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Happiness, Virtue and Religious Commitments

As is well-known, virtue ethics has had a massive revival in the last few decades; in philosophy departments it is now regularly taught as a third approach to ethical theory, alongside Kantian and consequentialist types of theory. Elizabeth Anscombe's seminal article 'Modern Moral Philosophy' is often credited as one of major sources of this renewal.¹ The most influential aspect of the article has been her suggestion of turning to a virtue ethics of an Aristotelian kind. The most prominent version of contemporary virtue ethics has been neo-Aristotelian² (though this is not the only version to be found).³

One striking feature of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics is that it is eudaimonist: it takes living virtuously to be constitutive of happiness

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- [1] Although it has been much reprinted; it is probably most easily accessible in Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (eds), *Virtue Ethics*, Oxford Readings in Philosophy, Oxford University Press, New York, 1997, pp 26-44.
- [2] The most prominent defenders of this kind of approach to ethics are Philippa Foot in her numerous writings, most recently *Moral Dilemmas*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2002, and Rosalind Hursthouse, whose very influential *On Virtue Ethics*, Oxford University Press, New York, was published in 1999.
- [3] There are several kinds of non-eudaimonistic virtue ethics. Two kinds of consequentialist virtue ethics are defended by Julia Driver, *Uneasy Virtue*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2001, and Thomas Hurka, *Virtue, Vice and Value*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001. Michael Slote, *Morals from Motives*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001, defends an 'agent-centered' version. Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics, a pluralistic view*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2003, defends a distinctive account, and has recently become interested in Nietzschean types of virtue ethics. Robert Adam, *A Theory of Virtue*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2006, and Linda Zagzebski *Divine Motivation Theory* Oxford University Press, New York, 2004, have both produced versions of virtue ethics which are distinct from, but related to, their versions of theism.

or (as *eudaimonia* is more commonly translated) flourishing. The use of 'flourishing' has come about in part to avoid chronic misunderstandings that attach to the contemporary use of 'happiness' to mean pleasant feeling, or satisfaction of desires, and to keep the focus on what matters to eudaimonists: the living of a happy *life*. I will not here go into the complications of distinguishing the view that holds virtue to be wholly constituent of happiness from the one holding it to be only partly so. Another prominent feature is that most discussions take the default account of virtue and flourishing to be a naturalistic one.⁴ Virtues are standardly regarded as the dispositions which enable us to flourish as humans, thus requiring an account of human nature to be sought from the appropriate sciences – psychology, biology and the like.

One reason, I think, that neo-Aristotelian eudaimonist virtue ethics has become so popular among philosophers so rapidly ('popular' in the sense of being regarded as an appropriate object of discussion, whether they actually agree with it or not) is that in contemporary terms it is, in effect, secular. This is not to say that anyone thinks that Aristotle himself had an approach to ethics that is secular in the contemporary way, but for Aristotle God does not come into ethics in anything like the way familiar to us from the monotheistic religions, and so his ethical framework is suitable for secular interpretation, and that is what it has mostly had. Interestingly, this is hardly what Anscombe herself would have taken to be a satisfying response to her original article, as some recent writers have begun to point out.⁵ I will not be discussing this particular issue here, however.

In what ways can a eudaimonist virtue ethics framework of an Aristotelian kind accommodate the demands of monotheistic religion? The Thomist transformation of the Aristotelian tradition of eudaimonist virtue ethics is of course widely familiar. Here I want briefly to look at a different strand in the ancient ethics of virtue and happiness, and a different religious transformation of it. I shall be briefly exploring the approach of Philo of Alexandria to the life lived in accordance with Mosaic law. These ideas are interesting in their own right, and suggestive about the relation of virtue to law, regarded as structuring the commitments of a life lived in accordance with religion.

[4] Not that this is uncontroversial, especially among philosophers who think that naturalism is unable to account for normativity.

[5] Cf. the articles in Anthony O'Hear (ed.), *Modern Moral Philosophy: Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement: 54*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004.

