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REGULAR PAPER

Devotion and Well-Being: A Platonic Personalist Perfectionist Account

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Rest in him, and restfulness will be yours.
– Augustine of Hippo

1 Introduction

My topic is the role that devotion to God plays in human well-being. That devotion to God plays some such role is central to traditional Christian teaching. The details have been spelled out variously by different Christian thinkers in different eras, sometimes in ways that are obviously divergent (if not inconsistent) and sometimes less obviously so; sometimes using culturally-familiar metaphors while at other times attempting to construct literal, universally applicable theories. So, for example, St. Paul characterizes our relationship to God as one of child to parent (and in many other ways); St. Augustine characteries this relationship as one of slave to master; Hadewijch, of knight to the lady he courts; Thomas Aquinas, of subjects to ruler, and so forth. To the extent that the slave metaphor is apt, it might appear that the Christian's relationship to God confers upon her one of the worst harms she can experience, the loss of her liberty. And if being God's *subject* is less offensive than being God's *slave*, the benefits of the arrangement are not at all obvious to modern people.

Nevertheless, it is striking that these and countless other representatives of the Christian tradition *do* take our proper relationship to God as *for our good*. While loving, honoring, and serving God may be our *duty* given our status as creatures (Aquinas, for example, is explicit about that), this is nevertheless not the last thing to say about why devotion is right and proper.[1] Paul characterizes the great benefit of devotion in terms of "glory," Augustine in terms of "rest," Hadewijch in terms of "eternal bliss," Aquinas in terms of "perfect happiness." What we stand to gain, in other words, is the greatest well-being possible for human beings.

[1] See Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica, 2nd Revised Edition*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>, (1920), II-II, question 81, article 1.

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In what follows, I aim to make sense of this traditional Christian conviction. I attempt a rational reconstruction using concepts familiar to the contemporary philosophy and psychology of well-being, and without relying on any explicitly theological commitments.

Here is the plan for what follows. I will begin, in section 2, by briefly summarizing two classic accounts from the Christian intellectual tradition of the good of devotion: Thomas Aquinas's Treatise on Happiness (from the *Summa Theologica*) and Soren Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*. In section 3, I sketch my preferred theory of well-being, Platonic personalist perfectionism. In section 4, I anatomize the posture of devotion into three constituent attitudes: abnegation, adoration, and existential dependence. I then show how, on Platonic personalist perfectionism, each of these attitudes redounds to our well-being, using Aquinas and Kierkegaard as inspirations. In the final section, I discuss three obstacles that might still prevent the reader from embracing devotion as good for her, even granting the preceding discussion.

2 Two Classic Accounts

My jumping-off point will be two classic accounts of the connection between devotion and well-being.

In his Treatise on Happiness in the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas argues that perfect human happiness consists in the beatific vision, where this is understood as the direct intellectual apprehension of God's essence. He argues for this conclusion in three steps. First, he identifies happiness with *perfection*: we are happy just to the extent that we are actualized as the sorts of beings we are. Second, he runs through a list of putative sources of happiness—wealth, honor, power, health, pleasure, etc.—and argues that none of these is perfective. Finally, he makes the case that the beatific vision *is* perfective, in fact *doubly* perfective, because two essential human capacities attain their proper object in the intellectual apprehension of God. Here are the relevant passages:

> The object of the will….is universal good, just as the object of the intellect is universal truth. From this it follows that nothing can satisfy the human will except the universal good [*bonum universale*]. This, however, cannot be found in any created good, but only in God, because every creature has only a partial or shared goodness. Only God, therefore, can fulfill the human will.
>
> The perfection of any power is found in the nature of the object of that power… Hence, the perfection of the intellect is achieved to the extent that it knows the essence of anything …For perfect happiness, it is necessary that the human person grasp the very essence of the First Cause.[2]

[2] *Thomas Aquinas: Basic Philosophical Writing: From the Summa Theologiae and the Principles of Nature,* trans. Steven Baldner (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2018), p. 146.

Aquinas thus employs two arguments. They share two premises and then diverge. The shared premises are these:

P1. Happiness consists in perfection.
P2. Perfection consists in one's essential faculties' attaining their proper object.

The first argument, which we can call the 'argument from the will', then proceeds as follows:

P3A. The will is an essential human capacity.
P4A. The proper object of the will is the good as such.
P5A. The good as such is found in God alone.

The second argument, the 'argument from the intellect', proceeds similarly:

P3B. The intellect is an essential human capacity.
P4B. The proper object of the intellect is the true as such.
P5B. The true as such (including the first cause of everything) is found in God alone.

It follows that happiness consists in attaining God somehow, and for the creature this means a direct intellectual apprehension of God's essence—the beatific vision.

In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Soren Kierkegaard claims that all human beings suffer from a soul-sickness, "despair." Kierkegaard uses the term in the familiar sense of the abandonment of hope. But, intriguingly, Kierkegaard insists that everyone is in despair whether they feel such loss of hope or not, owing to an inescapable disjointedness within each human self. A human self is a "synthesis" of finitude, temporality, and necessity, on the one hand, and infinity, eternity, and freedom, on the other. These dimensions of oneself pull against each other. As one becomes aware of such discordance within oneself, one is pushed toward a coping mechanism of one sort or another. Kierkegaard describes the dynamics of this psychological process in terms of a downward spiral of increasingly pathological (and eventually diabolical) psychological states:

1. Unconscious despair. One lives entirely within the finite/temporal/necessitarian dimension of oneself, in a state of self-deceptive "immediacy," responding in instinctive or culturally programmed ways to situations.
2. Conscious despair "of weakness," which comes in two forms. First, despair "over the earthly or something earthly." This is despair as it is normally recognized, the profound loss one feels in response to a tragedy. It initially manifests as despair over "something earthly," i.e., over some particular loss; but it grows into despair over "the earthly," i.e., over the entire realm of transitory being. Second, despair "over oneself." One becomes aware that it is one's nature as a finite thing with infinite aspirations that makes particular tragedies inevitable.
3. Conscious despair "of defiance." At this point, one actively accepts despair as one's inevitable lot and tries to make something of oneself in spite of it. Kierkegaard discusses three forms. First, the *active* form, in which one asserts one's autonomy as a meaning-maker in a meaningless world; second, the *passive* form,

in which one makes meaning via proud, stoic resignation; finally, a *demonic* form, in which one makes meaning via rebelling against the whole absurd order of things.

