

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 38 | Issue 4

Article 8

10-1-2021

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Recommended Citation

Lee, John Y. (2021) "Mark R. Wynn, SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS AND THE VIRTUES: LIVING BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 38: Iss. 4, Article 8.

DOI: 10.37977/faithphil.2021.38.4.8

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol38/iss4/8>

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BOOK REVIEWS

Spiritual Traditions and the Virtues: Living Between Heaven and Earth, by Mark R. Wynn. Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. ix + 254. \$85.00 (hardcover).

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Philosophers of religion, theologians, and practitioners of a religious way of life should welcome Mark R. Wynn's *Spiritual Traditions and the Virtues: Living Between Heaven and Earth*. In the past decade or so, we have witnessed the intellectual fruitfulness of analytic theology as methods, concepts, and critical tools from analytic philosophy have been employed in the service of elucidating different areas of theology. In a similar vein, Wynn offers his project to introduce readers to what he calls "analytic spirituality." (In the Acknowledgements, Wynn honors the late David Eford as the pioneer of this new movement.) What is Wynn's project? Wynn's general project is to invite us to "examine world views and ways of life in combination, and on that basis arrive at an assessment of what form of the spiritual life [one should] lead, if any" (205). Wynn's more specific project "seeks to show how a certain notion of spiritual good, one that is rooted in Thomas Aquinas's account of infused moral virtue, can generate a distinctive vision of human life, and the possibilities for spiritual fulfilment" (7). While I endorse the general project, I doubt the persuasiveness of Wynn's more specific, Thomistic project rooted in a certain understanding of the beatific vision. The appeal of Wynn's general project is easy for us to appreciate. World views (religious or otherwise) come with an explicit or implicit ethics. The ethics can be fleshed out in terms of actions, patterns of behavior, attitudes, virtues, or some other ethical or spiritual good. Not all ethical or spiritual "goods" will be understood (and hence, appreciated) by those standing outside of a particular spiritual tradition. Nevertheless, there might be some ethical or spiritual good that can be understood and thus appreciated sufficiently enough for someone standing outside of a spiritual tradition to be drawn toward that tradition in such a way that the person might consider being part of that spiritual tradition. Wynn clearly hopes for this kind of response. And in this hope, Wynn simply aligns himself with the long history and reflection of Christian witness to the world. The problems arise, philosophically, not in this



general terrain, but as I have said, in the more specific, Thomistic proposal. For the remainder of this review, I want to examine two areas where the Thomistic proposal prove questionable. I will conclude the review by suggesting a better alternative than the Thomistic proposal rooted in the beatific vision. I will argue that the beatific vision itself should be understood within a larger framework of a biblical eschatology that presents the redemptive and re-creating work of God in terms of *new creation*, and that as the believing community is incorporated in the new creation through their participation in Christ, the ethics of how Christians ought to live is informed not only by what will happen in the future but what is happening now, in the unfolding work of God's new creation in Christ and in the power of the Spirit.

As Wynn states early in his text, "The key concept that runs through this volume is Thomas Aquinas's notion of infused moral virtue" (4). An infused virtue comes supernaturally from God, who "infuses" the virtue into the life of an individual believer, whereas an acquired virtue comes about naturally without the aid of supernatural assistance. Wynn identifies two examples of infused moral virtues, abstinence and neighbor love, to contrast how they might be perceived by a religious person and a non-religious person. For the non-religious person, abstinence will be seen as morally permissible but the motivation for it will not be appreciated. For the religious person, abstinence will be seen as morally admirable and the motivation for it will be appreciated. The difference in the two perceptions lies in the presence or absence of a religious frame of reference, a frame that includes appraisals of God-directed attitudes and actions. From a non-religious perspective, such attitudes and actions are not accounted for. But in the case of showing love to one's neighbor, both the religious and non-religious persons will have certain judgments about it. For the non-religious person, showing love to one's neighbor is morally optional; showing such love will be seen as going beyond one's moral obligation. In contrast, for the religious person, showing love to one's neighbor is morally obligatory; showing such love is duty-bound since the duty to love one's neighbor comes from God. This difference in how neighbor love is understood depending on one's frame of reference provides for Wynn "a kind of moral argument for theism" (62). The moral demands for how we treat others are higher for the theist in contrast to moral demands made on the secularist. Theists are obligated by God to love others with neighbor love, while no such obligation exists for secularists. The apologetic hope is that the secularist would see the more stringent moral demands in theism as something admirable or praiseworthy and in doing so might consider the truth of theism that undergirds such admirable or praiseworthy ethics. Certainly, Wynn hopes that such a moral appeal might persuade the secularist to consider a theistic framework and perhaps a way of life that conforms to that framework. But that hope will depend, in part, on how neighbor love is grounded philosophically. It is here in this area of *grounding neighbor love* that the Thomistic project becomes conceptually