Philo is a Jewish philosopher whose work takes the form of commentary on the Torah; I shall here be concerned only with his works on the Ten Commandments and Mosaic law, in which he is clearly influenced by Plato in the *Laws*.⁶ In his second ideal state, Plato holds that not just the institutional framework of the state but everyday life should be structured by laws, which people are educated to obey. But people are not just to develop the disposition to do what they are told; they are educated, particularly by means of the laws' preambles,⁷ to understand the point of the laws and to grasp that living according to the practices and ways of life structured by the laws will help them to develop virtues and thus, as Plato assumes in this work, to live a happy life. Law should persuade and not just force; living according to good laws, with understanding of them, develops aspiration to virtue, and so laws will produce people of good character who will live well and so happily.

Philo takes himself, in this case as in others, to be making use of pagan ideas to make them contribute to a better purpose. He regards Moses as the supreme example of a lawgiver, comparing pagan examples unfavourably, and he thinks it 'low and unworthy of the dignity of the laws' to describe a system of ideal laws in the context of a city, even an ideal one, for this means that they are compromised from the start by thoughts of institutions created by humans.⁸ Rather, ideal law for Philo should be seen in the context of cosmology; by which he means *Genesis*. Philo is thus critical of Plato's *Laws*, though he nevertheless has some respect for the way Plato sees God as the source of ideal human law.⁹ Philo's God is of course not Plato's cosmic reason but the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and so the laws he is concerned with are the rules of Mosaic law given in the Torah.

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- [6] Philo's wording sometimes shows the influence of the *Laws*, and he explicitly refers to 'preambles', *prooimia*, Plato's most distinctive innovation in that work.
- [7] Each law comes with a preamble or prelude (the Greek word puns on the idea of musical prelude), of varying type depending on the kind of law, but always aimed at producing in the citizens the appropriate kind of conviction about the point of the law and of obeying it.
- [8] *Life of Moses* II, 45-51. Cf the criticisms of other lawgivers at *de Opificio Mundi* 1-3.
- [9] Philo is arguably unfair to Plato here, whose account of law in the *Laws*, though located in an ideally run city, is also set in a distinctive account of the cosmos and its ordering.

Philo is also influenced by the Stoics, and does sometimes think of Mosaic law as a 'written copy of natural law',¹⁰ and indeed it would not be unreasonable to see both Plato (in the *Laws*) and Philo as supporters of a kind of natural law theory. Here, however, I want to leave that aspect aside, and focus on Plato and Philo insofar as they are ethical thinkers who hold both of two positions; firstly, our end in life is to be happy, which we achieve by living virtuously, and secondly; we must live our lives according to laws and rules whose authority derives from God, and which structure a specific way of life. These two positions are in modern ethical thought often taken to be in patent and hopeless conflict. In the way they they integrate them both philosophers illuminate for us the resources of virtue ethics as a form of ethical thought which can accommodate a position that demands that we live our lives in a way structured by religious commitments.

Philo is a eudaimonist. This might seem surprising to us until we reflect that eudaimonism was the default option in ancient ethical theory. It does not occur to him that laws and rules might be ethically self-standing, that simple obedience to rules might be what is most ethically basic in people's lives, even if the rules have God's authority behind them. Hence Philo thinks that it is obvious that living according to Mosaic law produces a virtuous character – not just a disposition to follow rules, but a character in which reasoning, emotion and decision are harmoniously integrated:

For each of the ten pronouncements individually and all together prepare and exhort us (*protrepousi*) to practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and justice and piety and the rest of the chorus of virtues. They make our words (*logoi*) healthy with good deliberations, and attach good actions to our words, so that the soul's instrument may throughout play in tune to procure concord of life and an unassailable harmony.¹¹

Here is the standard ancient position, that the virtuous person is someone whose character is integrated and free of conflict, whose emotions and reasoning are 'in tune'. Moreover, real virtue leads to happiness:

[10] See: Hindy Najman, 'A Written Copy of the Law of Nature: An Unthinkable Paradox?' *Studia Philonica Annual*, Vol. XV, 2003, pp.54-63 and Gregory Sterling, 'Universalizing the Particular: natural law in Second Temple Jewish Ethics,' *Studia Philonica Annual*, Vol. XV, pp 64-80.

[11] *Special Laws* IV, 134; cf *Virtues* 184.