A self inevitably occupies a position somewhere on this downward spiral of self-deception - agonizing hopelessness - proud defiance. There is only one escape, Kierkegaard insists: *faith*, understood as the offering of one's discordant self to God. "In relating itself and in wanting to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the power that established it."[3]

3 A Framework: Platonic Personalist Perfectionism

It will be my contention that these two accounts, different as they are, help us understand the relationship between religious devotion and well-being. I begin with some observations about them, both affirmative and critical, and then present a theory of well-being that can address the most pressing contemporary worries about them.

First, note what the two accounts have in common. Both make the case for devotion in psychological rather than theological terms. If devotion is good for us, this is because of something about *us*, about our psychological makeup. This does not mean, however, that our *preferences* determine what is good for us. For both Aquinas and Kierkegaard, what is good for someone is a *natural, objective* fact about her, rather than a divinely super-added fact *or* a subjective fact.

But note, second, that this is just about the only thing the accounts have in common. The accounts aim to show two very different things: while Aquinas aims to show that devotion amounts to a great good, Kierkegaard aims to show that the absence of devotion amounts to a great bad. Strikingly, for all Aquinas says, it might not be all that bad for us to eschew devotion (just not *very* good), and for all Kierkegaard says, it might not be all that good for us to embrace devotion (just not *very* bad). What this suggests is that the two accounts might be combined in some way. This is the strategy I pursue below.

Now some observations about Aquinas in particular. First, as previously indicated, Aquinas is a perfectionist about well-being. This is no idiosyncrasy on his part: most thinkers in the Christian intellectual tradition have explored questions of human happiness and misery in perfectionist terms. (Kierkegaard, by contrast, gives us no general theory of well-being.) Perfectionism is one of the two leading objectivist theories of well-being in the contemporary philosophical literature. The other is the so-called objective-list theory. Perfectionism has the virtue of explaining why the items on the objective list belong, and for that reason alone is, to my mind, preferable.[4] The two leading subjectivist theories of well-being are hedonism and the

[3] *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 44.

[4] 4. For discussion, see e.g. Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), Gwen Bradford, "Perfectionism," in Guy Fletcher, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-being* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 124-134, and Hud Hudson, *Fallenness and Flourishing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

desire-fulfillment theory. I think that perfectionism can capture what is right about these views, while rejecting what is wrong with them, and again, for that reason alone is preferable to them.

Second, note how perfectionism works for Aquinas. Given our human nature, we have certain essential capacities, and these capacities are *aimed* at something. Perfection is thus a matter of degree, turning on how fully actualized each capacity is, how close it gets to its proper object.

But now some worries. Talk of essential capacities aimed at their proper object will strike contemporary readers as, at best, quaint. There are at least three serious challenges facing anyone who wants such talk to be included in a contemporary discussion of well-being. First, even if we grant that there are such things as essential human capacities that are teleologically directed, what is so important about the *complete* actualization of these capacities? Why say, in particular, that happiness requires attaining, by the will, *the good as such*, and by the intellect, *the true as such* (whatever this might mean exactly), rather than that happiness requires modest activation of one's will and intellect? One might worry that someone who sets her sights on such lofty objects is, at best, opting for a life of strain rather than happiness, or, at worst, demanding of the world that it satisfy her every wish and curiosity.[5]

Second, hasn't contemporary science, including contemporary psychology, dispensed with teleological directedness, proper objects, and all that? And third, what sense can be made of essential human capacities, after Darwin, after Sartre, after Foucault?

These are serious challenges for Aquinas's version of perfectionism. I'll use my responses as a springboard for articulating my preferred version of perfectionism, which I believe can meet the challenges.

(1) Must a perfectionist say that one is living well only if one's capacities are actualized as completely as possible? No, because she can think of perfection as the actualization of a suite of capacities together, rather than as the actualization of each capacity individually. An unfortunately neglected voice in the perfectionist tradition is Plato, who defines human excellence in terms of the *harmonious interplay* of the component capacities of the human soul.[6] This is an architectonic excellence over and above the excellence of each component capacity. The extent to which each individual capacity ought to be actualized will thus depend, in part, on how the various capacities affect each other; the psychologi-

[5] Whether the charge of over-strenuousness really applies to Aquinas's perfectionism, it does apply to recent versions of perfectionism developed in an Aristotelian vein. Hurka (op. cit.), for example, claims that our capacity for practical rationality is perfected to the extent that we engage in activities that are *difficult*, at least in the sense of holding in mind and requiring mastery of a lot of precise elements all at once. So understood, perfectionism in the philosopher's sense starts to look like perfectionism in the workaholic's sense—a kind of obsession with hard work and achievement.

[6] In Book 4 of the *Republic*, Socrates says of that the just man that he "puts himself in order, becomes his own friend, and harmonizes the three elements [of the soul] together, just as if they were literally the three defining notes of an octave." *A Plato Reader: Eight Essential Dialogues*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2012), p. 394.

cal details matter. For Plato, harmony in the soul is achieved only when passions and appetites, on the one hand, and the intellect, on the other, are activated in a mutually-supporting way.[7]

(2) Can a contemporary perfectionist invoke teleological notions? Yes, she can, because human psychological capacities *are* teleological. For example: having rational capacities just means, all by itself, being subject to certain standards. What is wrong with saying, "*p* is false, and I believe that *p*?" The answer is that *believe the truth* is the constitutive norm of rationality.[8] Failing to follow this norm is not just to run afoul of the rules but to fail to play the rationality game entirely. But similar things can be said about other capacities. Aquinas himself states (in the Treatise on Law) that the first principle of practical reason is "Good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided." *Choose the good*, we might say, is the constitutive norm of the rational will, and this explains why it is practical nonsense to say "x is worse in every way than y, and I endorse x."