vulnerable. Rather than grounding the love of others in a divine command theory or in a Christian ethics of *imitatio Christi* or in the theological claim that to love others is a way to love God, Wynn appeals to Aquinas's proposal that neighbor love is grounded in a future event, the beatific vision. Wynn writes, "Aquinas is suggesting that the appropriateness of neighbor love is grounded in a future truth concerning the beatific vision (23). . . I take it that Aquinas's answer to these concerns would be to appeal to the possibility, relative to our present epistemic vantage point, that any given human being will share in the beatific vision" (24). The argument is a type of prudential argument based on the *possibility* that the person with whom you are interacting might show up in the same place you will presumably show up in the future presence of God. The possibility, it should be noted, applies to both you and the other person. As a Christian, let us say, your confidence may be very high in terms of your future enjoyment of the beatific vision, but nevertheless, it cannot be completely presumed. But even granting a high probability of your place in the eschaton, the other at this present time enjoys only a possibility if that other is not a fellow believer. Wynn attempts to strengthen Aquinas's beatific vision proposal by suggesting the following: "Relative to the [present epistemic] vantage point, it is appropriate for me to treat any given human being as my neighbor [i.e., those saved], even if it should turn out that some of those to whom I extend neighbor love will not in fact share in the beatific vision. We could put the point by saying that in these matters we are to adhere to a kind of precautionary principle: if it is possible, from my epistemic vantage point, that an individual has a relatively elevated moral or ontological status, then I am to treat them as having that status, even if it is also possible, from the same vantage point, that they have another, lower status" (24). The more-to-the-point, question ought to be: What is the moral status of the neighbor *now*? The question, Might the neighbor have a higher status (because of inclusion in the beatific vision) *later*? seems not only philosophically odd but morally inappropriate. The Scriptures tell us that human beings have *moral worth* now (irrespective of their future state) because they are loved by God with attachment love and they are created in God's image. A more promising approach that argues for such grounding comes from Nicholas Wolterstorff (*Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton University Press, 2008)).

The second aspect of Aquinas's proposal that seems philosophically questionable is how Aquinas understands neighbor love. Wynn writes, "For neighbor love, understood as Aquinas understands it, requires not simply that I should benefit other human beings, but also that I should think of my relationship to them under the category of 'friendship.' When Aquinas considers the question 'whether charity is friendship?' (ST 2a2ae. 23. 1), he replies emphatically that it is" (46). Aquinas knows that in a friendship "a certain mutual love is requisite, since friendship is between friend and friend: and this well-wishing is founded on some kind of communication" (47, from ST 2a2ae. 23. 1). Aquinas is well aware that any true description of friendship must include a notion of *mutuality*. But how then

can Aquinas describe one's relationship to someone else who does not return one's love or even recognize one's loving intentions and actions as a *friendship*? Here, again, the future aspect of the beatific vision informs how we ought to understand our present relationship with others. Wynn explains, "Even so, on his view, it is clear that if we are committed to living according to the ideals of neighbor love, then our relationship to others can be assessed, here and now, not only in terms of beneficence, but also attitudinally, in so far as our attitudes to other human beings here and now should be congruent with the truth that we will one day enjoy a perfected relationship of friendship with them" (47). In other words, the *possibility* of our being friends with strangers and acquaintances in the future beatific vision should make us think of them as *friends now* according to Aquinas. The same sort of critique as previously applied is appropriate here. The relevant question is not so much about various possibilities of a future state. The relevant question is, How ought we to treat other human beings? If the other indeed is a friend and as such there is mutual recognition and affection, then treat that other as a friend. But if the other is not a friend, one can still show love—not in the mode of friendship but in the mode of benevolence. Love as benevolence is morally sufficient and honorable for people we do not know. To describe our love for people we do not know well as friendship is to distort our understanding of friendship. We can be acquaintances now; we may be friends in the future, including in the future eschaton. We can show love in either case.

