

Teresa of Avila's Liberative Humility

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WHEN IS A VIRTUE not a virtue? It's easy to say "when it doesn't contribute to flourishing," but that's not always easy to determine, especially if one lives in a context which offers multiple accounts of good, as Gordon Gekko and many others in American culture affirm. Is poverty a sure route to holiness, as Francis of Assisi taught? Is patience a virtue, or, as I complain to my students, is patience too often a vice recommended to marginalized or oppressed people in the name of upholding an unjust status quo?¹ And while I think a good case can be made against greed as a virtue, patience is stickier—if it is a virtue, it is a suspect virtue at best. It needs to be explained, contextualized, and delimited in order not to be a tool of the wicked.

Humility is another suspect virtue. It is recommended by St. Paul as the resounding virtue of Christ² and is highly valued by more saints than one can count, but still can carry discomfiting connotations. In this paper, I will show how Teresa of Avila, 16th century Spanish mystic, religious reformer and doctor of the Church, wrestled with, nuanced, and, in some ways, undercut the suspect, uncomfortable virtue of humility. In conclusion, I will return to this question: is humility—as she defines it—a virtue in Teresa's life or a vice, and why?

What makes humility uncomfortable in the first place? First, most Christian sources, from Scripture on, place a high value on the cultivation of humility—and after St. Paul, humility presents a pretty grim picture, focusing on human wretchedness and sin. For Augustine, humility is tied closely to awareness of one's sinfulness: since all sin was rooted in pride, the virtue of humility would lead Christians to know their utter wretchedness apart from the grace of God in Christ. Benedict of Nursia constructed humility in 12 steps, including discounting one's own will and desires, submission to one's superi-

¹ I invoke Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" in support of my argument. King wrote: "There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience" (www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html).

² Who "did not regard equality with God something to be grasped," but—"humbled himself." Phil 2:6-7, NAB.

ors under difficult or unjust circumstances, and embracing the suffering this brings.³ For Anselm, the seven steps of humility begin with acknowledging oneself contemptible, and culminate in loving being treated with contempt.⁴ Aquinas struggled mightily to distinguish humility, the salient virtue in Christian tradition, from “undue” humility, a vice opposed to the virtue of magnanimity praised by Aristotle.⁵ While he took care to recognize that, like all virtues, there is a vice both of excess and deficit regarding humility, he still believed that the paradigmatic act of humility is self-abasement: “humility, in so far as it is a virtue, conveys the notion of a praiseworthy self-abasement to the lowest place.”⁶ So in Christian tradition, humility is often seen in the practice of self-abasement, culminating in receiving disdain from others.

But for Teresa the issue with humility was not its connection to self-abasement. After all, even though virtues are constitutive of human flourishing, they are not always pleasant or enjoyable to acquire.⁷ And as we shall see, she had a sharp sense of her own sinfulness: the aptness of self-abasement before God was obvious to her.

Teresa’s more substantive difficulty with humility was political—specifically, the politics of gender in which she lived and worked. Women in 16th century Spain were systematically disempowered in Church and society to a degree that hardly needed reinforcement by exhortations from men that they should abase themselves even more. Mary Daly argues that the Christian tradition of the “passive” virtue of humility is especially toxic to women:

There has been theoretical emphasis upon charity, meekness, obedience, humility, self-abnegation, sacrifice, service. Part of the problem with this moral ideology is that it became generally accepted not

³ Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, trans. Carolinne White (New York: Penguin Classics, 2008).

⁴ Quoted in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. English Dominican Prov., (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), II-II q. 161, a. 6, obj.3. See also R.W. Southern, *Saint Anselm and his Biographer. A Study of Monastic Life and Thought 1059-c.1130* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).

⁵ For an account of the struggle, see Lisa Fullam, *Humility: A Thomistic Apologetic* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2009) chs. 1 and 2.

⁶ *ST* II-II q. 161, a. 1, ad. 2. He doesn’t have a distinct name for the vice that looks like humility to excess. He labels it “akin to pusillanimity,” (which is the vice of deficient magnanimity) exemplified by “the mind’s attachment to things beneath what is becoming to a man” (II-II 162, a. 1, ad. 3).

⁷ Consider, for example, the wrestling with fear, including great fear, that is part and parcel of becoming courageous. Not to mention the risks inherent in actually being courageous: “Courage is a virtue that—especially if not balanced with other virtues that have a better connection to their bearer’s well-being—is burdensome: the courageous actually risk sacrificing themselves.” Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2691/4851 of Kindle edition. Further citations are of Kindle line numbers.

by men but by women, who have hardly been helped by an ethic which reinforced their abject situation. This emphasis upon passive virtues, of course, has not challenged exploitativeness but supported it.⁸

Teresa was a mystic, a woman of deep prayer to whom others, both men and women, looked for guidance. In addition, she was spearheading a reform of her religious community against substantial opposition. Too much cultivation of any “passive” virtue would not serve her well in this mission. And humility isn’t just passive, it is silent, as Francisco de Osuna notes in his *Third Spiritual Alphabet*:

Humility is very quiet and does not make noise of any sort; and although she sees that she has been offended, she does not complain, but only reproaches herself, because she felt the offense. When she is offended, she is silent, and only displays what is contemptible about herself, and tries to disavow her abilities and favors.⁹

Further, Teresa was endangered by her mission. While there was a substantial appetite for spiritual guidance in Teresa’s Spain, the Inquisitors were alert and assiduous at rooting out “heresy.” *Conversos*¹⁰ (Teresa was the granddaughter of a *converso*), *alumbrados*¹¹

⁸ Mary Daly, “After the Death of God the Father: Women’s Liberation and the Transformation of Christian Consciousness,” in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 60.

⁹ Francisco de Osuna, *Tercer abecedario espiritual*, ed. Melquiades Andres (Madrid: Catolica, 1972), 551. Cited and trans. Weber, 72. This book was very important to Teresa. Early in her *Life*, she says “I began to...start upon the way of prayer with this book as my guide. For I found no other guide (no confessor, I mean) who understood me” (*Life*, 80).

¹⁰ *Conversos* were people who publicly recanted Judaism and embraced Christianity, and members of their families. With the official edict of April 29, 1492, Jews remaining in Spain were forced either to emigrate or convert. Even before the edict, savage anti-semitism played a role in conversions. Starting in 1449, gradual restrictions were passed barring *conversos* from admission to religious orders and positions of civil authority. Limitations placed on *conversos* and widespread suspicion of the sincerity of these conversions led to an obsession with establishing “*limpieza de sange*,” or purity of blood, distinguishing the *converso* and his or her family, “new Christians,” from the so-called “old Christians.” The Spanish Inquisition, an instrument of the state, was charged with keeping an eye on *conversos*. See Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1990), 12 ff.

