CALL, ENCOUNTER, AND RESPONSE:
LOVING MY NEIGHBOUR WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

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SUMMARY

Why, theologically speaking, do we care? Specifically, what grounds the ethical motivation and formation of service provision? Christian faith-based organizations have a responsibility to go beyond negative restrictions and legalistic frameworks to foster a culture of positive support. Which theological resources offer a compelling vision of ethical caregiving? To answer this question, this project draws upon diverse theological and philosophical sources and incorporates personal experience as a direct support professional (DSP) with a Christian faith-based service agency in Canada.

Four additional considerations help guide the inquiry. First, what premises and principles currently guide the moral posture of direct support? These may indicate challenges or opportunities. Second, what current conversations at the intersection of theology and disability might be informative? Third, what myths or barriers must be overcome to foster an ethical posture? Finally, what are the virtues or moral practices that exemplify a uniquely Christ-shaped vocation of care?

PART ONE explores the ethical “call.” Chapter One asks why the language of vocation surrounds direct support work. How might care providers experience work as a “calling,” whether from religious or secular perspectives? One may hear a call from God, and/or to another, carrying the weight of transcendent obligation. A calling may be received as onerous or freeing. Responsibility can exacerbate tensions and disillusionment within bureaucratic systems or free caregivers to embrace the meaningful aspects of their work without feeling overwhelmed and worn out. Looking to current research along with the writing of Martin Luther and Miroslav Volf, this chapter asks, “What vocational posture avoids compassion fatigue and burnout while sustaining meaningful passion?” It is determined that resilient ethical care requires balancing one’s sense of belonging with a healthy perspective or “distance” from one’s work.

Chapter Two seeks to understand vocation in relation to the human other. Building on the theme of transcendence, it contrasts Lutheran undertones of “neighbour-love” with love of neighbour as articulated by Søren Kierkegaard. How
might the ethical call be grounded not in natural preference, but in eternal equality before God? How does Christ’s command to love one’s neighbour as oneself compel people beyond existing comfort zones toward their brothers and sisters with intellectual disabilities?

Chapter Three contrasts theological approaches with ways in which contemporary service delivery models attempt to establish a basis for ethical conduct. Professionalism is the means by which developmental services seek not only to attract potential direct support staff, but also to form these workers into ethical service providers. Professionalism fails to offer the resources required to establish a moral foundation. The behaviours or “competencies” proposed by professionalism rely upon what Alasdair MacIntyre calls a moral fiction of management: effectiveness. Without a clear conception of the good or goods towards which direct support aspires, professionalism fails to provide adequate moral motivation or formation for direct support professionals – especially in times of transition and change.

PART TWO contrasts the moral framework of professional caregiving with the ethical resources of Christian theology. How might we encounter one another as human beings created in God’s image?

Chapter Four sketches contemporary discussions on the imago Dei at the intersection of theology and disability. What are helpful ways of engaging this image? What ways might actually undermine the dignity of people with intellectual disabilities? Contemporary theologians along with insights from Emil Brunner and Søren Kierkegaard shape the priority of relationality in this imago. God is love, and so love must be the foundational principle whereby one may be created in God’s image. Following Levinas, we encounter the trace of God in the face of our neighbour.

Chapters Five through Seven confront barriers to encountering one another as created in the divine image. The first barrier lies in the myth of the transparent other, addressed in Chapter Five. We fail to encounter the image of God in others when we project onto them our own account of who they are, particularly through the lens of
disability. In the theology of the incarnation, and Christ’s command to love, we are opened to receive our neighbour in all of their beauty and mysterious complexity.

**Chapter Six** builds on the reflexive nature of our failure to encounter our neighbour as created in God’s image. The *myth of the transparent self* suggests that this failure has more to do with the way in which I *give an account*, and expect others to do the same, than it does with the actual person whom I encounter. Narrative ethics places the weight of ethical responsibility upon the transparency of the accounts we give of our lives. This weight of intelligibility places people with intellectual disabilities at a significant disadvantage. Judith Butler points to the possibility of an ethics grounded not in our transparency to one another, but in our *shared opacity*. As relational beings, we depend upon one another in those moments we are unable to “give an account.” This social selfhood is radically established in and through the divine image.

**Chapter Seven** emphasizes that it is the account we give of God that ultimately generates the myths of transparency of those created in God’s image – ourselves and others. In glossing over the significance of profound mystery at the heart of the biblical account, we perpetuate the *myth of a transparent God*. To counter this myth, Chapter Seven recounts the Old Testament emphasis on God’s hidden presence, appreciates the humility of theological approaches such as *via negativa* and theopoetics, and points to the mysterious revelation of Christ’s love. This love is the catalyst for transformative care with people created in God’s image.

The sublime opacity woven through stories of God, self, and others reveals that ethical responsibility is not based upon my neighbour’s ability to become “transparent” to me through a coherent account. Instead, we receive a loving obligation rooted in our shared hiddenness. In the wellspring of the love of a relational God, One who is revealed in the suffering love of Christ on the cross, the Christian receives ethical motivation and formation towards her neighbours created in the divine image. One cannot give an adequate, transparent “account” of this love, of human beings, or of God. The task is to re-imagine virtues not on the basis of transparency myths but out of our shared opacity with others and ourselves.
PART THREE points toward the response called for in acknowledging the opacity of our accounts and our responsibility before God. While the intellect may assist in the process of moral deliberation, the weight of ethical responsibility lies prior to cognition in one’s encounter with God and others. People with intellectual disabilities are, in this way, complete moral agents capable of full human flourishing. Chapter Eight outlines several virtues of discovery that are rooted in the gift of love. These virtues must be embodied in relation to the near-one, the neighbour. They do not rely upon excellent cognition but rest in profound love and appreciation for epistemic and embodied limitation. These virtues shape ethical care provision in Christian services, care that is not determined by a set of rules or learned theological precepts but discovered in a lifelong journey with God and others.

Chapter Nine ties up these themes in relation to the account of the author’s own life and experience, concludes, and points to areas of future inquiry.

The mystery of the imago Dei opens space toward constitutive relationality even when one is unable to give an account. Vulnerability and interdependence are not only aspects of what it means to be human; they give rise to full human flourishing. In learning to rest in the divine love that establishes us, we discover a graceful way of being human together. This way carries the potential to not only ground the ethical framework of Christian service, but to heal interpersonal relationships and revive the diverse communities in which we live.
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Introduction

The whole trouble lies in that people think that there are conditions excluding the necessity of love in their intercourse with man, but such conditions do not exist. Things may be treated without love; one may chop wood, make bricks, forge iron without love, but one can no more deal with people without love than one can handle bees without care.¹

~ Leo Tolstoy, Resurrection

You have arrived at the beginning. An introduction is a glorious and frightful moment of omniscience, that briefest of experiences where the writer has seen the end and has returned to give a full account. Even then, parts of the pages that follow are a dim memory. There are paragraphs that I stumbled through clumsily and perhaps even chapters that will not make much sense. If you are one of a handful of people that reach the final page – thank you.

In the end, we will discover that the “answers” along the way lie in the interconnected relationality at the heart of giving an account. Narrative accountability is in many ways the heart of the matter. There are many people that I have met who struggle to “give an account” in a manner that is expected of them by society. Perhaps they have a speech impediment, and so while they may have stunning intellectual capabilities, they are perceived as “dim-witted” or unable to process the account they are attempting to deliver. Perhaps they have mobility challenges, and so are unable to get to as many places to talk to people and have their account heard, whether due to physical barriers or simply the cost of accessible transportation. Perhaps they have a lower IQ than the “normal” population, and so do not deliver their account in the way that we expect them to. These friends would be unable to write a dissertation if their life depended on it. They would begin the project in a way that did not meet standards of academic rigor. Their put-together-words may not be right. More significantly, perhaps, they may not be able to express their intentions, their actions, or their plans as

coherently or intelligibly as is demanded of them. In telling their story, others may assume that they *never* act with ill intent or conversely, that they are always looking out for themselves and are incapable of generosity. Due to the way society expects these friends to tell their stories, they are often condemned to be angels or demons in others’ experience of them. Perhaps an even worse fate lies in being perceived *ineligible* as a moral agent. Within narrative accounts of moral responsibility, to offer an incomprehensible story is to withdraw from the human community of reflective moral agents inadvertently. Devaluing perceptions can separate such storytellers from friendship, from meaningful connection, and often from love itself. The “cult of normalcy” cuts deep at the heart of our interwoven humanity.² As Thomas Reynolds observes, society has a “set of rituals trained upon demarcating and policing the borders of a ‘normal’ way of being.”³ This policing extends to the representation we give of ourselves to one another, colouring our accounts in subtle and frequently dehumanizing ways.

Throughout this project, I will be interposing “accounts” of my own varied experience of the world that have shaped my understanding of moral responsibility. As will be seen primarily in Chapter Six, these accounts are problematic if taken in an authoritative or definitive sense, yet all gesture towards the ways the people I have encountered have formed this project. I begin by recounting my support relationship with an often-vocal yet seldom-speaking Lebanese man to whom I will refer as Nassim.

**Giving an Account: Nassim⁴**

I saw Nassim almost daily for four years when I worked as a direct support professional. He was a large hairy man everywhere except on the top of his head where he was balding. He sauntered around his home swaying and singing or laughing with short, gulping chuckles – as though he had just thought of a joke that only he understood. When Nassim became anxious or upset, he would pace quickly. His vocalization became louder and more

³ Ibid.
⁴ Names have been changed.
agitated. He would hit himself on the side of the head. I worried that his colostomy bag might get caught and come undone, leading to a messy and possibly dangerous interaction.

When Nassim was happy, though, he would take you by the arm. At times he would play with his fingers on your hand, tapping on your palm as though he were sending a telegraph to the remote regions of space. Perhaps to those who heard and laughed along with his inside jokes.

Nassim loved food. One of his favourite activities was to go each week down to the local shawarma restaurant and gulp down shawarma. They knew him well there. They knew he was Lebanese, and so shawarma tied him to his cultural and social roots. They did not know his grandmother, though. Nassim's grandmother was a short and feisty Lebanese woman who had raised one grandson with a significant developmental disability and Nassim's father, who had lived under her roof for most of his adult life. We suspected Nassim's father might deal in illicit substances or belong to the mafia, gauging by the number of regular visitors in expensive cars that stopped by their place.

Nassim's grandmother didn't just call him Nassim. It was “my Nassim.” She doted on him in a way I have only seen mothers do with newborn children. She would make sure that his care was top-notch down to minute details. One might surmise the blessing and curse of this for those who supported him. There would be moments of intense preparation as we were heading out the door to take Nassim to his grandmother’s house for the weekend. We must match every sock perfectly without signs of grime or dust. We had to be ready to answer for every aspect of the care he had received in the past week. Yes, he had been taking his medication. Yes, he had enjoyed his shawarma. Yes, Nassim had been a “good boy.”

As time passed, Nassim's grandmother was no longer able to take him for the lengths of time she had previously. She was growing older, and Nassim was just as strong as he had always been. She was not able to handle his times of anxiety and distress anymore. It was remarkable that she was able to support him for as long as she had. Love is miraculous that way.

To those who knew Nassim well, his life may have revolved around food, but his food pointed to his deeper roots in his culture and, more specifically, in his close and sustaining relationship with his grandmother and his father. To
observe his relationship with her was to see his life, his personality, and his interconnectedness with the world.

a. The aim of this project

What does life look like for Nassim now that his grandmother is no longer able to care for him and his father has passed away? These natural relationships lie at the very core of who he is. Once these roots are severed, who will be grafted into Nassim’s identity? It is apparent to us who know him that Nassim’s grandmother and father are irreplaceable. Nevertheless, the direct support professionals that are with him and care for him most hours of the day also play an integral role. How might these workers conduct themselves in ways that contribute to Nassim’s sense of identity and fulfillment? More specifically, what does moral responsibility look like with people like Nassim within a Christian faith-based agency?

The purpose of this dissertation is to inquire into the role of professional caregivers supporting people like Nassim to discover the basis for ethical motivation and formation with the people that they support. At its core lies the experience of direct support professionals (DSPs) serving people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in a Christian faith-based service agency in Canada. Conversations around rights and self-determination dominate the field along with an emphasis on core competencies for direct support professionals. Christian faith-based organizations must demonstrate adherence to government-established compliance standards together with their desire to nurture organizational cultures rooted in distinctive faith-related commitments. This culture may include themes such as service, vulnerability, care, belonging, community, and other positive ethical standards. These commitments are rooted in a theological understanding of who God is and who human beings are, created in God’s image. How might faith-based organizations foster in direct support professionals a posture that goes beyond mere compliance and negative constraints to embrace their care for others as a positive, uniquely faith-shaped opportunity?

In Part I, this dissertation explores the ethical resources of the experience of “calling” or vocation regularly professed by caregivers. Direct support professionals often express a sense of “higher calling” to people with intellectual disabilities, whether
they describe this using religious language or not. This call to others is a potential source of ethical motivation. Indeed, this motivation first led me to work with people with intellectual disabilities. Drawing on contemporary research along with an examination of the history of “vocation” through Max Weber and Martin Luther, I will establish that belonging and distance are integral factors in resilient vocational caregiving.

Chapter Two goes on to unpack the nuances of belonging and distance in direct caregiving relationships. Building on my account of supporting Michael, I show that a kind of “eternal equality” is necessary to maintain ethical distance. However, we are also called by those whom we support into relationships of belonging. True care is mutual care according to Henri Nouwen, but direct support professionals must be able to navigate the complexities of the calling to support (a “higher calling” or a sense of distance) and being called by the people they support (a sense of belonging).

Chapter Three seeks to understand current approaches to caregiving ethics as established in the name of professionalism. Do current practices of professionalism equip direct support professionals to practise resilient, ethical care? Inspired by Alasdair MacIntyre’s critique of “managerial effectiveness,” I show that current developmental service practices are insufficient in explaining or promoting ethical motivation and formation in direct support. In particular, an emphasis on core competencies fails to equip direct support professionals to respond to changing needs in ever-adapting service models. To adequately address the sense of being “called to” and “called by” experienced by direct support professionals, Christian developmental service agencies require a fuller understanding of theological anthropology and account of human flourishing.

Part II: Encounter argues that an adequate understanding of calling in the Christian tradition of developmental services entails recognizing that people with intellectual disabilities have intrinsic value, being created in God’s image. However, preceding intellectual recognition we first encounter one another as image-bearers of God. Chapter Four provides an overview of existing approaches to the imago Dei and disability. I situate this project’s perspective among established theological approaches. In particular, I look to Emil Brunner’s distinction between the formal and material
aspects of the *imago Dei* and the writing of Emmanuel Levinas as a fruitful ethical elucidator of the former. We *receive our* fundamental ethical obligation to one another – the root of ethical motivation – before we develop any theoretical moral system. We are responsible to one another precisely *as* created in God’s image. However, we *live into* the fullness of this image through the *imitatio Dei*. Within the Christian tradition, ethical formation involves *conforming* to the nature of Christ. This is where we come to appreciate the mystery and revelation bound up in our encounter of others, ourselves, and God.

Encountering one another as created in God’s image is no simple ethical task due to the barriers and presuppositions we face. Chapters Five through Seven examine three myths of recognition that underlie these barriers: a.) The myth of the transparent other, b.) The myth of the transparent self, and c.) The myth of a transparent God. When we think recognition of the *imago Dei* is easily accessible to our intellect, we presume that our knowledge of one another and ourselves is easily accessible as well. Ethically, narrative ethics have a propensity to demand intelligible accounts that must comply with the *tyranny of transparency* – a transparency that is unattainable. Through the interplay of thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Judith Butler, I demonstrate that we need a moral responsibility tied not to myths of transparency and recognition, but to the shared opacity of our stories and lives.

Once we encounter one another, including people with intellectual disabilities, as mysteriously created in God’s image – both revelatory and opaque – *Part III: Response* sketches the posture that is *called for* by Christ. It unearths several *virtues of unrecognizability* and concludes where the project began, with an exploration of the Source of this mysterious calling. Within the Christian tradition, direct support professionals respond to the ethical call out of an overflow of God’s initial love toward us. The virtues of courageous humility, loving mercy, of confession and forgiveness, of lament and morning, and of quiet attentiveness arise not out of an over-reaching estimation of intellectual prowess but out of quiet humility. In this way, we encounter people with intellectual disabilities as full moral agents, living lives of flourishing.

Drawing on the writing of Søren Kierkegaard, Miroslav Volf, Emil Brunner, Henri Nouwen, Emmanuel Levinas, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Judith Butler along with other
theological, philosophical, and biblical sources, I will explore profoundly human questions that ultimately cannot escape their divine origin. I will argue that an obligation and response-ability to ethical care defines humanity as created in the imago Dei. The loving work and ministry of Jesus Christ ultimately reveal the path of ethical formation in Christian faith-based service. “We love because he first loved us.”

In response to this love, no ethical system is adequate. Systems of thought privilege intellectual ability and competence in a way not reflective of our encounter with God or one another, created in the imago Dei. The intellect is a sharp scalpel, proficient at dissecting the world around us in meaningful ways. Our ethical task, and the task of this project, is to work towards stitching the world back together. Therefore, the aim of this project is not to establish any such ethical system. As the form of a dissertation itself pursues an intellectual goal, however, I will primarily engage rational activity to question and to unsettle assumptions regarding what it means to be created in God’s image and the ethical import of intellectual capacity in our shared humanity.

The virtues I discuss towards the end of the project are, in this sense, merely a gesture towards the possibilities that open up once we accept our radically relational constitution and embody humility in our shared stories. It is true that, insofar as we have intellectual capacity, our intellect and rationality are to seek the Good and ultimately to love God. Any gift or capacity (and any capacity is given) is to be directed towards this end. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” However, in being formed to “Love my neighbour as myself,” I have become aware that loving God with our minds is no more morally upright than loving God with any other aspect of who we are. My neighbours with intellectual disabilities have frequently exemplified the virtues discussed herein without requiring the ability to articulate them, or even to understand that this is what they are doing. In this way, living into our encounter with God and the people created in

5 John 4:19, NIV. Scripture references are in NIV unless otherwise noted.
6 Mark 12:30
God’s image is often as much a matter of unlearning as it is advancing in rational knowledge.

b. A note on methodology

What is reasoning? It is the result of doing away with the vital distinction which separates subjectivity and objectivity.

~ Søren Kierkegaard

This project does not claim detached impartiality or cold objectivity in its process. Eva Feder Kittay aptly demonstrates the implications of Kierkegaard’s quote above in "The Personal Is Philosophical Is Political: A Philosopher And Mother Of A Cognitively Disabled Person Sends Notes From The Battlefield." We cannot separate Kittay’s relation to her daughter Sesha from her writing on caregiving ethics. To do away with the “vital distinction” between her subjective relationship and her objective statements is to deny the inescapable effect that her role as a mother plays in her work as a philosopher. To take this a step further, not having a relationship with someone who is cognitively disabled does not “free” that person to undertake a more accurate objective ethical investigation. Kittay rightly challenges Peter Singer’s unqualified pronouncements on the lives of people with intellectual disabilities from his seat in the ivory tower, detached from meaningful relationships. Instead, lack of relationships – and potentially friendship – with people with intellectual disabilities then shapes the philosopher’s or theologian’s ethical system.

The method I employ in the pages that follow attempts to take seriously the vital distinction and interplay between subjectivity and objectivity. My arguments and critical analysis arise not apart from my experience in direct support, but precisely out of these encounters and experiences. The people I have met and known have shaped the ways I think. I will share “accounts,” stories of my interactions with others, and proceed to

analyze the ways that relevant theories and the Christian tradition might critically interpret these interactions.

One might note that Søren Kierkegaard, Miroslav Volf, Emil Brunner, Henri Nouwen, Emmanuel Levinas, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Judith Butler are diverse thinkers in their interests, areas of expertise, and conceptual frameworks. Each contributes important insights toward my argument. They often state needed positions better than I could. Occasionally, in points that are relevant to my thesis, I will highlight where they complement or critique one another. Note that my use of their writing is primarily constructive, drawing from them precisely in those areas that intersect with my argument.

The commitment of this project is to unpack Christian ethical motivation and formation in the context of direct support.

- **Motivation** is the "inner or social stimulus for an action." In the pages that follow, I closely link motivation to recognizing obligation or responsibility. As we will discover, a fundamental obligation or “calling” to moral response serves as the basis of Christian motivation.

- **Formation** speaks to those interactions that shape and form us into an *image* or *form.* Personal formation occurs particularly through those voices that inspire us, that breathe life into our everyday experiences. Stories, “giving an account,” shape our formation.

Ultimately, then, it will be understood that within the Christian tradition we are always already responsible to one another as people created in the image of God. Ethical motivation always refers back to this “call to” love my neighbour, recognizing that God first loved me. Our stories then shape us and form us in Christ’s example, in the *imitatio Dei.* We are formed in the virtues of discovery as much out of the partial opacity of our shared stories as out of the revelation of who we are *through* our stories.

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10 Ibid.
c. The end of the beginning

In a sense, this dissertation is itself an attempt to tell my own story, to “give an account,” that inspires moral formation and appreciation for our shared ethical obligation toward every other; in particular, our neighbours with intellectual disabilities. As Madeleine L’Engle writes, “Story makes us more alive, more human, more courageous, more loving.”¹¹

I hope that upon arriving at the end of this project, you will have a new appreciation for how our stories are significant, not due to their intelligibility but due to their relationality: how our partial, shared opacity to ourselves binds us together. The accounts we give gesture toward goals, projects, hopes, and dreams. They structure us and define us in new ways and old. They help make sense of (reveal) our experience and hide (conceal) aspects of it simultaneously. More than intelligibly pointing towards our telos or our end, our stories are a mysterious revelation of where we came from – our origin as people created in God’s image.

The story that I gave of Nassim’s life is only a short account of who he is from the time that I was fortunate to share with him. It is not exhaustive. It may not even be entirely accurate. It is a way of pointing, gesturing, and alluding to Another whose life and love have roots deeper than I can understand. I pray that this project, similarly, points beyond itself to the fabric of the passing gift we call “life” and the richness of those moments that we call “care.”

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PART I: CALLING

CHAPTER ONE

Called to: Vocation as a “higher calling”

“This is your calling.”

We are beckoned to perceive everything as a calling. The above phrase is from Shopify on Facebook, advertising its readers’ ability to start an online store. Once ‘calling’ was restricted to a life of devoted service to God and the church, yet now almost every occupation claims this status. Every stimulus, person, object, or thought makes a demand upon us for our attention, our time, and our resources. Is it all a ‘calling’? Is all work a ‘calling’? What are the ethical ramifications, if any, of ‘calling’ and how might they affect the work of serving people with intellectual and developmental disabilities? Is there any right or wrong way to pursue ‘calling’?

This chapter seeks to answer these questions with the purpose of discovering ethical ramifications for people who work in caring professions. It does so by investigating current and past senses of ‘calling’ in both secular and theological sources. There are dimensions to the language of ‘calling’ that will aid in the larger project of understanding moral motivation and formation in direct support.

As will be demonstrated, while ‘calling’ is used in diverse contexts and with varying definitions, it continues to be haunted by a sense of transcendent. By transcendent, I mean that it invokes something “higher”, a moral obligation or accountability to an ideal or power that goes beyond oneself and one’s immediate context.

The etymological history of calling will lead us to an understanding of generative and destructive uses of “calling”, particularly in the writings of Martin Luther. Drawing on Miroslav Volf and Søren Kierkegaard, we will show that resilient vocational commitment requires a strong sense of belonging to oneself, one’s place, and one’s ‘people.’ As important, one must cultivate a respectful distance from one’s projects and passions. The Christian tradition holds belonging and the love of preference in balance with the eternal equality of loving one’s neighbour and oneself before God.
a. Why vocation?

One may well ask why the first consideration in this project is that of *vocation.* Understanding one’s work as a calling is not unique to working with vulnerable people. In its modern connotation, ‘calling’ may seem to bear little relation to a theological-ethical inquiry.

This project proceeds by way of interpretive analysis of my experience of direct support. Friederich Nietzsche observed that every great philosophy so far has been “a confession of faith on the part of its author, and a type of involuntary and unself-conscious memoir.”¹² As such, I will attempt to be transparent concerning my autobiography by way of explanation.