If our words (*logoi*) are of the same kind as our deliberations, and our actions of the same kind as what we say, and these reciprocate with one another, being bound with the unbreakable chains of harmony, then happiness (*eudaimonia*) prevails; happiness is wisdom (*sophia*) free of falsehood, and practical wisdom (*phronesis*)—wisdom for the service of God, practical wisdom for the organization of everyday life.¹²

Living according to Mosaic law produces a virtuous character, one with the standard virtues (wisdom, temperance, courage and justice) though with an emphasis on piety (*eusebeia*), something notable also in Plato. And this leads to *eudaimonia*, happiness.

Philo ascribes to Moses his own approach to presenting the demands of Mosaic law: Moses is said to think that mere command without encouragement is for slaves, not for the free, and he gives guidance by means of ‘preambles’ and other forms of discussion.¹³ For citizens well-trained and formed in virtue should not need the sanction of the actual written law: the mere recital of Sabbath duties, says Philo, ‘is enough to make those with good natures perfect with regard to virtue, without effort, and to render the restive and stubborn more open to persuasion.’¹⁴

Because he does not see rules as ethically self-standing, Philo does not deal with the Ten Commandments as a list of isolated rules, but sees the specific rules of Mosaic law as clustered round particular Commandments, which he sees as ‘generic’.¹⁵ For example, the Sixth Commandment is ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ but Philo does not treat this as an isolated prohibition of just one kind of action, as though as long as you don’t commit adultery your attitude to marriage is fine. Rather, the Commandment picks out something crucial to the right maintenance of marriage, and this is treated as the ‘heading’ under which we find the rules which structure marriage in both positive and negative ways. We find here prohibitions against other kinds of sexual activity than adultery (incest, bestiality, homosexu-

[12] *Praem.* 81.

[13] *Life of Moses* II, 50-51. The language in this passage contains many reminiscences of the *Laws*’ contrast of force and persuasion appropriate to slave and free respectively.

[14] *Special Laws* II, 39,1.

[15] *Special Laws* II 189: the ten are *genikoi nomoi*, while the others are *ta en eidei*; III 7: *ta en merei* are said to ‘tend towards’ the ten. Cf *Decalogue* 154: the ten are *kephalaia* (summaries) of the particular ones throughout the whole legislation. I have been told that this approach was also characteristic of the rabbinical tradition of Philo’s time.

ality, rape, seduction) and rules regulating who can and cannot marry, and purity regulations within marriage. All these rules, which, on the surface are only loosely connected with one another and with marriage, are thus seen to be unified by their reference to the aim of properly controlling and conducting sexual desire, which is assumed to be universally strong and socially unreliable, always liable to transgress boundaries.¹⁶

It is Philo's treatment of the Tenth Commandment which shows most clearly how he takes rule-following to be connected to the development of character. He reads it as, 'You shall not desire (*epithumein*)'. For Philo, control of *pathos*: feeling or passion, is the point of many rules, and in keeping with this he treats this Commandment as the heading under which are brought rules to regulate desire.¹⁷ Nothing, he holds, is more troublesome than desire, the urge to get what we don't have. It leads us to think things good which are not, and thus it systematically disturbs our values. It leads the irrational part of the soul to get the person to take irrational and disastrous courses and leads us to mistaken evaluations of what matters in our lives. This happens over our lives as a whole, not just in one area. Desire for money, for example, turns people dishonest, desire for fame turns them unreliable and desire for power turns them unscrupulous.

It is important, then, to discipline the most basic form of desire right from the start, since this, the claim goes, will render its other forms more amenable. Hence our basic desires for food and drink are from the start to be regulated and trained by the dietary laws, which bring it about that even basic eating and drinking take place in a disciplined and discriminating framework. When they are hungry, members of the Jewish community will not just eat what is there to gratify desire; they will always think first in terms of what foods are permitted and forbidden, and which ways food can and cannot be prepared. Desire for food and drink will be trained to seek only orderly and discriminating gratification, and so will come to be itself orderly and discriminating. This lays a foundation for a well-regulated character in other areas where different kinds of desire are in question. Thus the overall aim of managing desire, as the basis of well-regulated character, leads to bringing Jewish dietary laws under the heading of the Tenth Commandment. This is something

[16] *Special Laws* III, 8-82.