Thus, there is nothing antiquated about Aquinas's teleological conception of the intellect and will. Now, Aquinas's notion of the will covers both appetite (of a certain sort) and the faculty of choice proper. Inspired, again, by Plato, I prefer to locate appetite in its own category, apart from intellect or will. That is, it is one thing to have a desire or pro-attitude toward something, and another to form an intention with respect to that thing. If belief aims at the true and intention aims at the good, desire aims at *satisfaction*. These are the proper objects of our intellect, will, and appetite, respectively.

(3) Can a contemporary perfectionist invoke the human essence? I think not. I am convinced that none of the candidate accounts of the category *human* is well-behaved. But there is a different category that can serve in its place: the category *person*.[9] Roughly, to be a person is to be able to freely govern one's actions according to what one deems to be good and right, and to do so in a domain-general way, across an open-ended set of situations one must navigate. Thus, personhood implicates at least the following psychological capacities just discussed: (a) cognitive capacities, including the ability to have thoughts, and to engage in theoretical and practical deliberation; (b) affective capacities—the ability to have desires and preferences and to experience feelings, emotions, and moods with positive and negative valences; and (c) volitional capacities—the ability to freely form intentions and to put them into action.

Putting these ideas together: on my proposed theory of well-being, *Platonic personalist perfectionism*, well-being for human beings consists in the harmonious co-deployment of the capacities that jointly constitute their essential nature as persons. Harmonious co-deployment means at least the following things: (1)

[7] A common objection to Hurka-style perfectionism is that affections play no role in well-being (see Bradford, op. cit.). Platonic perfectionism is not subject to this objection.

[8] There are various rival construals of the constitutive norm of belief, it should be noted. See Andrew Chignell, "The Ethics of Belief," in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/ethics-belief/>). That there *is* a constitutive norm of belief is what matters most for my purposes.

[9] Hudson (op. cit.) proposes the category 'human person', for similar reasons.

each capacity must be directed at its proper object as fully as possible, without undermining another capacity; (2) the deliverances of one capacity must not conflict with the deliverances of another; and (3) the deliverances of a capacity must not conflict with other deliverances of the same capacity.

4 The Posture of Devotion as Salvific and Consummative

I will now argue that devotion to God is a uniquely powerful driver of the harmonious co-deployment of personal capacities. But what *is* devotion?

I take devotion to be a (metaphorical) *posture*. A posture is, at the very least, a self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating suite of dispositional and occurrent attitudes and activities. The posture of devotion, I contend, includes at least three constituent attitudes: *abnegation*, *adoration*, and *existential dependence*. Whether the three attitudes are sufficient for devotion, I do not know; I only claim that they are necessary. (Moreover, I doubt they are fully independent of one another.) Each perfects the person in a dual way: it is *salvific*—it remediates a great harm; it is *consummative*—it confers a supremely great benefit.

4.1 Abnegation

Abnegation is submission: willingly yielding to another's will. To say that one *willingly* yields is to say that abnegation contains an element of love and trust. Submission rooted in fear, mere hierarchical status, or even indifference is not devotional submission, and thus not abnegation in my sense.

How could surrendering one's will be salvific? The answer is not hard to come by. On just about any account of the human situation, our volitional capacities fail to honor their constitutive norm of willing the good. At the very least, we do not make our choices in light of all the facts: we don't know which putative goods will actually redound to our benefit, and even if we did, we wouldn't know which means would effectively secure those goods. But things are probably worse than that. Our wills are moved by all sorts of motivations that do not reliably track the good, even when we are aware that they do not reliably track the good. Whether or not we all are, as Hud Hudson has recently insisted, "abysmally steeped in sinfulness, in utter bondage to sin and suffering from concupiscence and grossly inordinate or insufficient self-love," we all fall short of the ideal.[10]

Thus: even if one fails to will the good, if one can instead will *what God wills*, one's will can still hit on its proper object, albeit indirectly. God's will serves as a stop-gap until the time one acquires the ability to will the good for oneself.

That's not all. Willing the good is necessary, and perhaps even sufficient (if such willing becomes habitual), for moral virtue. Moral virtues are necessary for the common life that lovers, families, friends and neighbors share. But the desire for loving

[10] Op. cit., p. 28.

relationship is among our deepest and most persistent desires. Our vicious inability to will the good prevents us from attaining what we deeply and persistently desire, then. But one who says to God, *not what I will but what you will*, is one who wills in accordance with the moral virtues. Abnegation disarms those character traits that torpedo relationships: impatience, resentment, entitlement, and so on, and replaces them with something better.

We have been discussing the ways that abnegation is salvific. How is abnegation *consummative*?

As Robert Emmons summarizes in his book *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns,* subjective well-being (roughly: feeling happy and satisfied rather than unhappy and dissatisfied) is strongly correlated with a life that is motivationally integrated around self-transcending goals.[11] There are three important claims being made here. First, goals are, as a matter of fact, central to human motivation; without goals, particular human behaviors are unintelligible, and, more importantly, human *lives* are unintelligible.

Second, it matters, for subjective well-being, which sorts of goals one prioritizes. Among the right sort are those related to interpersonal affiliation rather than those related to power and dominance; specific rather than abstract goals; and—most importantly for our purposes—*final* (non-instrumental) goals rather than instrumental goals.

Third, it matters how such goals fit together, or fail to fit together, to form a harmonious whole. Emmons writes: "Persistent conflict among one's highest-level goals is as good a predictor of low subjective well-being as any other variable. Motivational integration, on the other hand, is the sine qua non of effective functioning in life."[12]

This is all exactly as Platonic personalist perfectionism would predict. Being perfected as a person means the harmonious co-deployment of one's cognitive, affective, and volitional capacities as an integrated motivational system. Such integration requires the absence of serious conflict among the deliverances of one's faculties, but it also requires the *presence* of something, viz., high-level goals that are chosen because desired *and judged desirable* for their own sake. That is, one cannot flourish as a person unless and until one identifies worthy, ultimate final goals around which to build one's life.