¹¹ The *alumbrados* were doctrinally diverse, but the belief in the direct illumination of the soul by God played a prominent role in their religious practice. In 1525, the Inquisition condemned a synthetic Illuminism culled from various *alumbrado* sources, and a number of heresy trials reinforced the seriousness of that threat. Like the *alumbrados*, Teresa advocated mental prayer, (i.e., prayer not bound by set formulas,) and writes of the immediate union of the soul with God. Teresa’s religious experiences, as she relates in her text itself, exceeded the grasp of some of her most

and visionary women were objects of special attention. The “*tiempos recios*” in which she lived were a legitimate cause for concern: “people came to me in great concern, and said that these were bad times and that it might be that something would be alleged against me and I should have to go before the Inquisitors.”¹² The risk of a well-read but theologically undereducated woman¹³ running afoul of the doctrinal niceties used as criteria for spiritual legitimacy was very real, and the Inquisition had its eye on Teresa from very early in her career as a reformer. On the face of it, a passive “humility” that would counsel her to abandon her mission would seem not just humble, but prudent.

It is not enough to say that, like all virtues, humility exists as a mean between vicious extremes, as Aristotle and Aquinas have it. That’s true, I think, but not sufficient: neither Augustine nor Aquinas was aware of the corrosive effects of systemic oppression.¹⁴ Lisa

trusted advisers, leading to fears that her experiences were demonic in origin. (This was a common accusation against *alumbrados* who reported extraordinary spiritual experiences.) Her *Life*, written and revised between 1562-1565 at the request of her Dominican confessor and friend, Garcia de Toledo, bore the double burden of explaining her experience for her allies while mollifying her less-friendly Inquisitorial audience.

¹² Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus. The Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1960), 312. She is acutely aware of the risks of speaking about spiritual experiences for fear that they will be labeled diabolical in origin, thus exposing those having them to the Inquisition: “one needs to be careful—women especially so, since we are very weak, and may come to great harm if we are told in so many words that we are being deluded by the devil. The matter should be very carefully considered and women protected from all possible dangers. They should be advised to keep their experiences very secret and it is very well that their advisors should observe secrecy too. I speak of this from knowledge” *Life*, 225.

¹³ After a teenage flirtation with a cousin began to spark gossip, Teresa’s father sent her to a local Augustinian convent to be educated according to the standards of noblewomen of her time. Her theological education was hamstrung by her lack of training in Latin. Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 42.

¹⁴ They recognize political injustice, yes, as well as moral bad luck that can lead to suffering, but they do not engage the default dehumanization that systemic oppression signifies. For two examples, consider how they think about women and slaves. Concerning women, instead of considering systemic injustice, Aristotle concluded that “The woman may be said to be an inferior being” (*Poetics*, Part 15, trans. S. H. Butcher, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.2.2.html>); “females are weaker and colder in nature, and we must look upon the female character as being a sort of natural deficiency” (*On the Generation of Animals*, 4.6, trans. Arthur Platt, <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/generation/book4.html>). Aquinas also regarded women as less rational and in need of male care-taking: this forms part of his justification for the indissolubility of marriage. See also *ST I* q. 92, a. 2: “woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates.” Similarly, both Aristotle and Aquinas justified slavery for those for whom it was “natural.” In the first book of the *Politics*, Aristotle distinguishes those who are

Tessman describes the effects of oppression on agents striving for virtue as operating at two levels. First, oppressive systems can create obstacles that limit one's options in pursuing virtue. The second, though, is more insidious:

The second way in which oppression interferes with flourishing is that it gives rise to moral damage in the oppressed agent; one way that it does this is by creating inclinations that conflict with liberatory principles, thus barring the possibility of full virtue.¹⁵

This second way oppression works its damage is a crucial consideration in an ethics of virtue. What if our very capacity to pursue flourishing is warped by vicious social structures so that we fail to perceive what flourishing actually means (and so fail to act on that vision)? Or what if we actively pursue a corrupted vision of flourishing, absurdly seeking our own diminishment?

Further, humility is not just a virtue to which Teresa pays passing lip-service—praise of humility suffuses her work. Weber notes:

There are few humility topics in St. Augustine's Confessions. They are surprisingly rare in the devotional writers preferred by Teresa—Luis de Granada and Francisco de Osuna, for example.... In contrast.... Teresa's text [of her Life] offers two or three topics per page.¹⁶

What's going on in Teresa's profound engagement with humility? In the next section, I will present Teresa's account of the suspect virtue that fascinates her. My intention in this section is to survey hu-

slaves "by nature" from those who are not: "some slaves are not by nature slaves, and some free are not by nature free. It is also clear that in other cases a natural distinction does obtain, where it is beneficial and just for the one to be slave and the other master." Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Peter L. Phillips (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 1255b4. Thomas concurs in his *Commentary on Aristotle's Politics*, identifying a kind of beneficial friendship between masters and those who are naturally slaves: "it is advantageous for slaves and masters, fit to be such by nature, that one be the master, and the other the slave. And so there can be friendship between them, since the association of both in what is advantageous for each is the essence of friendship." Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Politics*, trans. Richard J. Regan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2007), Bk 1.4.11.

¹⁵ Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 609/4851. This second category may sound like a fancy version of blaming the victim for his/her oppression, but Tessman avoids this trap by noting that being born in an oppressive environment is an example of "bad, constitutive, systemic moral luck," arguing carefully that "[t]his characterization of moral damage implicates oppressive systems as the sources of the bad, constitutive moral luck that adversely affects the characters of the oppressed, but it also does not deny that the person who is morally damaged in this way retains moral responsibility for herself, despite her lack of complete control in the formation of her own character" (835/4851).

¹⁶ Weber, *Rhetoric*, 50.

mility as Teresa presents it; in the following section, I will offer an analysis of her account.

HUMILITY FOR TERESA IN GENERAL

Teresa's definition of humility is a moving target. Humility is truth simply, and it is the imitation of Christ and it is the foundation of the whole edifice of prayer. It is a virtue that should be avidly pursued by deliberate practice, but it is also pure unmerited gift—it is God's first gift to those who pray. It is also a reality-check, a warrant for mystical experience, and is accompanied by—and judged according to—affective experiences like tranquility. Strikingly, humility as a response to favors in prayer not only affirms their validity but determines their value—if the devil presents to the soul an image of God that leads to a response of grateful humility, the evil purpose is thwarted, while even the highest favor from God is of no benefit to the soul if the response lacks humility.¹⁷ This trait is a *sine qua non* of contemplation and religious life, while false humility is one of the devil's most tempting illusions. Teresa freely mixes different or flatly contradictory meanings of the word, sometimes within a few pages of each other, pointing to a subtler concept that is less defined like a proposition than recognized like a person. For Teresa, the complex unity of humility points to the mystery of contemplative prayer, or perhaps the mystery of prayer simply. Humility is what is characteristic of the serious seeker after God. For Teresa, humility is less an intellectual concept than a quality of Teresa's interaction with God taken as a whole.

