications are heard as what they are and the truth about oneself, including the truth about one's resistance to acknowledging that truth, is acknowledged. In both cases the talking involves a discipline, in the one case that of prayer, in the other that of psychoanalysis. And both insist that there is no way of evaluating that particular discipline from a purely external point of view, for such evaluation will be frustrated by those same fantasies from which the discipline is   designed to free us.'[12]

MacInytre's point serves also to bring out another aspect of Christian practice that distinguishes it significantly from a Stoic (or perhaps Buddhist) counterpart: its intrinsically relational character, its always being directed to or conducted in the presence of an Other. If 'talking' is an element here (as it so manifestly is in e.g. the Psalms, central in Christian prayer and liturgy over the centuries), it is not, however, the main element. At least for the contemplative tradition within Christianity, the emphasis is more on listening in silence and, more generally, on openness and receptivity. To be sure, there must be an active intention to pray; but the most fundamental act in prayer is one of consent to the presence and action of God in one's life and being, a 'letting go' in which one is radically vulnerable and dependent - and thereby also open to a grace that can never be received on one's own terms. Carried through, such consent has both a purgative and a unitive aspect. Everything that divides one - ambivalent motivation, unresolved conflict, more or less hidden desire - also diminishes one's capacity for presence. And to invite God's presence is to risk having all this - traditionally covered by the term 'sin' - exposed in a process of purification and healing that is likely to be pain-

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[11] Alasdair MacIntyre, Preface to revised edition of *The Unconscious: A Conceptual Analysis* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 7, 3.

[12] Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (London: Continuum, 2009), 29. Characteristically, MacIntyre does not to regard prayer as only a matter of interior dialogue with God. As he observes elsewhere, 'productive work' can be 'thought of as a kind of prayer and performed as an act of prayer' – though this is a truth all too likely to be obscured in a fragmented culture that consigns prayer to '"religion", religion conceived of as no more than one more compartmentalised area of activity' (Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Where we were, where we are, where we need to be', in Paul Blackledge and Kelvin Knight (eds.) *Virtue and Politics: Alasdair MacIntyre's Revolutionary Aristotelianism* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011], 323).

ful, lengthy and hazardous. Healing is possible because not only is the exposure fierce and relentless but the Other to whom one is exposed offers a love that is tender and merciful. Progress on this path - and 'progress' is hardly the right word here, unless in the Beckettian sense of 'fail again, fail better' - is toward unity with this Other, a unity which, through a conversion of one's willing and desiring, allows one to participate in, and as it were to become a channel of, the divine *agape*.

I will conclude this section with two points of clarification regarding the complicated nature of the relationship between 'ordinary' flourishing and the 'fullness of life' that opens on the spiritual path. First, it is only with caution that one should refer, as I have just done, to healing. For if 'healing' is identified with a sin-blind psychotherapy aiming at a conflict-free normalcy, then it has no application here. What one needs to be freed from is not a pathology that distinguishes one from healthy people by disabling one as its helpless victim. Rather, it is a form of affliction to which all human beings are prone and in which they are always to some extent complicit. Moreover, healing can be understood only in the context of an acknowledgement that 'God has given a new transformative meaning to suffering' and that 'following him will dislocate and transform beyond recognition the forms which have made life tolerable for us'.[13]

Second, while it is important not to collapse 'fulness of life' into ordinary flourishing - and therefore to resist any understanding of religion as a recipe for 'happiness' or 'success' - one may use these valorised terms to characterise the post-conversion state if proper acknowledgement is made of just how deeply revised or 'transvalued' their meaning has then become. Indeed it is just such use that one finds in the Beatitudes, the quintessentially Christian teaching of the Sermon on the Mount .[14] For the venerable formula, 'Blessed are those who ….' might equally be rendered as 'Happy are those who…' (in translation of *makarioi* in Greek versions of the gospels). If one has become the kind of person characterised by the qualities recommended in each of the Beatitudes (to which I'll briefly return in the next section), then one truly is happy or flourishing - a fact which may be related to the frequently recurring references to joy, peace and the absence of fear throughout the New Testament. (At the very least, one has unburdened oneself of many of the ways of manufacturing *un*happiness for which we humans have an immense talent.) Here one has to recognise the gulf between renunciation and the *rejection* of happiness, found in extreme form in Schopenhauer (who deeply admired the ascetical element in Christianity and indeed Buddhism).[15] It is here too, and pre-