We can now speak directly to the question of how abnegation could be consummative. To flourish, a person needs to achieve self-transcendence: she needs to integrate her motivational system around ultimate final goals she judges sufficiently worthy. God's will can serve this purpose. It can do so as such: one could espouse, as her top-most goal, *obey God's will*. Now, this goal might be frustrating for being so abstract. More effective might be to espouse the *contents* of God's will, as one understands them. These could be quite general purposes of God's, such as that one be virtuous, or that one serve others. Or they could be more specific vocations (in

[11] *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns: Motivation and Spirituality in Personality* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999).

[12] Op. cit., p. 115.

the traditional sense of *being called*)—to pursue such-and-such a work, to serve in such-and-such a capacity.

Not only *can* surrendering one's will to God bring about self-transcendence, but it may be the most effective way to do so. To return to the findings of empirical psychology: what Emmons calls "spiritual" goals—goals pertaining to one's relationship to the sacred—have been found to be the most effective at integrating one's motivational system. As Emmons puts it: "The correlations between the proportion of spiritual strivings and well-being measures were stronger than any other type of strivings that has been studied."[13]

There is an indirect way that abnegation contributes to consummation. I said above that the desire for loving relationships is one of our deepest and most persistent desires. Why do we care so much about our bonds with other people? Of course, having friends confers all sorts of incidental benefits, and a desire for friendship seems to be part of the human hardwiring. But I suspect more is going on. Above I characterized personhood *formally*, in terms of capacities directed toward formal objects. But it seems plausible that personal perfection has a *material* component to it as well. At least one desire is constitutive of being a person: the desire for loving relationship. There is no space here to defend this claim, so I simply assert it, and appeal to a long-standing tradition that affirms it, going back to Aristotle.[14]

If loving relationships consummate personhood, and if moral virtue is necessary for loving relationships, then to the extent that abnegation inculcates moral virtue, it is indirectly consummative.

And perhaps the consummative function of moral formation is not even that indirect. Morally virtuous persons are captivating; they have a certain luminousness to them. To behold this luminosity is not merely to take note of their moral goodness, though it involves this. Nor is it merely to have an aesthetic experience, though it is that. It is something more. This quality—which the Christian Scriptures calls "glory" and "the splendor of holiness"—is as familiar and attractive as it is difficult to characterize. Surrendering to God's will kindles that peculiar radiance manifested in the ones we call, and cannot help but call, "saints."

[13] Ibid., p. 44. On religion's unique ability to provide "global meaning," i.e. the harmonization of one's beliefs, goals, and emotions, see also Crystal Park, "Religion and Meaning," in Raymond Paloutzian & Crystal Park, eds., *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (New York: Guilford Press, 2013), 357-379, and Fraser Watts, *Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). As Watts puts it: "Within religious meaning making, everything coheres" (p. 99).

[14] Matthew Shea has proposed a version of perfectionism that appeals to the human "social capacity" alongside the other essential capacities. See "The Quality of Life is Not Strained: Disability, Human Nature, Well-Being, and Relationships," *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (2019): 333-366.

4.2 Adoration

"Adoration of something is to be drawn to it on account of its worth, to be gripped by it," writes Nicholas Wolterstoff.[15] The religious person regards God as of great worth, and responds by offering God attention, love, and praise. How is doing so *salvific*? Here we can follow Kierkegaard. Persons find themselves in a terrible bind. They flourish only to the extent that they have things to love—things whose value inherently calls out for a motivational response. But to the extent that they find such objects of love, they set themselves up to experience tragic loss. Every finite good is transitory, after all. One must thus choose either to diminish oneself by detaching from the value of things, one the one hand, or to plunge into the "despair over the earthly" that accompanies attachment to finite goods, on the other. Now, if one could attach oneself to a good that one is not destined to lose, then one could be free from this dilemma. God is just such a good.

How, then, is adoration of God *consummative*? In the previous section, we discussed how an integrated motivational structure begins with *final goals*. These goals serve as fixed points around which conflict in the will can be resolved. A closely related notion is the notion of *final values*—that which a person takes as non-instrumentally good. Of course, these notions are closely related. In an integrated psyche, one's final goals are *underwritten* by her final values: one pursues what one pursues for its own sake because it is good, for its own sake, to do so.

The close relationship between final goals and final values can be clarified by reflecting on Aristotle's discussion of happiness in the final book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. What, he asks, is the most perfective activity for humans? Not the actions prescribed by prudence and involving moral virtue, he insists, since all such activities "require trouble." Activity of only two types is genuinely *leisurely*: amusement and contemplation. The former is a poor candidate as a final goal, as it would not justify all our toil and struggle. Thus, the highest human activity must be contemplation, the intellectual apprehension of reality. Now, Aristotle is predisposed to this sort of answer because of his version of perfectionism, which points to theoretical reason as the highest human capacity, thus inviting the worry that he over-intellectualizes well-being. But Platonic perfectionism provides a richer account of the activity that is done for its own sake. This activity is adoration. Our cognitive faculties understand that which is good, our volitional faculties direct our attention toward that which is good, and our affective capacities both give us an appetite for what is good and allow us to take delight in what is good. Directed at an object conceived as the highest good, such an activity actualizes and harmonizes our person-level capacities to the highest degree.

A recurring theme in Christian devotional writing is the mysterious way that the adoration of God changes one's relationship to other values, including other final values. These other values are said to "pale in comparison" to God's goodness, but at the same time their value is not denigrated but rather appreciated in

[15] *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), p. 25.

a new way. Writes Augustine in a famous passage in the *Confessions* (a passage which also includes this paper's epigram): "If souls are pleasing, let them be loved in God, for they … are mutable, but when fixed on Him they become stable; otherwise they would pass and perish."[16] Despite his at times excessive ascetism, it clear that Augustine loves many things besides God, and believes it good to do so, if one loves those things 'in God'. What could this mean?

Here's what I suggest. For the devotee, God's goodness fills one's field of vision; it allows her to experience the world as a plenum of value. All other final values are then relegated to the level of *intermediate* goods. This is not because they have been downgraded—no, they still have non-instrumental value, after all—but because they no longer have the same existential significance. They are experienced as gratuitous sources of joy. The adage quoted by C.S. Lewis, "He who has God and everything else has no more than he who has God only," is not literally true, but it is quite close to the devotee's experience.[17]

Just as abnegation serves an integration-function with respect to one's goals, so adoration serves an integration-function with respect to one's values. It fully and harmoniously actualizes one's nature as a lover of the good, such that one can say, with the author of the 23rd Psalm, "I lack nothing."