**Giving an account: My calling**

It was just over twelve years ago that I was completing my undergraduate in philosophy, surrounded by renowned works of morality and ethics. Through this time, I wrestled with my framework for right action. Primarily influenced by the Christian existentialism of Søren Kierkegaard, I became aware that my *relation* to moral thought was just as – or more – important than having all of the right answers. If I was not acting on what I already knew to be good, it was not helpful to continue to pursue a proper understanding of the Good. I was called to particularize the *ideal* of the Good in practical ethical action in the world around me.¹³

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¹³ Søren Kierkegaard may seem an unlikely ally as one explores disability and theology. Besides the fascinating work *Kierkegaard the Cripple* by Theodor Haecker and a chapter on Kierkegaard in *Disability and the Christian Tradition* by Brian Brock, little research has been carried out on Kierkegaard’s relation to disability either from the perspective of his thought or life. Haecker’s work explores the conviction that when Kierkegaard writes of his “thorn in the flesh” he is writing about his experience as a hunchback. It would be possible to proceed by making the argument that Kierkegaard’s relation to disability renders him the best theologian and philosopher to guide my inquiry. However, as this account attempts to show, my attraction to Kierkegaard began with my interactions with his writing before ever considering his relation to disability. I hope to demonstrate that Kierkegaard’s insistence on the dependency of the self, the de-intellectualization of faith, and the primacy of love have much to contribute to ongoing discussions on disability and faith. Similarly, the manner in which Kierkegaard *gives accounts* through his own and pseudonymous voices inherently problematizes the stories we tell in helpful ways.
I was driven to find work that had a practical impact in the lives of people in need. In 2006, this drive – together with a philosopher’s desperation for reliable income – motivated me to apply to work with a Christian organization serving people with intellectual disabilities.

In this instance, it was primarily philosophy that drove my autobiography. I joined the developmental service organization that I continue working with to this day. It was not a well-thought-out ethical system that called me to serve in this way; instead, it was an almost unsettling feeling that I needed to do something and meet the needs of someone.14 As a young man, my ethical philosophy motivated my course in life.

Today, my experiences drive my philosophical and theological inquiry. Neither is complete without the other. Experience prompts questions that were at first hidden from me, just as my studies first opened me to experiences that put my ethical beliefs to the test. What began as detached study became personal and meaningful to me. In turn, I seek to uncover those extractable principles from my own experience that may be transferable to others. As Henri Nouwen, following Carl Rogers, describes, “what is most personal is most universal.”15 It is this interplay between recognition of one's subjective experience and the exploration of transferable principles that constitute any semblance of objective understanding.

Through this journey, I have sensed a “higher calling” on my life, one that pushed me, pulled me and dragged me beyond my projects and purposes. I first pursued this call to Bible college, seeking to understand God's purpose for my life. It then brought me to study philosophy and morality and most recently to hear the call to love my neighbour as myself in direct support.

**Vocation** (from the Latin *vocare* “to call”) captures a fundamental aspect of the journey of ethical pursuit in direct support. The prevalence of a motivational calling is

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14 It is important to note that I had little to no understanding of what I was “getting myself into.” Calling does not come a job description. In *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship*, John Swinton explains that for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the call to discipleship follows a similar trajectory. Christ’s disciples had no idea where they were headed when they followed him. There may have been an unsettling from where they were, but more significantly there was a draw to the person of Christ who called them to follow. [John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016).] In the structure of the call, then, we see that it is not a prerequisite to be fully informed about that to *which* or to *whom* one is called.

borne out in research done with direct support professionals (DSPs) by Robert Hickey of Queen’s University. Most direct support professionals identify a desire to do good through their work, described as ‘prosocial motivation.’ Whether inspired by religious factors or not, prosocial motivation is an indicator that many direct support professionals view their work as more than a job. Their desire to do good may take the form of a spiritual calling or a call to help people without a clear sense of religious motivation.16

After working in direct support, I spent several years as a Recruitment Manager. I conducted several hundred interviews in this role. In each of these interviews, I asked some form of the question, “Why do you want to work in this field?” These exchanges verified that my own story is not an isolated example. This line of work drew potential direct support professionals. Many interviewees had limited knowledge of the precise responsibilities of the day-to-day job yet felt a strong sense that they had been called to work with vulnerable people.

b. Drawing near: Belonging from religious and secular perspectives

To gain a sense of where the ethics of a “higher calling” arise from, we must examine the history of vocation. It is important to understand how this is or is not shaped by religious concepts, particularly within a Christian social service context. Work understood as calling carries a convoluted history, intertwined with religion yet regularly separated from its spiritual origins in contemporary research. Current studies assessing the impact of “calling” may control for the importance of religion or simply state that “This concept of a calling is not to be taken in any traditionally religious sense.”17 Definitions, likewise, vary depending on the presence or absence of spiritual


17 As one paper describes, “Because recent research (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007) and calling’s historical roots as a religious construct (Weber, 1930) suggest religiosity could affect the development of calling, the analyses controlled for participants’ subjective, global assessment of the importance of religion in their lives.” Shoshana R. Dobrow, ”Dynamics of Calling: A Longitudinal Study of Musicians,” J. Organiz. Behav. Journal of Organizational Behavior 34, no. 4 (2012): 439. “It is not a turning away from or a rejection of the world. Instead, it is a turning toward the world as it is; not through some dreamy wish fulfillment, but rather as an ethical activity that itself attempts to fulfill the aspiring presence of humanity
principles. An example of a non-religious description from a scientific journal reads as follows:

[T]he present study uses the following definition of calling: a consuming, meaningful passion people experience toward a domain... This definition views calling as a psychological construct: it exists within Individuals’ minds and reflects the sentiments people experience toward a domain.”

Contemporary non-religious definitions draw from psychology and psychological motivation. Calling involves finding meaning in one’s work and a passion towards one’s work. These definitions relate to the thoughts and emotions (sentiments) that one experiences in one’s work. They are confined to a closed, immanent frame – to borrow from Charles Taylor – that claims no access to a “higher power” or reference to the divine.

Frederick Buechner, a Christian author and theologian, describes calling from a spiritual standpoint: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

Understandably, these descriptions differ in their reference to the divine. One definition is articulated from the perspective of academic psychology, while the other is intended for a relatively devout lay audience. The former presumably attempts to reduce calling to that which might be measured – that which ‘exists’ within individual minds and can be professed. Buechner, alternately, has no hesitation in identifying “God” as the One who calls, and “profound need” as the place to which God calls.

I will explore the aspects that these descriptions have in common to arrive at a generalized understanding. We can describe these similarities as relating to belonging...

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18 Dobrow, 431.


First, each description emphasizes the meaning attached to belonging to a ‘domain’ or ‘place.’ In Buechner’s account, the attachment comes in the form of “deep gladness,” while for the former study it involves “a consuming, meaningful passion.” This place or domain may or may not be where one currently is or in which one is currently participating. The “to” in Buechner’s description calling seems to draw one to somewhere that they are not. Being directed “toward a domain” in the former psychological definition does not exclude one from being actively engaged in the domain. In either case, though, the “to” or “toward” indicate forward movement – a deepening commitment within a domain if not an actual change of domain. There is a domain within which one experiences belonging in that “place.”

Secondly, each references the importance of finding belonging with oneself. Calling is not separate from who one is or where one finds oneself. In Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation, Parker Palmer observes,

Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.\(^{21}\)

Palmer stresses that one cannot pursue one’s vocation as one would pursue a goal.\(^{22}\) Vocation relies on a tension between one’s own identity – coming to understand one’s truths and values – and an unsettling toward that which calls. It takes into consideration one’s vulnerability along with one’s strengths, channeling these towards the meaningful difference one might make in the world.\(^{23}\)


\(^{22}\) Particularly when seen through the lens of religious vocation, John Swinton writes, “Our vocation occurs in God’s time and is intended to fulfill God’s purposes. Within such a context, vocation is never perceived as a personal achievement or goal; it is not an individual search for the fulfillment of our own destiny” (Swinton, Becoming Friends of Time, 117). The nuances here between religious and secular views on vocation become pronounced. Religious vocation may very well feel as though one is “fulfilling their destiny,” though this comes about by seeking to respond to the call of the divine first and foremost. In other words, the Caller takes priority over the Called.

\(^{23}\) Palmer puts it this way, “My life is not only about my strengths and virtues; it is also about my liabilities and my limits, my trespasses and my shadow.” [Palmer, 29] Deborah Creamer’s reference to “limitness” rather than limitations or liabilities with their negative connotations is relevant here. Our limits are an important factor, not a negative liability, in the human experience. We each have “embodied peculiarities” that we may dislike, yet often these are an intrinsic aspect of what it means to be human,
Thirdly, secular and religious perspectives reference the importance of finding belonging with others. There is a crucial intersubjective aspect to calling. The former, non-religious study makes this connection apart from the definition listed above. The article highlights the relevance of “social comfort.” Social comfort is the relational or interpersonal aspect of domain involvement, specifically in feeling *comfort, enjoyment,* and *fit* being around others. Social comfort, it indicates, is a key indicator of work as a calling.\(^{24}\) Another non-religious study focuses *primarily* on the relational aspect to calling, explaining, “A relational perspective is particularly relevant to a discussion of callings, given the importance of relationships and interpersonal sense-making for understanding the meaningfulness of one’s work.”\(^{25}\) Buechner similarly references the intersubjective aspect of calling with “the world’s deep hunger.” Meeting the needs of another and having positive relationships with other human beings through the course of one’s activity is a hallmark of work as a calling.

In summary, experiencing work or occupation as a calling involves a deep sense of *belonging* to a place, to oneself, and to other people according to the definitions provided above. Vocation engages a person’s identity, including her strengths and limits. Within vocation, one finds deep gladness in meeting the needs of others and experiences the “social comfort,” of “being around others” in a place or domain.

There is one remaining descriptive outlier in our examination of these definitions. While the first study controls explicitly for religion so that it does not ‘skew’ its results, Buechner explicitly identifies the One who calls as “God.” While some contemporary definitions continue to infer that it is God who calls, non-religious

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what it means to be whole. [Deborah Beth. Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 108.] In the disability context, our physical or intellectual limits and abilities are key to this embodied peculiarity. Similarly, our epistemological limits in understanding our own story, in “listening to our life,” must be embraced in the process of self-recognition as will be explored later.

\(^{24}\) Dobrow, 42. It should also be noted that “social comfort” is closely tied to the cult of normalcy previously referenced. It is difficult to attain this kind of comfort in systems of power and control that confine one to devalued roles and the margins of society. Much work remains to be done on vocation, calling, and discipleship in the context of people who experience disabilities.

notions beg the question *who* or *what* is calling. They may refer to a nebulous summons of some kind without mentioning “God.” Does this aspect of relating calling to a higher power or ideal make a difference? In examining the history of vocation, I will argue that it does. Whether this difference is positive or negative, however, depends on several factors.

**c. Vocation as a spiritual calling**

Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, to acclaim and critique, has been instrumental in the conversation on vocation. Weber deals extensively with the history and sociology of work as calling.

A significant portion of Weber’s assessment focuses on the contributions of Martin Luther. While others have debated the distinctiveness of the notion of “calling” in Lutheranism, there is no doubt that Luther’s writing had a significant impact on how vocation came to be understood. The timing of the etymological shift from “spiritual calling” to “occupation or profession” bears this out. The usage of “vocation” as “spiritual calling” dates back to the thirteenth century from Old French *vocacion* as “call, consecration; calling, profession.” It was not until the 1550s that it first came to mean "one's occupation or profession."  

26 Note that at this point I do not yet wish to distinguish between God as understood in the Christian tradition and mere identification of “the one who calls,” something or someone that is viewed as “higher” or transcendent to one’s own immediate projects and concerns.

27 As Dobrow notes, “The elements of Weber’s analysis that are most definitely called into question, I would say, are: the distinctiveness of the notion of the ‘calling’ in Lutheranism” (Dobrow, 22). Weber himself had responded to a similar critique earlier, arguing in defense of this distinctiveness, “Cicero says of someone ‘non intelligit quid profiteatur’, in the sense of ‘he does not know his real profession’. The only difference is that it is, of course, definitely secular without any religious connotation. In the Romance languages only the Spanish *vocación* in the sense of an inner ‘call’ to something, from the analogy of a clerical office, has a connotation partly corresponding to that of the German word, but it is never used to mean calling in the external sense. In the Romance Bible translations the Spanish *vocación*, the Italian *vocazione* and *chiamamento*, which otherwise have a meaning partly corresponding to the Lutheran and Calvinistic usage to be discussed presently, are used only to translate the κλάσις of the New Testament, the call of the Gospel to eternal salvation (which in the Vulgate is *vocation*).” Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 2001), 154.

Whereas previously calling related specifically to a monastic or religious calling, Luther reacted to this special status of priests, monks, and nuns by emphasizing the spiritual calling to all occupations: “What seem to be secular works are actually the praise of God and represent an obedience which is well ‘pleasing to him.’”

In an example intended to challenge contemporary thought, Luther praises housework above pursuing the monastic life: “It has no obvious appearance of holiness, yet these very household chores are more to be valued than all the works of monks and nuns.”

Initially, calling connoted the sacred or set-apart call by God to the full-time devotion of a religious order. Luther extends this call of God to ordinary life. As Charles Taylor observes, “The denial of a special status to the monk was also an affirmation of ordinary life as more than profane, as itself hallowed and in no way second class.”

Luther still understood calling as from God for work done for God, except there is now no “set-apart” sacred work. Throughout Luther’s writing, one reads the consecration of the ordinary. Just as Luther identifies each Christian believer as part of a “holy priesthood,” all work is now understood to be “God’s work.”

As Swinton indicates, “Luther’s intention inter alia, was to move the spiritual power of vocation away from the monastery, the priest, and the minister and to relocate it within the everydayness of human life.” Luther’s understanding of vocation continued to be securely attached to the God who calls and only found its fulfillment in the life of the baptized community.

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30 Ibid. John Swinton observes that Luther viewed himself as restoring the “priesthood of all believers” from 1 Peter 2:5-9 to its rightful place. “Vocation had been taken out of the hands of the whole people of God and handed over to a spiritual elite: those who were ordained priests... Luther considered the creation of such a spiritual hierarchy an abomination.” [Swinton, Becoming Friends of Time, 118.]


32 “Holy priesthood” references 1 Peter 2:9, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

33 Swinton, Becoming Friends of Time, 119.
In the centuries that followed, however, this idea of all work being “sacred work” gradually saw its religious overtones fade into undertones. Weber traces this transition through Calvinism and other Protestant influences. Valerie L. Myers suggests that

In the quest to fill gaps in the dominant conversation, scholars have yet to address – in a serious way – the voluminous literature and layers of meaning that have been woven into the definition of calling over hundreds of years.34

We now find ourselves in a society where management scholars “have dismissed Weber’s major claims (particularly that calling is moral or sacred),” yet how “calling” is utilized across fields is by no means homogeneous.35

Following A. J. Conyers, theologian John Swinton highlights the role of the Enlightenment and Immanuel Kant in shifting terminology from the idea of a divine call to the use of reason and choice:

Within a secularizing culture that was gradually beginning to allow science and reason to usurp ideas about God, reason came to replace the idea of vocation. ... To have a vocation is to receive something from outside of yourself, to have your life profoundly shaped and directed by forces beyond your own control and comprehension.36

The question, then, is begged: Why do management scholars, health service academics and researchers into meaningful work continue to investigate a sense of “calling” or “vocation” in numerous journal articles each year? If reason truly replaced the role of vocation, it would seem natural for it to fall out of common parlance. Perhaps, however, we receive from outside of ourselves something that is inescapably ethical. Perhaps, without being willing to identify a higher moral framework or reference religious beliefs, current research attempts to capture the understanding that our lives

34 Ironically in this context, Myers goes on to observe “Instead, the accepted taken-for-granted routine is to cite Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Max Weber, as if no other philosophers or practitioners have engaged or informed the dialogue between or since these works.” In lieu of challenging this observation, I must refer readers to Part II of Myers’ work for a more in-depth analysis. Valerie L. Myers, Conversations about Calling: Advancing Management Perspectives (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 81.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., emphasis mine.
are “profoundly shaped and directed by forces beyond [our] own control and comprehension.”

Forces beyond our control that do not require religious belief may shape our lives in diverse ways. Disability, for instance, is often formative in one’s experience of the world. We all experience limits whether through genetics or circumstances, just as we each possess gifts and attributes that may “direct” us in certain ways or establish us with a propensity or aptitude for certain activities. Simply experiencing these forces is not sufficient for an ethical calling, however. The language of calling elicits not only dispositions based on determinative factors but a responsibility towards the caller or a higher telos towards which one is being shaped.37 “Calling” implies not only an is but an ought. If it is only rational choice that determines direction, however, it makes little sense to speak of “calling.” One cannot “call” oneself.

Thus, for this project genuinely ethical vocation in direct support requires reference to a higher moral obligation, responsibility, or a telos of some kind. What has yet to be determined is how this calling “transcends” one’s current reality. At a basic level, to be called is to be summoned towards something other. The transcendent, as a “higher calling,” is a spectre that continues to haunt vocation. In contemporary literature related to profession, calling may reference a sense of purpose or meaning and the actions and choices one takes in pursuing this purpose. In Christian theological circles, vocation typically references God’s calling on one’s life and one’s ability to respond or reject this sense of calling.

In light of the current project, the question we will explore in the coming chapters is what “higher calling” adequately serves as a foundation for ethical motivation and formation within Christian developmental service organizations? In Chapter Three, we will consider if professional obligations are sufficient in grounding ethical conversations for direct support professionals. Upon examining the limits of this model in rapidly changing service environments, we will go on to discern ethical resources from within the Christian tradition. The doctrine of the imago Dei transcends established

37 In the background here, of course, is Aristotelian causality.
professional codes of conduct, and its obligations call us to respond on a more fundamental relational level - an ethical responsibility that goes beyond any given profession.

Before moving on, however, we must do further work to grasp how a “higher calling” may serve unethical ends. We noted that calling relates closely to a sense of belonging – in one's own authenticity, in a place or domain, and to a social or intersubjective group. Yet finding belonging within a higher calling without having a certain “distance” from which to step back and assess one’s projects as ethical or not can be stifling at best and tragic at worst, as we will see from literature regarding developmental services and in the advancement of Luther’s sense of calling within Nazi Germany.

A dangerous ghost: The dark side of vocational commitment

Current research into the impact of vocation does not merely emphasize its beneficial effect. In *Relational and Identity Perspectives on Healthy vs Unhealthy Pursuit of Calling*, Cardador and Caza outline potential detriments:

Researchers have noted that those with callings can develop “career tunnel vision,” characterized by a resistance to feedback from others and a lack of adaptability in their work (Dobrow, 2006). Others have observed that the need to devote everything to one’s calling may involve personal sacrifice (Serow, 1994) and come at the expense of other aspects of life (Levoy, 1997). Another study found that a deep sense of calling was associated with higher levels of burnout due to high expectations for one’s own and others’ level of performance (Vinje & Mittelmark, 2007). Other researchers have demonstrated that individuals’ relationship with their employing organization can also be impacted by their orientation toward work as a calling. For instance, Bunderson and Thompson (2009) found that callings could be a “double-edged sword,” providing zookeepers with a sense of passion, but putting them at risk not only for personal sacrifice but even for exploitation by their work organizations. Other work has suggested that having a calling can lead to decreased identification with one’s employing organization because the work itself, and not the place in which one does the work, is
likely to be of ultimate importance for those with callings (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).  

The authors go on to describe the elevated rates of burnout of nurses. They point out that these situations happen primarily if the nurses are first “on fire.” In other words, nurses are more likely to burnout if they are initially passionate about the work they do and see it as a calling. Studies on compassion fatigue further validate the work of Cardador and Caza. Compassion fatigue is a type of burnout specifically related to caring professions, defined as "Fatigue, emotional distress, or apathy resulting from the constant demands of caring for others." Rather than only becoming overworked and tired, those in caring professions who experience compassion fatigue are at risk of depersonalizing the people that they care for, which can lead to disastrous consequences for people receiving support.

Robert Hickey has conducted extensive research into the nature of burnout and compassion fatigue among direct support professionals in Ontario. Overall, his findings make one thing clear: “The most striking finding in this initial review is how much people enjoy working with people with developmental disabilities.” He records that direct support professionals “truly enjoy working with people with developmental disabilities and appear deeply committed to the nature of direct support work.”

However, Hickey found that while prosocial motivation and “value-based behaviours at work” helped to buffer the support relationship from stress and emotional exhaustion, “the desire to do good was found to also be related to employees feeling more emotionally drained as they experienced the conflict between service idealism and

38 Cardador and Caza, 339.
39 Ibid.
41 Hickey 2013, i.
42 Ibid., 4.
service reality.” In imperfect systems and contexts of inadequate funding or challenging situations, a frustrated “desire to do good” actually leads to compassion fatigue.

One observes in Hickey’s work the dangers of a sincere desire to belong in one’s vocation without a corresponding sense of progress or fulfillment. This lack of a sense of achievement may be due either to the system around the worker or to not seeing growth in the people for whom they care. If a passionate attachment to one’s work may lead to compassion fatigue and burnout, what approach might sustain direct support professionals in resilient, ethical engagement with people they support?

We now briefly return to the history of viewing work as calling in the writing of Martin Luther. We will discover that particularly in the religious origins of work as a calling, frustrating and even tragic implications have arisen from over-attachment to one’s work without a corresponding ability to stand back and critique the projects to which one belongs.

**Luther and quietude**

For there is a perennial nobleness, and even sacredness, in Work. Were he never so benighted, forgetful of his high calling, there is always hope in a man that actually and earnestly works: in Idleness alone is there perpetual despair… The latest Gospel in this world is, Know thy work and do it.

~Thomas Carlyle

One of the doctrines Martin Luther is best known for espousing is sola fide, the principle of salvation by faith alone. He draws on Paul’s plea that one is not saved by good works, but by grace through faith. Ironically, in Luther’s expansion of vocation to

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43 Hickey, 18. To assess burnout levels, Hickey employed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) to measure three distinct characteristics of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment.

44 Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1843), 137. I do not think that Carlyle’s Gospel is what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he exhorted the Colossians “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.” [Colossians 3:23, NLT]

45 Ephesians 2:8
make each person’s occupation ‘sacred,’ Carlyle’s association of work with Gospel becomes possible. While salvation is not dependent on moral acts of righteousness, carrying out one’s occupation is now the work that one performs for God.

According to Max Weber, Luther espouses a strong sense of God’s Providence that defines one’s current occupation as one’s call from God. Luther reflects a kind of ‘divine destiny’ that leaves little room for flexibility in one’s vocation. When applied to any occupation, such as direct support, the implication is that the worker is essentially “trapped” within this profession in God’s will. Weber observed,

> The stronger and stronger emphasis on the providential element, even in particular events of life, led more and more to a traditionalistic interpretation based on the idea of Providence. The individual should remain once and for all in the station and calling in which God had placed him, and should restrain his worldly activity within the limits imposed by his established station in life.

Weber goes on to observe that in the development of orthodox Lutheranism, “the only ethical result was negative; worldly duties were no longer subordinated to ascetic ones; obedience to authority and the acceptance of things as they were, were preached.” This view of providence is not a weak or flexible sense of vocation such as Swinton or Scott Bader-Saye profess, “[A] way of narrating our lives in light of God’s larger purpose rather than as a way of explaining every event as caused by God.” In the development of conservative Lutheranism, one discovers an oppressive providence that confines one to the situation one finds oneself in, to the “forces beyond one’s control and comprehension.” One’s “is” becomes their “ought,” without the distance from which to call into question this situation as ethical or otherwise.

The impact of this kind of obligation to one’s place in life is best observed in situations where the call of God was conflated with the call of local authority to serve the

46 Weber, 44-45.
47 Ibid.
48 Swinton, Becoming Friends of Time, 116
49 Ibid., emphasis mine.
interests of the State. In his 1522 preface to Romans, Luther writes, “In chapter thirteen, [Paul] teaches us to respect and obey the secular authorities.” The implications of Luther’s teaching on this topic became evident early on, as only a year later he is compelled to write Temporal Authority: To What Extent it should be Obeyed. Here, Luther defines a two-Kingdom approach: the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of the world. The call of Christ’s teaching is for those who belong to the Kingdom of God. Christians should not need the sword or law, and yet find themselves also living in the Kingdom of the world and under the practical rule of state authority.

While Luther’s stated intent is to define and limit the extent to which temporal authority should be obeyed, he ends up limiting the extent to which one’s conscience and Christ’s teachings should be obeyed. Christians are to obey New Testament ethical principles in their interactions with one another, yet these may need to be set aside in the domain of secular authority as instituted by God.

Luther significantly reinforces and enhances the divine institution of authority in this letter. First, he pronounces obedience to authorities – even to the point of “the sword” – to be as sacred as other callings:

51 Luther’s primary concern is for the soul; rulers are not to command beliefs or doctrines that would interfere with God’s revelation through the Bible.
52 Remarkably, it is Luther’s initial intent to limit the extent to which temporal authority is to be obeyed! He writes “For God Almighty has driven our princes mad: they really think they can command their subjects whatever they like and do with them as they please. And their subjects are just as deluded, and believe (wrongly) that they must obey them in all things.” [Harro Höpfl, Martin Luther, and John Calvin, Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 5].
53 Luther again reflects on Romans 13, “What can be the meaning of the phrase, ‘It is God’s servant,’ except that the governing authority is by its very nature such that through it one may serve God?” [Luther, Martin. "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed." Accessed April 29, 2015. http://pages.uoregon.edu/sshoemak/323/texts/luther-1.htm]. This full work is also available in hard copy: Martin Luther, The Christian in Society II, ed. Walter I. Brandt (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962).
You should esteem the sword or governmental authority as highly as the state of marriage, or husbandry, or any other calling which God has instituted.  