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[13] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 655.
[14] Gospel of St. Matthew, 5-7.
[15] See especially Arthur Schopenhauer *The World as Will and Representation (*trans. E. F. J. Payne. London: Constable, 1966), 573-588 and 603-33.

cisely in opposition to such misanthropy, that one may make sense of the following: 'The saints are those who are supremely successful at the exacting task of being human, the George Bests and Jacqueline du Prés of the moral sphere. Morality is not primarily a question of duty and obligation but of happiness or well-being. Why we should want to be happy is …the very prototype of a silly question.'[16]

This kind of affirmativeness, like much of what I have written above, is inseparable from a claim that, for all the awfulness of divine transcendence and the abyss separating God's being from ours, there is a still some basis here for relationship. Moreover, this basis lies not only in God's gratuitous act of entering redemptively into human history but also in the fact that, on their side, human beings are already imbued with a directedness towards God. However protean and vortex-like it may be, human will is not just an engine of futile, self-frustrating desire, as in Schopenhauer's disparagement of it (or indeed a vehicle of untrammelled power, as in Nietzsche's celebration of it). Christian understanding here is classically expressed by St. Augustine who, as MacInytre points out, 'like every other ancient author, whether pagan or Christian, takes the intensity of human desire for granted'. 'What we discover in our progress towards self-knowledge', MacIntyre writes, 'is that our desires are inordinate in respect of their finite objects', and he goes on:

> they are inordinate because they are at once expressions of and disguises for our love of God. We repress in ourselves the knowledge that we are by nature directed towards God and the symptoms of that repression are the excessive and disproportionate regard that we have for objects that substitute themselves for God, objects, which, when we achieve them, leave us disappointed and dissatisfied. It is only insofar as we make God the object of our desire, acknowledging that to desire otherwise is to desire against our nature, that our desires in general become rightly ordered and that we are rescued from the self-protection of a will informed by pride.[17]

lll Virtue from the Forest

Aristotle's conception of virtue (*arete*) must seem in some respects congenial to the 'forest' perspective, which, with special attention to a Christian variant of it, I have just outlined. It is a strength of this conception that - concerned with action, emotion, and desire, as well as with insight and judgement - virtue points to the way one is disposed in one's whole being; in particular, it is expressive of what one loves or delights in. And it is a strength of this Aristotelian conception, also, that it acknowledges a certain 'primacy of practice',[18] especially with regard to the process through which

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[16]Terry Eagleton (apropos a Thomist ethical vision), in 'Disappearing Acts' [Review of Denys Turner, *Thomas Aquinas: A Portrait*], *London Review of Books,* 35, 23 (5 December 2013), 39-40.

[17] MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities*, 28.

[18] John Cottingham uses this term in *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 5-8 and 150-51), while pointing out that it

virtue is acquired and developed: outside of sustained engagement in conducive *activities* - without which one lacks material for the only kind of reflection that is apposite - one has no chance of becoming virtuous. The corollary of this primacy is that there can be no informed understanding or sensible discussion of virtue by someone who lacks the relevant experience. This does not mean, as MacIntyre has tartly observed, that 'in order to become an Aristotelian one first has to become virtuous - even a slender acquaintance with Aristotelians would be enough to dispose of that claim'.[19] But it does mean that some experience of the need for virtue, of its indispensability for the achievement of centrally important individual and common goods, *is* required; no standing start or vantage-point from a neutral ground can compensate for the lack of this 'engaged' or 'insider' perspective. All this, which I take to be standard in any adequate account of Aristotelian ethics, is structurally akin to what holds also with regard to the world of spiritually and religiously inflected experience as adumbrated in the previous section.