4.3 Existential Dependence

The religious devotee receivers her self-worth as an unmerited gift from God, rather than founding it on some excellence or achievement of her own. Such an attitude is expressed in the popular Christian song, "In Christ Alone":

> What heights of love, what depths of peace,
> When fears are stilled, when strivings cease!
> My Comforter, my All in All,
> Here in the love of Christ I stand.[18]

These impassioned words capture the author's experience—common, I think, to Christian piety—of rich personal thriving when one ceases to "strive," and instead lets Christ's love be "all in all."

[16] *Confessions*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1953), Book IV.18.

[17] It will be observed that loving the eternal God above all else does not by itself assuage grief over the death of beloved fellow humans. Death still breaks human bonds of love. Thus it would seem that once we have put intermediate final values back into the picture, devotion to God can no longer serve as the full antidote to despair. Now, the conviction that God has overcome death is no small part of Christian reflection on the human good. The crucial question is what psychological relationship holds between this conviction, on the one hand, and the posture of devotion, on the other. Perhaps there are simply two separate ingredients in the antidote to despair: adoration and hope. But I think it plausible that adoration can produce hope on its own, insofar as God's goodness itself is the ground of hope. To adoringly behold God's goodness is to know that, in Julian of Norwich's famous words, "all shall be well."

[18] Stuart Townend, & Keith Getty, "In Christ Alone" (<https://www.stuarttownend.co.uk/song/in-christ-alone/>, 2001).

Now, one might worry that the very idea of receiving self-worth from without is confused. For, consider: when I affirm the people I love, I do not thereby instill value in them. Rather, I am responding to the value that I see in them already, prior to my affirmation. And if that's so, why can I not recognize and affirm my *own* worth, which must be there already?

If we are thinking of the worth of a person along the lines of that person's *dignity*—the high moral status she enjoys in virtue of her nature—then I suspect that these questions are on point. If a person as such is a bearer of dignity, then dignity cannot be bestowed upon a person (except by creating the person in the first place). But there are other senses of the worth of a person that *can* depend on another's valuation. The first is one's acceptability, i.e., how one measures up to a social standard. The second is one's worth as an irreplaceable individual. Both matter precisely for interpersonal reasons: a deficit in either type threatens one's suitability for loving relationship, and loving relationship is (let's recall) requisite for personal perfection.

Existential dependence is *salvific*, therefore, insofar as it remediates a deficit of one or both of these types of personal worth. Let's start with the first. In a discussion of the various types of shame, Eleonore Stump writes: "A person is and feels shamed because he himself is and feels personally deficient or less than he himself wants to be by some standard of value which he accepts and which he expects real or imagined others to accept as well." In consequence, the shamed person "reasonably anticipates that some real or imagined others will have a warranted desire to reject him."[19]

Plausibly, the believer finds herself in just such a scenario vis-à-vis God's standards. First of all, God's standards may be opaque, so the believer's standing with respect to them may be opaque to her as well. Second, insofar as they are transparent, she either has already failed to meet them or is apt to at any moment. Shame of this sort is at least part of what Kierkegaard means by "despair over oneself." That is: despair is not just the province of those who do not have what they want; it is the province of those who have what they want tenuously. Not only external loves but also traits of character are among one's tenuous possessions. If God's acceptance of me depends on any contingent fact about me, then it is an ever-present possibility that I will lose God's acceptance. I am not enough to sustain God's approval.

What the Christian tradition has long maintained is that God's desire for union with us is not dependent on our satisfying any set of standards whatever. So, at least one sense of one's worth—one's acceptability to God—is not a function of any achievement or characteristic of one, but entirely a function of God's love for one.

But there is an even deeper form of "despair over oneself" that could still plague one, even after any standards for one's acceptability have been set aside. In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Immanuel Kant articulates a concept of dignity that implies *irreplaceability*: "What has a price can be replaced by something else as its *equivalent,* what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore

[19] *Atonement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 347, 340.

admits of no equivalent has a dignity."[20] As Linda Zagzebski points out, dignity in this sense of irreplaceable value is not the same as dignity in the sense of high moral status and cannot be reduced to it: one could enjoy high moral status and nevertheless be fungible (with another item of the same high moral status).[21]

Nor is acceptability vis-à-vis standards sufficient for being irreplaceably valuable. Now, people try to establish their irreplaceable value via their accomplishments and by the meeting of standards. But such an endeavor cannot succeed, since excellences and accomplishments are metaphysically repeatable. Irreplaceable value is the value that an irreplaceable thing has qua the particular thing that it is. One acquires one's irreplaceable value, if one acquires it at all, by being valued because *understood to be irreplaceable* by another person—being interpersonally known and loved. Only by receiving love from someone can one be delivered from the nagging suspicion that one is only valuable for being the *type* of thing one is, not for the very individual one is.

Existential dependence rescues one from despair over one's inability to meet relevant standards and over one's replaceability. Now, to a certain extent, any loving relationship can perform a similar function. What is uniquely salvific about existential dependence stems from the extraordinary *source* of the affirmation that one receives. The religious devotee is going to think of God as the highest court of appeal. Moreover, God's adjudication is completely perspicuous. There is no room for thinking that God has overlooked a certain flaw or is swayed by one's usefulness for some purpose or other. Third, because the religious devotee attributes her very existence to God's will, then the source of one's being also affirms one's being. Thus, by becoming existentially dependent on God, the religious devotee finds that she *belongs here*—she is at home with herself in the universe.

How is existential dependence *consummative*? There is a close parallel here with the integration-function of adoration. Just as adoring God as the highest good puts all other final values in their proper place *without valuing them any less*, so also receiving God's unconditional and singular acceptance puts one's excellences and accomplishments in their proper place, without valuing them any less. Indeed, one can take *greater* joy in one's excellences and achievements if one isn't using them as currency in a social exchange.