In any of Teresa's writings, humility is a complex concept. Moreover, her notion of humility may be seen as developing from a near-caricature of self-abasement in her *Life* to a much more vibrant quality of responsive, self-transcending self-knowledge in *Interior Castle*. But there is a complex unity that breathes through Teresa's picture of humility in all of these works: if the moral aspect of humility is clearest in *Way*, it is surely not absent in her *Life* and *Interior Castle*. Likewise, the seeds of the notion of humility as self-losing focus on God that are sown in her *Life* really germinate in *Interior Castle*. However, without discounting the development that occurs across these works, I want to focus on a synthetic understanding of Teresa's picture of humility in its manifold variety.

Teresa writes of humility in two main ways: humility as true self-perception in relationship, and humility as a virtue properly speaking, i.e., the character trait that arises from and fosters that self-understanding. Virtues affect (and effect) the everyday stuff of liv-

¹⁷ Teresa of Avila, "The Book of her Foundations" in *The Collected Works of Teresa of Avila, vol.3*, trans. K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1985), 140.

ing, while truth illuminates. To consider humility as a virtue raises questions of how we acquire that true sense of self in relationship, as well as pointing to other virtues that are associated with humility. While truth—even the truth about oneself in a particular context—can be considered as an objective matter abstracted from the person, virtue can only be set in the context of the moral agent striving to attain that truth.

HUMILITY AS TRUTH

For Teresa of Avila, the essence of humility is that it is truth itself—the truth of human lowliness: “to be humble is to walk in truth, for it is absolutely true to say we’ve no good thing in ourselves.”¹⁸ Candid self-knowledge is the essence of humility: “self-knowledge is so important that, even if you were raised right up to the heavens, I should like you never to relax your cultivation of it; so long as we are on this earth, nothing matters more to us than humility.”¹⁹ That self-knowledge will issue a self-condemnation—it gives the soul “power to behold its own wretchedness.”²⁰ There is no lack of references in Teresa’s work to the abject state of humanity—Teresa’s first exposure to religious life was at the hands of Augustinian nuns, and she rediscovered Augustine in her maturity. Her resounding echo of this Augustinian rallying-cry of humility as reflecting the truth of humanity’s wretched state apart from God is a distinctive emphasis in her writing.

But while humility for Augustine is a virtue without the possibility of excess, Teresa draws a distinction between humility between human beings and humility between human beings and God. Humility always has a referent, explicit or implied: humility is inescapably a virtue situated in relationships. In fact, community is required for self-knowledge regarding humility:

[P]eople who are always recollected in solitude, however holy in their own opinion they may be, don’t know whether they are patient

¹⁸ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, trans. E.A. Peers (New York: Image/Doubleday, 1961), 196. Written in 1577, *Interior Castle* is an extended allegorical reflection on contemplative prayer, in which the soul is envisioned as a castle comprising seven mansions. (The exact metaphor is loose: “mansion” is sometimes singular and sometimes plural, and attempts to draw this castle based on Teresa’s descriptions fail.) In this work the more thematically scattered picture of humility from the *Life* and the more clearly moral vision from her *Way* are brought together into a stronger—though still not especially univocal—understanding. Overall, there is a greater sense of self-assurance here than in her earlier work. Humility expressed in exaggerated denials of self-worth of her *Life* are moderated here into a strong emphasis on self-knowledge—humility is self-knowledge, and humility is the foundation of the whole edifice, the whole castle.

¹⁹ Teresa, *Interior Castle*, 38.

²⁰ Teresa, *Life*, 263.

or humble, nor do they have the means of knowing this.... St. Peter thought he was very courageous; see how he acted when the occasion presented itself. But he came through that experience not trusting at all in himself, and as a result he trusted in God.²¹

When the relationship in question is with another human being, one's stance of humility is limited. On one hand, inter-human humility is important, especially for those in authority: in a chapter of the *Constitutions* called "On the Humble Offices," she begins: "The Mother Prioress should be the first on the list for sweeping."²² On the other hand, it is not limitless. For example, Teresa's writings are full of stories of receiving bad advice regarding prayer from people who were learned but unfamiliar with the kind of experiences she was having. She humbly acknowledges the learning of the *letrados* but she did not assume that they were necessarily adept in prayer. Indeed, humility is one of the key virtues for directors, for God may be teaching "some old woman"²³ contemplative prayer beyond the scope of the director's learning.

But while interpersonal humility is subject to limitation, humility before God is unmitigated. Humility is sketched in contrasts; Teresa's sense of the abjectness of the human soul may be understood as an expression of the glory of God.

Just so the water in a vessel seems quite clear when the sun is not shining upon it; but the sun shows it to be full of specks.... When [the soul] looks upon this Divine Sun, the brightness dazzles it; when it looks at itself, its eyes are blinded by clay.... And very often it remains completely blind, absorbed, amazed and dazzled by all the wonders it sees. From this it acquires true humility, which will never allow it to say anything good of itself nor will permit others to do so.²⁴

Humility always reflects a double perception—looking at the soul in contrast to God reveals both the soul's neediness and God's glory, and it is in seeking God that the humbling, specked truth about oneself can be recognized. "As I see it, we shall never succeed in knowing ourselves unless we seek to know God."²⁵ Humility, then, is not merely a truth about the contrast of the human soul and God—a humble self-assessment is gnomonic of that truth.

²¹ Teresa of Avila, *Foundations*, Chapter 5, 15, in *The Collected Works of Teresa of Avila*, Volume 3 ed. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1985), 122.

²² Teresa of Avila, *Constitutions*, 22, in *The Collected Works of Teresa of Avila*, Volume 3, 326.

²³ Teresa, *Life*, 326.

²⁴ Teresa, *Life*, 202.

²⁵ Teresa, *Interior Castle*, 38.

This dynamic is the foundation for using humility as a warrant for the divine origin of mystical experience. The contemplative seeks God in the depths of prayer. True encounter with God leads to humility, therefore humility can be used to sort out divine favors from demonic illusions. "If [the state of quiet] comes from the devil... it leaves behind it disquiet and very little humility."²⁶ Similarly, confessors are advised to evaluate apparitions by their fruits: "they have to proceed cautiously, and even to wait for some time to see what results these apparitions produce, and to observe gradually how much humility they leave in the soul and to what extent it is strengthened in virtue."²⁷ Humility not only results from an awareness of one's unworthiness, it sharpens that awareness: "If these favors come from God, you will [scrutinize yourself] more frequently...for such favors bring humility with them and always leave us with more light by which we may see our own unworthiness."²⁸

Teresa also considers false humility; in fact, the first significant discussion of humility in Teresa's *Life* concerns false humility. Consider this: candid self-assessment cannot help but result in self-conviction of sin. But an acute sensitivity to one's own sinfulness opens the door to a perverse temptation: to consider oneself unworthy to pray at all. As Teresa became more sensitive to her own sinfulness, she began to be visited by such shame that she avoided prayer altogether: "The devil, beneath the guise of humility, now led me into the greatest of all possible errors. Seeing that I was so utterly lost, I began to be afraid to pray."²⁹ Teresa repeats this story directly and indirectly in her writings—clearly she sees this as a significant pitfall for spiritual life. She's careful to warn of this trap because she fell headlong into it: she quit praying, she says, for more than a year.