Still, is there not a great gulf in sensibility, with respect both to what is to be lived and to the kind of reflection that will adequately articulate this living, between this latter world and the world of Aristotelian virtue? This question can be sharpened by briefly tracing a genealogy of the concept of virtue (*arete)* before its appearance in Aristotle's texts. As found in Homer, *arete* refers to any excellence through which a person shows that he is equal to the demands of a well-defined role, paradigmatically that of the warrior on the battle-field. Physical strength and prowess, courage in facing down danger, wily intelligence - supplement to or substitute for strength or courage - are the eminent *aretai.* To excel, and thereby to deserve and preserve honour, is to be on one's mettle, to contend, and if fortunate to prevail, in face-to-face combat with an opponent - or in any case in face of uncontrollable forces (erupting sometimes within oneself), the always present spectre of death, and the imperative not to become a supplicant. This arduous, unsentimental and deeply agonal ethos, in which mastery mattered above all, is partially sublimated through its deflection into the athletic arena and later the law-court and the assembly. And perhaps we can see it interiorised and further sublimated in the philosophical ethics of Plato and Aristotle, which depict the individual soul as both composite and the scene of conflict - between reason (*logos*) and and the unruly elements comprising the other parts of of the soul - and as virtuous to the extent that in this conflict it is reason that prevails.

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does not of course imply any rejection of theory; rather, an adequate theory will incorporate and account for it.

[19] 'On Having Survived the Academic Moral Philosophy of the Twentieth Century', in Fran O'Rourke (ed.), *What Happened in and to Moral Philosophy in the Twentieth Century?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 29.

Prima facie, then, to juxtapose our two worlds - of field (in broadly Aristotelian terms) and forest - seems to confront us with two very different and apparently opposing rhetorics: one of strength, mastery, prevailing, excelling; and the other of vulnerability, yieldingness, dependency, receptivity, surrender, supplication. One question about virtue then will concern the range of qualities that are to count as virtuous - and what qualities, therefore, are to be added to or substracted from the proposed catalogue of virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre was already dealing with this question in pointing out that, in the genealogy of Aquinas's list of virtues, historical elements (including a very different understanding of history itself) have intervened to make him consider as virtues qualities such as charity and humility which, if they were to be included at all in Aristotle's tabulation, would more likely appear as *vices*. And in *Dependent Rational Animals*, he goes further by both excising Aristotle's great-souledness *(megalapsychia)* as a virtue - precisely because its comfort in masterful giving is only the obverse of its repugnance to receptivity or dependency - and adding 'just-generosity', a quality that he associates with 'acknowledged dependency' and finds pre-figured in Aquinas's virtue of mercy (*misericordia*). This MacIntyrean revision of Aristotle is consonant with what, in terms of this paper, might be called movement towards the forest. And there are still other, related qualities that a forest perspective would also include, notably a capacity for forgiveness (already implicit in charity and mercy), and purity of heart, poverty of spirit, gentleness, forbearance, a capacity for mourning, as urged in the Beatitudes, as well as reverence and 'fear of the Lord' (this Lord being not only Abba, loving Father, but also creator and sustainer of a universe of incalculable scale and complexity).

If great-souledness, at least, is to be deleted from Aristotle's catalogue, the question arises as to how the remaining virtues, and especially the 'cardinal' ones (justice, courage, temperance and practical wisdom) relate to the forest virtues just mentioned above. Obvious issues will arise here such as whether, when, or to what extent in any given case, justice is to to be tempered by mercy. Such dilemmas may seem no different from those that can arise anyhow within Aristotle's own own plural scheme when the claims of one virtue pull against those of another, and to call therefore for no more than a routine exercise of the master-virtue of practical wisdom (*phronesis*). But things may not be so simple if charity (*caritas*, *agape*) is now the master virtue, not, to be sure, usurping the role of practical wisdom but informing it (and, through it, all the other virtues). And a further question is whether, even if 'forest' virtues can alter or redirect the exercise of 'field' virtues they may not themselves still be parasitic on, impossible without, some of the latter. 'Yes' seems the right answer here: for example, on the account of prayer given above, could anyone undergo such scouring en-

counter with God without mustering courage to face and truthfulness to acknowledge what may emerge in and from this encounter?