Second, Luther acknowledges that rulers are often foolish and corrupt. As long as they are not dictating the beliefs of a soul and are instead ‘only’ acting as “executioners and hangmen,” however, they are God’s executioners and hangmen and as such are to be respected, feared, and accorded riches:

You must know that since the beginning of the world a wise prince is a mighty rare bird, and an upright prince ever rarer. They are generally the biggest fools or the worst scoundrels on earth; therefore, one must constantly expect the worst from them and look for little good, especially in divine matters which concern the salvation of souls. They are God’s executioners and hangmen; his divine wrath uses them to punish the wicked and to maintain outward peace. ...He desires that everyone shall copiously accord them riches, honor, and fear in abundance.

What is striking here is that we read these passages in a document explicitly designed to limit the powers of temporal authority. Despite this, Luther ordains this authority in their divine calling, limits their power chiefly as it concerns internal beliefs, and reinforces one’s duty to obey temporal authority as a duty to God. He also gives explicit permission for subjects to continue in obedience even if they are unsure whether a ruler is in the right or not. In historical hindsight, Luther’s attempt to limit the powers of the State only further reinforces one’s divine duty to serve and uphold ruling authorities.

The Nazi regime of the 20th century brought the tragic consequences of uncritical state obedience to light. Scholars including William L. Shirer and Thomas Mann argue

54 Ibid.

55 Luther does provide an exception to following a prince or authority when they are clearly in the wrong. The way in which he does this, though, is to imply that insofar as one is not certain that their ruler is in the wrong, one may continue to obey the ruler without fear of guilt: “What if a prince is in the wrong? Are his people bound to follow him then too? Answer: No, for it is not one’s duty to do wrong; we must obey God (who desires the right) rather than men [Acts 5:29]. What if the subjects do not know whether their prince is in the right or not? Answer: So long as they do not know, and cannot with all possible diligence find out, they may obey him without peril to their souls.” [Ibid.]
that Luther’s theology of vocation led to a Germany composed of “quietists” and “yes-men” who felt compelled to obey the dictates of government as if obeying God.\footnote{See for instance Thomas Mann’s “Germany and the Germans” speech where he asserts that Luther’s writing minimizes political liberty. Thomas Mann, Germany and the Germans. (An Address Delivered in the Coolidge Auditorium in the Library of Congress on the Evening of May 29, 1945.) (Pp. 20. Washington: Library of Congress, 1945). Uwe Siemon-Netto, in The Fabricated Luther: Refuting Nazi Connections and Other Modern would dispute this reading of Luther, however even if it was unintended by Luther it is difficult to read “Temporal Authority” without seeing the connection. For a summary of Uwe Siemon-Netto’s work, see Uwe Siemon-Netto, “Vietnam, Luther, and the Doctrine of Vocation, Religion & Liberty 24, no. 1 (January 2014), accessed April 29, 2015, https://acton.org/sites/acton.org/files/issue-pdf/Winter%202014.pdf.} It is overreaching to claim that Luther single-handedly convinced the German people to submit to Nazi ideology, but it is indisputable that his writing had a significant impact on the prominent Lutheran tradition in Germany at the time. Karl Barth of the Swiss Reformed movement, which was not as heavily influenced by Luther, observed the impact of this ‘two Kingdoms’ doctrine on compliance with the Nazi regime: "The German people suffer under [Luther’s] error of the relation between law and Bible, between secular and spiritual power."\footnote{Karl Barth, Eine Schweizer Stimme: 1938-1945 (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1945), 113. Perhaps the perceived compatibility of these two Kingdoms is best observed in the rallying cry, “Our religion is Christ, our politics Fatherland!” of Hans Schemm, who became Bavarian Minister of Education and Culture for the Nazi party. [Roger Griffin, Fascism, Totalitarianism and Political Religion (London: Routledge, 2005), 97].}

Hans Reinders, John Swinton, and others emphasize that providence “should not be seen as God predetermining every human movement as if life occurred on some kind of giant, transcendent chessboard.”\footnote{Swinton, Becoming Friends of Time, 116.} A strong view of God micro-managing every action and interaction leaves many people, perhaps especially people with disabilities, wondering how God can continue to be good in light of suffering and evil. What is now primarily a psychological and theological question for many was, in the time of the Third Reich, a practical and life-threatening question for people with disabilities. A culture that understood its relation to authority as divinely ordained, and its rulers as “God’s executioners and hangmen,” was ill-suited to stand up to one of the most oppressive and evil regimes in history. According to the government, physicians that were part of the Akton T4 program were providing a “mercy death” to patients “deemed
incurably sick, after most critical medical examination.”\textsuperscript{59} This program alone killed over seventy thousand people, most of whom were disabled.\textsuperscript{60}

**Stepping back: Gaining perspective**

The purpose of considering Luther and the language of vocation relating to political authority is not to advocate the abandonment of civil duties. Rather, let us consider this historical account in relation to the potential downfall of passionate pursuit of a “higher calling” particularly in relation to religious commitments. Luther’s consecration of the place where one finds oneself and divination of civil obedience, culminating in a religious quietude when confronted by injustice, factored in Hitler’s ability to rise to power and commit heinous atrocities within a religious society.

Returning to the language of belonging, experiencing a sense of belonging in one’s work and calling can be a rewarding and fulfilling experience. To only belong to one’s work, without the capacity to step back and question one’s environment, engagement, or the authority for whom one works is a dangerous position. Belonging is a double-edged sword. In the context of sustaining relationships, experiencing belonging is life-giving and frees us to flourish. Without perspective or the ability to escape oppression, though, belonging takes the form of crushing servitude. To only experience belonging without also a sense of distance from one’s work can be catastrophic. In personal vocation, lack of objectivity can be devastating personally and professionally. In culture and politics, the same lack of perspective may be disastrous on a much larger scale.

Even within non-religious contexts, an elevated sense of vocation can lead to “career tunnel vision,” to great personal sacrifice and burnout. In caring professions, a “consuming, meaningful passion” can result in depersonalization and compassion fatigue. Within Christian social service settings, direct support professionals often relate


\textsuperscript{60} Ernst Klee, *Dokumente Zur Euthanasie [Documents on Euthanasia]* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1985), 232.
calling to the divine. Here, the need to establish resilient theological “distance” from the weight of a strong view of providence is paramount.61

Translated into developmental service environments, direct support professionals find themselves deeply connected to the lives of the people they support. Within social services, we understand “professional distance” to be the response to over-entangled relationships with the people we support. However, what is a convincing theological answer to the need for this “distance?” How might resources from within the Christian tradition serve to mitigate the difficulties described in Luther’s conception of vocation? To this investigation we turn next. We will see that we are not only called to serve others and called by those whom we support to relationships of belonging but are bound by “eternal equality” with our neighbour before God. Love for neighbour calls us not only to this person with an intellectual disability but also to every other neighbour.

61The language of belonging and distance here is borrowed from Miroslav Volf, who writes, “What should be the relation of the churches to the cultures they inhabit? The answer lies, I propose, in cultivating the proper relation between distance from the culture and belonging to it.” According to Volf, positive engagement requires the ability not only to invest-in and belong-to a culture but also the ability to step back, to go beyond cultural or political entanglements. [Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 37].
CHAPTER TWO

Called by: Preference and the eternal equality of neighbour-love

In Chapter One, we began by investigating vocation to understand the initial ethical motivation of people entering caring professions, specifically serving people with intellectual disabilities. We observed that diverse religious and non-religious occupations use the language of calling. Even in its nonreligious usage, “calling” remains haunted by an etymological and theological ghost of an obligation that transcends our immediate environment and situation. Historically, the appropriation of “calling” from strictly monastic or clerical connotations occurred through the writing of the Reformers. We specifically examined the contributions of Martin Luther. Whether used religiously or otherwise, if a perspective of ‘distance’ does not help to balance the closeness of ‘belonging’ then viewing work as a calling was observed to have detrimental effects.

In the following pages, I will highlight an account of a particularly challenging learning experience in my time working direct support. This encounter will demonstrate how relational connection with people we support both fosters significant vocational experiences and holds in check our obligation to professional expectations and imperfect systems and structures. We are called to our neighbour with intellectual disabilities, but we are also called by the person whom we serve. It is in these relationships that we experience belonging that sustains our ethical obligation and commitment.

The chapter then goes on to investigate how this responsibility to one’s neighbour (those who are near) must not only extend to the person in front of us, but to every other neighbour and, in the Christian tradition, to God. I will reference Søren Kierkegaard’s concept of the eternal equality, which compels us to consider the ramifications of unquestioned obedience to the “place” of one’s vocation in light of our love for neighbours. Built on a foundation of eternal equality before God, love for one’s neighbour takes us beyond relationships of immediate inclination (preferential love) to love those who may otherwise remain beyond our sightlines.
a. Belonging and distance in direct support

**Giving an Account: Michael**

I had worked in the field of direct support for a couple of years when I became the coordinator of supports for an overweight man in his 40s who sported oversized square frame glasses that he had to keep pushing up on his nose. We’ll call him Michael. Michael had a mild intellectual disability and wrestled with depression. With our organization, Michael was offered supports in a group living environment where he had a large basement apartment-type setting to himself. For the most part, he was a joy to be around. He had friends and family outside of the group home and regularly participated in events and social gatherings, taking the bus and operating with a relatively high level of independence. He had difficulties with impulse control both concerning food and money, and his generosity was regularly taken advantage of by friends and family members. I grew to appreciate and care for Michael. I frequently accompanied him to appointments and events.

Every so often, Michael would move out. That is, he would decide that he no longer wanted to live in the group living environment or receive support. Despite having a relatively independent living arrangement and the freedom to come and go as he chose, he struggled with the idea of receiving support at all. This cycle continued for a while; Michael would move out yet return to admit that he needed the assistance that group living provided.

In our province, there were – and still are – close to twenty thousand people with intellectual disabilities in need of additional support. Due to these pressures, it was untenable for the organization to continually keep this space and support open to Michael if he chose to keep leaving services. It was determined that if he decided to go again, we would no longer be able to keep his apartment for him upon his return. Someone else would quickly move into that living space.

Michael understood this, yet several months later he left again. Knowing that he was saying ‘goodbye,’ we helped him to move out and to settle in the community. We knew that he had the potential to have success living on his own, yet we doubted that he would continue to have positive influences in his life encouraging healthy decision making and financial responsibility. Having spent a couple of years as his primary support worker, I experienced a real sense of loss in seeing him go. We advocate for self-determination, yet
it is never easy to see people we have come to care about make potentially catastrophic decisions.

Michael and I kept loosely in touch over the years that followed. Communication became difficult, though, as he frequently moved. It became challenging to know where he would be at any given time. We heard rumours that he was living on the street, either due to financial mismanagement or giving what little he had out of his generous and somewhat gullible spirit. When he had come to us, he was significantly overweight. Through encouragement and support, he had learned to make healthier decisions and to lose weight. When Michael left services, his support system was gone. He quickly regained the weight he had worked hard to lose.

As an idealistic young man, I took my sense of vocation seriously. I had become a support worker to respond to the call of God on my life to make a positive difference in the lives of people who had been marginalized by society. Through my relationship with Michael, vocation took on the reality of ‘belonging.’ I cared about Michael. He was delightfully funny and genuinely kind and unassuming. The support relationship was reciprocal in that we received mutual enjoyment from the time we spent together. I am grateful to Michael for his patience with me as I figured out how to provide support and empower him to make decisions. I'll never forget how he would lumber over in his Ottawa Senators T-shirt with a goofy grin on his face and elbow me in the side when we were kidding around.

I wish that this story had a happy ending. Perhaps I assumed that a strong sense of vocation would lead to fulfilling outcomes for all involved. The goal was to see Michael grow and learn to make decisions toward a full and rewarding life.

Unfortunately, it turned out that Michael still needed a supportive community that did not take advantage of him. Michael had many friends, but I’m not sure anyone was close enough to him to impact his life in this way. Michael went back and forth between support systems on the streets of Ottawa and friends and family. He put on weight and was unable to manage his finances successfully. We lost track of him for a while. One day I heard the devastating news that Michael died from a heart attack while living on the street.

As we gathered together to celebrate Michael’s life and remember him together, I wrestled with the knowledge that, for a period, I had been his
primary support. There are so many things I could have done differently. Maybe his death could have been prevented?

In these moments the rose-tinted perception of vocation that brought me to the field to serve and support others seemed to shatter. I found myself in systems and structures of support with limited funding, tight governmental regulations, and formats of service that didn’t allow complete flexibility to meet Michael’s needs. What if this had been different?

In my experience with Michael, my sense of calling and my relationship of “belonging” with him only made his eventual death that much more heartbreaking. Thankfully, my commitment to God and to every other person I supported had shaped my theological understanding of vocation and I was able to “step back” and gain the perspective I needed to keep on going. I realized that no matter the “what ifs,” I was not ultimately responsible for Michael’s life or decisions. Rather than crushing my sense of calling, Michael’s passing was a reminder to keep on investing wholeheartedly in the lives of the people I continued to support. In the pages that follow, we will seek to understand how a humble appreciation for the eternal equality of each person before God together with the experience of belonging – mutual care – are constituent elements of a resilient ethical call to serve one’s neighbour.

1. The call of eternity: The self before God

One reason I believe Michael’s death did not have a more devastating effect on my sense of calling had to do with religious conviction; the Christian tradition to which I belong. I experienced vocation as a call from God. It had brought me down various roads and directions in my journey. My transition from theoretical philosophy to serving people with intellectual disabilities began as an unsettling call to find an avenue to apply ethical principles. In this, the Christian existentialism of Søren Kierkegaard was a key motivator. His writing reminded me that it is not only knowing the truth “objectively” that matters but also living out a passionate and authentic relation to one’s beliefs.

When supporting Michael, it was evident that the system we were a part of was not able to provide the best support for him. Pressures for others to receive services forced a difficult choice. If my calling were to my organization, or even to social services
in Ontario, I would be too embedded in the system to stand back and critique it. If my fundamental obligation were to “the place that I was,” then I would have despaired at the constraints within which I found myself. Rather, I understood my obligation to be to God. This obligation “transcended” not only my obligation to the service system itself but even to Michael. I needed to know that I had been faithful to my calling before God, not to an organization or person.

To be a human being before God is the fundamental relation of the Christian tradition. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer indicates, the Incarnation of the divine makes this evident: "God enters into created reality, that we may be and should be human beings before God." Kierkegaard describes that this positioning “before God” places each person in an eternal relation with God. Without diverging into an investigation of the metaphysical dimensions of the afterlife, the Christian belief in eternity means that one’s relationship with God goes beyond any particular or immediate projects and concerns. Our responsibility to God takes a transcendent priority to any particular and immediate frame of reference. From this perspective within the Christian tradition, I was able to recognize that a.) I was not responsible for controlling all aspects of Michael’s life, nor the system we found ourselves a part of, and b.) I had a higher obligation to God, to Whom I was ultimately accountable. This obligation included a duty to Michael directly, yet also extended beyond Michael; it is a responsibility that extends into eternity.

The eternal relation of the self before God is what brings Kierkegaard to the topic of one’s earthly occupation. The driving question of vocation, he asserts, is “whether your occupation is great or mean, is it of such a kind that you dare think of it together with the responsibility of eternity?” He suggests a thought experiment to illustrate “eternal responsibility before God.” Imagine someone that you profoundly respected in life visits you from beyond the grave. You find yourself “before” her or him in your

64 Ibid., 197.
present occupation. Do your commitments continue to be meaningful and worthwhile as you explain them to this visitor from eternity?  

Consciousness of one’s eternal responsibility before God

...does not demand that you withdraw from life, from an honorable calling, from a happy domestic life. On the contrary, it is precisely that consciousness which will sustain and clarify and illuminate what you are to do in the relations of life. You should not withdraw and sit brooding over your eternal accounting. To do this is to deserve something further to account for. You will more and more readily find time to perform your duty and your task, while concern over your eternal responsibility will hinder you from being ‘busy’ and busily having a hand in everything possible – an activity that can best be called: time-wasting.

Kierkegaard goes on to stress that eternal responsibility must be considered not only in the end or result of one’s occupation but in the means that one uses to attain the end. “There is only one end: the genuine Good; and there is only one means: this, to be willing only to use those means which genuinely are good.” The perspective of eternity is a reminder that one’s ethical responsibility is not measured after a particular result but in each aspect of one’s occupation.

Viewing one’s occupation from the perspective of the eternal inspires a ‘lightness’ or a freeing viewpoint in engaging in temporal affairs. It is no longer the demands or crises of the moment that determine meaning and success. Neither, as Kierkegaard observes, are the results of our actions of paramount importance. We do not find in Kierkegaard a utilitarian ethic of care. The demands of eternity weigh equally on the means as they do on the ends.

Kierkegaard’s first observation regarding vocation, then, is a nuanced ‘distance’ from one’s call. Each person’s responsibility before God provides perspective from which to assess and question one’s vocational pursuits. Within this distance lies a strange tension between the weight of ethical responsibility and a ‘lightness’ regarding

65 Ibid., 198.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid., 202.
temporal affairs and immediate projects. Rather than simply resulting in detachment or eternal accounting, however, one intimately engages in lasting aspects of one’s vocation. The light of eternity illuminates those areas where traps of busyness or obsession with temporal success might otherwise catch us, distracting us from loving God and our neighbour.

At the time, I would not have used Kierkegaard’s words to describe my processing of Michael’s death. In hindsight, though, it was my conviction that I invested faithfully in each moment of my time with Michael that prepared me to process my grief at his passing and frustration over the circumstances that led to his death. That I understood my vocation in the context of the Christian tradition, as a fundamental obligation and responsibility to God in light of eternity, provided the perspective from which to recognize the constraints of the system of which I was a part without despairing that my calling was confined to or negated by these constraints.

2. The call of equality: The neighbour before God

“It is easier to love humanity as a whole than to love one’s neighbour.” ⁶⁸

~Eric Hoffer

The second aspect of a “higher calling” that helps to provide perspective/distance in direct support within the Christian tradition is built on the first. In the same way that the God-relation defines one’s vocation, so the God-relation defines every other relationship. The eternal perspective of the self before God means that every neighbour is similarly positioned before God in eternal equality. Kierkegaard wrote extensively on neighbour-love shortly after he began reading Luther.⁶⁹ In Works of Love, he observes,

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⁶⁹ Embedded in a society of state Lutheranism in Denmark, Kierkegaard’s writing protests the practice of Christianity simply being adopted because of “the place in which one finds oneself.” One is not automatically a Christian because she or he is born in a ‘Christian country.’ Rather, each one must become Christian through a leap of faith. Surrounded by Lutheran Christianity, it is surprising that Kierkegaard only reads Luther directly late in his authorship. Kierkegaard appreciates much of what he reads in this fresh reading of Luther. He argues that the Lutheranism of his time has strayed far from Luther’s writing. On the other hand, M. Jamie Ferreira observes in Love’s Grateful Striving that “Kierkegaard is definitely
“The neighbor is one who is equal... The equality of a human being before God.”⁷⁰ One human being cannot be considered of greater worth or value than another since with the eternal perspective that he and Luther claim to share, each person stands equal before God. This fundamental equality remains whether that person is a priest, a ruler, or a peasant.

Here, the distance or perspective that the call of the neighbor provides is firmly established within the divine relation. Kierkegaard links the equality of one’s neighbour to each human’s position “before God,” just as its posture before God defines the self. Indeed, acknowledging this position is the only way to attain true equality according to Kierkegaard. Without an eternal, transcendent criterion, we might judge each person in reference to his or her similarity to or difference from oneself. The neighbour is thus the category of equality for Kierkegaard, defined by each one’s relation before God:

The neighbor is every person, since on the basis of dissimilarity he is not your neighbor, nor on the basis of similarity to you in your dissimilarity from other people. He is your neighbor on the basis of equality with you before God, but unconditionally every person has this equality and has it unconditionally.⁷¹

Kierkegaard endows the category of the neighbour, a “neighbour” also crucial to Luther’s theology, a subversive challenge to any ableism, racism, sexism or other forms of bigotry or prejudice.⁷² In the neighbour’s unconditional equality before God, “There

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⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² One may wonder how Luther himself would answer, “Who is my neighbour?” [Luke 10:29] His writings in works such as “On the Jews and their lies” call into question his commitment to unconditional equality regarding his Jewish neighbours. Similarly, Luther reportedly suggested that a disabled 12-year-old boy at Dessau be suffocated. This boy was only able to eat and to excrete and Luther was said to have reasoned, “I think he’s simply a mass of flesh without a soul.” For more on Luther’s treatment of persons with disabilities, see M. Miles, ”Martin Luther and Childhood Disability in 16th Century Germany,” Journal of Religion, Disability & Health 5, no. 4 (2001): independentliving.org/docs7/miles2005b.html, Accessed April 10, 2015, doi:10.1300/j095v05n04_02. See also M. P. Mostert, ”Useless Eaters: Disability as Genocidal Marker in Nazi Germany,” The Journal of Special Education 36, no. 3 (2002): catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=7019, accessed
is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female.” In Kierkegaard’s words, it is through this relation that the neighbour “is the absolutely true expression for human equality.” Without an unwavering commitment to human equality and dignity, vocation lacks the perspective from which to question one’s place or one’s domain when ethical integrity is at stake. The basis for this commitment is also crucial, as it must supersede one’s immediate projects, duties, or other obligations – such as to one’s organization or the State.

Within Christian theology, the doctrine of the imago Dei establishes the dignity of the human person. In Part II: Encounter I will demonstrate that there is more mystery in what is presented as intellectual “recognition” of the imago than Christian theological anthropology often admits. Our root of ethical obligation does, indeed, arise from encountering one another as created in God’s image but this encounter takes place before we have the words to recognize it as such. Kierkegaard’s articulation of this relation highlights one’s eternal responsibility, or accountability, before God, and responsibility for others who are equally defined by this encounter with the divine.

3. The call of neighbour-love

“Love your neighbour as yourself.” ~ Jesus

The third aspect of a higher calling examines the relation of preferential love to neighbour-love. Invariably, we come to “prefer” people, often because we share time with them and get to know them; this is the love of preference. Where preferential love and care are intimate aspects of finding belonging in one’s call, neighbour-love provides the initial loving commitment that helps us to encounter those with whom we may not associate otherwise, as we will come to see. Preferential love pulls us toward another, whereas neighbour-love pushes us toward those whom we may not yet know. In

April 10, 2015, doi:10.1177/00224669020360030601. Following these accounts and others, one may question whether Luther shared Kierkegaard’s commitment to eternal equality with one’s neighbour.

73 Galatians 3:28.


preferential love, we are called by the human other; in neighbour-love, we are called toward our neighbours by the divine Other. Again, it is in the eternal equality of neighbour-love that we transcend our immediate projects and inclinations in order to enter into the life of another.

Henri Nouwen's Adam expresses feelings that many new support workers experience when they first step into their role. Nouwen recalls being asked to support Adam as part of the L’Arche Daybreak community near Toronto. “I was aghast! I simply didn’t think I could do this. ‘What if he falls? How do I support him as he walks? What if I hurt him and he cannot even tell me? …So many things can go wrong. Besides, I don’t know the man. I’m not a nurse.” There is a fear, a hesitation, an initial repulsion, even, to encounter Adam as a neighbour. Nouwen feels inadequate and unprepared.

The response Nouwen receives from experienced staff is reassuring. There will be plenty of time to feel comfortable. He will come to know the routine. Perhaps, most importantly, “you will get to know Adam and he will get to know you.” In the early days, Nouwen saw Adam as “someone who was very different from me.” Nouwen is constantly nervous about the role and his ability to support Adam. Why was he given this role? Why was he was supporting a man with so many needs? The answer was always the same, “So you can get to know Adam.” Adam faced significant limits in his communicative ability, and Nouwen failed to understand how he could ever truly “get to know Adam.” Nouwen constantly needs to call on others for help. His fellow workers always encouraged him, “Keep at it, Henri... You’re just getting to know him. Pretty soon you’ll be an old hand! Pretty soon you’ll love him.” Nouwen could not imagine what it would mean to love someone like Adam.

One can imagine how the story goes: “Gradually, very gradually, things started to change.” As a professor whose life had been shaped by words and books, Nouwen had

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77 Ibid.
78 Ibid., 43
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid., 46
to get to know Adam in a new way. He began to meet Adam in the time they shared together and in the silence of the rhythms of Adam’s day. Nouwen recounts, “I began to talk to Adam... It didn’t seem to matter to me anymore that he could not respond in words. We were together, growing in friendship, and I was glad to be there. Before long Adam became my much trusted listener.”

The remainder of the book explores the many things Nouwen learned about himself, his world, and his faith from the gift of his friendship with Adam. Most new support workers experience a transformation similar to Nouwen’s, yet few go on to express it in the way that Nouwen can. Nouwen followed his calling to get to know Adam, yet it was not until he faced his fears that this friendship started to grow. What at first was only a commitment to get to know Adam became a sincere appreciation for and love for Adam. Nouwen developed a preferential love for Adam because of the time they had invested together.

