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BOOK REVIEWS

Love Disconsoled: Meditations on Christian Charity by **Timothy P. Jackson**. Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp. 254 + xiii. Cloth \$59.95.

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In the opening pages of *Love Disconsoled*, Timothy Jackson dedicates his book to the memory of Paul Ramsey and to Richard Rorty. It is a most unusual coupling, and deeply revelatory of the spirit and content of *Love Disconsoled*. For as Jackson explains, *Love Disconsoled* is an extended effort to blend Ramsey's orthodox Christian sensibilities with Rortian irony. The fundamental goal of Jackson's book is to defend the traditional Christian claim that charity is the first among the virtues without falling prey to "false consolations" such as the Boethian claim that charity is invulnerable to evil, or the Pauline claim that Christian charity somehow requires the immortality of the soul. The result is an extremely interesting, elegantly written, and sometimes unpredictable meditation on the nature of Christian charity.

Roughly the first half of the book is devoted to defending the claim that charity is the primary value or the "metavalue". In the first chapter, "Biblical Keys to Love", Jackson sketches an account of what charity is, and how it relates to love of self and neighbor. On Jackson's view, to have *caritas* is to (1) be unconditionally committed to the good of others, (2) regard equally the well-being of others, and (3) passionately serve others in a manner that is open to self-sacrifice for the sake of others (p. 15). To claim that charity thus understood is the *primary* value is to say two things. First, it is to claim that charity is primary in the sense of being *foundational*. Charity is that value the instantiation of which is a necessary condition of our participating in those goods that constitute our flourishing. Jackson's claim here is not simply that apart from God's exercising God's agapic love there would be no other created goods. Nor is it merely that apart from Christ's atoning sacrifice sin would not be forgiven. Rather, Jackson defends the stronger view that human flourishing is impossible apart from the human exercise of charity. Apart from the exercise of unmerited care from our fellow human beings, none of us would have developed the capacities requisite for participating in the numerous goods that comprise human flourishing. Moreover, apart from the exercise of charity, the participation in goods such as erotic love and friendship inevitably go awry.

Second, to claim that charity is the primary value is to say that charity is

the unrivaled *telos* of the moral and spiritual life. Charity is that value which all of us ought to strive to exemplify to the highest degree, and which defeats all rivals. Consequently, in any instance in which the exercise of charity comes into conflict with the realization of other goods — and Jackson readily concedes there are such conflicts — charity trumps.

The next three chapters illustrate various features of the priority of charity. Chapter two is a close reading of Ernest Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*. It is a provocative and rich chapter whose aim is to put before us in stark form two stories in which the loves become disordered absent the leavening effect of charity. In what is perhaps the finest chapter of the book, "The Five Loves", Jackson offers a nuanced interpretation of four figures: Freud, Augustine, Simone Weil, and Edward Vacek. Jackson's claim is that all four figures misunderstand the relation of charity to the other loves, and the sense in which charity is primary. Jackson's diagnosis of both Freud's and Augustine's views on charity is that neither gives a plausible reckoning of charity's relation to *eros*. For Freud, charity is "aim-inhibited *eros*", a defective love which tries to rein in *eros* (p. 72). For Augustine, charity is "aim-enhanced *eros*", a love which is (in part) erotic desire channeled toward God (p. 61). Jackson's diagnosis of Weil and Vacek is that neither gives a plausible account of the relation which charity bears to love of self and friendship respectively. Weil attempts to reconcile love of self and charity by propounding Buddhist-like annihilation of the self. Vacek, by contrast, reduces charity to a type of friendship, viz., friendship with God. In opposition to these authors, Jackson takes a middle course. Jackson contends that charity is neither fundamentally at odds with any of these loves nor a mere variant of them.