One aspect of false humility is its tendency to grandiosity—at one point, "tormented by a thousand doubts and suspicions," Teresa writes, "I felt I was so evil that I began to think that all the evils and heresies that had arisen were due to my sins. This is a false humility."³⁰ This grandiosity contradicts the innate truth-value of humility, and since humility is true perception in relationship, both the soul and God are misrepresented:

Beware also, daughters, of certain kinds of humility which the devil inculcates in us and which make us very uneasy about the gravity of our past sins.... [A] soul can be made to believe that, through being

²⁶ Teresa, *Life*, 159.

²⁷ Teresa, *Interior Castle*, 188.

²⁸ Teresa, *Way*, 259.

²⁹ Teresa, *Life*, 96.

³⁰ Teresa, *Life*, 280.

what it is, it has been forsaken by God, and thus it almost doubts his mercy.³¹

One can also be induced to think that one already has enough humility:

Where the devil can do great harm without our realizing it is in making us believe we possess virtues which we do not: that is pestilential.... On the one hand, our humility is weakened, while on the other, we neglect to cultivate that virtue, believing we have already acquired it.³²

Humility is used as a warrant for the divine origin of mystical experience, but false humility is a real threat: so how do you know if your humility is true?

[G]enuine humility does not produce inward turmoil, nor does it cause unrest in the soul, or bring it darkness or aridity: on the contrary, it cheers it and produces in it the opposite effects—quietness, sweetness and light. Though it causes us distress [to behold our own wretchedness] we are comforted to see what a great favor God is granting us by sending us that distress and how well the soul is occupied. Grieved as it is at having offended God, it is also encouraged by his mercy.³³

This distress or “confusion which quite overwhelms us” is a source of peace.³⁴

Humility, however deep it be, neither disquiets nor troubles nor disturbs the soul: it is accompanied by peace, joy and tranquility. Although, on realizing how wicked we are, we can see clearly that we deserve to be in hell, and are distressed by our sinfulness... yet, if our humility is true, this distress is accompanied by an interior peace and joy of which we should not like to be deprived.³⁵

Teresa is very concerned about the origin of favors in prayer: Is an experience divine in origin, is it human (self-deception), or is it demonic? Teresa offers a two-step discernment process: experience (whether in the prayer of quiet, or apparitions, or the unsurpassable union of the seventh mansion) is judged by humility (and other effects), and humility is judged by the affective results in the soul. So why bother with the detour into humility? In other words, why not

³¹ Teresa, *Way*, 256.

³² Teresa, *Way*, 251.

³³ Teresa, *Life*, 280.

³⁴ Teresa, *Life*, 163.

³⁵ Teresa, *Way*, 257.

just rely on the emotional accompaniment of the experience in prayer directly?

One reason for the detour is political: remember the *alumbrados*. Mystical experience without some possible exterior evaluation is politically dangerous in Teresa's time because it leaves the institutional Church completely out of the loop—if mystical experience is gauged entirely on subjective grounds, not answerable to any coherence with theological or other community norms, the Church becomes merely an institutional accretion indifferent to (or a hindrance to) spiritual growth. The *alumbrados* assertion of independence from ecclesial structures was one reason for their suppression.

But there's a substantive spiritual reason, too. If the risk of demonic deception is real (as Teresa considers it to be), there has to exist some means of spiritual discernment outside the individual. Without any transpersonal warrant for experiences in prayer, there is no possibility for critique of these experiences or for guidance in one's progress. Without the possibility of critique and guidance, demons notwithstanding, one would either be left at the mercy of whoever claims the most spectacular spiritual experience, or ultimately find oneself cut off from assistance from any community of interpretation. Humility takes mystical experience from the depths of the self out into public life (at least to the community of contemplatives), and looks back into the self for confirmation. By this hermeneutical circle of subjective-objective-subjective, the mystic is protected (to some extent, at any rate), from the deceptions arising from mental illness, poor discernment, or, perhaps, the occasional demon.

Nothing in Teresa's work is simple. Humility is not truth simply, or if so it is truth that does not extend to all areas of human knowing. There are two distinct ways in which humility disregards truth in Teresa's work. First, Teresa engages in some utilitarian moral reasoning: it is good to have humility, which means, in part, to disengage oneself from concern about one's reputation. If bad reputation is productive of humility, then bad reputation is a positive value. One can acquire a bad reputation either deservedly or unjustly. To be unfairly derided or unjustly accused is a possible path to true humility. To suffer such an attack undeservedly is to suffer as Jesus suffered, so to be slandered unfairly not only produces humility directly, but is also to imitate Christ.

For indeed, it takes great humility to find oneself unjustly condemned and be silent, and to do this is to imitate the Lord...I think it is very important to accustom oneself to practice this virtue and to endeavor to obtain from the Lord the true humility which must result from it.³⁶

³⁶ Teresa, *Way*, 111.

This is a peculiarly uncharitable version of humility, not unlike a vision of martyrdom indifferent to the fact that for each martyr someone else has become a murderer—here, humility flourishes when others are liars. Perhaps this understanding can better be understood as a way of enduring the inevitable hurts of social life—i.e., this recognition that true humility can result from unjust accusation does not desire to be maligned so much as cope with the hurt that crops up regardless.

The second way in which humility flirts with falsehood comes from the slippery nature of humility itself.

These virtues [humility and mortification], it is true, have the property of hiding themselves from one who possesses them, in such a way that he never sees them nor can believe that he has any of them, even if he be told so. But he esteems them so much that he is forever trying to obtain them, and thus he perfects them in himself more and more.³⁷

Humility in this passage is a virtue, a moral quality (as will be discussed below), but what Teresa describes as missing here—seeing oneself accurately—is exactly the self-awareness that she defines as humility. Thus humility is self-knowledge that does not know itself, truth that denies itself. The paradoxical nature of humility in this respect is essential to its character—this is not an addiction that craves the next fix, nor is the humble person only skeptical of his or her other qualities. Humility makes one agnostic of one's humility itself.