**Giving an account: my first day**

My first experience in providing care was with one of the men in the region who required extensive two-on-one supports, Hiroshi. This gentleman did not require total care in the way that Adam did, but needed extra support because he would express himself in behaviour that frequently put himself and support workers at risk. Two other men were hired in the house at the same time as I. Another potential worker who was significantly bigger in stature than I was intimidated by his experience with Hiroshi. I didn't see him again in my orientation and found out that he requested to work at another location, fearing that he would not be able to meet Hiroshi’s needs. This, I concluded, was not a good sign. If he did not think that he could work with Hiroshi, what was I thinking?

As days and weeks went on, however, I came to know the people that I supported in a new way. Hiroshi’s behaviour was no longer frightening. It was still often unpredictable, but with hindsight, we could usually figure out what had caused him to be upset or anxious. His needs were not so different from my own. For the people we support who are not able to communicate using words, or who have difficulty understanding and expressing their emotions,

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81 Ibid., 47
behaviour may be one of their only avenues to communicate their needs and come to terms the world around them. Where I was initially anxious first for my own safety and that I would demonstrate competence to my coworkers, challenging behaviour began to make me worried for new reasons. I grew to care for the people I supported, and beneath each of the “outbursts,” I came to appreciate a longing to be known, to be understood, and to communicate in ways that I had come to take for granted in my own relationships.

Later, as I worked in recruitment, I found that the number of applicants for the role of direct support professional who had siblings or a son or daughter with disabilities was significant. Where I initially assumed that people who were full-time caregivers in their personal lives would be looking for a ‘break’ when applying for work, this was largely not the case. Rather, having been impacted by living closely with and supporting loved ones with disabilities, family members recognized the need for support in this area and had a desire to make a difference. They also knew of the profound rewards that come from getting to know and care for people in this way. They had come to realize the truth that, “You are not only you; others belong to you too.”

It is important to note that the call to care and being called by the people we care for are two crucial aspects to viewing care as a calling. It is in moving toward others that what might initially feel like a nebulous higher calling becomes real and particular. A love for humanity “in general” becomes affection for people, specifically. It is also in moving toward others that one experiences belonging yet begins to recognize the need for distance and perspective in one’s vocation. By drawing close to other human beings, we realize our shared eternal equality before God. Working eight or more hours a day with the same people, support staff may spend just as much time with those receiving support as with their own family. We learn their joys and sorrows, and we become invested in their goals and dreams. We realize that we are not so different, after all. We come to know and love others as Nouwen came to know and love Adam.

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82 Ibid.
The beauty and danger of preferential care

There is profound significance in “preferential love.” It is love that has come to know and value another. We see something in the other that we appreciate, that we care for, that we prefer. Friendship is an evident example of this, frequently arising out of shared interests, hobbies, or activities. Family love also falls into this category, for we share experiences, DNA, and heritage with them. We are like them. Love for one’s partner generally falls into this category as well. Kierkegaard writes, “Erotic love is undeniably life’s most beautiful happiness and friendship the greatest temporal good!”

These are highly to be valued, and not to be taken for granted. There is beauty in these moments of human connection with people for whom we have come to care.

The challenge lies in the human inability or lack of desire to know everyone in this way. Each of us carries a natural inclination to love people who are similar to us yet struggle to develop “preferential love” with those who are dissimilar. Indeed, there are many people whom we will not get to know, even to the degree that we discover similarities might exist. In this way, each form of preferential love is good temporally but fails to meet the demand of an eternal good for Kierkegaard. Note how erotic love is life’s most beautiful happiness, and friendship is the greatest temporal good. We recall here Kierkegaard’s emphasis on one’s “eternal responsibility” before God. The question remains whether loving someone because we prefer them sufficiently meets this ethical demand.

According to Kierkegaard, it is the love of neighbour that holds in tension preferential love, whether that be preferential love of a person, a ‘clan,’ or the place where one belongs. “Love for the neighbor is... the eternal equality in loving, but the eternal equality is the opposite of preference.” Preferential love, either because one is “bound” in familial love or has grown to love another as Nouwen came to know Adam, is not discouraged. One must be aware of the dark side of preferential love, however, which is “clannishness.” Kierkegaard writes,

84 Ibid., 58.
All clannishness is divisive. It is divisive when clannishness shuts out the common citizen, and when it shuts out the nobleborn, and when it shuts out the civil servant. It is divisive when it shuts out the king, and when it shuts out the beggar, and when it shuts out the wiseman, and when it shuts out the simple soul. For all clannishness is the enemy of universal humanity.

In our initial exploration of the transcendent aspects of one’s calling, those aspects that permit vocational perspective, we highlighted the category of the neighbour as the ‘eternal equality’ of encountering every other as before God. When central to a passionate sense of calling, it allows caregivers to acknowledge that every other is worthy of love. For direct support professionals who may become frustrated in their current obligations, the call of neighbour-love can provide a necessary corrective. Here, in the example of Nouwen and Adam, neighbour-love is what draws us to others even when similarities are not initially evident. For Nouwen, this commitment opened him to draw close to Adam and discover the beauty from which then preferential love developed. For others, it may mean carrying on in dedicated support even when preferential love is an ever-elusive affection. Just as in relation to people without disabilities, there will always be people whom we do not “prefer.” Neighbour-love releases the pressure of feeling as though everyone we support needs to be an “Adam.” It describes the commitment we have toward one another as people before God, a determination that counteracts tendencies to ‘clannishness.’

**Toward true care**

“[T]rue care is mutual care. If their only reward had been the small salary, their care would soon have become little more than human maintenance.”

— Henri Nouwen

As it relates to calling and vocation, preferential love for people supported – whether evident from first meeting or hard-won as it was for Henri Nouwen or myself – is a beautiful reality of finding *belonging* in direct support work. Nouwen’s quote above

85 Kierkegaard, Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing, 206.

86 Nouwen, Adam: God’s Beloved, 58.
emphasizes that reciprocity is a sustaining aspect of meaningful care provision. When there is no initial respect for people receiving care, or when depersonalization begins to occur because of compassion fatigue, care provision becomes nothing more than “human maintenance.” As Janie Butts and Karen Rich describe, “health care professionals must acknowledge that they have something to learn from disabled people, that giving and receiving flows in both directions in flourishing communities.”

Kierkegaard’s emphasis on neighbour-love does not depend on, and will not always develop into, preferential love. However, the initial ethical demand of neighbour-love should always lead to an increased appreciation for the dignity of the person whom we shall love. Even where friendship does not develop, eternal equality before God acknowledges that each person has also been endowed with gifts and abilities.

Perhaps the most important consideration for social service organizations is to recruit qualified staff who view their work as more than the maintenance of human bodies. There must be a sense of ethical commitment in direct support professionals to care about the people who receive support and who find themselves in vulnerable circumstances. The direct support professional must not only practice this ethical commitment and care with people toward whom the direct support professional has a sense of attachment in the form of preferential love. There will be people, there will be days, and there will be periods of time during which the support worker feels more or less preference towards people they serve. As established in the first chapter, even feeling a high degree of preferential love towards those receiving care, without a sense of perspective and ethical distance, can quickly lead to burnout and, in turn, depersonalization.

b. Distance in professional services

One of the ways the research previously explored on vocation describes ‘perspective’ or distance is as flexibility. Cardador and Caza write that

flexibility is characterized by the degree to which people are willing to engage in deliberate and informed comparison of one’s present work-identity commitments with other possibilities, and/or by the degree of readiness to initiate change or to demonstrate plasticity in response to life events and circumstances. 88

This flexibility, then, “allows individuals to adapt to or bounce back from setbacks and challenges, and even to engage the environment more proactively” and “allows individuals to account for the needs of others and use adaptive strategies to respond to workplace challenges and adversity.” 89 Flexibility means that one is not too closely to a single set of ideas, or overly invested in one way of doing things. Flexibility requires a sense of ‘distance’ from the immediacy of one’s work.

In the words of one nurse,

People that have a calling just are willing to take what the assignment brings. You know, you’re willing to adjust. You’re willing to go the ways it needs to be. And you don’t get all uptight over that stuff. [Those that can't adjust] are the people that, you know, who get the ulcers, the people that are all up in a wad about stuff every day. 90

What is interesting to observe here is that while the research recognizes the behaviours that help mitigate compassion fatigue, burnout, and depersonalization in caregiving contexts, it does not go so far as to articulate the motivation or viewpoint from which these behaviours are most likely to arise. Without addressing the motivational framework for one’s vocation or having a particular tradition from which to approach the moral formation of caregivers, it is difficult if not impossible to describe how caregivers might arrive at a well-balanced outlook on vocation. As this nurse has done, however, it is possible to explain what a healthy sense of calling looks like on a day-to-day basis. Flexibility is the behaviour where support workers are “willing to adjust” rather than being “all up in a wad about stuff every day.”

88 Cardador and Caza, 345.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid., 346.
In Kierkegaard’s writing, neighbour love and preferential love are postures toward one another deeply rooted in Christ’s commands and human nature, respectively. As will be explored later, the Christian tradition to which Kierkegaard belonged formed these dispositions. This is the same Christian tradition within which I found myself when I heard that Michael had died. Here, I found the resources with which to continue caring for others, even while mourning Michael’s death. I was able to understand that I could not control the systems I found myself a part of, nor was this my responsibility. My calling was a higher or transcendent call, a responsibility before God to care for my neighbours. It was a blessing to be near to Michael for a period of time. His life influenced my own, and I pray that my care had a positive impact on his life as well. Rather than experiencing devastation at his passing, my Christian faith and fundamental responsibility to God equipped me to give thanks for the time that we had together and resolve to continue to pour my efforts into supporting those who were now near. Had I not found myself within this tradition, I doubt that I would have had the resilience to continue in the way that I did.

Illustrated by my accounts of supporting people with intellectual disabilities and framed by discussions ranging from secular accounts of vocation to Martin Luther and Søren Kierkegaard, the first two chapters have laid the groundwork for a theologically informed understanding of “calling.” Direct support involves a “call to” serve people with intellectual disabilities together with being “called by” the people we serve. In order to be an ethical calling, there must be a “higher” ideal, perspective, or responsibility to which one is called, beyond one’s own immediate inclination. To provide resilient care, both a sense of belonging and appropriate distance are necessary. Within the Christian tradition, Søren Kierkegaard points to the call of eternity, the call of equality, and the call of neighbour-love as perspectives from which to draw this critical distance.

In the following chapter, we will turn our attention to the language of the “professional” which, I will argue, serves as the primary framework from which current caregiving practices derive their supposed ethical weight. Etymologically, “profession” has followed a similar trajectory as “vocation.” Severed from any identified tradition, however, professionalism as an ideology captures certain desired behaviours without
having recourse to a story or account of moral formation. Cardador and Caza reference the need to have flexibility without pointing to any clear path whereby to form this flexibility. Similarly, the language of professionalism attempts to establish core competency behaviour without providing a framework of motivation formation toward these competencies.

Following this examination on the limits of professionalism, in Part II we will turn to the Christian tradition to understand how faith-based agencies might come to appreciate within our theological heritage a fuller framework of moral motivation and formation than professional ethics provides. More specifically, we will observe within Christian calling the rich theological tradition of encountering other human beings as created in the imago Dei. In doing so, we will ask:

1. What does flourishing look like for people with and without intellectual disabilities within the Christian tradition? What is the theological anthropology that guides the moral motivation and formation of direct support?
2. What are the barriers to encountering people with intellectual disabilities as complex moral agents created in God’s image?

Finally, in Part III:

3. Which virtues are called for within a Christian ministry of care (in contrast with the language of core competencies) in light of Christian theological anthropology?
CHAPTER THREE
The Limit of Professionalism

Chapter One began with an autobiographical account of the call of care to practical support. Chapter Two started with an exploration of how calling – shaped by a profound sense of belonging with the perspective of distance – affected my ability to care and to sustain that care through trying events. While these examples both reflected on my perception of work as a calling, a significant shift occurs between the first sketch and the second. In the first, I had yet to form an attachment to the people to whom I felt called. Neighbour-love compelled me to get to know those whom I served; similar to Henri Nouwen’s calling to get to know Adam. Once I had met Michael, though, my vocation took on a different form. My purpose was no longer abstract, now fulfilled in the context of people with unique stories, experiences, expectations, and desires. What had begun as an ethical call to others was reinforced by, and was held in tension with, the call by Michael and others with whom I had spent time. I now knew what it meant to prefer people whom I previously may have had little reason to get to know. I had come to know and be known by people receiving care, and my vocation would no longer be one of detached ethical motivation. I had found belonging in caregiving, and “those people” whom I initially felt called to serve now had faces and names. Each person I supported had a unique sense of humour and gifts to contribute to my life and the communities to which they belonged. As we will see, however, certain tensions and limits arise in these relational dynamics in the context of professionalism.

a. From vocation to profession

I stressed in the previous chapter, “Perhaps the most important consideration for social service organizations is to recruit qualified staff who view their work as more than the maintenance of human bodies.” Part of the challenge is that organizations are ill equipped to provide employees with a deep sense of ethical motivation from which to engage with the people they support in their work. Developmental service organizations can articulate the behaviours they expect of employees without giving support staff a framework out of which to arrive at those behaviours, beyond the desire to keep and progress in one’s job. The ethical framework that is provided is superficially
“immanent.”91 Higher principles such as motivation towards flourishing, a spiritual calling, or moral imperatives are often lacking due to the absence of defined anthropology. We can discover clues to how agencies have arrived at this place in the language of “profession.”

In many ways, the connotation of “profession” traveled a similar path as that of vocation. Just as vocation began as a religious concept to describe the work of full-time service of God, so “profession” originally described the work of clergy and expanded to describe any occupation with a governing body and a set of standards. In the 12th century, “profession” was taken to mean "vows taken upon entering a religious order," from Old French profession, from Latin professionem meaning "public declaration." Modern usage of “profess” carries this sense with it. From the mid 14th century, “profession” referred to "any solemn declaration" and then "occupation one professes to be skilled in" from early 15th century. Eventually, it came to describe a "body of persons engaged in some occupation" from 1610.92

There are subtle transitions that took place between clergy and the establishment of other professions, such as lawyers.

The closest approach to a learned legal profession during the early Middle Ages lay in the ranks of the clergy... Churchmen were deeply involved in every aspect of the legal and institutional structures of the early Middle Ages... When Roman administrative structures began to crumble in the sixth century, clergymen moved in to fill the breach.93

As clergy were among the first lawyers, the adoption of professional commitments by specialized lawyers with no clerical obligations was a natural development. In time, physicians also became professionals according to such “professions” as the Hippocratic Oath. These transitions led to Irving Zola’s observation

91 Thinking here of Charles Taylor’s immanent frame as referenced in Chapter One.
that the red cloaks of bishops gave way to the black cloaks of lawyers and then to the white cloaks of doctors.94

While the impact of the religious roots of “vocation” has become ambiguous or controlled—formerly in most current studies, the religious or spiritual connotation of “profession” has all but vanished. The original ‘profession’ was to God and one’s Christian brothers and sisters in making religious vows. This has become a generic profession to the public or clients that one has the skills and competencies associated with one’s claimed occupation. A governing body then confirms or invalidates one’s profession through a piece of paper, references, or compliance with a set of standards.

As is the case in much of Western moral language, the grammar of “call” and “profess” carry a lineage deeply indebted to Christian ethical thought. Where these terms initially carried the weight of a rich tradition of thought and practice, they have become disconnected from the contexts that gave them meaning. Yet, to describe oneself as a “direct support professional” is precisely the way in which one makes an ethical claim about one’s responsibilities to people receiving support. To be a professional is to commit to a specific set of competencies that one will display in every situation, with every person the professional supports. As will be demonstrated, the process of professionalization is how the sector attempts to provide distance or a perspective of ethical objectivity to the belonging experienced in care for people supported. It is a way of articulating a commitment to following ethical standards with each person, regardless of the professional’s personal relationship with that person.

Chapter Two referenced the need, articulated from within the Christian tradition, for an appreciation for eternal equality with one’s neighbour, or a consciousness of one’s actions in light of eternity, as a basis for finding perspective in one’s calling. This eternal equality of neighbour-love is rooted in the Christian account of moral formation with a particular understanding of what it means to flourish as a human endowed with an eternal destiny.

Without recourse to articulating underlying beliefs, professionalism expects direct support professionals to display, consistently, certain behaviours in pursuit of immediate ends or particular ends. Behaviour in this context has no defined precedent or articulated higher *telos* of a full picture of human flourishing. It lacks an understanding of the tradition within which to establish its merit. The resultant message is that the intention or motivation of employees is secondary and perhaps even superfluous to the behaviours they demonstrate. Similarly, the *good* toward which professionals work either remains undefined or merely reflects current trends in social service theory. The assumption is that agencies are left to determine what “human flourishing” looks like for the people that they support, yet the identified competencies are undoubtedly formed within a specific conception of who people with intellectual disabilities are and the end towards which agencies strive. In times of meagre funding and competition for service dollars, people with disabilities are inadvertently reduced to little more than consumers or funders of the current system of service provision.

We will turn to Alasdair MacIntyre to observe how the language of *professional*, denying its teleological roots and unhinged from its obligation to ethical motivation, has adopted philosophical and ethical presuppositions from the field of bureaucratic management. Neglecting to address intention and motivation is not a value-neutral approach. Values continue to be formed within a tradition of which agencies may be entirely unaware – an emphasis on *effectiveness* that directly undermines a “higher call” of ethical responsibility that arises in the Christian faith-based tradition.

One may question whether cultivating moral motivation and formation is even of interest to organizations providing support. If employees demonstrate the necessary behaviours, does it matter how they arrive there? The difficulty, as will be shown, lies in the ongoing expectation that direct support professionals act as moral agents *even when* the answers and behaviours are not clear or defined. Precisely in times of transformation and change, the ability to prioritize, question, and respond to moral decisions are crucial elements of ethical support provision. To expect this without robust anthropology, which in Christian service organizations is *theological* anthropology, is to set care providers up for failure or at least for nothing more than unquestioned compliance to a semi-arbitrary set of competencies.
b. Professionalism: Perspective without purpose

“I fell in love with social work, and that was my undoing as a poet.”

~ Carl Rakosi

As with other social services organizations, those working with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Ontario, Canada are caught between two realities. One is a commitment to a poetic ideal of completely person-centred supports provided by an unlimited employee base of qualified professionals. This is nothing more than a romantic fiction given the systemic and financial constraints of the field of developmental services. The other realities are of a practical nature: limited funding and recruitment base, and the pressure of retention of competent employees.95 To respond genuinely to existing needs means to abandon a certain poetic ideal of providing supports. As the provincial government ministry’s HR Strategy for Developmental Services explains,

Finding people with the skills and enthusiasm to work in developmental services is getting harder. High turnover and an aging workforce mean that we have to change how we promote and grow this field.96

The Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) brought together an Expert Panel on Training in 2007. This panel made several recommendations to address the current and future human resource challenges facing the developmental services sector. Out of this assessment, the Human Resources Strategy for Developmental Services was established to help the sector “maintain a qualified workforce that will grow with the system.”97 Another recommendation was that core competencies be


97 ibid.
developed for seven key positions and become the basis for training, hiring and career progression within the sector.98

The development of these core competencies began with the intent that the position of direct support professional become a “career of choice” in Ontario, with the belief that increased professionalization would help establish consistency and recognition of these positions.99 The Hay Group, a global management consulting firm, was called upon to develop the core competencies.100 The Hay Group conducted 17 focus groups with 188 people to assess the competencies (i.e., characteristics, traits, motives) that distinguish top performers from average performers.101 In their words, “Competencies enable top performers to demonstrate critical behaviours: more often, in more situations, and with better results.”102

The Hay Group confirmed the following seven core competencies for direct support professionals:

1. Advocating for others
2. Collaboration
3. Creative Problem Solving and Decision-Making
4. Fostering Independence in Others
5. Initiative
6. Interpersonal Relations and Respect
7. Resilience

When the competencies were developed, I was working as a recruitment manager with the largest developmental services organization in Ontario. As such, I participated in a consultancy group. Rather than focusing primarily on skills and technical

99 Ibid.
101 “Core Competencies Implementation.”
knowledge, the core competencies gave recruiters a framework from which to assess the behavioural aspects of direct support work. Core competencies referenced how a person approached their work related to elements such as social role, self-image, traits, and motives instead of merely acknowledging what a person needed to possess in skills and knowledge.\textsuperscript{103}

The core competencies project has provided consistent language from which to describe the role of direct support professionals across organizations. In my current position, I introduce direct support employees to the concept of core competencies as an aspect of organizational culture. In general, employees feel that the Hay Group did well in assessing core competencies. Their work has contributed to increased recognition for the role of direct support professional and has mainly achieved the goal of identifying critical behaviours that top performers demonstrate \textit{more often, in more situations, and with better results.}

While the Hay group established these competencies to identify top performers in the field, they also serve the purposes of professionalization by identifying a behavioural or ethical code for direct support professionals to follow. Elliot Freidson notes the rise of these codes in professionalized services: “Part of the purpose of such codes,” he writes, “is without doubt to persuade the public that the formulation of ethical standards justifies trust.”\textsuperscript{104} In developmental services, knowing that direct support professionals follow the behavioural principles laid out in core competencies instills confidence in the services they provide and in the organizations that hire them. They are one way of “professing” to people and families receiving services that there will be no preferential treatment – each person can expect to receive the same standard of care, as based on defined behaviours.

We cannot overstate the importance of establishing trust with families and individuals who engage developmental services. Along with the practical reality of a transient workforce, developmental services face an ever-increasing challenge to provide

\textsuperscript{103}“Core Competencies Implementation.”

innovative, individualized services that are compatible with flexible models of living and working in communities. MCSS has made it a key priority to “transform developmental services so individuals and families can benefit from greater choice and flexibility in services and be active members of an inclusive society.”¹⁰⁵ In this rapidly changing environment, agencies need to adapt and change. These changes entail risk – risk that new services do not receive adequate funding or interest, risk that older models of services are not provided in the same way anymore, and risk that clients, donors and partners no longer see themselves as aligned with the interests of the organization. Through this, service providers must know that they can depend on DSPs to flexibly make day-to-day decisions that align with organizational values and ethics. The question then becomes, “Which models of ethical behaviour best equip organizations to respond appropriately in times of change?”

Not denying the benefits of core competencies, as with any established list of behavioural expectations, core competencies may become outdated, irrelevant, or even counterproductive if not reviewed or adapted as times change. Specifically, while competencies indicate what were known to be the most effective behaviours in direct support when they were established, they lack the underlying motivational and moral formation necessary to fully equip the direct support professional and their organization to respond in times of service transformation.

1. From descriptive to prescriptive: the limits of a process

The Hay Group is a company devoted to “management consulting” with no direct ties to developmental services. They were commissioned to conduct extensive focus groups and interviews to assess key indicators of competencies of “outstanding performers” in the developmental services field. In doing so, the Hay Group provided their best estimation of a true-to-life snapshot of effective direct support – as defined by service providers and receivers – in 2009. I do not intend to argue that they failed to do so. For this argument, one may even assume that the Hay Group accomplished what

they had been commissioned to assess. From this perspective, it was a valid process. Core competencies are generally positive behaviours and direct support professionals exhibiting them would be welcome in any supportive setting as defined in the context within which they were evaluated. Based on this process, the descriptive competencies then became the prescriptive basis for assessing incoming direct support professionals to service agencies. Further, core competencies now form the basis of ongoing performance evaluations for direct support professionals.

Two potential areas of inquiry arise within these accepted assumptions. First: the way in which the Hay Group process relied upon an evaluation of effectiveness to determine competencies. Second: the impact of the reality that this effectiveness is particularly situated in a time, place, and specific history. Put differently, the process itself occurred within the context of a precise narrative – a particular story or account – at a certain point in the transformation of developmental services.

In the following pages, I will explore this narrative:

1. I draw on Alasdair MacIntyre’s observations on the ethics of managerial effectiveness to show that just because something is effective does not necessarily make it right. There must be an understanding of what is good for the person with an intellectual disability to know if the ends towards which core competencies are effective are “good.” In this sense, effectiveness is a moral fiction.

2. As a set of guidelines established in a particular time and place, core competencies cannot provide, on their own, the ethical formation required for direct support professionals to adapt to an era of change in developmental services. Again, knowing the good towards which one is working is the start of ethical formation that will equip the direct support professional to respond flexibly to new situations as services are transformed.