Existential dependence is indirectly consummative in a way that mirrors our discussion of abnegation. Virtue, recall, is necessary for loving relationship. But so is vulnerability, and vulnerability is a source of considerable uneasiness if one's acceptability is in question. God is one "to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden." This means that a human person's relationship with God involves an intimacy that is greater than that which occurs between any two human persons, and thus consummates our desire for loving relationship in a way that no other relationship can. But it also requires the highest

[20] *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 42.

[21] "The Uniqueness of Persons," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (2001), 401-423.

degree of vulnerability. Existential dependence alone resolves the tension between self-protection and intimacy, rendering union with God possible.

And just as we said above that virtue confers on its bearer a kind of luminousness—a type of value that has a moral component and an aesthetic component but is also something more—something similar can be said regarding the person who, having received God's unconditional and singular acceptance, no longer has need of anyone's approval. Such a person is completely secure in herself, and she exudes, as Timothy Keller calls it, 'the freedom of self-forgetfulness.'[22] There is, of course, a kind of self-forgetfulness rooted in the denigration of the self, but this rather the opposite. The existentially dependent person is free to give herself over to whatever calls for her attention, on its own terms. Affirmation and acceptance flow through her. She shimmers.

5 Three Remaining Obstacles

I have been discussing how devotion to God redounds to the well-being of the devotee, in the sense of being perfective of her nature as a person—both in the sense of saving her from diminishment and discord (the salvific effect of devotion), and in the sense of actualizing and harmonizing her faculties to a very high degree (the consummative effect of devotion). To summarize and simplify:

- Abnegation saves by redirecting one's will from the bad and the vicious toward the good and the virtuous; it consummates by supplying a worthy final goal, the ultimate pole around which one integrates one's motivational structure. Moreover, virtue makes its possessor (a) luminous, and (b) fit for loving relationship.
- Adoration saves by rescuing one from despair over the actual or potential loss of all transitory goods; it consummates by giving one a worthy final value, the ultimate pole around which one integrates one's loves.
- Existential dependence saves by rescuing one from despair over one's worthiness qua satisfier of standards and qua unique individual; it consummates by supplying a worthy source of self-worth, the ultimate pole around which one integrates one's pursuit of excellence and achievement. Moreover, security in one's self-worth makes its possessor (a) luminous, and (b) fit for intimate relationship—including the maximally intimate sort of relationship that is possible with God alone.

Now, to show how religious devotion redounds to our benefit in this way does not yet recommend it. I want to discuss three remaining obstacles that might yet prevent someone from occupying the posture of devotion.

The first obstacle is the worry that devoting oneself involves an inappropriate abdication of one's person, a giving-over to another what is properly one's own.

[22] *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness: The Path to True Christian Joy* (Leyland: 10Publishing, 2012).

Thus, even if devotion is good for us in all the ways I just summarized, it is not all-things-considered good for us. Its benefits come at the cost of a terrible harm.

Before we get into the details, we should observe how strange this worry is likely to sound to many religious people. God, the Lord of all, is our natural superior, they will say. Giving oneself over to God devotionally *just is* giving to God what is properly God's own. What the objector sees as the ultimate deal-breaker, the devotee sees as the ultimate selling-point. (That the current cultural moment in the West includes a dialectical stand-off of such a magnitude is, to my mind, extraordinary.)

In what follows, I will not appeal to God's purported natural superiority as a reason to be devoted. I pronounce no verdict on this idea. My strategy, rather, will be to show that insofar as the devotee is subject to God, this need not be seen as a harm.

Different versions of the worry apply to each of the dimensions of devotion that I have discussed.

(1) *Against abnegation:* You shouldn't surrender your will to someone else's. Doing so amounts to heteronomy. Even if you must learn to live with an unreliable will and without an ultimate pole around to which to integrate your motivational structure, retaining your autonomy is worth it.
(2) *Against adoration:* You shouldn't value some other entity more highly than you value yourself and your well-being. Doing so amounts to self-abasement. Even if you must live with "despair over the earthly" and without an ultimate love around to which to integrate your values, retaining your self-respect is worth it.
(3) *Against existential dependence:* You shouldn't rely on someone else's acceptance of yourself to establish your value. Doing so puts you at the mercy of another's judgment, and thus amounts to a form of disempowerment. Even if you must live with "despair over yourself" and without the freedom that comes from being unconditionally accepted, empowering yourself to live by your own standards is worth it.

These objections are not mutually entailing, of course; one need not find them equally plausible. Nevertheless, they are all expressions of similar sensibilities.

Each objection turns on a dichotomy: between autonomous and heteronomous willings, between self-concerned and self-abasing loves, and between internally-imposed assessment and externally-imposed assessment, respectively. I will argue that the objector deploys an implausibly narrow conception of the first category in each dichotomy, and the result is that devotional acts appear to fall into the second category.

Let's begin with autonomy and heteronomy.[23] Plausibly, a will is autonomous only if it is moved by its own reasons. Consider a case. On a vacation together, Alannah and Brianna are trying to choose one of two popular restaurants. Alannah wants to eat at Restaurant X, and Brianna at Y. At some point Alannah defers

[23] Here I am indebted to discussions of these topics in Eleanore Stump (op. cit.) and John Cottingham, "Meaningful Life," in Paul Moser & Michael McFall, *The Wisdom of the Christian Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 175-196.

to Brianna's preference, and they dine at Y. Is Alannah's will autonomous? It depends on the nature of Alannah's motivation. Perhaps Brianna is simply the more stubborn or demanding of the two. This looks a classic case of heteronomy, since Alannah's will is not moved by reasons internal to it, but by external forces. Suppose, on the other hand, that Alannah has acquiesced after an agreement has been made that Brianna would pay for dinner. In this case, Alannah has her reasons for deferring. She is autonomous.

We can schematize these two species of deferral as follows:

Heteronomy: A wills what B wills, against A's (all-things-considered) reasons R_1-R_n.
Autonomy: A wills what B wills, for A's (all-things-considered) reasons R_1-R_n.

But what if Alannah simply defers to Brianna's preference *because it is what Brianna wants*? I submit that the objector has miscategorized a case of this sort as heteronomous, despite its clearly fitting the schema for autonomy. Now, the case doesn't fit a stronger version of that schema:

Radical autonomy: A wills what B wills, for A's reasons R_1-R_n that make no essential reference to B's will.