If the relationship between these two sets of virtues seems reciprocal, each being capable of influencing the other in perhaps complicated ways, how can we enquire further about this relationship? Perhaps one fruitful way of doing so is by turning to the developmental or learning process, through which virtues are acquired and perfected as a person advances in ethical or spiritual maturity. In this matter Aristotle thinks that one's early years are the crucial period, in which there is need for proper training, the formation of good habits through repeated performance of good actions, the cultivation of appropriate sentiments and perceptions so that one not only desires and is disposed to do these actions but also recognises and esteems them *as* good, and the gradual refinement of practical intelligence so that one comes in time to understand better *why* they are good and thereby to be more discriminating and sure-footed about them in one's actual conduct. Aristotle is right, I believe, to emphasise the importance both of childhood and of this kind of formation in childhood if a person is to have a fair chance of becoming virtuous. What happens, however, if the conditions are not met - by the adult world of parents, carers and teachers - and this kind of formation does *not* happen? Let us suppose this to be the case in the following passage:

> But perhaps a man is the kind of man not to take care. Still they are themselves by their slack lives responsible for becoming men of that kind, and men make themselves responsible for being unjust or self-indulgent, in the one case by cheating and in the other by spending their time in drinking bouts and the like; for it is activities exercised on particular objects that make the corresponding character. This is plain from the case of people training for any contest or action; they practise the activity the whole time. Now not to know [this] … is the mark of a thoroughly senseless person. Again, it is irrational to suppose that a man who acts unjustly does not wish to be unjust or a man who acts self-indulgently to be self-indulgent. But if without being ignorant a man does the things that will make him unjust, he will be unjust voluntarily. Yet it does not follow that if he wishes he will cease to be unjust and will be just. For neither does the man who is ill become well on those terms. We may suppose a case in which he is ill voluntarily, through living without self-control and disobeying his doctors. In that case it was then open to him not to be ill, but not now, when he has thrown away his chance, just as when you have let a stone go it is too late to recover it; but yet it was in your power to throw it, since the moving principle was in you. So, too, to the unjust and to the self-indulgent man it was open at the beginning not to become men of this kind, and so they are unjust and self-indulgent voluntarily; but now that they have become so it is not possible for them not to be so.[20]

One may regard what Aristotle says here as simply true, practically realistic, or deeply pessimistic (even deterministic) - or indeed as all of the above. Two things in any case stand out: first, that a person who routinely acts badly is not to be let off the hook - there is no hint of exculpation or ex-

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[20] *Nicomachean Ethics*, 3, v, 1104a 7-22.

tenuation on grounds of earlier inadequate nurture or instruction: somehow, even 'at the beginning', it 'was in your power'. And, second, once the routine is established, there is no going back - the gravitational pull of established bad habit is irresistible.

I will not dispute the first thesis here - however much it goes against the grain of a great deal of modern psychology (and, even more so, sociology) and may seem at odds even with Aristotle's own insistence on the indispensability of a person's having received a sound early formation. But the second, no less arresting - and practically more significant - thesis surely deserves scrutiny. A person of poor character, we are being told, is irreformable. But how are to regard this claim? Can we in good conscience write off perhaps a very large proportion of our fellow humans? Indeed can we be sure that we are not ourselves being written off? For how many of us can claim truly that our own formation was directed towards the good and noble - as distinct from many other lesser things - or that our characters are not in serious need of remaking? Could we not resonate, rather, with McIntyre's observation somewhere that a big part of our experience of the moral law is of our own inability to keep it? And even if we were to be placed on the right side of the stark separation here between those who are virtuous *enough* (to echo Winnicott) and those irretrievably beyond the moral pale, should we accept - acceptance here having unavoidably moral as well as intellectual implications - the existence of any such pale? The moral implication here stems not from any wish to hold that everyone is actually good - a preposterously foolish claim - but rather from reluctance to accept that those who are not good (and it's important that in the above passage Aristotle does not seem to be referring to deep *evil*) are condemned to remain in that state so that they, and we as their friends or fellow-citizens, are helpless to do anything about it.