To conclude, I compare the tension of Fostering Independence in Others with fostering belonging as an example of how competencies must continue to be related to the higher end or telos of faith-based organizations and developmental services in general.
2. Effectiveness as a moral fiction

In the introduction to the Core Competencies Dictionary, the methodology of the Hay Group sets out to determine the “characteristics that distinguish the top performers in a particular job from average performers.”\(^\text{106}\) The concept of effectiveness is implicit in the identification of performance. The first assumption of the Hay Group methodology is, “In every job, some people perform more effectively than others.”\(^\text{107}\)

It is perhaps not surprising that the Hay Group, a “global management consulting firm” relies upon what MacIntyre calls one of the “central moral fictions of the age,”

[T]he peculiarly managerial fiction embodied in the claim to possess systematic effectiveness in controlling certain aspects of social reality. And this thesis may at first sight seem surprising for two quite different kinds of reason: we are not accustomed to doubt the effectiveness of managers in achieving what they set out to achieve and we are equally unaccustomed to think of effectiveness as a distinctively moral concept.\(^\text{108}\)

Some nuances to MacIntyre’s thought are not necessary to explore here. Rather, let us examine MacIntyre’s fundamental objection to bureaucratic management: “The manager treats ends as given, as outside his scope; his concern is with technique, with effectiveness in transforming raw materials into final products, unskilled labor into skilled labor, investment into profits.”\(^\text{109}\) Managers’ perceived effectiveness is understood as a good or excellence unto itself, yet this effectiveness is understood without a critique of the end, telos, or goal toward which they direct their work. More than this, implicit to managerial effectiveness is the expectation that managers will not fundamentally challenge or question the ends toward which they direct their efforts. Effectiveness is portrayed as a form of excellence while simultaneously embodying a-morality. Managers are assessed based on their ability to produce results toward the end that has been passed down to them, rather than being treated as moral agents. In

\(^{106}\) “Core Competencies Dictionary,” 1.
\(^{107}\) Ibid.
\(^{108}\) MacIntyre, After Virtue, 88.
\(^{109}\) Ibid., 35.
this way, effectiveness takes on the morality of whatever end it happens to be directed toward. In *Excellence V. Effectiveness: Macintyre’s Critique of Business*, Charles Horvath explains that, in MacIntyre’s view, “managers have substituted external measures of ‘winning’ or ‘effectiveness’ for any internal concept of good.”

Let us re-examine the process of developing core competencies in this light. The Hay Group, as global managerial consultants, came alongside developmental services in Ontario to identify behaviours of top performers – effective workers. A distinct entity from the organizations it serves, the Hay Group does not evaluate the ends toward which these organizations direct themselves. Instead, the Hay Group aims to incorporate those ends as found within the process accurately. When the Hay Group arrives at a set of core competencies, developmental service organizations then adopt these competencies. The managerial criteria of *effectiveness* towards objectively discovered ends has subtly embedded itself, through this process, into the process of hiring direct support professionals.

### 3. Effective competencies vs. ethical formation

If the ends of developmental services in 2009 continue to be *good* for the person with intellectual disabilities and for society in the years/decades that follow, then arguably effectiveness continues to be directed toward an ethical end. For the purposes of this inquiry, we need not question whether the ends of the sector in 2009 were good for the person with intellectual disabilities in 2009. One may also go so far as to assume that the Hay Group accomplished what they set out to do. The complicating factor is the era of change the sector is experiencing, expressed by MCSS’ mandate to “Transform Developmental Services.”

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As services adapt and change and direct support professionals are expected to respond appropriately and ethically in dramatically shifting situations, organizations must have the capacity to assess and critique the continued applicability of core competencies and other behavioural standards toward organizational ends. Agencies providing services that are now different from when core competencies were developed, or which are working towards ends that are not identical to those of social services in 2009, must either continuously refine and update behavioural expectations or equip their direct support professionals to be reflective moral agents.

To maintain and monitor ever-adapting sets of behavioural expectations is onerous and untenable. The alternative is to be clear on the ends toward which the organization is committed. These ends form the basis for empowering direct support professionals to become reflective moral agents. Rather than assuming the moral fiction of effectiveness, direct support professionals need to be equipped to question and critique current practices and actions in order to best support the flourishing of the person with intellectual disabilities. Depending on services an organization provides and their vision, we must recognize that the person that qualifies as a “top performer” in 2009 may or may not be the best person to hire in 2018, or at another point in the future. Similarly, a “top performer” as defined by one service organization may fail to work towards the established goals or conception of human flourishing espoused by another agency. When various faith-based perspectives are at the heart of service provision, these differences become especially pronounced.

While the Hay Group was selected for assessment purposes as an external third party, unaware of the nuances of the history of social services, we cannot neglect that history as we consider accounts of goods for people with intellectual disability. Disability studies and developmental services as a sector have understood “the goods” internal to its practice in diverse ways over the past decades. Various traditions will also have differing perspectives, and each social service agency will have its own account of what it is working toward, as embedded in its history and organizational culture.

- Not long ago, the “account” of ethical service provision argued that people with intellectual disabilities are best cared for outside of the public eye, in a place where they can all be “looked after” together.
• As problematic aspects of institutions came to the fore, another account argued that group home settings were the best place to care for people with intellectual disabilities, places where they can engage with the community and see their family and friends in an environment of constant support.
• As time went on, the limiting nature of providing too much care became the emphasis. Agencies recognized that each person requires different forms of support and that group homes not the ideal environment for everyone.
• In times of increasingly individualized supports and little to no increase in government funding, “human flourishing,” especially as a nebulous concept to begin with, becomes subservient to economic realities. It becomes difficult to separate the aims of maximizing cost/benefit ratios from an emphasis on “independence” as a human good.

More recent accounts of flourishing assert that people with intellectual disabilities need maximum self-determination, an abundance of choices and the ability to make their own decisions in as-close-to-independent an environment as possible: one with problematic neoliberal capitalistic influences and power dynamics. In many ways, this is the account of the good in which the core competencies arose. As such, the defined behavioural expectations of employees meet a real need for Fostering Independence in Others, for example. In the Core Competency Dictionary, there is a strong emphasis on “enabling others to be self-sufficient,” in reference both to staff and to people supported.

In Dependent Rational Animals, MacIntyre examines the different ways one can describe what is “good.” Daniel O. Dahlstrom breaks this down into four categories.

• The first is pleasurable goods (when something is good because it is pleasurable, i.e., because it satisfies felt bodily wants or felt wants generally);
• The second are instrumental goods, as MacIntyre describes good “only as a means.”\textsuperscript{112} Specific skills or opportunities are good because they help advance another good.

• The third type of good is found within a practice. The goods of the practice dictate whether the agent is good at their role. “Whether there are (genuine goods) and what they are is characteristically and generally something to be learned only by being initiated into this or that particular activity.”\textsuperscript{113} MacIntyre gives the examples of being a member of a fishing crew, or as a mother, or as a chess or soccer player.

• Finally, individual and communal human goods (when something is good because it is something that an individual person \textit{qua human being} or society \textit{qua human} should make a place for in its life). Individuals, while part of a particular society, need to determine the role that particular goods will play in their own lives. Human societies also determine particular goods, “[F]or every society there is the question of whether it is good for that society that the goods of this or that particular practice should have this or that place in its common life.”\textsuperscript{114}

One may begin to see how the goods of the practice of direct support quickly become complicated. It is one thing to determine what the goods of the profession are in relation to society. Over time, much of modern Western society has come to recognize the value of involving and including people with disabilities in communities, for example. This recognition has shaped the goods internal to the practice of direct support. Each developmental services organization, however, has its own history and organizational culture that further determines the priority it places on particular goods. Faith-based organizations often arise out of a long tradition of what is “good” that to greater or lesser degree influences the goods internal to their practice. Also, one of the

\textsuperscript{112} Alasdair C. MacIntyre, \textit{Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues} (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1999), 65.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
more recently acknowledged fundamental goods of the practice is that each person supported is expected to determine the role that particular good will play in her life and support.¹¹⁵

Depending on the tradition organizations belong to, they will draw in varying extents from the modern neo-liberal capitalist mindset, or from the medical model of disability, or from varying religious or cultural traditions. Priorities will vary significantly especially as methods of support become more diverse and innovative. There will be times when certain “accounts” of the good are incommensurable with others in the same field, or with those that came before them. It is in wrestling with these incommensurable accounts, embedded within specific times, places, and histories, that developmental service organizations will be best able to give an account of how competencies and particular behaviours can best serve the ends towards which they work. In turn, direct support professionals will be equipped as moral agents to make decisions in line with the ends defined by their agency. Organizations must assess, on an ongoing basis, how their identified behavioural expectations continue to meet the objectives of the practice or the organization. More importantly, agencies must equip direct support professionals with a robust and well-articulated understanding of what flourishing looks like for people with intellectual disabilities from within their tradition, and recruit employees that are passionate about this vision.

Many developmental service agencies, focused on the day-to-day concerns of running an organization in times of transition and the practical challenges identified previously, have not given significant thought to the goods towards which they work. These organizations have no defined framework or narrative from which direct support professionals might form moral intentionality. Without understanding the goods inherent to their particular practice, direct support professionals are unable to situate their behaviour within a higher purpose or vision. They cannot act as moral agents to determine which behaviours might need to take precedence in any given situation. Neither do they have a consistent “overall picture” or the perspective from which to

stand back and critique past ways of providing service without a clear anthropological vision for what constitutes the good for people with intellectual disabilities. MacIntyre writes, “We cannot... characterize behavior independently of intentions, and we cannot characterize intentions independently of the settings which make those intentions intelligible both to agents themselves and to others.” 116 Without being aware of the intentions and the settings behind core competencies, agencies may find at any given time that individual competencies detract from, rather than work toward, their organizational goals.

### 4. Fostering independence and loneliness

Having worked in social services for over twelve years, it has been encouraging to see the way in which people supported by agencies have been empowered to make their own choices and to receive services that cater to their own goals and dreams rather than those of the organization that serves them. We have by no means “arrived.” There is still work to be done toward Fostering Independence in Others. Independence as a primary focus, as one of the key ambitions of developmental services in 2009, helps to reduce the risk of coercion and abuses of power by service agencies. I am not convinced, however, that Fostering Independence in Others is as “effective” toward helping people with developmental disabilities form real and meaningful friendships. The available evidence suggests that up to half of persons with intellectual disability are chronically lonely, compared with around 15–30% of people in the general population. 117 The authors of Social Inclusion and Community Participation of Individuals with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities make a similar point. They suggest that “society has done a better job of increasing the community presence of people with an ID [intellectual disability] than in facilitating their ‘living’ within the community.” They go on to observe that “research has found that people with IDD [intellectual or

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116 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 240.

developmental disabilities] have few friends and mostly they name other disability service users, staff, and family members as their friends.”

To their credit, developmental service organizations desire for people to go beyond being ‘present’ in the society to build real and meaningful friendships in the community. What they often miss, however, is intentional dialogue around how identified competencies might lead to or detract from this need.

Within organizations that recognize the importance of coming alongside people with developmental disabilities as they grow in friendships and relationships, core competencies can still serve as a valuable summary of crucial behaviour traits expected of employees. We should not assume, however, that what the Hay Group assessed to be effective in 2009 would continue to be effective and ethical in diverse scenarios in 2018. We should also not assume that effectiveness would lead, on its own, to the flourishing of people with intellectual disabilities or ethical results. Instead, organizations must identify from their perspective the end towards which they work, the good as it relates to people with intellectual disabilities and society as a whole. With these primary motivations recognized, direct support professionals can be equipped as moral agents to make decisions and act ethically in response to the diverse and novel situations they encounter on a daily basis.

c. From competencies to virtues

Christian faith-based organizations serving people who experience disability find themselves in a particular tradition with an account of goods for people with intellectual disabilities that is not always going to align with their secular contemporaries. As MacIntyre writes, “[A]ll morality is always to some degree tied to the socially local and particular.” Where these organizations claim certain distinctive elements tied to their


119 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 147.
faith roots, it is entirely possible that in uncritically adopting competencies as described previously, they will merely be re-aligning to the dominant cultural narrative and reinforcing presuppositions that run counter to their stated beliefs.

Without providing a firm grounding in organizational history and priorities, expecting employees to make creative decisions and respond quickly in changing situations is to set them, and the organization, up for failure. To recount one’s history is also an act of humility. Honest history-telling acknowledges that any person, any organization, belongs to a particular time and place, and this time and place shape the way in which they perceive the world. This perception, in turn, does not claim an objective view but seeks particular ‘goods’ in the world based upon its experience of the world. For MacIntyre, as for Aristotle, each tradition aims at some good embedded in the practices of the organization. “Every activity, every enquiry, every practice aims at some good; for by ‘the good’ we mean that at which human beings characteristically aim.”

The Chief Executive Officer of the organization for which I work once told a story about a time when she was on vacation. She came across a family on the beach. The son in the family had autism and was having difficulty navigating the many environmental factors and new experiences on the beach. The mother was struggling to respond to the young man’s behaviour in the public eye. Our CEO simply went over and, using the skills she had learned in years of direct support, helped the child and the mother to regain their composure. In telling this story, she was not seeking to inspire core competencies in the leaders and direct support professionals that heard how she responded in this scenario. Instead, as she made clear, the organizational priority of “fostering belonging” was one that she hoped influenced employees’ lives beyond the scope of their expectations as an employee.

120 Ibid., 174.

121 A recent article in Esquire illustrates the counter-example to one’s work qualities being an expression of one’s self identity. In “What Happened When I Dressed Like a Priest, An investigation into the power of a uniform,” Tom Chiarella relays how detachment from a particularly “lousy” job helped him maintain his sanity: “The blue shirt was all that mattered. Me—my body, my corporeal self—I didn’t register one bit, so long as I refilled the chips and delivered the ‘ritas while the glasses were still icy. I just had to do my job. The blue shirt was me. Me in that job. You might find this depersonalizing. Not so. The
From a labour law standpoint, such a hope from the Chief Executive of a company can quickly become problematic. Is it perceived that this behavioural expectation of employees goes beyond the scope of what an organization can require of its workers? In MacIntyrian terms, she is implying that the *good* of people with developmental disabilities belonging to their community is one that is not only internal to the practice, but that society should adopt as one of its recognized goods *as well as* a good that people (employees, for example) should individually adopt as a priority in their own life. She is appealing to a value that transcends a particular practice.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre tentatively provides a definition of virtue: “A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.” 122 He goes on to build on this definition throughout the book, yet maintains this basic outline. Samuel Scheffler challenged MacIntyre, arguing that virtues identified within practices may not be virtuous once they cross over into other spheres of life and practice. For instance, if one were to take the qualities of ruthlessness and relentlessness apart from being able to distinguish when they were appropriate and when they were not, these qualities may be very *effective* within certain practices. MacIntyre takes a section of his *Postscript to the Second Edition* to respond to Scheffler’s critique. 123 Acknowledging that he may not have expressed himself clearly in the original text of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre clarifies

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blue shirt meant I owed the world only what the job demanded, and only for those few hours. I came to relish disappearing into the hectic mechanics of work, into a routine of expectation and ritualized tasks. It turned out I could forget myself for a few hours. I was soon named employee of the month. Twice.” Tom Chiarella, “What Happened When I Dressed Like a Priest,” Esquire, August 29, 2017, http://www.esquire.com/style/mens-fashion/a36947/how-uniform-style-affects-daily-life/

122 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 191

123 There are signs that point to MacIntyre’s rejoinder in the text of *After Virtue* itself. I think, for instance, of “A virtue is not a disposition that makes for success only in some one particular type of situation.” (203) MacIntyre goes on to explain the difference between professional skills that are effective within certain situations and virtues which are exercised in many different scenarios and make sense only in the context of the unity of one’s life as a whole.
that “no human quality is to be accounted a virtue unless it satisfies the conditions at each of the three stages.”\(^{124}\) The three stages are:

- a.) Qualities necessary to achieve the goods internal to practices;
- b.) Qualities contributing to the good of a whole life;
- c.) Qualities that enable the good for human beings, “the conception of which can only be elaborated and possessed within an ongoing social tradition.”\(^{125}\)

When a leader pushes for certain behaviours or qualities that go beyond the scope of job requirements, then, especially if she is seeking to inspire a specific moral motivation as well as a behavioural outcome, it is legitimate to question what kind of quality is sought. While no organization could legitimately monitor, or provide performance reviews outside of job-related duties, our CEO was attempting to inspire employees to be motivated to foster belonging beyond the confines of their job. In doing so, the organization aims to encourage a set of qualities that go beyond competencies internal to the practice. These qualities contribute to the good of a whole life and enable the good for human beings as defined within the ongoing social tradition of Christian service.

Recalling MacIntyre’s clarified understanding of virtue, then, this faith-based developmental service organization seeks to inspire virtue among its leaders and those providing direct support services. This brings us to a site of potential incommensurability. If a faith-based developmental service organization claims only to be interested in competencies as demonstrated while at work, it is incommensurable with the more in-depth understanding of morality found within the Christian tradition, “the good for human beings.” If, on the other hand, a faith-based developmental service organization seeks to promote and monitor virtues outside of paid employment (unless it is due to a significant and public transgression of fundamental organizational principles, such as making fun of people with developmental disabilities on social


\(^{125}\) Ibid., 264.
media), then this organization oversteps its reach as an employer in the Province of Ontario.

The way to avoid incommensurability is not to abandon the Christian faith tradition or to violate employment and human rights legislation. Instead, it is to welcome people from various faith traditions, to enforce expectations as laid out in competencies and measurable indicators of organizational alignment, and invite those that join the organization to investigate the underlying principles that drive its culture and motivate faith-based service. In other words, it is to inspire employees *qua human beings* to embrace their responsibility as moral agents toward a future that promotes flourishing for all people, as understood within the tradition to which the organization belongs.

MacIntyre’s reflections on virtue and practice provide several vital considerations as this project continues:

a.) Unlike competencies, to explore virtues within the context of direct support work requires an examination of intention, motivation, and moral formation — the questions that underlie this project. “Virtues are dispositions not only to act in particular ways, but also to feel in particular ways. To act virtuously is not, as Kant was later to think, to act against inclination; it is to act from inclination formed by the cultivation of the virtues.”126 It is thus not until *Part II: Response* that we will get to the virtues that are “called for” within Christian service. First, we must examine intention, motivation, and moral formation in the Christian tradition.

b.) To understand which virtues are essential, indeed those that may be under-recognized within a practice, one must investigate the ongoing social tradition in which the practice is embedded. Communal roles as they are identified within the Christian tradition may have very different expectations from those of contemporary society. “It is always as part of an ordered community that I have to seek the human good. The individual carries his communal roles with

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126 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 149.
him as part of the definition of his self, even into his isolation.”\footnote{Ibid., 172.} The next part of this project investigates theological anthropology from within the tradition of Christian disability studies, which will form a basis for a conception of *flourishing* for the person with an intellectual or developmental disability, and hence the virtues that help or hinder these internal goods.

c.) Relating to the communal roles one carries into self-definition, *narration* will be a key theme in *Part II on Encounter*. MacIntyre observes, “Any specific account of the virtues presupposes an equally specific account of the narrative structure and unity of a human life and *vice versa*.”\footnote{Ibid., 243.} Chapter Four explores an account of the narrative structure and unity of a human life from the perspective of Christian disability services. Chapters Five through Seven then build on this account to highlight the ways in which our narration of others and ourselves is radically limited by our embodiment and self-incomprehensibility. Whereas MacIntyre stresses, “Narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions,”\footnote{Ibid., 208.} we will examine the limits to this narrative history in Judith Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Encountering the opacity and mystery of the *imago Dei* will lead us to explore several virtues that are undervalued in accounts that emphasize only narrative transparency.

The previous chapters have revealed the ways in which social services have been established on a fundamental obscurity towards its own traditions and foundations. Vocation and professionalism are two aspects of the way in which contemporary social service theory fails to understand its own account of the *good* for people with intellectual disabilities. The process of discovering core competencies similarly reveals a lack of appreciation for the implicitly adopted values of bureaucratic management and effectiveness as a moral fiction.
The sections that follow explore an “account” of the good for people with and without intellectual disabilities from within the Christian tradition as grounded in the *imago Dei*. We here transition from a sense of *calling* per se to encountering *the One who calls* and *those to whom we are called*. In doing so, however, we discover that mystery and revelation are both integral to creation in the image of God. In this, there are limits to the accounts that we can give of our traditions and ourselves. These limits are not peripheral to the Christian account of the good, however - they lie at its heart. Any attempt to form an account of Christian moral agency must consider the mystery of God’s revelation and the revelation we encounter in our neighbours.
PART II: ENCOUNTER

Part One unearthed several premises underlying the ethics of direct support. It did so under the framework of “calling.” Chapter One asks why the language of “calling” or “vocation” continues to surround accounts given of direct support work. The language of vocation makes certain ethical resources available to us. What does it mean to experience one’s work as a “calling” from secular or religious perspectives? In what ways is this call still haunted by a ghost of the transcendent – a “higher calling” or ethical responsibility? There is a sense in which we experience direct support as a call to another, as an ethical summons that carries with it responsibility. Where might this responsibility come from that translates into moral obligation and motivation? Direct support workers may experience transcendence as either onerous or as freeing. It may exacerbate tensions with frustrating systems and disillusionment with a sense of progress, or it may free caregivers to embrace the meaningful aspects of their work without feeling overwhelmed and worn out. The posture that helps people working direct support escape compassion fatigue and burnout while maintaining passion for their work carries with it by a deep sense of belonging and an appropriate acknowledgement of distance. These are the ingredients of resilient ethical care in one’s vocation.

In Chapter Two, another aspect of calling comes to the fore. What does vocation look like in relation to the human other? Building on the theme of “higher calling” from Chapter One, Chapter Two contrasts Lutheran undertones of neighbour-love with love of neighbour as articulated in the work of Søren Kierkegaard. This chapter asked what an ethical call might look like that is not based simply on natural preference or established relationships, but instead on eternal equality before God. The command of Christ to love one’s neighbour as oneself compels us beyond our comfort zones toward people who are different from us, people such as our brothers and sisters with intellectual disabilities. Christianly speaking, Kierkegaard stresses the call of eternity, the call of equality, and the call of neighbour love in upholding an ethical perspective in the midst of immediate projects and concerns. Kierkegaard’s insistence on human beings’ status “before God” makes these commitments possible. In other words, the God-encounter establishes the equality of neighbour-love in the light of eternity.
Where *Chapter Two* points in the direction of an encounter with God and one another as the beginning of ethical relationships, *Chapter Three* contrasts this approach with the way in which contemporary service delivery models attempt to establish a basis for ethical conduct. *Professionalism* is the means by which developmental services seek not only to motivate potential direct support staff to join in the work of direct support, but also to form these workers into ethical service providers. Does professionalism offer the resources by which to establish this moral foundation? Drawing on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, we observed that the behaviours (core competencies) established by this quest for *professionalism* rely on a moral fiction of management: *effectiveness*. Professionalism lacks a clearly articulated conception of the *good or goods* towards which direct support aspires (i.e. an understanding of holistic flourishing in the lives of people with intellectual disabilities). As such, it fails to provide adequate ethical motivation or formation to guide appropriate behaviour of direct support professionals, particularly in times of transition and change. Contemporary professional approaches, detached from religious or philosophical traditions of moral formation, lack a transcendent or “higher” responsibility that goes beyond the behavioural expectations of one’s job. Within this context, expecting direct support professionals to be reflective moral agents in a rapidly changing environment is a futile effort.

In *Part II: Encounter*, we start by seeking to understand the moral framework that arises out of the Christian tradition of responding to the call of God. In direct support provision within Christian faith-based agencies, professionalism must be subservient to a higher responsibility and recognition of human flourishing as people created in God’s image. *What ethical opportunities and barriers present themselves in the doctrine of the imago Dei?*

*Chapter Four* begins by sketching contemporary discussions about the nature of the *imago Dei* at the intersection of theology and disability. What are helpful ways of relating to this image in supporting people with intellectual or developmental disabilities? What are ways of relating to this image that may actually undermine the *imago* as one relates to people with disabilities? Theologians on disability along with insights from Emil Brunner and Søren Kierkegaard shape the priority of *relationality* in this *imago*. God is love, and so love must be the foundational principle whereby one
may be created in God’s image. The ethical weight of this relation lies not on the part of each human being, but in God’s love towards each person. In receiving God’s love as a gift, we are then called to respond. How might one respond to a givenness that transcends, overwhelms, and always exceeds one’s own capacity to respond? I draw parallels between this exceeding call to respond to the *imago Dei* and the work of Emmanuel Levinas on *the face* of the other and the trace of God.

Revelation and mystery are closely bound up in these relations. In our encountering one another, ourselves, and God, there are significant barriers to recognizing the *imago Dei*. Chapters five through seven dive into the heart of the relational image of God as encountered in one another and discovered in Christian scriptures. In the biblical text, we find a God who is both revelatory and mysterious, transparent and opaque. It is no surprise, then, that the relational constitution of human beings is always already being revealed and being withheld. Alasdair MacIntyre, Judith Butler and others help to unsettle our over-confidence in recognizing the image of God in our own accounts and the accounts given by others. However, it is in the midst of this unrecognizability that we encounter one another and discover what it means to love our neighbour. Responsibility is not established in our transparency to one another, but in our shared, partial, opacity.
CHAPTER FOUR: Encountering the *imago Dei*

“So God created human beings in his own image. 
In the image of God he created them; 
male and female he created them.”