[17] *Special Laws* IV 79-131. The discussion of desire is also prominent in the treatment of the Tenth Commandment in *Decalogue* 142-153.

that would seem far from obvious if we think in terms of rules alone, in isolation from character. Philo's focus here on desire, as a fundamental and potentially disastrous aspect of human psychology, emphasizes the importance of dealing with it rightly for the development of character.

Philo presents the laws and rules that define a specifically Jewish way of life in a eudaimonist context that would be familiar to him both from philosophy and from ordinary ways of thinking. It is a system that defines a whole way of life, where following the written law is sustained by the traits and dispositions of character which develop from consistently following it (something illustrated most clearly in the case of the dietary laws). Two things become important in this regard. Firstly, people brought up to appreciate the point of living according to practices structured by certain laws will be able to acquire a positive attitude to them. Rather than just seeing them as requirements that have to be met to avoid sanctions, they can come to see them as positively helping virtuous development. Valuing the benefits of living according to the law will lead them to value even more the law's being observed.¹⁸

Secondly, people brought up not just to obey laws and rules, but to appreciate that in doing so they are developing traits enabling a virtuous and so happy life, will come to appreciate the values that are fostered in obeying the laws, and thus will come to praise and blame behaviour that will encourage and discourage it accordingly before it gets to the stage of needing punishment for breaking an actual law. Hence, the way that people obey the law will be a self-maintaining system, where people follow the rules and organize their lives in self-directed ways. Stress only on law and rules, and on obligations to follow them, foregrounds obligation and sanction, but they can look different when seen as enabling the living of a good and happy life.

This is why Philo stresses the importance of not only conformity to written law but also the ready acceptance and internalization of 'unwritten laws':

Habits (*ethe*) are unwritten laws, the resolutions (*dogmata*) of men of old, engraved not on monuments nor on papyrus, which gets eaten up by moths, but on the souls of people who share in the same constitution. Children should inherit habits from their par-

[18] In Plato's *Magnesia* the same effect obtains, and this leads, more alarmingly, to the attitude that part of being a good citizen is intervening in other's lawbreaking, and informing officials of lawbreaking by others (*Laws* 730d2-7, 808e7-809a3).

ents, as well as property, habits in which they were brought up and have lived with from the cradle, and should not despise them because their handing-down is not in writing.¹⁹

Philo is here thinking in the terms of Greek philosophy, but what he says answers well to some of the passages in the Psalms which stress that understanding, as well as following, God's law brings happiness. Some brief examples: 'Happy²⁰ the man who did not walk by the counsel of the impious ... Rather, his will is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he will meditate day and night.' 'The statutes of the Lord are upright, making glad the heart.' 'Happy are the blameless in way, who walk in the Lord's law. Happy are those who seek out his testimonies.'²¹

As well as concern with virtue and character, something else emerges in Philo's treatment of the Fourth Commandment, to honour the Sabbath, which does not limit itself to treatment of the Sabbath day, but discusses all the Jewish festivals in detail.²² They belong together because they all require right observance of a festival, something which requires not just the performance of ritual (though ritual must be scrupulously performed) but the right frame of mind. He goes through the different ways in which the different festivals enable members of the community to come to understand the right relationship with God and with one another. People who dutifully go through the motions are obeying the law, but this falls far short of the *virtuous* performance of ritual, which involves understanding of God and one's place in the world. If only we were not dominated by the vices, Philo says, 'but the powers of the virtues had remained unconquered in any way, our time from birth to death

[19] *Special Laws* IV 149-150; cf *Virtues* 65. Philo at once goes on to say that praise belongs to the person who willingly obeys unwritten laws, rather than the person who obeys the written law because he has to. This is quite close to *Laws* 822e-823a, where Plato insists that the most 'complete' praise of the virtuous citizen is that he obeys the written laws in the light of unwritten sanctions and the praise and blame attached to these.

[20] The Septuagint word here and in the other passages is *makarios*, sometimes translated 'blessed'. In Greek, however, it is used indifferently with *eudaimon* to mean 'happy' (Arius Didymus, a generation before Philo, tells us that it makes no difference which term you use).