What I am pointing to here may be taken as a lacuna in Aristotle's account of ethical development: actually (despite claims to the contrary) he has not very much to say about development in childhood and perhaps even less about it in adulthood. To be sure, we might take is as significant that, having given his account of flourishing, voluntareity and the virtues (in books 1 to 6), and having then offered his account of moral weakness (in book 7), he immediately follows this with his account of friendship (books 8 and 9). A good friend, it is clear, is one's greatest asset or ally in one's attempt to integrate potentially contrary inclinations and to remain on the path of virtue. 'Remain' is the important word, however; for, on Aristotle's view, friendship itself is possible only between those who are *already* committed to virtue (so that mutual help in sustaining this commitment is at the heart of their friendship). This is surely an exalted view of friendship - but one that does nothing to address the issue just raised: the fate of those who are *off* this virtuous pathway.

Here is a big breach between core insights of Aristotelianism and those of Christianity. If Jesus was, as Hannah Arendt suggests, '[t]he discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs',[21] this is related to another central concept in the gospel (associated particularly with Jesus's immediate forerunner, John the Baptist), that of repentance or change of mind/heart (*metanoia*) - which itself of course is related to the idea of sin. It is perhaps ironic that a perspective that differs from Aristotle's in seeing human beings both as more deeply embroiled in evil and as called to a more demandingly high level of virtue, nonetheless sees the distance between these two poles as traversable in a way that Aristotle does not see the comparable, and arguably lesser, distance that opens up in his moral ontology. Whereas the very idea of sin is often rejected because of its supposedly consigning people to damnation and permanent exclusion (something very like what I am finding in Aristotle), it is in fact both bracingly inclusive and, as Taylor points out, dignifying: rather than damning or pathologising, it accords all of us the dignity of somehow choosing what will not in fact fulfil us but the 'glamour' of which lures us into supposing that it will.[22] Instead of a defined line separating two irreducibly different moral types, perhaps we might entertain the more richly complex ethical picture suggested by Charles Péguy: 'What is formidable in the reality of life is not the juxtaposition of good and evil; rather it is their interpenetration, their mutual incorporation, etheir mutual sustenance, and sometimes their strange and mysterious kinship.' Such a depiction allows Péguy also to write:

> 'No one is as knowledgable as the sinner in matters of Christianity. No one if not the saint. And in principle, it's the same person… The sinner extends his hand to the saint, since the saint reaches out to help him. And all together, the one through the other, the one pulling the other, they form a chain … of fingers that can't be disconnected… The one who is not Christian is the one who does not offer his hand.'[23]

One way of expressing the difference between the accounts offered by Aristotelianism and by a spirituality of the forest is that, whereas in the former a failure of formation seems to lead into a moral cul-de-sac, in the latter it can open a path beyond itself towards *trans*formation.[24] If this difference lends attractiveness to the forest (as I believe it does), we should have no illusions about just how

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[21] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 238.

[22] See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 619.

[23] Both passages from Péguy here are quoted in Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 750 and 751.

[24] Reference might be made here - and not only because of its echo of Aristotle's reference to the drinking bouts of the self-indulgent in the passage above - to the work of Alcoholics Anonymous, work that is transformative on the ethical plane while also being indissolubly linked to forest spirituality. For elaboration of this link, see Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Journey to Wholeness* (NewYork, Bantam Books, 1994) and, closer to my own elaboration of the forest in this paper, Thomas Keating (with Tom S), *The Divine Therapy and Addiction: Centering Prayer and the Twelve Steps* (New York: Lantern Books, 2009).

difficult is the envisaged transformation. And here Aristotle's work too is attractive both because it allows little scope for illusion (in marked contrast to much contemporary moralising which matches volubility in canvassing very high standards with taciturnity about the sources that might help us to meet them) and because of its depiction of the outcome of ethical formation when it *is* successfully carried through. The lack of illusion is linked to Aristotle's steady acknowledgement that virtuous character is formed in and not above the 'middle soul' - that is to say the whole seat of appetite, emotion, desire, and capacity for pleasure and pain - while the attractiveness of the outcome lies in its attunement of all this psychic material, 'resisting' and 'opposing' though it will have been in the pre-virtue state, with a reason capable of truthfully disclosing the noble-and-good.[25]