~ *Genesis* 1:27, NLT

These words, at the beginning of Judeo-Christian scripture, “set the stage” for Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theological anthropology to come. To understand the goods internal to the practice of Christian social services, we must grapple with how the *imago Dei* shapes Christian understanding of who we are as human beings, and hence what it means for human beings to *flourish*. More specifically, a perspective of the *imago Dei* that values and respects the lives of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities is essential to ethical Christian faith-based service provision.

It is as we encounter the divine image in one another that our love for God translates into love for people created in God’s image. We begin to recognize that we have a fundamental moral responsibility to every other and *no one* is exempt from reflecting this divine image.

**a. The image of God and disability**

Through the past millennia, Jewish and Christian theologians have sought to understand what it means that human beings are in God’s image. Several views have arisen out of these theological investigations. Here we will briefly touch on the *substantive view*, the *functional view*, and the *relational view* of the *imago Dei* and their implications for people who experience disabilities.

1. The *substantive view* asserts that something within the physical, psychological or spiritual makeup of the human being resembles God. Somehow, human beings have a unique capability to interact with the world in ways that no other animals can. Creativity may be the attribute that links humankind to God. This similitude may be located in intellect or will. Hans Reinders refers to the substantive view when he writes that through history, “The ‘human being created in the image of God’ was taken
to mean that human beings are closer to God than any other living creature because of their capacity for reason and will.”

2. The functional view builds on the verse that follows the creation of humankind, “Then God blessed them and said, ‘Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground.’” Here, the imago is closely related to the context of calling from the previous chapters. Is God’s image found in a commission to govern creation – to have “dominion”?

3. In the relational view, “God is love” forms the basis of the imago Dei. Karl Barth points to the odd Hebrew phrasing “Let us make man in our image” and the Trinitarian nature of the divine to posit that humanity is reflective of the “I-Thou” existence of God. Similarly, Thomas J. Scirghi draws on the doctrine of the Trinity and the Eastern Orthodox notion of perichoresis. Between the Father and the Son, “there exists such a dynamic activity of exchange, a love which opens up through the Holy Spirit to the whole of creation.” Scirghi goes on to maintain that the Trinity serves as a model of belonging for human beings created in God’s image.

At an initial glance, these perspectives appear to have little bearing on the practical aspects of supporting and caring for people with intellectual disabilities. On the contrary, perspectives on who is or who is not created in God’s image have had a powerful and sometimes catastrophic impact on human history. In Mein Kampf, Adolf Hitler claimed the phrase “highest image of God” for the Aryans, writing: “Whoever would dare to raise a profane hand against the highest image of God among His

131 Genesis 1:28, NLT.
132 1 John 4:8
creatures would sin against the bountiful Creator of this marvel and would collaborate in the expulsion from Paradise.”\textsuperscript{134} This ideology was instrumental in the Holocaust as well as Action T4, a “euthanasia program” to kill incurably ill, physically or mentally disabled, emotionally distraught, and elderly people.

At times the doctrine of the \textit{imago Dei} has been an agent for positive social change. John Locke, for example, derived his principle of human equality in part from the belief that all human beings are created – male and female – in the image of God.\textsuperscript{135} This principle became central to both the \textit{Declaration of Independence} and the \textit{Universal Declaration of Human Rights}. As an Enlightenment thinker, though, even Locke’s concept was problematic. His primary conception of the \textit{imago Dei} was a substantive view. It was human beings’ intellectual prowess, and the resultant abilities, that relate people to the divine.\textsuperscript{136} Stacy Clifford argues, “Understanding Locke’s treatment of disability provides a new way to read his social contract as a \textit{capacity contract} that bases political membership on a threshold level of capacity and excludes anyone who falls below.”\textsuperscript{137} The substantive view of the \textit{imago Dei} thus has the potential to undercut the very equality that Locke claimed to champion.

In \textit{Restoring the Image: Spirituality, Faith, and Cognitive Disability}, John Swinton points to Peter Birchenall’s writing as one example of the effect these substantive views can have on the life of the church. According to Birchenall, “People with a profound mental handicap [sic] possess a limited ability to reason at the complex level, and are therefore not able to work through any doubts and develop any sort of

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\textsuperscript{136} In practical matters, this meant that Locke’s “economic-abilities view of the image of God led to the ‘disinheritance of many’ impoverished people during the Industrial Revolution.” John Frederic Kilner, \textit{Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 19 (footnote 95).

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faith.” While most would not state this directly, the belief that people with intellectual disabilities are not able to engage fully with their faith due to a ‘lack of intellect’ is one of the possible ramifications of associating the image of God with rationality.

These substantive views of the image of God open up the possibility that people may be born who lack the substance of this image. Throughout history, will or intellect are the primary attributes identified that set humankind apart as created in God’s image. Saint Thomas Aquinas quotes Augustine when he writes, "Man’s excellence consists in the fact that God made him to His own image by giving him an intellectual soul, which raises him above the beasts of the field." While Aquinas’ views on intellect are nuanced and include an “aptitude for understanding and loving God,” his insight into what is “intellectual” has in popular understanding been reduced to modern rationality. One observes the implications of this misstep when Aquinas goes on to observe, “Therefore things without intellect are not made to God’s image.” It is in following this line of thinking that pastors, community leaders, and writers such as Birchenall are led to believe that people with intellectual disabilities cannot fully participate in a life of faith.

Similarly, the functional view of the image of God calls into question the imago Dei of people with intellectual disabilities if they are not believed to be able to “rule” or

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140 Thomas Aquinas, "Question 93. The End or Term of the Production of Man," in The Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Kevin Knight, 2017), 1, Q. 93, co., http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1093.htm. It must be noted that Aquinas’ response on this is much more nuanced and arguments have been made on both sides that Aquinas does (Romero, Miguel J. "Aquinas on the Corporis Infirmitas: Broken Flesh and the Grammar of Grace." In Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader, edited by Brian Brock and John Swinton, 101-51. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2012.) and does not (Reinders 2008) fully include people with intellectual disabilities in the ‘fullness’ of this image. Regardless, the point here is that key theologians in the history of Christianity have argued for a substantive view of the image of God that has been construed or misconstrued in a variety of ways at the expense of people with IDD.
shape the world around them in a tangible way. Disabilities that interfere with one’s capacity to ‘have dominion’ may be viewed as a distortion of the image of God.141

1. Humility and understanding

As someone invested in the lives of people with intellectual disabilities, it is tempting to respond (ironically) with strong intellectual arguments against theological perspectives that call into question the divine image of people for whom I care. Perhaps for our own good, the biblical text does not provide solid ground from which to attack others’ views on God’s image polemically. Nowhere does Genesis explicitly define what “the image of God” means. When we look to the New Testament, we find texts closely relating Christ to the image of God142 and the call on disciples to conform to that image, but little to indicate that authors are using the imago Dei in these texts in the same sense as in Genesis.143 When Paul or James refer to human beings created in the image of God, they again do not precisely indicate what this image is, nor is it the intent of these verses to do so.144

With this in mind, we must proceed from a posture of humility. The image of God is mysterious. Over the coming chapters, we will delve into this mystery as we encounter other human beings, ourselves, and God. Here we note that the imago is a mystery even when examining the biblical source itself. As Hans Reinders observes, “The Bible does not seem to answer the question in which respects human beings reflect the image of their Creator...”145 Thomas Reynolds commits to honouring this mystery through his account of the image of God in Vulnerable Communion. Reynolds writes, “It is crucial to

142 2 Corinthians 4:4, Colossians 1:15.
144 1 Corinthians 11:1-6, James 3:9.
observe that the Genesis account never precisely defines what the image of God is. The language is elusive, perhaps deliberately so.”

Continuing in this vein, Reynolds suggests rather than defines that to be created in the image of God means to be created for contributing to the world, open toward the call to love others. Three dimensions are implied: creativity with others, relation to others, and availability for others. The point to be stressed is that all people can be contributors, representing a range of both gifts and limitations.

The concern to offer a response to theological views that may undermine the full *imago Dei* of any people group, such as those with intellectual disabilities, is as much pastoral as strictly biblical or even theological. This pastoral or practical response seeks to follow the command to *love one another*. To read the image of God as a set of traits that defines certain human beings as an “us” against “them” (i.e. those who are potentially not created in God’s image) is unjustified theologically. Going further, it conflicts with commands to love one’s enemy, to love one’s neighbour as oneself, to be hospitable to strangers, to care for widows and orphans, etc.

Built into the scriptural account, then, is a ‘check’ on any application of reason that wishes to have all of the evidence and clear proofs up front. Rather, we see with Emil Brunner that “Man’s relation to God is not to be understood from the point of view of reason, but reason is to be understood from the point of view of man’s relation to God.”

We therefore proceed cautiously to sketch out possibilities of the *imago Dei* that lead to flourishing for people with intellectual disabilities within communities of faith and in society. In various ways, both the substantive and functional views of the *imago Dei* depend on capacity: certain abilities inherent in the human being or the capacity to rule and adapt the world. These perspectives of the *imago* fail to align with Christ’s

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146 Reynolds, 178.
147 Ibid, 177.
command to love one’s neighbour. In the sections that follow, we proceed to explore the relational view of the image of God and its potential to ground ethical motivation and formation in supporting people with intellectual disabilities.

2. The relational image: A higher call to love

Throughout Part I, we teased out the “transcendence” of the language of calling and vocation. This transcendence implies in calling a sense of moral obligation, a draw or a compulsion to invest in and engage with one’s work and the people with whom one interacts. One way that one might understand a “higher calling” is via a recognized telos. One might have a clear conception of the end towards which one is called. Within developmental services, I argued in Chapter Three that without an ethical tradition within which service is rooted, this telos is undefined and leaves direct support professionals scrambling to identify priorities in a changing field. One cannot identify or articulate the “good” for people with intellectual disabilities towards which one is working. Within an intellectual moral framework, lack of clarity leads to confusion and burnout. The DSP has difficulty expressing their love for their neighbour with intellectual disabilities because of conflicting accounts of the Good.

Within Christian services, then, the imago Dei understood relationally may serve as a fruitful basis from which to articulate the good. Thomas Reynolds’ tentative outline of what it means to be created in God’s image walks through the themes of “creativity with others, relation to others, and availability for others.” Any of these aspects relates to another, or as he describes it, leaves us “open toward the call to love others.” 149

Kierkegaard likewise does not attempt a systematic theological explanation for the divine image but rather teases out the implications of being created in this image. He bases his understanding of the image of God in Works of Love on 1 John 4:8, “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” Kierkegaard observes, “As Christianity’s glad proclamation is contained in the doctrine about man’s kinship with God, so its task is man’s likeness to God. But God is love; therefore we can

149 Reynolds, 177.
resemble God only in loving.” Just as love flows between the Persons of the Godhead, so this love can flow within human relationships with one another and the divine. This “task” of growing into likeness with God then, can be understood as a “higher calling” that takes shape within a tradition of moral formation concerning how one grows to resemble God in loving.

It is, however, entirely possible to accept an idea of the good and have full knowledge of the path of moral formation without ever fully committing to it. One must also have an initial impetus to love, a motivation that causes one to commit to ethical action. The root of the motivation to love finds its moral significance elsewhere, outside of an intellectual framework of ethical theory. Direct support workers in Christian services must reflect upon appropriate, ethical courses of action. They must also be motivated to act in this way.

Building on Chapter Three, we have seen that direct support professionals must come to appreciate the overarching telos of their organization or the ends towards which it works. They must have a sense of what flourishing looks like for the person with intellectual disability. In Christian faith-based services, we have shown that the imago Dei serves as a foundational point in Christian theological anthropology and its account of ethical flourishing. However, we have also demonstrated that the biblical record is ambiguous in “nailing down” precisely what the nature of this imago is. The imago Dei as an ethical resource does not begin with moral precepts, but with a relation: the relation of being “before God” (coram Deo) as Kierkegaard described in Chapter Two. I will go on to argue that being called in the sense of a fundamental ethical obligation always comes before understanding the moral framework from which to act. We are called to respond to the encounter with God and with one another, created in God’s image.

In this way, any account of the Christian moral framework and its view of human flourishing must draw its weight from the posture of being before God: the imago Dei. Over the coming chapters, we will discover that this is an image that conceals (limits

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understanding) as much as or more than it reveals. In this initial discussion of the *imago Dei*, we must first understand how the *imago* functions in ethical discourse.

To begin, we seek to understand how Emil Brunner articulates the “formal” and “material” senses of the *imago Dei*.\(^{151}\) We will see that Brunner’s classification helps to make sense of both the Genesis account of being *created* in the image of God and the New Testament calling to be *formed* into the image of God.\(^{152}\) Where the first serves as an intellectual boundary-marker, describing the limits on our understanding, the second inherits a *telos* that guides ethical action and moral formation, though one that still does not depend upon one’s intellectual ability for its significance.

### i. The formal likeness (imago Dei)

Emil Brunner, building on Kierkegaard’s work before him, emphasizes the human beings posture *before God*.\(^{153}\) This essential relationality is the inheritance of human beings whether they have chosen to follow the Christian God or not. Stanley Grenz observes that for Brunner, “The formal dimension refers to the fact that we stand

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\(^{151}\) It must be noted that Irenaeus initially articulated a similar distinction. Hans Reinders observes that Irenaeus relies on an over-emphasis of the distinction between being created in God’s “image” and God’s “likeness” in Genesis 1:26: “In his anti-Gnostic treatise, *Adversus Haereses* Irenaeus explained the ‘image’ as referring to the substance that human beings can never lose without ceasing to be human. ‘Likeness’, in contrast, refers to the original state in which man was created before the fall, the state of a *justitia originalis*. ” [Reinders, “Imago Dei as a Basic Concept in Christian Ethics,” 191.] While Reinders goes on to note that modern scholarship reads “in our image, according to our likeness” as a phrase “wherein the second term is explanatory of the first,” [ibid.] Irenaeus’ overall inclination does find a certain basis in the biblical text. Where the Genesis account of being created in God’s image accords dignity and moral standing intertwined with the very nature of what it means to be human, the New Testament points to Christ as the “image of the invisible God,” and calls Christians to imitate Christ in order to *live into* God’s image. Reinders writes, “Evidently, these Paulinic sources contain very powerful notions for the doctrine of *imago dei*, but when considered together with the text in Genesis 1 one cannot help but conclude that the scriptural sources seem to pull in different directions. On the one hand, the image seems to be God’s gift to humankind as he created them. On the other hand, however, the divine image is seen as real only in those human beings whom Christ has restored into conformity with God through his spirit.” [Ibid., 195.]


responsible to respond both to God and to others.”  

The sense of responsibility lies at the heart of Emil Brunner’s theology and anthropology:

Thus the original nature of man is being in the love of God, the fulfilment of responsible being, the responsibility which comes not from a demand but from a gift, not from the law but from grace, from generous love, and itself consists in responsive love.  

The ability to respond to God and one another arises not because of any particular human attribute, but because of the gift of generous love. It is in being loved and related-to that gives human beings their unique status before God. People are born into a wide range of circumstances and with a variety of limitations. As Jane Deland observes, “When God is imaged through the lens of disability it becomes clear that God’s love and grace are not contingent on physical appearance or ability…”

We can also trace the recognition that receiving of the image of God is not due to particular characteristics or substance of human beings through Kierkegaardian texts. The quantitative particularity of substance makes it impossible to be created in God’s image in this way. Due to God being Spirit, however, likeness becomes possible:

But God is Spirit, [He] is invisible and the image of the invisible is also invisible: thus does the invisible Creator reflect himself in that invisibility that is an attribute of Spirit, and God’s image is precisely the invisible glory. If God were visible, then there could be nothing that could be like Him or be His image; for there can be no image of anything that is visible and in the whole realm of visible things there is nothing, not a single blade of grass, that is the likeness of any other or is its image: if that were to happen then the image would be the object itself.


156 Deland, 58.

Likeness to God does not come about as it might with a carved idol. Because there is no visible image upon which to base this likeness, there must be an invisible glory that is an attribute of the Spirit. Because no two physical objects could be identical images of each other without actually being each other, this form of image is an impossibility. Emmanuel Levinas sustains this objection to visible resemblance when he differentiates between the trace of God in the human face and the idea that a human being would be somehow a “living icon” of God.158

In contrast to views that perceive the image of God as something ‘in’ a human being, either by a trait or ability that she embodies or by a role that she enacts over creation, Kierkegaard stresses that it is paradoxically in not being like God that human beings are related to by God. The image of God is found in this divine relation with us:

[It is glorious to stand erect and have dominion, but most glorious of all is to be nothing in the act of adoration. To adore is not to exercise dominion, and yet adoration is precisely that wherein humanity is like God, and, in truth, to be able to adore [God] is what gives the invisible glory preeminence over the rest of creation.... Humanity and God are not to be likened in any direct way, but inversely: it is only when God has infinitely become the eternally omnipresent object of adoration, and humanity remains forever the one who adores that they are ‘alike.’ If humanity would seek to be like God by exercising dominion, then it has forgotten God, God has departed and humanity is playing at being Lord in His absence.159

One must decipher what Kierkegaard means, “to be nothing in the act of adoration.” Is not adoration itself an action, to be or to do something? In this way, is it not to exercise dominion over one’s ability? Yet Kierkegaard identifies that this is not to exercise dominion. Thus, the One whom one adores must entirely determine and define the kind of adoration Kierkegaard references. It is to be acted upon. Only within this framework might one “be nothing” in the act of adoration. The act is also strangely achieved through the “being” of the One who is adored. “To be able to adore” is itself the

158 For further exploration of this theme in Levinas, see Claudia Welz, Humanity in God's Image an Interdisciplinary Exploration (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
159 Pattison, The Philosophy of Kierkegaard, 145 (11 17, UDVS 193).
act of God, and it is this “ability” that “gives the invisible glory preeminence over the rest of creation.” We are not accustomed to thinking of a person’s ability as the ability of Another, yet this is what adoration of God is. It is a givenness, a receiving of the Other, before which one has no capacity except to receive, to be acted upon. We see that the love of God and the ability to return this love in no way depends on abilities or characteristics of the human beings created in God’s image.

Here we observe space opening the imago to people with and without disabilities. If even the ability to adore is sustained within the person who adores, we find ourselves back within a framework that excludes. However, if this relation is received, as Hans Reinders advocates, all human beings are “capable,” as it were. Reinders observes, “The fact that humans differ with respect to the abilities and capacities characteristic of the human species does nothing to qualify or alter this unique relationship... God’s love is unconditional and thus cannot be broken because of human limitations.”

In other words, “In the loving eyes of God... there are no marginal cases of being ‘human.’” This inclusivity does not render the distinctive characteristics of human beings unimportant; instead that these distinctions do not bear on the status of being created in God’s image.

We find in Kierkegaard not only a critique of the substantive and functional views of the imago, which rely on inherent abilities or dominion, but a foreshadowing of Brunner’s theology of relationality and encounter. According to Brunner, the nature of the human being is “responsibility from love, in love, for love.” The love of God is a gift that has already been given, and this love bears the gift of image and likeness.

A sharp contrast emerges between this understanding of “relationality” and that of Luther and Calvin. In Luther’s view, “the essential thing about the human creature was not its rationality... nor its will... but its capacity for relatedness with God.”

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160 Reinders, Receiving the Gift of Friendship, 274.
161 Ibid, 119.
162 Brunner, Man in Revolt, 99.
“relation” though also requires participation on behalf of the person and thus can be lost. In his Lectures on Genesis, Luther remarks, “I am afraid that since the loss of this image through sin we cannot understand it to any extent.”

John Calvin concurs. “At base, what is referred to is not something that we have or had but something that we do or fail to do. We image God if and insofar as we are oriented toward God. Rightly turned to God, we reflect the divine image, as mirrors reflect what they are turned toward.” Calvin’s insistence on action and response means that “The image of God is thus not a permanent endowment, any more than a given reflection in a mirror belongs to the mirror, but a quality that is dependent upon our posture vis-à-vis God.”

Calvin writes,

Since the image of God had been destroyed in us by the fall, we may judge from its restoration what it originally had been. Paul says that we are transformed into the image of God by the gospel. And, according to him, spiritual regeneration is nothing else than the restoration of the same image. (Colossians 3:10, and Ephesians 4:23.)

It becomes clear that even certain conceptions of relational images leave people with intellectual disabilities outside of the divine image, or at least only questionably related to the divine. If relation to God depends, at least in part, upon the ability of the human being, then we may always question whether “this” or “that” person bears the image. It is this question that Reinders undermines in his quest for a relational ontology that, building on Greek Orthodox theologian John D. Zizioulas, considers “how to think of human beings as constituted by external rather than internal relations.” This receiving of God’s love is not, strictly thinking, an acting or even a being, as Tom

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165 Hall, 216.


167 Reinders, “Imago Dei as a Basic Concept in Christian Ethics,” 191. See also Receiving the Gift of Friendship for development of this direction.
Reynolds describes, “As a capacity for love, the *imago Dei* is a capacity for God (*capax Dei*).”\(^{168}\) Love’s “ability” is on the part of the One who loves first. “We love because he first loved us.”\(^{169}\)

It is only within a framework that does not require people to possess specific abilities in order to be recognized as fully human that everyone, with and without disabilities, will be accorded the full dignity of their humanity.

**ii. Moral obligation and the *imago Dei***

**Giving an account: The Hospital**

He was experiencing significant pain. We often knew this because of the behaviour we observed – the behaviour we felt. The more we were scratched, kicked, chased, the more pronounced we knew his pain to be. However, it was when this frantic activity ended in being curled up in the fetal position on his bed that it was time to go to the hospital. His gastrointestinal problems, due in large part to the concoction of medications he was on, were not being addressed by the other drugs that he took to alleviate these symptoms.

One of these hospital visits I’ll never forget. I had just arrived to replace another support worker. While this gentleman required two-on-one support at all times, he had been sleeping or “knocked out” on medication for several hours now, I learned, and my colleague went down to the hospital restaurant to get food for both of us.

It was not the controlled environment in which we were accustomed to working. With a tendency towards self-injurious behaviour, his room at home was well-padded. It still contained modern conveniences and amenities, but each had been specially designed to mitigate the potential for self-injury, or harm of workers. Here in the hospital, though, things were different. They had not been prepared for us when we arrived, and he had been in pain and unable to physically engage with his surroundings. Scattered around the room were various tools, implements, and potential objects of destruction.

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\(^{168}\) Reynolds, 184.

\(^{169}\) 1 John 4:9.
Then he woke up. He was up out of his hospital bed before I had even had a chance to absorb the environment fully or to sit down. We had no idea that he would be able to engage in this way, given his condition. It must have been a combination of fear, confusion about where he was, pain, and a restricted ability to communicate that drove him to this level of behaviour.

At that moment, I knew the non-violent crisis intervention (NVCI) techniques I had learned were ineffective. He was moving too fast, and I was alone. It had quickly escalated into a matter of personal safety, for both of us. Looking back, I suppose I had a choice to make. Either abandon him to save myself and find my co-worker, seeking help, or do what I could to intervene, to prevent self-injury on his part. Intervening in this way, I risked severe injury along with the potential of engaging in a way that broke policy and failed to meet any techniques of non-violent crisis intervention.

At the time, though, there was no real choice to make. There was no question in my mind where my obligation lay. As I caught his eyes, coming towards me, a mixture of pain and confusion haunting his expression, my own instinct to self-preservation was overridden by an encounter, by a demand. Before professional commitments, before learned techniques and rational calculations, I knew what I had to do. As we danced in that hospital room, adrenaline coursing through our bodies, I had no idea what the outcome would be. I had no time to consider it. I was committed to preventing him from seriously injuring himself and, secondarily, to protecting myself.

The moments that ensued are a blur in my mind. My colleague eventually returned, and we were able to use two-person techniques to support him again. Miraculously, he and I escaped unscathed. Whatever moves I had used to keep him from the dangerous implements lying around the room had left no bruises, and apart from surface scratches and a torn shirt, I sustained no lasting injuries.

What I realized in those moments, though, is that no amount of training or ethical study could have prepared me for it. No matter how much moral formation I had, the instinct to respond, to intervene, came down to moral motivation. Indeed, this motivation ran deeper than my instinct for self-preservation. It ran deeper than any conscious decision, any moral deliberation. Underneath an intellectual recognition that I needed to help him lay a fundamental obligation that compelled me to act in the way that I did.
It is this fundamental moral obligation to one another that we are trying to “gesture towards” when we describe other human beings as created in God’s image. What we are hesitantly, haltingly, and imperfectly hinting toward is that we experience a profound responsibility to other human beings that transcends (or undergirds) any rational calculation. In the way that we find ourselves before God, we likewise find ourselves before one another. We are “our brother’s keepers.” We are accountable for the human being who stands before us before we might even begin to form an account. At any given moment, it may be demanded of us, “Where is your brother?” or, “Where is your sister?” The weight of any ethical account-ability is not established or justified within an intellectual tradition or moral framework, nor by a professional organization or even a religion. This “grounding” runs deeper than comprehension to an encounter with another. However, it is not “another” in any quantifiable, objective, or descriptive sense. Emmanuel Levinas would describe this as an obligation to the face of the other.