[21] Psalm 1.1-2; Psalm 19.9; Psalm 119.1-2. I use the version Philo used, the Septuagint, and A. Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright (ed.), *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2007. I am indebted here to Hava Tirosh-Samuels, *Happiness in Premodern Judaism*, Hebrew Union College Press, Cincinnati, 2003.

[22] *Special Laws* II 39-222.

would have been one continual festival, and families and cities, in peace and freedom from fear, would have been filled with good things in tranquillity.²³ For, properly understood, keeping a festival is not just having a good time but 'finding delight and festivity in the contemplation of the cosmos and what is in it, and in following nature and in harmony of words with actions and actions with words.'

Here we find not just an emphasis on the good character developed by following a specific way of life structured by Mosaic law, but the happiness this brings. Elsewhere Philo stresses this, and the way in which members of the Jewish community display virtues which pagans admire, as well as virtues like *philanthropia*, care for all humans, which he thinks they ought to admire but don't. Here we find a particular way in which the fact that the way of life is structured by specifically *religious* commitments produces an overall attitude to life in which the ethical and the religious are blended.

Philo was aware that this blend was not specific to Judaism. In Plato's *Laws* there is a similar emphasis on the importance of having citizens who bring the right kind of attitude to the observation of religious festivals in a way which both reflects and expresses their attitude to life. 'What I say is that we should be serious about the serious, and not about the unserious. By nature it is god which is worthy of every happy serious effort, while humans, as we said before, have been constructed as some plaything of god, and really that is what their best part is; and corresponding to this every man and woman should live their life at play in the finest ways they can.'. The right form of both education (*paideia*) and play (*paidia*) is this: 'We should live our lives at play in certain ways, sacrificing and singing and dancing, so as to be able to have the gods favourable to us and to defend ourselves against enemies, and to conquer them if we fight'.²⁴ Plato elsewhere stresses the low and humble attitude that humans should have towards God, so that contemplating the cosmos will produce indeed a sense of the goodness of the orderly organization of the whole, but also a deep sense of the insignificance of humans and their endeavours, and the unlikelihood that they matter in the cosmos. This is seen by Plato as the only appropriate attitude

[23] *Special Laws* II 42. Cf *Special Laws* II 209: the Feast of Tabernacles is not just pleasant, but aids the practice (*askesis*) of virtue. Josephus (*Against Apion* II 188-189) says that Jews maintain all the time what pagans call *mysteria* and *teletai* (religious rites, particularly of initiation).

[24] *Laws* 803 c2-e3.

to take to a God which is cosmic reason, not a person and not in a personal relation to humans (though he also thinks, perhaps unhappily, that his citizens can continue to worship God adequately through cleaned-up forms of the polytheistic civic religion of his time).

Philo's account of the role and point of festivals in the good life is rather different, in ways which bring out quite pointedly the abstract features of Plato's God as opposed to Philo's God, who belongs in a tradition of worship, scripture and tradition. Philo thinks that members of the Jewish community will 'find delight and festivity in the contemplation of the cosmos and what is in it' in ways other than admiring the mathematical regularity of the paths of the heavenly bodies and the orderliness of their motions, which is what Plato focusses on. For Philo, the delight and festivity are seen more in terms of the kind of pleasure produced by contributing to traditional activities in a way informed by awareness of tradition in the form of narratives, prayers, sacrifices and so on, tradition which brings God into relation with his people.

So we find on this view, for both the pagan Plato and the Jewish Philo there is no distinction, when we are talking about the good life, between the ethical and the religious: no cutoff between bits of life which are merely mundane and parts that bring in a relation to God. God is seen as a lawgiver, but is not seen as giving a set of rules which then have to be thought through and applied to everyday life; they already *are* part of life. Accepting both ethical and religious commitments means not just following the rules, but learning to follow them in the right way, and this involves understanding the point of them and their role in the development of traits and dispositions which are virtues, and which help to constitute a life which is a *good* life: one which enables you to achieve happiness. In a eudaimonist system, the happiness which is the result of the agent's achievement is not, of course, pleasant feeling or getting whatever it is you happen to want; it is *eudaimonia*, the flourishing life. Still, all accounts of *eudaimonia* require that it involve a positive attitude to your life, and so it is right to think of it as happiness – at least, as the happiness of a *life*. We can see a real connection with the idea expressed in the Psalms, that studying the laws of the Lord brings happiness.