As we have seen even in this brief critique, it is the *beatific vision* as understood by Thomas and as defended by Wynn that does the major conceptual work in explaining how the infused moral virtue of neighbor love has the purchase it does in the believer's life. Because the beatific vision is understood principally as a state of affairs in the future, the question then arises how a future state conditions present action and behavior. Wynn explains, "And in the beatific vision, our lives will be aligned with that reality as perfectly as is humanly possible. Why? Because in the beatific vision, we shall 'see' the divine nature and be brought into union with it, so far as that is humanly possible. And in turn, therefore, a life that is lived, here and now, in conformity with the beatific vision will be aligned so far as possible for us here and now with the divine nature" (172). The beatific vision operates on the mind and faith of the believer from a distance in time. As such, the believer is thus called to "align with," to live "in conformity with," to live "congruently with" this future state of affairs. But if we see the beatific vision as the endpoint of God's ongoing work of new creation, then we have more than just the future that shapes us. We have, instead, the present realities of life in Christ through the power of the Spirit who is at work in the unfolding work of God's new creation. Part of that new creation work is the work of God in the formation of a new humanity. Given my present limitations in this review, let me call to your attention the work of some biblical scholars whose writings have offered deeper insights into New Testament ethics. The

many publications of N. T. Wright have thrown much light on our understanding of Second Temple Judaism, the thought of the Apostle Paul, the meaning of the resurrection, and the New Testament community centered in the crucified and risen Lord. Michael J. Gorman's *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Eerdmans, 2015) presents a compelling case that it is the transformative reality of the Spirit-enabled people in Christ-like participation that advances God's mission to the world. And in Richard B. Hays's *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation; A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (HarperCollins, 1996), we get a richly informed theological and biblical account of New Testament ethics. The ethics of the New Testament church is not to be understood in the standard ways we tend to think, in terms of deontology, right order, virtues, or Aristotelian eudaimonia. The ethics of the New Testament church is woven into the story of what God accomplished in Christ. That story runs as follows according to Hays: "The God of Israel, the creator of the world, has acted (astoundingly) to rescue a lost and broken world through the death and resurrection of Jesus; the full scope of that rescue is not yet apparent, but God has created a community of witnesses to this good news, the church. While awaiting the grand conclusion of the story, the church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is called to reenact the loving obedience of Jesus Christ and thus to serve as a sign of God's redemptive purposes for the world" (*The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 193). The "grand conclusion" can be interpreted as the beatific vision but what is important for us to notice is the *continuity* between the present life in the Spirit and the future life in God's consummation. This continuity implies an ethics not only of "congruence" to God's future but of strict conformity to God's present work in the community of faith. Of particular attention is the image of new creation. Hays states, "*The church embodies the power of the resurrection in the midst of a not-yet-redeemed world. Paul's image of 'new creation' stands here as a shorthand signifier for the dialectical eschatology that runs throughout the New Testament. . . Thus, the New Testament's eschatology creates a critical framework that pronounces judgment upon our complacency as well as upon our presumptuous despair*" (*The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 198). The dialectical eschatology—how we are caught between the already/not yet reality of God's kingdom—explains the tension in our ethical, spiritual lives. This tension is to be expected since we have the Spirit as a down payment which gives us hope and power but at the same time we await our full redemption (Ephesians 1: 14). Whether or not someone standing outside this New Testament story finds the attitudes and actions of those committed to the way of Christ and new creation persuasive is a much more complex matter. I close with the thought in response to Wynn's project that there is still a place for the beatific vision. But this beatific vision will need to be reimaged according to the eschatological story of God's ongoing work of new creation.