This is not the same process by which other virtues are acquired. There is, certainly, a dynamism of acquiring virtue. One must value, e.g., justice in order to desire it enough to practice it, and the practice of justice does not satisfy one's thirst for it—if anything, the possession of some degree of justice can lead to its greater valuation and greater desire to perfect that virtue in oneself, and at the same time might foster a keener sense of one's failures in practicing justice. One sees better the scope of justice in practicing it. But one need not actually become less just in acquiring justice, while here one becomes less self-aware in acquiring self-awareness. Why (and how) would one strive after a virtue that becomes more and more obscure in its very acquisition?

And yet Teresa's statement rings true. Humility creates an openness, an other-awareness, that requires a certain indifference to self. To focus on one's own openness shuts down the self-transcendence that is the essence and goal of humility. Thus the core of humility consists in letting go of self-concern in which one's vision of the

³⁷ Teresa, *Way*, 90.

other is enhanced. Humility serves relationships by freeing oneself of concern for the self—in interhuman relationships in a bounded way, and in the human-divine relationship by recognizing human limitations and frailties, and simultaneously recognizing that God seeks us regardless.

Two other aspects of humility as true self-knowledge bear mentioning. First, humility is seen in not seeking spiritual gifts beyond one's proper stage.

[W]hen you learn or hear that God is granting souls these graces, you must never beseech or desire him to lead you along this road.... The first reason is that it shows a lack of humility to ask to be given what you have never deserved.³⁸

The spiritual gifts Teresa describes are understood to be purely gifts distributed by God as God sees fit. Humility is a prerequisite for them. “[These gifts] will never be bestowed on a person devoid of humility, because before the Lord grants a soul these favors he always gives it a high degree of self-knowledge.”³⁹ Writing to console those who have not reached an advanced state of contemplation, she says that “true humility consists to a great extent in being ready for what the Lord desires to do with you.”⁴⁰ At the same time, in a moment of what reads like contemplative triumphalism (or perhaps simple encouragement), she writes “I think [God] will not fail [to grant the soul high contemplation] if you have true detachment and humility.”⁴¹ God will not deny these favors to a truly humble soul, but spiritual bootstrapping—seeking what is beyond one's capacity—is self-deceptive, and so is contrary to humility. Moreover, spiritual favors are not the measure of excellence in prayer; prayer is measured by its effects, chief among them being humility. The truly humble person carries a profound sense that he or she in no way deserves these favors, and so also sees more clearly the utter gratuity of God's gifts in prayer.

But even if we do all that is in us, how can we repay God, since, as I say, we have nothing to give save what we have first received? We can only learn to know ourselves and do what we can—namely, surrender our will and fulfill God's will in us. Anything else must be a hindrance to the soul.... It causes it, not profit, but harm, for nothing but humility is of any use here, and this is not acquired by the under-

³⁸ Teresa, *Interior Castle*, 190.

³⁹ Teresa, *Interior Castle*, 190.

⁴⁰ Teresa, *Way*, 127.

⁴¹ Teresa, *Way*, 127.

standing but by a clear perception of the truth...that we are nothing and God is infinitely great.⁴²

The second aspect worth mentioning is this: humility is a relational quality. One grasps one's humanity by looking at God, but looking at God tends to dazzle—one can lose oneself in God. Humility before God draws the soul out of itself in the very act of knowing itself. The effect on Teresa of a vision of Christ was that “[t]he soul is now a new creature: it is continuously absorbed in God.”⁴³

This has two effects: first, unconcern for the opinions of others, for those to whom God grants the favor of possessing such humility and great love for him [as to be indifferent to honor] forget themselves when there is a possibility of rendering him greater services, and simply cannot believe that others are troubled by things which they themselves do not consider as wrongs at all.⁴⁴

The second effect is a more direct openness to the soul's encounter with God.

Avoid being bashful with God, as some people are, in the belief that they are being humble.... A fine humility it would be, if I had the emperor of heaven and earth in my house, coming to it to do me a favor and to delight in my company, and I were so humble that I would not answer his questions, nor remain with him, nor accept what he gave me, but left him alone.... Have nothing to do with that kind of humility, daughters, but speak with him as a father, a brother, a Lord and a spouse.⁴⁵

And likewise, the remedy for the aridity that accompanies the false humility of fixation on one's own wickedness is to redirect one's gaze: “When you find yourselves in this state, cease thinking, so far as you can, of your own wretchedness, and think of the mercy of God, and of his love and his sufferings for us.”⁴⁶

HUMILITY AS A VIRTUE

Highlighting the moral dimension of humility is a shift in emphasis from the more objective notion of humility as a truth about the human person in context, a notion that predominates in Teresa's work. The connection is clear—humility the virtue seeks the true understanding that she develops so carefully. Humility the virtue cannot simply be conflated with that truth, just as justice the princi-

⁴² Teresa, *Way*, 217.

⁴³ Teresa, *Life*, 263.

⁴⁴ Teresa, *Way*, 243.

⁴⁵ Teresa, *Way*, 184.

⁴⁶ Teresa, *Way*, 257.

ple (a harmonious and equitable state of affairs in society and, at least according to Plato, within the individual) with justice the virtue, which Aquinas defines as “a habit whereby a man renders to each one his due by a constant and perpetual will.”⁴⁷ Justice the virtue, then, engages questions of formation of stable character traits that justice the principle does not, asking, in essence, how one becomes the sort of person who consistently and resolutely strives for justice. Similarly, justice the virtue might lead one to consider other virtues associated with it. When Teresa considers humility as a virtue, she combines humility with mortification⁴⁸ and obedience into a trio of virtues that shape religious life.

Teresa freely mixes this virtue understanding of humility with her more usual view of humility as a true sense of one’s place in a particular relationship. “True humility,” she writes, “consists in our being satisfied with what is given us.”⁴⁹ (She refers here to being satisfied with the consolations in prayer bestowed by God—another reference to the sense of God’s timeliness in bestowing favors, so the humble soul does not seek to leapfrog into spiritual encounters beyond itself.) But on the next page, humility becomes more clearly moral: the true mark of progress in prayer is not spiritual exaltation—for those favors may cease at any time—but the moral qualities associated with spiritual growth: “I am referring to the great virtues of humility, mortification, and an obedience so extremely strict that we never go an inch beyond the superior’s orders, knowing that these orders come from God since she is in his place.”⁵⁰

The moral sense of humility is most prominent in *Way of Perfection*. This book is largely a guidebook for contemplative religious life. This is not a historical account (as her *Foundations* is), nor does it carry the apologetic burden of her *Life*; this is the meditation of a person with a distinct vision of religious life on the essentials of that vision as she sought to bring it to birth in her reform of her order.

⁴⁷ *ST* II-II q. 58, a. 1.