I have briefly put forward Philo's view of law and virtue, because I think it is interesting in its own right, but in the present context more because I think it represents an intriguing option within virtue ethics. It has not been explored by contemporary virtue theorists, but this is not surprising since, as I noted, contemporary virtue ethics

takes its cue from neo-Aristotelian eudaimonist virtue ethics, which has been developed in secular ways.

The basic point, as underlined so far, is that virtues are developed, and help to constitute *eudaimonia*, within a way of life and a set of practices which are explicitly structured by religious commitments: commitment to a way of life organized in accordance with a system of laws whose source is God, a way of life which spells out sets of different commitments for different areas of life. It is because of this that the way the person flourishes, in this perspective, cannot be compartmentalized as purely ethical or purely religious.

This perspective is most clearly open to members of religions which require commitment to such a set of laws and rules structuring everyday life. My example was of course Judaism, in its ancient Second Temple version. The prospect of living such an integrated life today is most obviously open to Jews who live by Jewish law, and by Moslems who live by Islamic law, and who regard living by the sets of rules in question as central to their commitment to their religion. Indeed, it is arguably the idea of a life integrated in this way which forms part of the appeal of these religions. Philo's development of the idea in a eudaimonist framework enables us to get a deeper and richer idea of the kind of appeal in question. We can see how commitment to a system of laws and rules need not be experienced as a series of burdensome and frustrating obligations, even where the rules in question have to be obeyed and are not up for negotiation. For such a system of obligations can also be experienced in the kind of eudaimonistic framework which enables us to see that the way of life in question is one that is a flourishing and happy one, a life lived *well*, and thus that the traits encouraged are not just traits but virtues which help to constitute the flourishing life.

Because Christianity separated from Judaism at a fairly early date, and it was decided that Christians did not have to observe Jewish law to be Christians, there is nothing in Christianity which corresponds to the role of Jewish law in Judaism or Islamic law – that is, a system of laws and rules which structures a recognizable way of life uniting all the members of that religion whichever other cultures they may live in. Christians are united in other ways, but not in the ways that Jews and Moslems are united across widely differing cultures by dietary restrictions, practices like circumcision and the like. Because of this, Christianity has always been more permeable to cultural influences from the society that Christians live in – as indeed early Christianity was deeply influenced in its formation by Roman society and culture

in the West, and subsequently by Byzantine culture in the East.²⁵ It has also been, by the same token, more open to change, or engagement with change, by different cultures. (This is of course a massively broad statement, and needs qualification by consideration of all the different forms that Christianity has taken over two thousand years, and the different cultures that have influenced it.)

No tradition is static; any way of life develops over time and in response to various situations and challenges. And so it is no surprise that it is disputed not just outside these traditions but internally to them, whether the dispositions encouraged by specific practices are in fact *virtues*, whether the life that they lead to is in fact a *flourishing* life. As virtues develop, the virtuous person becomes more reflective and self-aware about the disposition that she has; she searches for the reasons both for which she acts and for reactions she has to various things, and seeks to understand them. This is commonplace in the neo-Aristotelian tradition, but since it is a feature of any eudaimonist virtue ethics it is only to be expected also when the virtues develop in a framework of religious commitment. Even when the religious commitments themselves are held steady, it can always be disputed whether the practices they structure have been contoured in the right way, or whether the relevant traits are being developed in the right way. Sometimes it may be queried whether the religious commitments in question are being rightly interpreted within the tradition – as is increasingly the case with patriarchal traditions.

It is certainly true that, while we can recognize the appeal of the integrated life where the religious commitments provide the structure for ethical development, we should not be unrealistically nostalgic for what we take to be ideal forms of it. Such lives tend to be, as with most ideals, in large part romantic projections. Nonetheless, the idea that some virtues at least might be developed in a framework of religious commitment seems to me interesting and suggestive, even when we look at it outside the framework of an overall way of life of the kind that Judaism and Islam offer.