Since radical autonomy isn't necessary to avoid heteronomy, and since radical autonomy rules out morally lovely behavior, one can indeed defer to another for the sake of the other's will and still be autonomous. To return to the case of religious devotion: there is nothing essentially heteronomous about willing what God wills because God wills it.

Let's now consider self-concern and self-abasement. It is often the case that people make sacrifices for what they value. The question is which sorts of costly valuing are self-abasing, and which are consistent with proper concern for oneself. Consider the following case of costly valuing. Alannah works for a struggling art museum. Wanting to see it thrive again, she pours her salary back into its operating budget. She turns down job offers at other institutions. She works long hours, sacrificing health and friendships. And so on. Does she debase herself for the sake of what she values? It depends. On the one hand, perhaps she thinks that she is of no consequence compared to the museum; if she must waste away to save it, then so be it. This does seem like a distorted attitude. On the other hand, perhaps she finds the work tremendously rewarding and meaningful, in which case she does not appear to be, in any obvious way, slighting herself.

It would appear, then, that one is properly self-concerned only if one does not believe that what one values is, in the final tally, a source of harm to one. (For simplicity, I'll leave out the bit about *belief* in my formulations.)

We can schematize self-abasing vs. properly self-concerned valuing as follows:

Self-abasement: A values x, at the cost of A's goods G_1-G_n.
Self-concern: A values x, for the sake of A's goods G_1-G_n.

At this point, it might appear that someone's love for something is only consistent with proper self-concern if her reason for loving it is that it contributes to her well-being. But not so. For the act of A's valuing x makes it the case that x is among A's goods. This is part of the mystery of love: loving something makes it the case that that thing is good for one, at least in the sense of being the object of one's conative and affective states. (This is consistent with an object of one's love being objectively bad for one. Poisoned beverages and abusive spouses come to mind.) If Alannah values the museum for the sake of the museum, this is consistent with *Self-concern*. If the objector denies that Alannah is self-concerned in such a scenario, the objector will have to insist on a stronger criterion:

> *Radical self-concern*: A values x, for the sake of A's goods G_1-G_n, all of which make essential reference to A.

Radical self-concern is recognizable as self-centeredness, so it would be crazy to endorse it.

What about empowerment and disempowerment? Suppose that Alannah is telling Brianna about a conflicted interaction she had with her supervisor. Alannah's take is that her efforts have not received the recognition they deserve, but Brianna reads the situation differently: Alannah has been petty. Alannah accepts Brianna's assessment. Does Alannah thereby disempower herself? Perhaps, if Brianna is using standards that Alannah explicitly rejects. But if not—if Brianna is simply pointing out the standards that Alannah herself accepts—then Alannah retains power over her self-assessment. Schematically:

> *Disempowerment:* A espouses B's assessment of A, and B's assessment conflicts with A's standards.
> *Empowerment*: A espouses B's assessment of A, and B's assessment deploys A's standards.

But *Empowerment* is consistent with A's standards for self-assessment *including* B's positive assessment. (For example, Alannah could come to believe that Brianna is a more gracious person than she is, and consequently espouse the following standard for herself: *I must satisfy Brianna's standards of social grace*.) The only way to rule this possibility is to appeal to a stronger criterion:

> *Radical empowerment*: A espouses B's assessment of A, and B's assessment deploys A's standards, none of which make essential reference to B.

But this criterion is implausibly strong, because it would rule out cases in which one trusts another's judgment before one understands it. Students of every type and level cannot proceed toward mastery of their subject without exhibiting such trust.

The Christian tradition, it should be admitted, does include accounts of devotion that extol heteronomy, self-abasement, or disempowerment (in the senses just discussed). Meister Eckhart, for example, insists that "The will is perfect and right when it has no selfhood and when it has gone out of itself, having been taken up

and transformed into the will of God."[24] But "stern-minded" piety (as Eleonore Stump calls it) of this sort is not required in order to occupy the devotional posture. The attitudes characteristic of the devotional posture are directed toward something distinct from the self, and in that sense, they require a form of self-emptying. At the same time, the attitudes themselves are the proper activity of a self. One defers, one values, espouses. One does these things on one's own steam (cooperating with grace, the tradition will insist).

So much for the first obstacle: devotion does not essentially require a deleterious abdication of oneself. The second obstacle is the worry that nothing privileges *God* as the proper object of devotion. Could not someone be devoted to something less than God or other than God and enjoy the same benefits?

But not every object of devotion is suitable, and being devoted to an unsuitable object is harmful. The reasons it is harmful are different from those that proponents of the set of worries just discussed have in mind, but they are related. To see this, let's revisit the case of Alannah's deferring to Brianna's judgment. This case was sufficient to show that willing another's will on a particular occasion does not *ipso facto* constitute heteronomy. But now suppose that Alannah *always* wills what Brianna wills, because Brianna wills it. "Why do you always let Brianna decide?" ask her friends, and she answers, "So Brianna gets her way." This answer is troubling, because Brianna's way, as such, doesn't seem to be more choiceworthy than anybody else's. Alannah's will is arbitrarily demoted. And that does diminish Alannah. In other words, although abnegation as such doesn't diminish one, abnegation to an unsuitable object *does* diminish one.

Similar things could be said for objects of adoration and existential dependence. Placing ultimate value in a dud of an object at great cost to oneself is a very bad thing. Taking a stupid person's acceptance as one's ultimate source of self-regard (think of Don Quixote's love for Aldonza Lorenzo) is a very bad thing.

So, what must an object of devotion be like in order to suit? It had better be able to bear the weight of the ultimacy of the attitudes one bears toward it. It must itself be *ultimate* in a certain sense, which we must explicate. There are, it seems to me, two different tiers of ultimacy that are prima facie suitable. Let's take each attitude in turn.

What must the object of abnegation be like in order to bear the weight of ultimacy the devotee places in it? Because the devotee makes the object of her abnegation the measure of her will, she must at the very least believe that this object is a better guide than her own will. But she must also believe that no *other* object will come along that is a yet better guide. For if that possibility is open to her, she has not made the contents of the will to which she surrenders her ultimate final goals, and such an attitude falls short of abnegation. So, it seems to me that a suitable object of devotion must be conceived, minimally, as *the supremely reliable will*.