⁴⁸ Mortification, strictly speaking, is a practice or set of practices, not a virtue. For Teresa, the practices of mortification aim at the virtue of detachment—a reasonable mean between extremes of forgetting our embodiment and all it entails and the contrary vice of inordinate attachment to bodily indulgence. The latter vice would have been an obvious obstacle to Christian spiritual life in Teresa’s (and our own) time. Notably, though, Teresa went out of her way to reject the former vice too: In her *Life*, Teresa writes of being advised to reject meditation on the humanity of Christ. After much struggle, she decides that this advice is wrong, lacking in humility, and hurtful to one’s progress unless one is “very proficient.” The deficiency in humility consists of impatience with God’s pace of instructing the soul—in Teresa’s metaphor, to wish to be Mary before having labored with Martha. But secondly, she writes: “we have bodies. To want to become angels while we are still on earth...is ridiculous” (*Life*, 214).

⁴⁹ Teresa, *Way*, 132.

⁵⁰ Teresa, *Way*, 133.

Way is a description of the virtues that reflect and create the possibility for contemplation as she understands it.

It is about prayer that you have asked me to say something to you.... Before speaking of the interior life—that is, of prayer—I shall speak of certain things which those who attempt to walk along the way of prayer must of necessity practice.... There are only three things which I will explain at some length.... One of these is love for each other; the second, detachment from all created things; the third, true humility, which, although I put it last, is the most important of the three and embraces all the rest.⁵¹

While the moral value of humility is clearest in *Way of Perfection*, it is not found only in that work. In her *Life* she sets up another moral trio that reflects the practice of loving God. This is taken up where she considers the first degree of prayer.⁵² She addresses the beginners:

Yes, love for God does not consist in shedding tears, in enjoying those consolations and that tenderness...in which we find comfort, but in serving him with righteousness, fortitude of soul and humility. The other seems to me to be receiving rather than giving anything.⁵³

She underscores her point—that spiritual consolations are not the essence of serving God—in no uncertain terms:

But when I hear servants of God, men of weight, learning and intelligence, making such a fuss because God is not giving them devotion, it revolts me to listen to them... they should realize that, as His Majesty does not give it to them, it is unnecessary; they should be masters of themselves and go on their way.⁵⁴

But it is not only beginners who are to be concerned with the moral aspect of loving God: souls in the seventh mansion of the Interior Castle are likewise “strongly desirous of serving him.”⁵⁵ Service

⁵¹ Teresa, *Way*, 53.

⁵² In her *Life*, Teresa describes progress in prayer in four degrees which she compares to the ways a garden may be watered: “It seems to me that the garden may be watered in four ways: by taking the water from a well, which costs us great labour; or by a water-wheel and buckets, when the water is drawn by a windlass (I have sometimes drawn it in this way: it is less laborious than the other and gives more water); or by a stream or a brook, which waters the ground much better, for it saturates it more thoroughly and there is less need to water it often, so that the gardener’s labour is much less; or by heavy rain, when the Lord waters it with no labour of ours, a way incomparably better than any of those which have been described” (Teresa, *Life*, 128).

⁵³ Teresa, *Life*, 131.

⁵⁴ Teresa, *Life*, 131.

⁵⁵ Teresa, *Interior Castle*, 217.

of God is the key value and one's service is enhanced and enabled by the virtues of righteousness, courage, and humility. True courage comes from humble trust in God; Teresa warns, though, that cowardice can masquerade as humility:

His Majesty desires and loves courageous souls if they have no confidence in themselves but walk in humility; and I have never seen any such person... [who,] under the guise of humility, acted like a coward, go as far in many years as the courageous soul can in few.⁵⁶

The fourth degree of prayer is marked by both increased courage⁵⁷ and increased humility. The effect of the grace of this hard-to-describe state⁵⁸ is an increase of humility brought about by the awareness that the soul “clearly sees how by no efforts of its own could it either gain or keep so exceeding and so great a favour.”⁵⁹

Overcoming her fear of being thought good by others, she realizes that her concern that people be aware of her sinfulness was “not humble, but pusillanimous.”⁶⁰ If a humble soul is tempted by the devil, “that virtue cannot fail to bring her more fortitude and greater profit.”⁶¹ Conversely, a certain adventurousness of spirit will increase one's humility, and that boldness will lead God to bestow courage.⁶²

So if Teresa understands humility as a virtue, the next question is: how is it gained? This ancient question reached a rhetorical peak when Augustine, writing in the context of his dispute with Pelagius, strongly emphasized the divine provenance of all that is good in humanity. Virtue is that which “God works in us, without us”⁶³ But this risks a kind of moral quietism, in which God does all the hard work in our moral lives, and our own effort is almost pointless. Thomas Aquinas described a two-fold order of virtue, in which moral virtues may be acquired by working at them, while theological virtues (faith, hope and charity) are infused by God into the soul, purely gifts. Humility is linked to the cardinal virtue of temperance in Thomas's

⁵⁶ Teresa, *Life*, 138.

⁵⁷ “The soul is left so full of courage that it would be greatly comforted if at that moment, for God's sake, it could be hacked to pieces” (Teresa, *Life*, 181).

⁵⁸ “The fact is, when I began to write about this fourth water, it seemed to me more impossible to say anything about it than to talk Greek—and indeed it is a most difficult matter. So I laid it aside and went to Communion” (Teresa, *Life*, 176).

⁵⁹ Teresa, *Life*, 181.

⁶⁰ Teresa, *Life*, 295.

⁶¹ Teresa, *Way*, 101.

⁶² Teresa, *Way*, 122.

⁶³ Thomas Aquinas cites this definition from Augustine in *ST I-II* q. 55, a. 4, obj. 1.

schema, and so may be acquired by practice. God can also infuse moral virtues, according to Thomas.⁶⁴

So here are two possibilities: first, that humility is solely God's gift, given as a divine prerogative, irrespective of any prerequisite human effort or merit. This is Augustine's stance (and also Thomas's, where infused virtues are considered). Or a virtue may be understood as the natural result of human effort, as a runner becomes a runner by running—virtue in this sense is a truly human endeavor. This is Thomas's position for all moral virtue not infused in us by God.

Teresa comes down firmly on both sides. On one side, Teresa views humility as pure gift. It is God who "makes the virtues grow."⁶⁵ While the beginner in prayer labors to weed the garden so that the flowers can grow, by the third degree of prayer it has become clear that God has been doing the work all along: "the Lord is now pleased to help the gardener, so that he may almost be said to be the gardener himself, for it is he who does everything."⁶⁶ Humility is greater than before as one progresses, "for [the soul] sees that it has done nothing at all of itself save to consent."⁶⁷ Moreover, Teresa rejects as the devil's false humility a view that sees the mercy of God only as imposing further obligations on the soul,⁶⁸ a position that would engender a Pelagian spiral of earned grace.