What I argue here is that one of the most significant functions of our use of imago Dei, in line with its reference in the Genesis account, is to point to – yet not articulate – the radical moral obligation that human beings have to one another. This is a responsibility that comes before any attempt to understand how this works itself out in everyday life.

It is perhaps Emmanuel Levinas, of Lithuanian Jewish descent, who captures this function of the imago Dei better than any other, without using these terms. David Novak observes, “Although Levinas assiduously avoids the traditional Hebrew term, tselem Elohim, and the traditional Latin term, imago Dei (probably because of his aversion to ‘theology’), there can be no doubt that this is precisely his point of philosophical entrance.”

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170 Genesis 4:9.
In his essay “God and Philosophy,” Levinas describes that “the God of the Bible signifies the beyond being, transcendence.” He goes on to say that “What the Bible puts above all comprehension would not have yet reached the threshold of intelligibility!” God as the infinite, cannot truly be thought or, as Malebranche knew, “There is no idea of God, or God is his own idea.” Levinas hovers here between a passive consciousness and the question if, at this point, it is still even consciousness. The degree of passivity involved in the reception of the idea of God is “like the passivity of a trauma through which the idea of God would have been put into us.” In various forms, this “receiving” of the infinite for Levinas is an “awakening,” or “wakefulness – but suggesting the passivity of someone created.”

It is then an idea signifying with a signifyingness prior to presence, to all presence, prior to every origin in consciousness and thus an-archical, accessible in its trace... What can this antiquity mean if not the trauma of awakening – as though the idea of the Infinite, the Infinite in us, awakened a consciousness which is not awakened enough? As though the idea of the Infinite in us were a demand, and a signification in the sense that an order is signified in a demand.

It is through this trauma that the initial demand, the initial obligation to an other is born. We encounter the sense of the other, the holy, as Levinas describes “as desirable it is near but different.” I am thus awakened “to proximity,” to a responsibility for the

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173 Ibid.
174 Ibid., 160. A similar move occurs as we observed previously with Kierkegaard on adoration. Just as adoration of God must be, in its truest sense, a reception of God’s love as an act of God, so the “idea of the Infinite” can only be “put” in me by an “unequalled passivity.”
175 Ibid., 161.
176 Ibid.
177 Ibid.
178 Ibid.
179 Ibid., 164.
neighbor, to the point of substituting for him.”\textsuperscript{180} This is the heart of moral responsibility.

Through this trajectory, out of the initial wakefulness of the idea of the Infinite, Levinas “traces” the birth of ethics, from a Source that precedes even consciousness. “Ethics is not a moment of being; it is otherwise and better than being, the very possibility of the beyond.”\textsuperscript{181} Thus God is prior to every neighbour and every encounter yet makes possible the ethical demand towards one’s neighbour. The result is thus an obligation towards one’s neighbour, that same obligation that I encountered in the face of the gentleman I supported in the hospital room. “Before the neighbor I am summoned and do not appear,”\textsuperscript{182} and it was this summoning to which I responded – to which I had no choice but to respond.

Where Levinas does not explicitly discuss the neighbour regarding the \textit{imago Dei}, Edith Wyschogrod makes this connection explicit,

What comes to mind in Levinas’s discussion of the trace is the classical conception of the \textit{imago dei}. This is indeed the perspective from which Levinas writes: the face is the image of God. But what does it mean to be in the image of God? It is not to be an “\textit{icon}” of God but “to find oneself in his trace.” The God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition retains “all the infinity of his absence.” He shows himself only through his trace as it is written in Exodus 33... “Thou shalt see what is behind me: but my face shall not be seen.”\textsuperscript{183}

We now return to Kierkegaard’s “to be nothing” in adoration. Just as we are related to God’s image by no act of our own, but “to be able to adore,” so my neighbour is not transcendent to me, and does not make demands of me, due to their finite embodiment but precisely due to this \textit{trace} of the Infinite: the image of God. As ethics is prior to ontology, so my obligation to my neighbour happens before any “core

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\item \textsuperscript{180} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{181} Ibid., 165
\item \textsuperscript{182} Ibid., 167.
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competency,” before any ethical framework, before indeed conception of moral formation.\(^{184}\)

It is for this reason that I employ the language of *encounter* throughout this project. Where in casual conversation it retains a sense of an informal meeting, to encounter someone comes from Latin “incontra” or “in front of.”\(^{185}\) We find ourselves “before” human beings created in the image of God. Yet, in the transcendent ethical summons we “face” in one another, the initial sense of “to meet as adversaries” in an encounter is not entirely lost. I recall that moment in the hospital, where the ethical summons (call) was received as a challenge to respond *at that moment* to the needs of my neighbour, my near-one. Encounter also carries with it the connotation of being “unexpected” in the sense of the *unexpected gift* of the other. Within the space of this encounter, then, we face a summons that we cannot quite “place.” Does the other present us with a gift? With a demand? With a challenge and opposition? In a way, the encounter represents all of these aspects and more.

As we will explore in the chapters to come, the primary sense of moral obligation – of the direct support professional or in any human interaction – refers back to this mysterious aspect of the *imago Dei*, that which always precedes ethical description or calculation. Moral obligation is a *given*. Indeed, our ethical obligation arises out of the *givenness* of the other. This same *imago* is at the core of our own identity and relation with ourselves and, in this way, our very awakening, our entry into consciousness, carries with it our *createdness*. Being created in God’s image is always ex-nihilo, for we have no words or understanding that arises before this givenness. Similarly, my neighbour with intellectual disabilities is *given*, and my fundamental obligation, responsibility, and motivation is likewise *given* with the face of my neighbour. In Levinas’ account of the face of the other and God as trace, we find a

\(^{184}\) It should be noted that Levinas discusses in more detail the relation of the Infinite and love, “Love is possible only through the idea of the Infinite” (“God and Philosophy,” 164). We return to this connection between love and the face of the other in Part III.

radical call to responsibility that describes a kind of “formal image” that in some ways exceeds Brunner’s own initial intent to apply the *imago* to all human relations.\(^{186}\)

**iii. The material likeness (imitatio Dei)**

While my initial obligation to respond to the needs of the person I was supporting in the hospital precedes thoughtful accounts of moral formation, I had received training on ethical approaches to supporting others. While I could not use many of the techniques of Non-Violent Crisis Intervention, the necessary training for supportive posture and reducing the chance of injury to others and myself was useful. The formation I had received gave my motivation (arising out of moral obligation) the tools it needed to act. Within the Christian tradition, the *imitatio Dei*, or as called by Brunner the *material* imago Dei, serves as a framework by which to understand moral formation.

The distinction between the formal and the material for Brunner lies not in the relational nature of what it means to be a human being, but in the way in which human beings *respond* to God. While human beings always bear God’s image, to respond in love to this initial gift is to “live into” God’s image as revealed in Christian scripture. In this way, according to Brunner, it is possible to lose the *material* sense of the *imago* by not responding to the call to love others. “[T]he loss of the *Imago*, in the material sense, does not remove the responsibility from man; he still stands ‘before God’, and he is still a human being... The loss of the *Imago*, in the material sense, presupposes the *Imago* in the formal sense.”\(^{187}\)

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\(^{186}\) Brunner describes the formal image as “the human,” that which distinguishes “man from all the rest of creation.” [Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology*, trans. John Baillie (London: G. Bles, 1956), 23.] However, Brunner oversteps his own description. He goes on to qualify the formal image, according it to human beings’ *subjectivity* and *responsibility*. To be a subject for Brunner carries with it *rationality*, that is, “one with whom one can speak, with whom therefore God can also speak.” [Ibid.] I have known many people through the years who would not pass this litmus test for “rational speech.” Secondly, to be human for Brunner is to be *responsible*. Levinas captures the sense of this responsibility without the requirement of rationality and speech. Indeed, for Levinas it is one’s inability to rationally articulate one’s responsibility that points towards one’s radical obligation. In this way, Levinas’ *imago Dei* captures a kind of moral obligation that can be attributed to all human beings in a way that Brunner’s own formal *imago* cannot.

Like Calvin, Brunner draws upon the imagery of a mirror. Brunner does not relate the mirror analogy to the imago Dei as a whole, but to the material likeness. According to Brunner, while every human being retains the image of God formally, this image is perfected as the human being seeks to imitate Christ. He considers 2 Corinthians 3:18, “But we all, with unveiled face reflecting as a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory.” Christ is the “Primal Image” which human beings are called to imitate. As Reynolds echoes, “The image of God both marks and fosters a human imitation of God: the imago Dei is an imitatio Dei.”

Rather than emphasizing the disobedience of humankind in this falling-away from the material image, Brunner restates that not responding to God is the turning away of a gift. In standing “over-against” God (the language of adversarial encounter is appropriate here), human responsibility to God is not first of all a task but a gift; it is not first of all a demand but life; not law but grace. The word which – requiring an answer – calls man, is not a ‘Thou shalt’ but a ‘Thou mayest be.’ The Primal Word is not an imperative, but it is the indicative of the Divine love; ‘Thou art Mine.’

We note a similarity here again with Søren Kierkegaard in Works of Love. “As Christianity’s glad proclamation is contained in the doctrine about man’s kinship with God, so its task is man’s likeness to God. But God is love; therefore we can resemble God only in loving.” One aspect of this likeness is the initial disposition of each person before God. Everyone is a human being in this formal sense of having been created by God and loved into existence by him. However it is only in looking back upon this that we are haltingly able to put words to it. We find ourselves always already responsible.

To live into this formal image through the moral formation of being shaped by God’s love is also open to all. Unlike substantive capacities for reason or functional

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188 Reynolds, 179.
190 Kierkegaard, Works of Love, 74.
abilities to rule, to love and to be loved is to live into the fullness of our humanity:
“Thus, every human being can know everything about love, just as every human being can come to know that he, like every human being, is loved by God.”

The material *imago* only finds its source in the formal *imago*. Our response to God is only ever made possible by God. Thus, we cannot simply manufacture love in God’s image. It flows from God’s initial relation to us:

Just as the quiet lake originates deep down in hidden springs no eye has seen, so also does a person’s love originate even more deeply in God’s love. If there were no gushing spring at the bottom, if God were not love, then there would be neither the little lake, nor a human being’s love.

John writes, “We love because he first loved us.” This love is not reserved for an elite group or a secret order but is available to all.

Coming from significantly different traditions and religious backgrounds, it is important to highlight a tension here between the project of Levinas and that of Brunner. In Levinas, an encounter with the face of another human being reveals the glory of God as a kind of ‘first ethics.’ It is a summons, a demand. It is an ethical imperative that makes me response-able to the One whom I encounter. For Brunner, on the other hand, an encounter with God’s love begins as a gift and not a demand. The call of neighbour-love examined in Chapter Two is now recognized to flow from a *prior* love, a transcendent love that forms human persons to love in the way that he first loved us. According to Brunner, “[God] is the One who wills to have from me a free response to his love, a response which gives back love for love, a loving echo, a living reflection of His glory.”

In Kierkegaard, on the other hand, we see a kind of both-and where our position “before God” in the *imago Dei* is both a demand and a gift. The “gushing stream” of

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192 Ibid, 9-10.
193 1 John 4:19.
194 Ibid., 55.
God’s initial love towards humankind that both makes possible human love and calls human beings to love. This is a gift that is also always a demand. The capacity of being response-able, however, is also made possible by this prior gift of God’s love.

Where the formal imago Dei, as understood in light of Levinas’ ethics, captures the root of human identity and moral obligation, the material image (being formed to resemble God in love) describes the path towards moral formation as contained within the Christian tradition. In reflecting upon scripture and Christ’s life, it is possible to develop a qualified teleological “transcendence,” a higher calling that is intelligible and which we can describe. Much of Christian ethical theory and discussion falls within this second category: learning what it means to “imitate God” by seeking to understand scripture and what it means to follow Christ. This is not to say that having a robust understanding of Christian moral formation is necessary to love well. Indeed, God’s initial gift of love has made a life of love possible. Peter puts it this way: “By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know him, the one who called us to himself by means of his marvelous glory and excellence.”\(^{195}\) It is not the knowledge of Christian ethical systems that renders ethical action possible, but knowing God in the sense of encountering God.

### 3. Love as the fulfillment of the imago Dei

According to Christ, the greatest commandment is to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” and to “Love your neighbor as yourself.”\(^ {196}\) In considering these commands, John Swinton reminds us that:

> [T]he two are not separate linear or consecutive commands. They belong together, and in fact interpenetrate each other; we cannot truly understand one without the other. The basis of our love stems from our essential relationship with God.\(^ {197}\)

\(^{195}\) 2 Peter 1:3.  
\(^{197}\) Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time*, 24.
In the Person of Jesus Christ we see not only a human being created in the image of God, but a God who has become a human being to love like us. We recognize this profound love in the ways he loved those who were considered ‘the least of these’ and ate with people looked upon as sinners. In doing so, Christ loved not imperfectly or hesitantly but fully and completely – perfect love.

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

In being conformed to this image, this likeness of Christ, then, humanity returns to its true nature and becomes ‘fully alive’. Paul writes to the Ephesians to proclaim this “one new humanity” which Christ has proclaimed by making peace between the Jews and Gentiles, peace in which there is “neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This is the true equality of which Kierkegaard writes, equality in which all are loved with an undying and unconditional love: the love of one’s neighbour.

This conception of the imago transforms the telos or goal of humanity from one of achievement, success, and intellectual prowess to relational responsibility in which each person is her ‘brother’s keeper.’ The end toward which we work as human flourishing is not capital gain but faithful response to one another: to use Reynold’s terms we work toward “creativity with others, relation to others, and availability for

198 Matthew 25:40, Mark 2:16.
199 1 John 4:9-11.
200 Romans 8:9. Thinking here of Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, “For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God,” which is often rendered “For the glory of God is the human person fully alive.” Irenaeus, Against Heresies (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2007), Book 4, 20:7.
201 Ephesians 2:15.
others.” Emil Brunner points the way forward, highlighting the full import of the relational image:

This means the discovery of a new idea of humanity, which does not find the distinctively human element, the core of humanity, in the creative or perceptive reason, but in community, as the fulfillment of responsibility.

Loving one another is both the place in which we discover who we are and who we are called to be and the place where we learn what it means to be created in the image of the divine.

b. Barriers to recognition

As we have observed, a commitment to valuing and respecting people with intellectual disabilities shapes one’s response to various interpretations of the *imago Dei*. In investigating the ethical motivation and formation of direct support professionals, we are committed to that view of the divine that does not relegate people with intellectual disabilities to second-class human beings.

Theoretical and theological analysis can only take us so far in exploring ethical motivation and formation. Efforts to locate the *imago Dei* in this or that quality of being human inevitably fall short, failing to capture the fundamental moral obligation and moral formation that we seek to identify. In relating Levinas’ *trace* of God to the *face of the other*, we found a description that does not articulate a theory of ethical motivation. Rather, Levinas gestures towards the phenomenological experience of encountering one another as created in God’s image. Perhaps Levinas has articulated better than Brunner what it means that “Man’s relation to God is not to be understood from the point of view of reason, but reason is to be understood from the point of view of man’s relation to God.” Even human beings’ relation to God “is not to be understood” in any conventional sense of intellectual capacity. We *encounter* God’s image in one another.

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203 Reynolds, 177.
205 Ibid., 102.
before we ever come to understand, to “recognize,” that it is God’s image that we encounter.

I am reminded of Christ’s encounter with his disciples on the Road to Emmaus. As the two disciples were walking, “Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him.”206 It is not until later, when Christ breaks bread with the disciples that their “eyes were opened and they recognized him.”207 He then disappears. Still, there was a deeper part of their experience that encountered Christ even while on the journey. “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”208 Is this not the same encounter we have with one another? To recognize each other as created in God’s image is a gift, a revelation that cannot be summoned by intellectual prowess. It always arrives too late, following our encounter with the divine. The best we can do of our own accord is to confront the barriers that prevent us from recognizing these encounters.

In the chapters that follow, I will demonstrate the limits of recognition of God’s image as we encounter others, ourselves, and God. We will discover that even in “thinking through” the imago Dei as we encounter God we are caught up in mystery and revelation, that which we cannot describe because we do not understand it, and that which we may only understand because we have received it. Even revelation comes from “outside” of ourselves and cannot be mustered by our intellectual capacity. The accounts that we can give of ethical formation, as with motivation, only go so far. In seeking to give an account of moral action and calling upon others to do the same, we rely upon myths of transparency. To leave space for moral obligation, we must not only recognize the limited possibility of intelligible accounts of a Christian teleology of love but acknowledge the epistemic limits of our understanding as we encounter the mysterious imago Dei in our neighbours.

207 Luke 24:31
208 Luke 24:32
CHAPTER FIVE: The myth of the transparent other

The initial obligation, motivation, I feel towards the person I support – the person I encounter – precedes any rational strategy or intellectual conception of “the Good.” With time I may be able to “put words” to the sense of obligation I feel, as Emmanuel Levinas does with the face of the other. Those words and that understanding do not serve to justify the initial impulse only to give it expression. We came to recognize this moral obligation towards every other human being as one of the functions of the Judeo-Christian concept of the imago Dei.

The “material” formulation of the imago Dei, as Brunner describes it, may involve extensive theological and ethical development of what it means to imitate God, by resembling God in love (Kierkegaard). Christian moral teleology depends upon this development, yet it only becomes possible out of the source of love that originates with God.

Between the initial ethical encounter with the face of the other – an obligation that Levinas describes as pre-ontological – and a developed theological anthropology as the imitatio Dei, there exist significant barriers of comprehension and interpretation. If we are to be faithful to the principle of humility established in Chapter Four, we must explore this range with the desire to understand what can and what cannot be understood, taught, and rationally understood in ethical formation for direct support professionals serving people with intellectual disabilities in Christian service.

Over the next three chapters, we will see how the impulse to view others, ourselves, and God as comprehensible (‘transparent’) undermines the very moral obligation that serves as the foundation of all ethical interaction. In this first chapter, we confront the potential barriers to encountering others as created in God’s image. It is in facing these barriers that we come to realize that the problem arises in our relation to ourselves and ultimately, in our understanding of God.

a. Encountering the imago Dei in my neighbour

“I never could understand how it’s possible to love one’s neighbors. In my opinion, it is precisely one’s neighbors that one cannot possibly love... It’s
It is often easier to welcome or embrace one’s neighbour in the abstract than in “the flesh.” It is possible to recognize intellectually that people are created in God’s image without loving them in actuality. Ivan goes on to say, “If we’re to come to love a man, the man himself should stay hidden, because as soon as he shows his face – love vanishes.” It is one thing to identify the theoretical and abstract need to promote flourishing by loving one’s neighbour and quite another to love one’s neighbour “up close,” or face-to-face. If one seeks to imitate God by loving one’s neighbour, an intellectual comprehension of the neighbour as created in God’s image abstractly does not go far enough. We must love the person who stands before us, encountering the imago Dei in them.

**Adam and the transparency myth**

I have previously referenced Henri Nouwen’s writing about his time spent with *Adam*. Nouwen grew to care for and be friends with Adam despite Nouwen’s initial hesitations and fears. Through one lens, Nouwen’s reflection on Adam is a beautiful picture of “being present” with people with disabilities. Nouwen learned much through his time with Adam and Adam became his “trusted listener.”²¹⁰ In these circumstances, however, it can be easy to believe that the other person has become “transparent” to us. In our intimate knowledge of the other, we can reduce their mystery to fit the image that we have of them instead of being an opportunity for further discovery. Any time someone seems to conform too closely to the story that we tell ourselves about them, it is time to stop and challenge our assumptions.

²⁰⁹ As quoted in Reynolds, 216.

Throughout the book, Nouwen represents Adam as “an image of the living Christ.”²¹¹ I must be wary of my own projections any time I base someone’s role primarily on how they fit into my account of myself. Our assumptions can define others rather than allowing ourselves to be open to their experience of the world. A striking example of this is when Nouwen observes, “A few times when I was so pushy he responded by having a grand mal seizure, and I realized that it was his way of saying, ‘Slow down, Henri! Slow down.’”²¹² Indeed, Adam having a grand mal seizure may be a good indication that Nouwen needs to slow down. However, the significance of this seizure in the life of Adam goes far beyond being a learning opportunity for Nouwen.

Nouwen recognized the human propensity to project into the life of another. One example of this occurs when another friend visits and comes away with a very different perception of Adam. Nouwen writes, “I quickly realized that he was not seeing the same Adam I was seeing. What my friend was saying made sense to him because he didn’t really ‘see’ Adam.”²¹³ Rather than allowing this experience to challenge his own assumption of “seeing” Adam, the implication here is that Nouwen did see the authentic Adam while his friend did not.

We tend to minimize the ability of people with intellectual disabilities to express the full range of human emotions. In the case of many people with intellectual disabilities, often we assign only the best feelings or intentions to their lives and actions. We assume that their intentions have become transparent to us.

**GIVING AN ACCOUNT: WIDENING THE WELCOME**

I will never forget sitting with a small group of church leaders and community organizers as we learned what it might look like to "widen the welcome" with people with intellectual disabilities. Several representatives from a nearby group home had joined the conversation. They were each unique and brought important perspectives to the conversation. One of the well-meaning church ladies turned to a woman with Down syndrome, “I’m just so inspired by you.

²¹¹ Ibid., 15.
²¹² Ibid., 47.
²¹³ Ibid., 53.
Everything you do is so filled with joy.” Without a second thought, the woman with Down syndrome responded, “I hate my life.”

This, more than any other experience, has challenged my assumptions about people with intellectual disabilities. I never want to be in the seat of judgement that colours someone else’s life with a single brushstroke. May I always stop to listen and learn what life looks like through their eyes.

Similar to this encounter with the churchwoman and the woman with Down syndrome, when we read Adam’s story, there is little to make us believe that Adam was capable of doing wrong in Nouwen’s eyes. What might be called “sin” in the lives of others is written off as “little vices” for Adam. What is striking is Nouwen’s failure to complexify the account or acknowledge the mystery of Adam’s life and experience. In writing Adam’s story, Nouwen observes, “I didn’t embellish it. I didn’t soften or sweeten it. I tried to write it as simply and directly as I could. I am a witness of Adam’s truth.” In another place, Nouwen writes, “I am convinced that Adam was chosen to witness to God’s love through his brokenness. To say this is not to romanticize him or to be sentimental... He became a revelation of Christ among us.”

As we get to know others, we face the danger of feeling that we have “arrived” at an understanding of who they are. We are tempted to reduce the other person’s life to the impact they have had on us – especially if it is a positive impact. We understand the person in light of our transformation and discovery instead of challenging us to continue to discover how they experience the world. Nouwen writes, “He simply lived and by his life invited me to receive his unique gift, wrapped in weakness but given for my transformation.” That Nouwen was transformed by his encounter with Adam is beyond question. That Adam was given for Nouwen’s transformation risks perpetuating the instinct to see people with disabilities as objects for our own inspiration and edification instead of as complex, mysterious, and unique people created in God’s

214 Ibid., 22.
215 Ibid., 126.
216 Ibid., 30.
217 Ibid., 55.
image. Nouwen has fallen prey to a transparency myth: That Adam could be “seen” for his “real self.”

As I grew closer to Adam, I came to experience his most beautiful heart as the gateway to his real self, to his person, his soul, and his spirit. His heart, so transparent, reflected for me not only his person but also the heart of the universe and, indeed, the heart of God.218

As Hans Reinders observes regarding this passage, “It appears that Nouwen’s claim to the transparency of Adam’s heart is simply saying too much. God’s unconditional love means that he is with Adam, but how the relationship between them affects Adam’s soul is something I don’t think we should pretend to know.”219

It is evident that Nouwen’s relationship with Adam left a lasting impact on his life and ministry. Nouwen’s writing on that relationship has gone on to affect thousands of readers around the world. However, one wonders how Adam might give an account of his own life. Nouwen’s story leaves little room for the complexity of a full human life. As Reinders rightly articulates, “Adam’s heart is a mystery that only God knows.”220 In Nouwen’s account, we miss the beauty of allowing Adam to have his own story, one that is as mysterious as it is revelatory. In turn, we accept Nouwen’s projection of his own story onto Adam’s “heart.”

We all face the temptation to rush to give an account of others. As thousands read Nouwen’s account of Adam, many readers will accept Nouwen’s account of Adam’s life as unproblematic. Unfortunately, many of these readers will not avail themselves of similar opportunities to get to know – and possibly befriend – someone with an intellectual disability. All they know is Nouwen’s retelling.