In recent years there has been a spate of books on happiness, many of them concerned with the sources of happiness in modern life. Many of them are not talking about *eudaimonia* but about pleasure or feeling good, but some of them do recognize the importance of happiness in an entire life, and can be brought into a discussion about *eudaimonia* or flourishing. Many of them report numerous

[25] For the influence of Roman society on Western Christianity, see G. Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

studies that indicate that 'religion has a positive effect on happiness', as it is often put.²⁶ Claims like this need to be handled very cautiously indeed, because often the studies show little sophistication about either religion or happiness, or indeed about the value of people's own reports on how happy they are. Still, with due caution, we can report that it does seem to be established that people who attend religious services (church, synagogue, etc.) regularly do score higher on psychologists' measures of what they call 'subjective well-being': that is, they judge that their lives are going well and that they are flourishing. For example, they suffer less from stress and from ill health generally, and score higher on indications of 'mental health'. Some of these results, however, could well be consequences of belonging to a religious community rather than constitutive elements of it. For example, regular church-goers have a reliable support system in times of trouble; they have a circle of acquaintances and are thus less likely to be lonely, and so on. These are real advantages, but they can be obtained in other ways, and so are not intrinsic to the role of religion in life.

Doubtless these surveys need to be made more sophisticated before we can get anything from them useful about the role of religion in a happy life. One thing which I think we could perhaps explore with some hope of success would be the role of development of traits and dispositions, of a sort to be at least partly constitutive of a happy, flourishing life, in cases where these dispositions develop in practices structured by religious commitments. What of the role of religious commitments in the development of the traits that we exercise, and evaluate as virtues or vices, in everyday life? Does regular attendance at church, for example, with the discipline that this brings, and the resultant need to organize your life round it, produce some of the benefits of a disciplined character that Philo finds in the practice of the Jewish dietary rules? We might assume that any kind of regular commitment will produce a more disciplined character, and that this could be produced by regular Sunday golf as much as by regular Sunday church attendance. If Philo is right, though, this would be wrong. We are not dealing here with a simple case of disciplining desires for the sake of fulfilling some further desire, but of disciplining desires as part of a life structured round certain reli-

[26] See Michael Argyle, *The Psychology of Happiness*, Routledge, East Sussex, 2001; Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*, Basic Books, New York, 2006, Ch. 9; David G Myers, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Who is Happy and Why*, Morrow, New York, 1992, Ch. 10.

religious obligations which come to be seen as having *value* in one's life as a whole.

There is nothing in the lives of most ordinary Christians today like the systematic demands of Islamic or Jewish law (and of course many members of these religions live in ways not structured by their traditions). The religious obligations of the lay Christian life are more fragmented and irregular, and they press much less heavily on the progress of ordinary living and the ways we spend our days. Is it worth exploring ways in which these obligations might nonetheless be seen in a eudaimonistic framework, as enabling the development of the virtuous and so flourishing life? Contemporary virtue ethics has done much preliminary work for us here, and it is no longer thought outlandish to argue that virtue is necessary, or even sufficient, for happiness. So we might hope for progress on the parts of both ethics and psychology.

Aristotle took it for granted that the traits of character the members of his audience were developing in Athenian society were on the right track, by and large, for them to become recognizably virtuous. Contemporaries, including contemporary virtue ethicists, have insistently indicated the inadequacy of the institutions of 4th century BCE Athenian life to develop traits that we can regard as satisfactory virtues. The response to this, however, has been to point out the obvious: virtues can be developed in a number of very different ways of life. Aristotle naturally talks about his own society, and we about ours. We have to start from where we are when reflecting about virtue, though the virtues are accessible from a number of diverse ways of life.²⁷

Contemporary virtue ethics has taken this point, and has accordingly developed study of the virtues in a variety of forms of contemporary life; thus we find virtue forms of medical ethics, business ethics, environmental ethics and the like. The model, however, has not been extended to the life structured by religious commitments. Why not? Partly this may be due to the assumption already mentioned, that ethical philosophy studies ethical theories only in their application to secular society. More centrally, I think it depends on the thought that such a life depends on accepting authoritative rules, and that this is incompatible with a virtue approach to ethics. I have tried to suggest why it might be well worth querying this thought.

[27] I have called this point obvious, but it does have theoretical underpinnings which I do not go into here.