Where Teresa considers humility as a virtue most clearly (i.e., where its moral character is emphasized), she emphasizes that it is acquired. The goal of religious life is service, not spiritual favors: "we should desire and engage in prayer, not for our enjoyment, but for the sake of acquiring this strength which fits us for service."⁶⁹ But the foundation of that whole edifice is humility, and "unless you strive after the virtues and practice them, you will never grow to be

⁶⁴ For humility as a potential part of temperance, see *ST II-II* q. 161. While cardinal virtues may be acquired by practice, God also infuses cardinal virtues along with theological virtues: "Now all virtues, intellectual and moral, that are acquired by our actions, arise from certain natural principles pre-existing in us, as above stated (I q. 51, a. 1): instead of which natural principles, God bestows on us the theological virtues, whereby we are directed to a supernatural end, as stated (q. 62, a. 1). Wherefore we need to receive from God other habits corresponding, in due proportion, to the theological virtues, which habits are to the theological virtues, what the moral and intellectual virtues are to the natural principles of virtue" (*ST I-II* q. 63, a. 3). For one account of the relation of acquired to infused moral virtues, see Jean Porter, "The Subversion of Virtue: Acquired and Infused Virtues in the *Summa Theologiae*," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1992): 19-41.

⁶⁵ Teresa, *Life*, 129.

⁶⁶ Teresa, *Life*, 163.

⁶⁷ Teresa, *Life*, 170.

⁶⁸ Teresa, *Life*, 281.

⁶⁹ Teresa, *Interior Castle*, 231.

more than dwarfs.”⁷⁰ Despising oneself can foster growth in humility “for we know that no efforts of ours are availing if God withholds from us the water of grace, and we must despise ourselves as nothing and as less than nothing. By doing this, we can gain great humility and then the flowers will begin to grow afresh.”⁷¹ Grace is still grace, and no human effort will compel God to bestow it, but at the same time, practice of despite-of-self yields the humility that puts one in the way of that grace. Likewise in *Way of Perfection*: “Always strive after humility, sisters, and try to realize that you are not worthy of these graces, and do not seek them.”⁷² “You must practice simplicity and humility, for those are the virtues which achieve everything.”⁷³

HUMILITY FOR TERESA: CAPITULATION OR REVOLUTION?

As I mentioned at the start of this essay, humility is a virtue that has often been framed in terms of stark self-abasement in Christian tradition. When exhortation to self-abasement is directed at those already marginalized, it may serve to reinforce the oppression they already face, with apparent divine approbation. Further, one may embrace that exhortation to humility in a way that leads to moral damage—internalized oppression thwarts human flourishing by corrupting our sense of what constitutes flourishing. Surely, there is much in Teresa’s account of humility that would present a version of the virtue that is ideal for keeping women in their place.

In light of this problem, what are we to make of humility as Teresa describes it? Alison Weber has interpreted Teresa’s motif of humility as a part of a rhetorical strategy intended to dispose Teresa’s readers favorably toward her, a practice the classical manuals of rhetoric call *captatio benevolentiae*.⁷⁴

In sum, we can only conclude that Teresa’s position, as a woman and an ecstatic, was so precarious that she repeatedly needed to request the benevolent cooperation of her audience and at the same time ‘disavow her abilities and favors.’ *Captatio benevolentiae* was not a petrified tradition but a vital necessity.⁷⁵

Teresa’s writing is full of declarations of lowliness, inadequacy, outright stupidity or wickedness, both her own and that of women generally.⁷⁶

⁷⁰ Teresa, *Interior Castle*, 229.

⁷¹ Teresa, *Life*, 153.

⁷² Teresa, *Way*, 250.

⁷³ Teresa, *Way*, 217.

⁷⁴ Weber, *Rhetoric*, 49.

⁷⁵ Weber, *Rhetoric*, 50.

⁷⁶ For example, *Life*, 124: speaking of her experiences in prayer, she writes “[M]y Lord well knows that I have no other desire than this, that he may be praised and

Ahlgren concurs with this reading of humility as rhetorical strategy:

Teresa realized the shakiness of her position as a mystical theologian and repeatedly acknowledged her limitations as an unlettered woman in her efforts to disarm hostile readers with her humility and lack of pretentiousness.⁷⁷

At the same time, as Ahlgren notes, her colloquial style and claims of personal inadequacy are paired with assertions that she nevertheless is transmitting faithfully what God has taught her, or what revelation and her own insight reveal.⁷⁸ She recites “proper” female docile humility, and archly undercuts it. Humility is set in relationships, always, and, in Teresa’s writing, the upper hand in human relationships is never granted by default to men, the learned, or the powerful. Thus she claims divine warrant to write, even as she loudly declares her own female worthlessness. Similarly, Teresa’s sharp declarations of personal unworthiness before God may serve a rhetorical purpose—the reader may be mollified by this woman’s recognition of her shortcomings and failings, and it places her safely within the traditions of Christian and female orthodoxy. But at the same time, mystical life itself, in which humility plays such a great role for Teresa, confers an unassailable authority available to all who pray:

Because God is revealed directly to the soul, there is no way for an outsider to control access to God or to monitor the soul’s progress....Teresa’s doctrine thus encourages spiritual autonomy and open access to God; her major message, which she modeled in her own life, is that the discovery of God’s presence in the soul is a spiritual imperative for all people.⁷⁹

It is this difference and interrelationship between interhuman humility and humility before God that marks Teresa’s contribution to rehabilitating the suspect virtue of humility. When she uses language of female deference and inadequacy to challenge authority figures around her, it resonates with an Aristotelian/Thomistic understanding of humility as a mean between extremes, in which humility opposes both the vice of pride *and* the contrary vice of insufficient self-assertion, both of which reflect an incorrect assessment of oneself in

magnified a little when it is seen that on so foul and malodorous a dunghill he has planted a garden of sweet flowers.”

⁷⁷ Gillian T.W. Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 67.

⁷⁸ Ahlgren, *Politics*, 80.

⁷⁹ Ahlgren, *Politics*, 112.

relationship. The tendency in Christian traditional writing on humility has been to emphasize the self-abasement, which may be appropriate for those who start with an inflated sense of self or relatively high social standing; but if it is a virtue, humility must also foster the stronger sense of self of “some old woman” God might be teaching to pray and calling to lead. Her exaggerated claims of inadequacy are a rhetorical mask for a bold stance of self-assertion and resolve, the humility of the oppressed.

This self-assertion and courage is fostered by the other aspect of humility Teresa presents. Instead of the recited-then-undercut rhetoric of humility she employed in interhuman contexts, Teresa regards the stark truth of her limitations before God with rhetorical exaggeration but without ironic revision. What is remarkable is the effect of this stance. Humility for Teresa is the marker and foundation for utmost intimacy with God, revealing her to herself as a sinner, yes, but a sinner loved by God. In prayer, she saw the figure of a child who said, “Who are you?” She replied, “I am Teresa of Jesus. Who are you?” The child replied, “I am Jesus of Teresa.” This humility before God is the foundation for true relationship, and bears no resemblance to the self-abasing servility so often lauded in Christian tradition. In the often-told story, Teresa, praying in adversity, (the accounts range from her pondering her enemies to having fallen off her donkey into the mud) asks God why she must endure all this. She heard God reply “That is how I treat my friends.” She responded “No wonder you have so few!”⁸⁰ In Teresa’s description, the spiritual dynamism of humility allowed her to appear before God with all her shortcomings, fears and sins on full display, and find herself loved, empowered, and missioned. Teresa’s sharp sense of her own shortcomings didn’t stop her in her work as founder/reformer and spiritual guide. It set her free.