Chapter four, "Love, abomination, and liberation", is a call to restore to our moral conceptual schemes the notions of 'abomination' and 'liberation'. The guiding idea here is that since the "moral lexicon shapes the contours of our self-understanding, to define the limits of that lexicon in terms of 'abomination' and 'liberation' is to begin to comprehend the worst and best we are or may be" (p. 96). Jackson argues that we should not simply adopt ordinary (conservative and liberal) uses of these concepts. Rather, he claims that both notions have to be reconfigured, and understood in terms of charity. The abominable, says Jackson, should be understood as whatever ultimately thwarts the human capacity for love while the liberating is whatever fundamentally expands it (p. 96). Once again, charity is put forth as the metavalue — that value in terms of which we are to understand the worst evils and the most magnificent triumphs.

Having defended the claim that charity is the metavalue, in the next three chapters, Jackson clarifies what this claim does *not* entail. First, it does not entail "Axiological Optimism", the view according to which claims about the priority of charity rest on indubitable epistemological foundations. Jackson hastens to add that the rejection of Axiological Optimism is perfectly compatible with espousing a robust form of moral realism, and rejecting Hemingway's moral pessimism according to which "we are all bitched from the start". Second, claiming that charity is the metavalue does not entail that charity is self-sufficient, the *solum bonum*. There are other

loves and other goods that, when all goes well, work in concert with charity. Charity is, nevertheless, the *summum bonum*. Third, the priority of charity does not entail that love is invulnerable to the evils of this world. To the contrary, Jackson admits that there are evils of such great magnitude that they can “unmake” (to use Elaine Scarry’s term) a person’s humanity, rendering the giving and receiving of human love impossible for that person. Nevertheless, Jackson maintains that there are limits to this vulnerability. The proponent of strong agape (i.e., the Christian believer who accepts the priority of love) strongly doubts, for instance, that there are any genuine moral dilemmas. On the strong agapist’s view, love cannot suffer *decisive* harm unto damnation; human agents cannot be compelled to sin through no antecedent fault of their own lest we give up on the goodness of God (p. 147). However, Jackson admits that the rejection of genuine dilemmas remains more of an article of faith for the strong agapist than a conclusion based on decisive philosophical considerations. Finally, and most controversially, charity’s primacy does not entail that the strong agapist should maintain that there is an afterlife in which charity is rewarded. Though immortality remains a “blessed hope” it has ultimately nothing to do with charity, and can even serve to inhibit the proper expression of charity. Practicing charity is its own reward.

There is a great deal to like about this book. It is extraordinarily learned and imaginative — rich in references from literature, poetry, philosophy, theology, art, and psychology. (The book includes, for example, prints of paintings by Guido Reni and William Blake together with intelligent interpretations by Jackson.) That said, it should be noted that, although Jackson is a trained philosopher, his style of argument is often more illustrative than systematic. Consequently, I imagine that some philosophers will not be entirely satisfied with various aspects of Jackson’s discussion.

First, Jackson defends some claims that appear overly strong. For example, Jackson contends that charity is primary in the sense that “it is a necessary condition for the enjoyment of goods such as happiness” and “other human goods” (pp. 20, 25). But that seems an overstatement on certain assumptions that Jackson adopts, viz., that exercising charity requires equally regarding the well-being of others (pp. 15, 212). It seems possible that a person might be happy in the “modern more or less Kantian” sense (p. 20) or participate in goods such as friendship without equally regarding the well-being of others. In addition, some of Jackson’s more controversial claims seem to me misleading in some senses and unpersuasive in others. In particular, Jackson’s attempt to detach traditional notions of immortality from the exercise of charity seems to me a blend of the misleading and the unconvincing. So, let me close by examining Jackson’s claim on this score.

Jackson asks us to consider two claims

- (1) The desire for eternal life ought to be a significant motive for practicing charity (p. 155).
- (2) If someone practices charity (i.e., loves God and others), then that person will enjoy eternal life (pp. 151, 157).

On Jackson's view, the strong agapist should simply deny (1). As for (2), Jackson claims in some places that the strong agapist needn't "insist" on or be "certain" of (2) (pp. 157, 159). In other places, Jackson says that the exercise of charity can be "coherent" or "justified" even if (2) is false, and that the antecedent of (2) does not "directly entail" its consequent (pp. 151, 153, 158, 163, 30, 133). Let me call the thesis that the strong agapist ought to insist on (2) the "insistence claim". Accordingly, let me call the thesis that the antecedent of (2) directly entails its consequent the "entailment claim".