In referring earlier to Aristotle's ethics as a 'sublimation' of the *arete* of Homeric figures, I intended no disparagement. For although in our modern western civilisation we have come a long way from that 'pre-Axial' ethos, we have no good reason to suppose that the humans depicted in its 'heroic' literature are essentially different from ourselves. Otherwise we should be even more surprised than we perhaps are at how strongly the ethos of that earlier society has been reimagined and reaffirmed in the philosophy of the past century by Nietzsche and his followers. Nietzscheanism too has *its* catalogue of favoured virtues and they are of an aristocratic and assertive bent, aspiring to great achievement without scruple about risk or cost - even if the cost includes other people's lives or indeed one's own. There is here a celebration of excess, even violent excess, and an easy contempt for the supposed pusillanimity of standard morality - including, benevolence, respect for equality, democratic participation and human rights (not to speak of the petty comforts they may assure) - all now exposed as little more than a thin disguise for the resentment of the weak against the superiority of the strong. Impatience with restraint (or the 'ascetical spirit' of which Socrates himself is seen as the decisive pioneer) is linked to a fierce assertion - of life, it may be, but a life willing to expend everything, including itself, in pursuit of 'self-overcoming'. However unsympathetic one might be to this philosophy, what is to be learned from its existence and obvious appeal is a keener sense of the tenacity of the most assertive instincts (especially regarding violence and sexuality), the psychic costs incurred in their curbing, and the relative precariousness, therefore, of a moral order such as our own that is based on such curbing. Going further, Taylor suggests that the appeal of Nietzscheanism can be seen as evidence of an 'ineradicable bent'[26] in human beings towards some good 'beyond life' (to recur to our earlier expression) *and* of where this bent can take us when it doesn't take us to the forest.

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[25] See *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1, xiii.

[26] The phrase occurs in the essay on Murdoch and later in *A Secular Age.*

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Short of such a provocative claim, bringing the Nietzschean perspective on stage can serve also to put pressure on its main contemporary alternative, one or other version of the standard morality mentioned above. For this (or any other) morality, 'curbing' can hope to be successful only if it is real sublimation, that is to say, a non-repressive turning around of these instincts so that their energies are deployed to 'higher' ends - without the inevitable 'return' or 'revenge' inexorably entailed by their repression. But sublimation is a big ask and Taylor sees no grounds for complacency about our capacity to pull it off in contemporary liberal-democratic societies. To be sure, we have learned to internalise many kinds of restraint through disciplinary regimes the workings of which over several centuries have been exposed in the writings of e.g. Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault. But what moral vision do we possess that might make such mechanisms of restraint any more than forms of psychic manipulation and/or coercion (however 'soft' their mode of operation), and how deeply does this vision penetrate to the instinctual level itself? Taylor does not question the substance of this morality; rather, he laments the widespread failure, as he sees it, to articulate a vision that might support it. And this failure, related to our culture's great reticence about 'constitutive goods', has a further debilitating effect: it weakens the *sources* that would inspire or empower us to live up to the standards - a weakening that is all the more serious when they are are so demandingly (indeed unprecedentedly) *high*. 'High standards need strong sources'.

At this point, available space and time having been more than exhausted, I must bring this paper to a close. My main purpose has been to open up a kind of discourse in which the search for strong sources might be less stifled than it often is in contemporary academic philosophy. And in doing that, I have tried to articulate a spiritual and religious perspective that might be taken to be marginal, if not indeed illegitimate and discreditable, in the philosophical arena. Moreover, in this articulation I have used Aristotle's ethics mainly as a foil, thereby perhaps treating it tendentiously (though not, I hope, obscuring my admiration for what it still has to offer in a culture of often bafflingly disparate and opposing perspectives). I have been encouraged to take these liberties here because doing so has seemed to offer a fruitful way of addressing the theme of this conference, '*varieties* of virtue', and because the organisers, with an expressly interdisciplinary remit, invite contributions from theology (though, assuredly, I am no theologian).