Somewhat paradoxically, this virtue that emphasizes shortcomings before God also conforms one to the person of Jesus. For Teresa humility is an important part of the imitation of Christ, and humility is one of Jesus’ most salient character traits. Teresa points to Jesus humbly asking God for what he needs: “[Jesus] knew that whatever he did on earth God would do in heaven, and would consider it good, since his will and the Father’s will were one, yet the humility of the good Jesus was such that he wanted, as it were, to ask leave of his Father.”⁸¹ And in a statement that rings poignantly in light of the

⁸⁰ Among many other places, this story may be found in James Martin, S.J., *Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor and Laughter are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 98.

⁸¹ Teresa, *Way*, 220.

menace of the Inquisition, Teresa points to Jesus modeling humility in submitting to human authority, “humbled even unto death.”⁸²

Let us return to Tessman’s description of the two-fold oppression effected by structures of what theologians would call social sin. Surely Teresa was impeded by the social and ecclesial sexism to which she was subjected, just as sexism continues to afflict and restrict the activities of women in most parts of the world and in many Christian churches. Likewise, the pressures of endemic mistrust of mystics and the obsessive suspicion of *conversos* and those connected to them are reflected in her care to write in ways that would disarm her adversaries.

What about that second level of oppression in which oppressive social structures cause moral damage “by creating inclinations that conflict with liberatory principles, thus barring the possibility of full virtue”?⁸³ In this context, did humility as she understood it serve as a liberatory or enslaving force in her soul? Here, what is striking about Teresa is not the opposition she faced, but the fact that she continually resisted, working within a corrupt ecclesial context to try to reform it and defying social norms for women in her time. She did so with great prudence, to be sure: for example, she sought out sound theological advice before her works were circulated. But what is important is that she *did* continue in her mission of reform and to write and publish her work. Too many subsequent scholars have been cowed by less dire threats than those Teresa endured.

Humility as represented in many Christian works, including those of special significance to Teresa like Osuna’s *Third Spiritual Alphabet*, requires subservience and silence before human authority and God alike. Teresa cannot properly be described as subservient or silent with regard to human authority, even as her writing affirms—even asserts—her female weakness and inadequacy. Between Teresa and God, humility is part and parcel of the freedom in her unity with God that permits, empowers, even impels her in her mission of reform and teaching. Far from disempowering her, humility set her free, even as she insisted on calling herself *mujercilla*. For Teresa, humility was the seedbed of courage and the foundation of the whole Interior Castle.

WHEN IS A VIRTUE NOT A VIRTUE?

Virtues are constitutive of individual and social flourishing, but accounts of the content of human flourishing differ. How do we discern true from corrupt accounts of the good life? I have argued else-

⁸² Teresa, *Way*, 240.

⁸³ Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 609/4851.

where⁸⁴ that Aristotle's account of virtues begins inductively, by looking around at who seemed to be flourishing, while Thomas Aquinas sets up an implicit dialectic between an *a priori* moral anthropology and a fundamentally inductive Aristotelian moral methodology. In both cases, social sin can warp the vision of virtue in the two ways described by Tessman—by direct constraints on one's social horizon, and by distorting one's vision of what flourishing means in the first place. This distortion corrupts the truth about the self that humility seeks, and so serves to misdirect the virtue toward that corrupted vision.

Virtues are reasoned means between vicious excess, but to recognize them in contexts stained by social sin (that is, in all human societies), we must ask also if a particular character trait liberates or constrains its possessor in his or her pursuit of flourishing.⁸⁵ In describing Teresa's account of humility, I have emphasized the function of humility before God in freeing her to be the mystic and reformer she was called to be (and how in that freedom she sharply relativized and even undercut proper female docile humility before other people, especially men in power).

All true virtues liberate, but not merely to set us free from constraint. The liberation of virtue is a liberation for a more expansive pursuit of the life to which one is called. Teresa's humility liberated her for a countercultural role in a dangerous time. We see a similar countercultural move in St. Francis' embrace of poverty in a social context in which it was just becoming possible to be a social climber through personal wealth. The fierce trust in God that is so remarkable in Martin Luther led him first into conflict with, then to be freed from, an ecclesial institution that acted to exteriorize and commercialize faith. Not all true virtue is countercultural, to be sure, but perhaps it is easiest to see the liberation of virtue in persons and situations in which virtue brings conflict with established or unexamined vicious norms.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Lisa Fullam, "Sex in 3-D. A Telos for a Virtue Ethics of Sexuality," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 27.2 (2007): 157ff.

⁸⁵ Tessman concludes with an expansion of the range of traits that can be counted as virtues by including various kinds of burdened virtues. In addition to the Aristotelian notion of virtues as traits that are conducive to or constitutive of a life of flourishing, she adds traits that would be good under better circumstances, traits whose goodness are measured by their potential to help the bearer transform the world, and traits that improve life even if oppression makes the good life possible (*Burdened Virtues*, 167). This is a different matter than redefining and refining the meaning of a particular virtue, as Teresa has done with humility.

⁸⁶ Liberation is itself in need of an adequate account in terms of virtues. One place to begin, perhaps, is to examine the relationship of liberation to the cardinal virtues in their general (not their specific) sense. Space does not permit such an examination here.

When all is said and done, mystics are dangerous people. They may (or may not) directly challenge the oppressive structures they confront. (For example, Teresa's contemporary Martin Luther did directly oppose ecclesial authority structures, while Francis of Assisi did not. Each was a powerful reformer.) Ultimately, the power that mystics possess is of a different kind—at its heart, mysticism serves to dramatically relativize other authority structures, especially those that serve to diminish the human spirit. Mystics are dangerous because they are unbound.

Teresa did not directly confront Church authority as such—she complied with it to the extent necessary to achieve her aims. She also did not directly confront the sexism of her time—the awareness of sexism as a morally corrupting force was, alas, still centuries in the future. However, her use of a rhetoric of self-abasement to skewer the powerful, combined with a spirituality of being freed in and through God's grace and her humility, grounded and focused her in her work. Humility can indeed be a weapon used by wicked people to oppress the powerless, but Teresa, set loose by humility and the courage that goes with it, turned this weapon against them. God must have smiled.

Let us all hope, then, for a flowering of mysticism in our hearts and in our world. We'll recognize the mystics in our midst, in part, because of their humility. **M**