Jackson is, in my estimation, correct to contend that the strong agapist should reject the claim expressed in (1). He is also, I believe, correct to say that we ought to reject the entailment claim as it is expressed in (2). (Of course this is not say that (2) is false; it is only to say that, if it is true, it is not true by virtue of the mere fact that what its antecedent explicitly states is true.) Nevertheless, there are at least three places where Jackson's discussion of these two claims seems to me to go astray.

First, though I take Jackson to be correct to reject the entailment claim, I think that the rationale he offers for rejecting it is wrong. The primary reason that Jackson offers for rejecting this claim is that "charity is its own reward" (p. 159): even if eternal life were not the "inherent consummation" of practicing charity, this would not "evacuate present love of all meaning" (p. 159) or imply that "life is wretched" or "meaningless" (p. 157). But that seems to me beside the point. Claiming that charity is its own reward in this sense does not count against the truth of the entailment claim. It could still be the case that, necessarily, the antecedent of (2) directly entails its consequent, and that charity is its own reward. (An analogy: it may be that honesty is its own reward but God has set up the world in such a way that, necessarily, every honest act eventuates in a chorus of angelic hallelujahs.)

Second, as Jackson reads them, both C.S. Lewis and St. Paul embrace the entailment claim. Now it is true that Lewis states that everlasting life is the "very consummation of earthly discipleship".¹ But I cannot see that this commits Lewis to the entailment claim. Nor can I find any evidence that St. Paul adopts the claim. Some things that Jackson says, however, indicate that he interprets Lewis and St. Paul to espouse this somewhat different thesis which he takes to be false:

- (3) If there is no resurrection of the dead, then our present love is evacuated of meaning, and our lives are wretched (p. 157).

(I assume that the resurrection of the dead implies immortality in the traditional sense.) But, again, I can find no evidence that Lewis explicitly embraces (3). St. Paul, admittedly, does appear to embrace (3) when he writes in 1 Cor. 15:29-30 that "[i]f the dead are not raised ... why are we putting ourselves in danger every hour? If the dead are not raised 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'". But it's important to see that when St. Paul talks about the resurrection of the dead here, he is also talking about *Christ's* resurrection. If I understand it right, Paul's argument is this: If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised from the dead. But if Christ has not been raised from the

dead, then our lives are pitiable. We are still mired in our sin, objects of divine wrath, false witnesses, responsible for many unnecessary and cruel deaths, without hope for our own resurrection, and shall have been wasting our time preaching the gospel (I Cor. 15: 12-33; Eph. 2:3). On this reading, Paul accepts an interpretation of (3) in which its antecedent refers to *both* Christ's resurrection and the resurrection of those who believe in Christ. To my knowledge, Paul does not consider, let alone embrace, a construal of (3) in which its antecedent refers to only the resurrection of the faithful, and which also assumes that Christ has been raised from the dead. Accordingly, it seems to me that Jackson attributes to St. Paul a view which he does not explicitly or implicitly hold. Thus, there seems to me inadequate grounds for chiding Paul for endorsing a "vitalism in which meaning requires permanence" (p. 157). Nor does Paul's claim in (3) (as I have understood it) seem to me something about which the strong agapist should be particularly suspicious. Once we eliminate Christ's resurrection from the content of the Christian faith, there is, I believe, a clear sense in which Christian charity is evacuated of its meaning. There is also a clear sense, I think, in which apart from Christ's resurrection, the early Christians, at least, had reason to despair.