Similar things can be said for the other attitudes. For the object of adoration to bear the weight of ultimacy that the devotee places in it, she must believe that this object is better than anything else she cares about, but also that nothing better will come

[24] Qtd. in Eleanore Stump, op cit., p. 190.

along. Thus, she must conceive of the object of adoration, minimally, as *the supremely valuable thing*.

For the object of existential dependence to bear the weight of ultimacy the devotee places in it, she must believe that it offers to her a more all-encompassing acceptance than any other source, but also that no more encompassing acceptance will come along. Thus, she must conceive of the object of existential dependence as *the supremely loving thing*, or rather, the supremely loving *person*, since only a person can extend acceptance to another person as such.

Add these three criteria together, and you get what we might call the "immanent" conception of God. God has properties that other finite particulars have, but has them maximally. Finite wills accord with reason to a certain extent; God's accords perfectly. Finite things are intrinsically valuable; God is more valuable than any of them. Finite persons offer a certain modicum of acceptance to each other; God offers acceptance in full. There is, then, a "common measure"—to use a phrase from Jennifer Herdt—between God and creatures.[25]

But is an immanent conception of the object of devotion sufficient? My tentative judgment is that it is not. For one thing, I have the intuition that, on an immanent conception of the object of devotion, abnegation turns out to be problematically indirect. The devotee bends the knee not to God's self, per se, but to certain properties exemplified by God. Here's an analogy. When I am lost, I defer to a map. But I don't care a hoot about the map. I care about what the map tracks, which is orientation proper.

For another thing, it's not clear that the adoration of an immanent God can provide the psychologically-integrating pole that proper adoration does. We said above that the religious devotee lives in a plenum of value, rendering other final values subordinate without down-grading them. But this means, I think, that the religious devotee does not just give God first prize among the things she loves. The difference in value between God and others is presumably one of quantity, at least in the sense that it is not finite. But God's goodness can only fill all things if it differs in kind as well. Ralph Cudworth seems to suggest as much when he writes, "Happiness is nothing, but the releasing and unfettering of our souls, from all these narrow, scant, and particular good things; and the espousing of them to the Highest and most Universall Good, which is not this or that particular good, but is goodnesse it self."[26]

On a transcendent conception of God, God indeed has the qualities of being supremely reliable, supremely good, and supremely loving. But God exhibits these qualities because determinative of them, or (on the doctrine of divine simplicity) identical with them. God is right reason itself, goodness itself, love itself.

Now, if it turns out that an immanent God serves as a suitable object of devotion, this still entails that devotion is properly directed to God alone. It is my suspicion, however, that this would miss an important aspect of the difference between

[25] "Affective Perfectionism: Community with God without Common Measure," in Natalie Brender & Larry Krasnoff, ed., *New Essays on the History of Autonomy: A Collection Honoring JB Schneewind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 30-60.

[26] Qtd. in Jennifer Herdt, op. cit., p. 42.

(a) God, the lone devotion-apt object and (b) everything else. God is devotion-apt *because* transcendent.

So: devotion redounds to our well-being without harming us, but it only does so when the object of devotion is conceived of as at least as exalted as an immanent God.[27]

But the non-devotee faces a third obstacle, this a practical one. The obstacle is that devotion requires a very specific motivational structure. The contents of God's will must be embraced as *final ends*; God must be adored as a *final value*; God's love must be received as a basic source of self-worth. When asked why we must love God, Bernard of Clairvaux answered, "The cause of loving God is God himself." If the cause of one's devotion were the benefits of devotion, one would not be devoted at all, and none of the benefits of devotion would accrue. So, what good does it do the non-devotee to hear the benefits of devotion extolled?

It would seem, then, that however far I have come in my defense of religious devotion, I have come up short. One becomes a devotee by quantum leap. It is not in anyone's power to make that leap.

One traditional thought is that *divine grace* accomplishes the leap. Here, for example, is Stump's account of the role of divine grace:

> What is required from a post-Fall person, then, is just a cessation of resistance to God's love. … Once a person Paula has surrendered and ceased resisting God's love, then God gives her the operative grace needed for a will that wills to will the good…Because Paula has ceased resisting God, God can infuse grace into her will without violating it. Through this infusion of grace, Paula comes to the will of faith: she longs for God's goodness and repudiates her own evil.[28]

Translated into the language of our discussion: willing to occupy the devotional posture is insufficient to occupy it, because one cannot alter one's ultimate motivations and commitments at will. But if one wills that God would alter her ultimate motivations and commitments, then God can bring it about that she occupies the devotional posture, while still respecting the integrity of her will.

That grace plays *some* such role is dogmatic in the Christian tradition. But one also finds suggestions of a more active role that a person can play in the transformation of her own motivational structure. In the very same work I just quoted, Bernard of Clairvaux describes an incremental process whereby a person comes to love God for God's self, by ascent through four "degrees of love."

The first degree of love is thoroughgoing self-concern. Gratitude for finite goods, in tandem with something like Kierkegaardian despair, awakens a desire for something lasting on which to affix one's love and hang one's hopes.

[27] It may very well turn out, then, that God is above us on a metaphysical hierarchy. Have I not relied on a hierarchical justification of the aptness of God as a devotional object? I have not, for it is not God's hierarchical primacy that makes God devotion-apt (at least, as far as I have said here), but God's *sourcehood* primacy.

[28] Op. cit., p. 343.

The second degree of love involves a burgeoning love of God via the repeated experience of God's provision in tribulation. But one still loves God for the benefits God gives.

The third degree of love comes when one has "tasted and seen" God's goodness; God's goodness itself becomes an object of love. One loves God for God's sake.

That's not the end of the ascent, says Bernard. There is a fourth degree of love, in which the soul becomes "drunk with love" and forgets itself. One's repose in God becomes so complete that one ceases to care for oneself as a final value. Instead, one loves *oneself* "for God's sake." "To love in this way is to become like God."[29]

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[29] G. R. Evans, *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 196.