Third, I find Jackson's reasons for rejecting what I've called the "insistence claim" unpersuasive. Jackson believes that, rather than insist on (2), it is better for the strong agapist "to keep immortality-as-personal-endlessness a pure hope, a vague intuition/intimation" (p. 167). I believe that we are offered a false dichotomy here. There is plenty of conceptual space for propositional attitudes that fall between *insisting* that a claim is true and merely *hoping* that it is true — among which is *firmly believing* it is true. Moreover, contrary to what Jackson appears to suggest, it may be that some of us *ought* for moral, religious and epistemic reasons to insist that (2) is true. Presumably, St. Paul and the early Christians had good reason to believe that Christ himself had promised eternal life (in the traditional sense) to those who love him.² If this is right, it is arguable that St. Paul, the apostles and the early Christians had excellent epistemic, moral and religious reasons to insist on the resurrection of the dead. Likewise, I believe it is plausible to hold that strong agapists who stand squarely in the orthodox Christian tradition today have similar reasons for insisting on the truth of this claim. None of this is to deny that insisting on (2) can function as a "false comfort" and lead to "cruelty" and a denigration of this life (p. 169). But that would not warrant Jackson's Rortian claim that it's best to "change the subject when the topic of heaven arises." It would merely warrant a certain degree of caution and candor on the part of the strong agapist. After all, our allegiance to the other loves can and often does function as a false consolation and as an occasion for "cruelty" (p. 169). But we don't take that as a good reason for not insisting on the centrality and goodness of these other loves. What is called for, it seems, is a commitment to charity in which charity itself purifies our commitment to other loves and doctrines.

Let me make a final point. At the outset of the book, Jackson states

that love's priority implies the "moral irrelevance of an afterlife" (p. 30; cf. also p. 133). That seems to me mistaken. As Jackson himself notes, philosophers such as Robert and Marilyn Adams have plausibly claimed that a loving God acting in character would grant us lives (or at least ample opportunity to have lives) that are a great good to us on the whole. But many of us (e.g., those who have participated in horrendous evils) appear not to have lives (or ample opportunity to have lives) that are a great good to us on the whole. But if that's right, the reality of an afterlife *does* appear to be morally relevant. It appears to be of crucial moral importance insofar as it vouchsafes the loving kindness of God.

Jackson demurs. He claims that "[t]he possibility of love [that doesn't imply an afterlife] is all that even an infinite Charity can offer a finite creature. And presumably it was once possible (however early in their careers) for all human beings to be or become agapic lovers" (p. 173). I am inclined to think that it is false that it was once possible (in any interestingly restrictive sense) for all human beings to become agapic lovers in this life. Moreover, I cannot see how it could be true that the mere possibility of becoming or being an agapic lover is *all* that a good God could offer us. Surely, as Jackson admits elsewhere, a good God *could* offer us eternal life. Finally, it seems to me that Jackson's stated position grates against some of our deepest moral intuitions. It is, I believe, very plausible to hold that a loving God *would* offer us (ample opportunity for having) lives that are on the whole a great good. But it is doubtful that a person's having the mere potential to practice charity (or even practicing charity) implies that that person's life is good for her on the whole. If that's right, "infinite Charity", on Jackson's view, is much less than the title indicates.³

NOTES

1. "The Weight of Glory" in *The Weight of Glory and Other Essays* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), p. 3.

2. On pp. 163-167, Jackson considers the possibility that Christ did not promise eternal life in the traditional sense, but only in some less robust sense in which "eternal life" refers to a special mode of God's presence in the here and now. Jackson claims that when we examine what Christ says about the issue, it is unclear as to what Christ actually did promise about eternal life. Perhaps so. But in this respect, the scriptural text concerning Christ's promises about eternal life is no different than Christ's claims, say, to be God the Son. It seems that when we consider how we should understand many of the central claims of the Christian faith (e.g., the trinity, the incarnation, the atonement, etc.), we must rely on the Pauline epistles, the Creeds, and the Christian tradition. And it is clear, I think, that the Pauline epistles, the Creeds, and the tradition unequivocally support the view that Christ promised eternal life in the traditional sense.

3. My thanks to Andrew Cuneo for discussion of these matters, and especially, Tim Jackson for helping me to understand better his views, and saving me from errors in interpretation.