These retellings are inevitably reductionist. Accounts given by others or the stories we tell about others never fully capture the mysterious complexity that we encounter in people created in the imago Dei. Often, as in the case of Adam, these

218 Ibid., 50.
219 Reinders, Receiving the Gift of Friendship, 373. See also 372 where Reinders points to Nouwen’s Christology as an important point of illumination for Nouwen’s interaction with Adam.
220 Ibid., 374.
stories fail to depict the person being described as a moral agent demonstrating the full range of sin and virtue. These stories portray others as villain or saviour, hardly ever as an opaque and ambiguous composition of the two. Perhaps even more tragically, people with intellectual disabilities may be perceived as “amoral,” incapable of ethical action and responsibility. In this way, the tyranny of transparency myths expects us to paint a picture in black and white. The resultant image is a watered-down version of a human being rather than a full image-bearer of the divine.

Indeed, it is this temptation to reduce the lives of others to a simple story that so often prevents us from getting to know them in the first place. Once we have “classified” others, we may no longer see their story as worth the effort to get to know. The account we give limits the possibility of a mutually-enriching journey of discovery together.

There are myriad forces at work in our initial interactions with others. Presuppositions of transparency often reinforce instinctual rejection of those whose embodiment differs from our own. We are profoundly incarnational beings. Just as our beliefs regarding the image of God shape and colour our encounters with people made in God’s image, so our assumptions about the Word become flesh form our interactions with others and are shaped by ‘the flesh’ of others. In the section that follows, we explore instinctual barriers that prevent us from encountering the image of God in others, and the way in which the incarnation can serve to disrupt these presuppositions.

As we investigate the ethical motivation and formation of direct support professionals, between an initial impulse of moral obligation and any understanding of moral formation lies our problematic psychological and embodied reactions to those who are “other.” Without confronting our embodied prejudices, we stand little chance of getting from the initial ethical impulse to an understanding of what it means to resemble God in love.

**b. Word become Flesh: Embodiment and its discontents**

Seeing is the most astonishing of our natural powers. It receives the light, the first of all that is created, and as the light does it conquers darkness and chaos. It creates for us an ordered world, things distinguished from each other and from us. Seeing shows us their unique countenance and the larger
whole to which they belong. Wherever we see, a piece of the original chaos is transformed into creation. We distinguish, we recognize, we give a name, we know. “I have seen” – that means in Greek “I know.”

~ Paul Tillich

Writers often use sight as a metaphor for understanding, and light for revelation or truth. These metaphors permeate Western thought, particularly through the Enlightenment but tracing back through ancient Greek philosophy. We think, for instance, of the allegory of the cave where Plato equates the light of the sun with the revelation of truth, in contrast to the shadows on the wall of the cave. Unfortunately, these metaphors do a disservice to people who are blind or visually impaired. They subconsciously associate loss of sight with a lack of intelligence. Sight metaphors are so ingrained in language that to address cognition, recognition, and understanding, one must come to terms with how we employ sighted metaphors.

Vision and light metaphors mirror our cognitive processes in various ways. As our understanding of the mechanism of sight has evolved, then, so has our perception of how we relate to truth. Gavin Frances writes in *Adventures in Human Being*, “Ancient Greek opinion was that vision was possible because of a divine fire in the eye – the lens was a kind of transmitter that beamed energy into the world.” Plato held this theory, yet Aristotle began to question it. Why, then, could we not see in the dark? English philosopher Roger Bacon attempted a compromise between the ancient and modern understandings: “The soul reaches out from the lens in a projection which ‘ennobles’ our environment, but that environment projects itself back into the eyes.”

Through the work of astronomers and scientists such as Johannes Kepler and Isaac Newton, we came ‘to see’ objects of sight primarily as the work of light and physical objects outside of ourselves. While this classical understanding was considered scientifically accurate, it remained to determine whether the classical understanding

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223 Ibid.
was helpful when transferred to our metaphors. Recent theories of consciousness lead us to believe that human beings are “prediction machines,” a world in which our projections, more than our physical environment, determine how we experience our world. Anil K. Seth, professor of cognitive and computational neuroscience at the University of Sussex, writes: “People consciously see what they expect, rather than what violates their expectations.” In other words, signals that we receive from the ‘outside world’ consist primarily of mistakes in our predictions, rather than what that is actually ‘there’. Most of our conscious experience follows a predictive path, which accepts visual cues as confirmation of that which we have already ‘projected’. Seth continues, “A number of experiments are now indicating that consciousness depends more on perceptual predictions, than on prediction errors.”

The pages that follow argue that intellectual perception is more closely related to ancient understandings of sight and contemporary research on consciousness than to classical theories of perception. Our knowledge of others involves more projection than it does observation. Our already-established predictions of who and what people are or are not outweigh our openness and ability to ‘take in’ others. Put differently: we regularly fail to recognize that we encounter the image of God in people with intellectual disabilities because of our own intellectual presuppositions and understanding.

1. The power of projection

The beginning of this love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. If in loving them we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to ourselves, then we do not love them: we only love the reflection of ourselves we find in them.

~ Thomas Merton

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225 Ibid.

226 Thomas Merton, No Man Is an Island (Boston: Shambhala, 2005), 177.
Embodied encounters involve a strange crossover of both sides of the metaphor of sight. As researchers of political races discovered, our beliefs about a person’s character are closely tied to our initial visual glance of them. In *First Impressions, Making Up Your Mind After a 100-Ms Exposure to a Face*, researchers discovered that it only takes a tenth of a second to form an impression of a stranger from their face. Longer exposures did not significantly change these initial impressions, though longer exposures may boost confidence in these first judgments. How often, then, might our embodied reactions to others dismiss meaningful spiritual encounters before they have even begun?

Flannery O’Connor was an American writer who delved deep into the subconscious prejudices of the society that surrounded her. She brought these prejudices “to light” and illustrated them in her work, painting caricatures of people as they were seen and then subverting the often racist, sexist, or ablest projections of her day. In *Flannery O’Connor’s Encounter with Mary Ann Long*, Kathleen Lipovski-Helal explores O’Connor’s interaction with a young girl who only lived until the age of 12. Cancer disfigured Mary Ann Long’s face. The growth of her tumor led to “blood transfusions, radium, X-rays, and the removal to one of her eyes, but the tumor continued to grow.” Driven by an instinctual repulsion, O’Connor initially rejected a request to write about Mary Ann. O’Connor later changed her mind about introducing this young girl’s story after an extended time gazing upon a photo of Mary Ann’s face and wrestling through her initial response. Lipovski-Helal goes on to argue that this encounter profoundly influenced O’Connor’s writing. In *Flannery O’Connor: Writing a Theology of Disabled Humanity*, Timothy Basselin echoes this point. He points to a letter where O’Connor specifically references “the Mary Ann piece” as something that future readers would need to understand to comment on her work. Basselin

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229 Ibid.
concludes, “To accept what we perceive as good to be from God is a simple matter. To be able to look into the face of Mary Ann and see a face ‘full of promise,’ a face that is fully given and not half-taken or half-full of promise, is entirely different.”

Throughout the stories that follow, O’Connor wrestles with the tension of ‘the grotesque’. She writes in reflection, “Few have stared at [the good] long enough to accept the fact that its face too is grotesque, that in us the good is something under construction.” Where we are often driven by our instinctual reactions to ‘the grotesque,’ O’Connor found deep meaning in wrestling through her tendency to dismiss based on appearance. In each one of us, the good is “under construction,” no matter how hard we work to disguise our vulnerabilities and limitations.

The particular contribution of O’Connor on the topic of disability, according to Basselin, is at this intersection of goodness and the grotesque. “Her grotesque characters challenge readers’ perceptions of ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ exposing the perceived good – whether it be sympathy, human progress, or ‘good’ country people – as actually well-endowed with original sin.”

O’Connor effectively problematizes the myth of the transparent other. Her characters are anything but transparent, to themselves or others. They are deeply mysterious and complex. Basselin observes that O’Connor’s “constant struggle as a writer was to make mystery real to those in the modern world whom she said were ‘a generation that has been made to feel that the aim of learning is to eliminate”

230 Ibid.


232 From Flannery O’Connor’s memoir, as quoted in Basselin, 5.

233 When considering Mary Ann or O’Connor herself, who was diagnosed with lupus just as she became a professional writer, we must be cautious to recognize the difference between illness and disability. Much damage has been done by equating the two. Disability does not always entail suffering, and many people with disabilities see it as an essential part of their identity rather than an aspect of their life that they are trying to “fix.” Nonetheless, there can be overlap between perception of disability and that of illness. Many people with disabilities would share O’Connor’s observation, “I believe that the basic experience of everyone is the experience of human limitation.” [Basselin, 10].

234 Ibid., 33.
mystery.’” In the short story *Revelation*, for instance, Mrs. Turpin’s perception of who would enter the Kingdom of heaven first is severely challenged. It is not the “God-lovin’ country folk” who rise to heaven first, but “battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs.” The world is much more mysterious than Mrs. Turpin’s prejudice makes space for, and those Mrs. Turpin perceives as grotesque are those from whom she has the most to learn about what it means to enter the Kingdom. Through all, O’Connor’s project is profoundly theological.

O’Connor wants us to look into the face of the grotesque and recognize Christ on the cross as the ultimate good… The mystery of the grotesque was more than a philosophical vantage point for her, more than a new paradigm of understanding. The mystery became real as it was mannered, just as God could not simply give new instructions but had to be enfleshed and had to suffer. The mystery is Christ’s mystery. It is unwritable, yet its possibility can be felt in the afterglow of O’Connor’s stories.

The beauty of O’Connor’s stories is that they are just this, stories. They are stories with a richness and a depth born out of a life wrestling with disability and suffering, but they are stories nonetheless. Similarly, our own projections onto the embodiment of others are stories. All too often, we tell ourselves stories about others based on our initial perceptions of who they are, based on first impressions. We give an account of others, not based on a longsuffering relationship of knowing and loving but based on a momentary glance or brief encounter. We spin a fictional tale out of a reaction of fear – be it fear of what it might be like to be similarly embodied, fear of not being able to connect through difference, or fear of encountering our own vulnerabilities. Just as Flannery O’Connor problematizes easy transparency in her literature, so must we problematize this easy transparency in the stories we tell ourselves about those whom we meet. In doing so, we begin to see that the grotesque lies not in the embodiment of another, but in our fear. It is by confronting the grotesque *in ourselves* that we may

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235 Ibid., 36.  
236 Ibid., 39.  
237 Ibid., 32.
begin to see the beauty in those around us and come to experience the beauty of friendship.

In entering into direct support, countless others and I, along with Nouwen, are confronted with the stories we tell ourselves about the people we encounter. They may not be “grotesque” in any way like Flannery O’Connor experienced Mary Ann Long, yet each person has their peculiarities and unique qualities which we might deem “other.” The ethical approach challenges these assumptions – the stories I tell myself about the other. I must embrace the good, in me, as a work in progress as well. Even my tendency to reduce others to my perception of them is a work in progress.

Research bears it out that an ugly trail of isolation and loneliness follows in the wake of a society unable to recognize its grotesque presuppositions. Available evidence suggests that up to half of persons with intellectual disability are chronically lonely, compared with 15–30% of people in the general population.238 We have come a long way in people with intellectual disabilities being present in the community. Unfortunately, while presence is a good start, it does not necessarily mean deep social connection or friendship. Research has found “that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities have few friends and mostly they name other disability service users, staff, and family members as their friends.”239 Friendship is an invaluable aspect of our embodied experience as human beings, yet people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are at increased risk of being marginalized and excluded. Tragically the opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to form deep and meaningful connections are often abandoned before the person has the opportunity to be known, simply based on misperception and mis-projection. I have experienced this first hand as I see gawking onlookers gaze at people I support as we walk together. Little do they know that the possibility of friendship exists if only they were willing to say “hello.”

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238 Linda Gilmore and Monica Cuskelly, 192.
239 Angela Amado Novak et al., 362.
2. The divine grotesque

He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men... as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

~ Isaiah 63:1-3, ESV

The Real Face of Jesus appeared in Popular Mechanics in January 2015. In this article, Mike Fillion reports from the field of forensic anthropology how British scientists, assisted by Israeli archaeologists, roughly reconstructed what Jesus’ physical appearance may have been.240 The face that gazes out from the page is not like many, if any, depictions of the Son of God found in Western art. It is somewhat unremarkable, although decidedly Jewish and middle-Eastern. The eyes are perhaps curious or astonished more than stately and wise. The mouth neither smiles with profound and endless love nor is pursed as though set to take on the world. It is a face that has no beauty that we should desire it, no form or majesty that would cause us to take a second look. It is grotesque, not in the sense of being remarkable, but in its very unremarkability.

Studies confirming that initial, instinctual reactions to people’s physical appearance dramatically determine human judgments back up research on first impressions. In The Look of a Winner in Scientific American, the authors highlight a growing body of research indicating that “voters seem to be heavily influenced by a candidate’s appearance, and in particular the kinds of personality traits that a politician’s face projects.”241 Even children, to a remarkable extent, can predict the outcome of significant political competitions based merely on the physical appearance of the candidates.


Judging by the height of his contemporaries, there is a high probability that Jesus Christ was close to 5’1” – by no means a tall and stately figure by modern Western standards. An article in *The Leadership Quarterly* indicates that height also helps political candidates to succeed. “Candidates that were taller than their opponents received more popular votes, although they were not significantly more likely to win the actual election. Taller presidents were also more likely to be reelected. Also, presidents were, on average, much taller than men from the same birth cohort.”

We cannot predict with certainty the appearance of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. However, based on the prophecy of Isaiah, together with forensic anthropology and archaeology, we can be confident that Christ would not have resembled a leader that the modern Western world would follow based on instinctual impressions alone. It would not be the first time that God subverts notions of normalcy when choosing an earthly representative. Consider David’s unremarkable beginnings as the youngest son of Jesse, a shepherd. Upon surveying Jesse’s eldest son, the Lord says to Samuel,

“Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

Samuel comes face-to-face with the complex interplay between heart and height, between spirit and spectacle, between human eyes and divine perception.

The previous chapter identified Jesus Christ as the ‘material’ image of God, the “second Adam” in whom Christians find the pattern of true humanity. Despite being the model for humanity, John the Apostle writes succinctly, “He was in the world and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.” In paying attention to the particular ways in which we fail to recognize the image of God in Christ,

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242 Fillion, 2015.
244 1 Samuel 16:7, ESV.
245 John 1:10.
we may begin to understand the reasons why we similarly fail to recognize that we have encountered the image of God in people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Søren Kierkegaard pays particular attention to the unrecognizability of Christ on earth. In Christ, Kierkegaard observes, God has gone ‘incognito’: “And thus it is unrecognizability, the absolute unrecognizability, when one is God, then to become an individual human being.”\(^{246}\) There is a way in which being an individual human being is the “greatest possible distance, the infinitely qualitative distance, from being God, and therefore it is the most profound incognito.”\(^{247}\)

The unrecognizability of Christ plays a particular role in Kierkegaard’s theology. This “God-man” is a “sign of contradiction,” and, as such, is not comprehensible by the intellect. “Immediately, [the God-man] is an individual human being, just like others, a lowly, unimpressive human being, but now comes the contradiction – that he is God.”\(^{248}\) In being an “offense” to the intellect, the incarnation as a critical tenet of Christianity can only be an object of faith.\(^{249}\) Just as intellectual humility is a necessary in understanding the *imago Dei*, so intellectual humility for Kierkegaard is essential to encounter Christ through faith. To believe that we have transparently comprehended Christ by our intellectual prowess is simultaneously to reject faith in Christ as the God-man.

How might that which is beautiful, intellectually, be bound up in that which might be considered “ugly” or “grotesque” physically? How might our prejudiced reactions to other peoples’ experiences of embodiment hinder or prevent an encounter with the divine? Perhaps in the example of Christ – from whom we “hide our faces” – we learn that at times our instinctual responses, and our unquestioned acceptance of those


\(^{247}\) Ibid., 128.

\(^{248}\) Ibid., 126. In conversations around theology and disability, where people with severe cognitive disabilities are often perceived as being unable to intellectually grasp matters of faith, perhaps it is even easier for some to go beyond the “offence” to faith in Christ.

\(^{249}\) Ibid., 121.
first impressions, keep us from those relationships wherein we might find the greatest fulfillment.

3. The command to love

Christ knew first-hand the tragic impact of instinctual prejudice based on physical appearance and public ridicule. They encountered the transparency myth that suggests that one can judge a book by its cover. When one merely perceives, judges, and moves on, first impressions and the encounters that follow only serve to reinforce prejudice. This “pre-judging” will at times work in favour of the person encountered, as when their leadership qualities are upheld simply based on their height or gender, but more often than not this prejudice condemns those with “abnormal” embodiments to isolation and, at times, ridicule.

We return to here Kierkegaard’s questioning of preferential love. When love is based on one’s similarity to the one who is loved, this love is effortless and natural. However, for Kierkegaard, it is not Christian love. It is an extension of self-love: “Self-love and passionate preferential love are essentially the same.” 250 In this way, following first impressions of those with whom one has an immediate affinity only reinforces one’s initial opinion.

To embody true Christian love, Kierkegaard maintains that there must be something that pushes us beyond an initial love based on preference. There must be a divine command to love those from whom we are different. This command is found in the Great Commandment, to love our neighbour as ourselves. 251 Whereas preferential love chooses the one to love, Christian love “teaches us to love all people, unconditionally all.” 252

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250 Kierkegaard, Works of Love, 53.
252 Ibid., 50.
4. Outside-in: Toward the inward grotesque

Approved attributes and their relation to face make every man his own jailer; this is a fundamental social constraint even though each man may like his cell.\textsuperscript{253}

\textit{Erving Goffman}

This project investigates the \textit{ethical motivation and formation} of caregivers in Christian developmental service organizations. Its emphasis is not on how people with disabilities might be accepted by society, but in responding to the ethical call that recognizes every person as created in the image of God. Indeed, theologically, Christ does not command that each person present themselves as lovable to be loved by God and others. Instead, the command is to love God and one’s neighbour, with no indication that the one who is loved must change into one who is lovable.

Following the command to love God and to love one’s neighbour, Christ is asked: “who is my neighbour?”\textsuperscript{254} The example Christ gives of neighbourly love is completely unexpected, yet “comes across with disorienting clarity.”\textsuperscript{255} Thomas Reynolds observes, “Contrary to what we might expect, it is the half-breed heretic, the Samaritan, who offers himself and shows mercy.”\textsuperscript{256} The Good News of Christ points the way to a subversion of the cult of normalcy, not simply to ways of working within it. Christ has turned the question around. It is not who our neighbor is that matters – that is, who has prestige, who believes the right things, who has the body capital and thus deserves love and care. It is who we are as neighbors that matters, that is, how we act toward others set before us in their vulnerability as human beings.\textsuperscript{257}


\textsuperscript{254} Luke 10:29.

\textsuperscript{255} Reynolds, 221.

\textsuperscript{256} See Reynolds, p. 221.

\textsuperscript{257} Ibid., 222.
Reynolds goes on to describe the counter-cultural nature of Christ’s example, “This story artfully displays the radical reversal we have seen endemic to the kingdom of God. The vulnerable outcast welcomes the vulnerable victim. Neighborly love joins the two as kindred souls.” 258 If, as Goffman points out, society is like an asylum run by inmates, the Kingdom of Christ is an alternate society – one founded upon the command to love people who are on the margins because they may, in fact, be at the centre of what God is doing in the world. 259

According to Yong, the history of monstrosity, freakery, and disability “tells us less about those who are so labeled then it does about the dominant majority doing the labeling.” 260 Insofar as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so is all that it finds abhorrent and strange. The ‘beholder’ needs to be commanded to love with new vision, with a new – yet startlingly ancient – comprehension of the metaphor of sight. Yong continues, “The ‘monsters’ of the Western culture have represented its internal crises and vulnerabilities, its deepest fears, its enemies, the strangers in the midst, and the borders demarcating the unfamiliar, unknown and incomprehensible that have lurked within.” 261

With Yong’s observation, we have arrived at a strange intersection. Not only does stigma and projection represent the “internal crises and vulnerabilities” and “deepest fears” of Western culture, but we come face-to-face with “the borders demarcating the unfamiliar, unknown and incomprehensible that have lurked within” us. In encountering a neighbour who questions and challenges our presumptions of normalcy (as formed by the culture in which we find ourselves), we are forced to respond to our own incomprehensibility as a self formed by culture and yet responding within culture. Nietzsche once proclaimed, “He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And if you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also

258 Ibid.
259 Also Reynolds, the Beatitudes.
260 Amos Yong, Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2007), 84.
261 Ibid.
gazes into you.”\(^{262}\) But what if we were always, already the monster? What if the abyss is not something that we “find,” something that gazes into us, but we project this abyss onto the world around us through our gaze?

The horror that we attempt to circumnavigate is the realization that we profess a doctrine that human beings are created in the image of God, yet our actions simultaneously deny others the fullness of this image. We are confronted by mystery on all sides: the secret of the formation of self, and why we respond the way we do, the opacity of the neighbour whom we reject because they are incomprehensible to us, and the sublime hiddenness of a God who would appear as a human being without any beauty to attract us to him. It is in coming to understand our own initial presumptions and preconceptions that opens us to the possibility that we do not know ourselves as thoroughly as we first imagined. There is a profound mystery at the heart of what it means to be a human being, and that mystery is encountered both in my neighbour and within myself.

It is in a mysterious interplay between our fundamental ethical obligation to respond to the human other created in God’s image and the call to imitatio Dei of Christ’s command to love our neighbour wherein we begin to be formed into the fullness of God’s “material” image in us. Christ’s clear command to love our neighbour is a “higher calling” than our instinctual response to those who are different than us and is required to confront the intellectual preconceptions and presuppositions that prevent us from recognizing that we encounter the image of God in one another. This does not mean that everyone requires this command to act ethically. Instead, it says that those of us who have established myths of transparency in the accounts we give of others need Christ’s command to break down these myths and open us to love the neighbour we encounter.

As we will examine in Chapter Seven, if we genuinely believe that human beings are created in the image of God then it should be no wonder that we approach mystery as we encounter one another. Throughout scripture, God is both revealing and

\(^{262}\) Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Aphorism 146.
concealing himself, at once transparent in his imminence and opaque in his transcendence. In the section that follows, we continue to explore how the myth of transparency impacts the provision of direct support. The humility that was called for in our understanding of God’s image in us is the same humility that must guide our caregiving practices. We must come to terms with our limited epistemology in the same way that we must come to terms with the limits of our theology.

c. Complex dependency: Confronting the myth of transparency in the caregiving relationship

[T]he care I offer, and the care I receive, springs forth from... partial and sometimes misguided narratives.  

~ Stacy Clifford Simplican

In Care, Disability, and Violence: Theorizing Complex Dependency in Eva Kittay and Judith Butler, Stacy Clifford Simplican problematizes Eva Feder Kittay’s account of the caregiver that “privileges the ideal of transparency.” This ideal points to a relationship where “The perception of and response to another’s needs are neither blocked by nor refracted through our own needs and desires.” We observe here a myth of transparency inverse to that found in Henri Nouwen’s Adam, where Nouwen read his own story in Adam’s life. Kittay strives toward an ideal that Nouwen seems to have lost sight of, an account where the person receiving care is understood independent from Kittay’s own needs and desires.

The question that arises is not whether knowing the needs and desires of the person receiving care is preferable. Caregiving would be less-than-caring if the caregiver

\[\text{References:}\]


264 It is identified as an ideal because even Kittay acknowledges this complete understanding of the other will never be fulfilled in the caregiving relationship, even where the person supported is one’s child. [Ibid., 220.]

failed to listen to the needs of the person receiving care.\textsuperscript{266} One questions, however, whether another's needs will ever be completely transparent. Simplican goes further: is it feasible or even healthy for caregivers to abandon their own needs and desires to “adopt” the perspective of the person receiving support?

Eva Feder Kittay knows the person who receives her care better than many caregivers do. Sesha is her daughter. “[I]t is because I see Sesha close up, because I have a deep and intimate relationship with her, that I am able to see what is hidden from those who are not privileged enough to see her when she opens up to another.”\textsuperscript{267} Even then there are aspects that Kittay admits she doesn’t know. For instance, “What cognitive capacities Sesha possesses I do not know, nor do others. And it is hubris to presume to know.”\textsuperscript{268}

There exists a tension in Kittay between professions of intimate transparency with her daughter and the recognition that “no self is ever truly transparent in this sense.”\textsuperscript{269} Simplican argues that an expectation that a subject of care is transparent to the caregiver and the caregiver forfeits their own desires in this relationship is a dangerous and untenable position. She begins her paper with a stirring account of Sky Walker and his mother, Trudy. Sky had autism and was prone to violence. Trudy, worn down from lack of support systems and unable to take the steps needed to release her son into the more intensive care he needed, died after being severely beaten by Sky in 2010. Sky recognized what had happened with the words, “Sky sorry hit Momma.”

Devoted as a mother, Trudy in many ways subscribed to the transparency benchmark described above. There were many aspects at play here, yet it is difficult to deny that Trudy’s perspective led to an over-investment in Sky’s life and psyche. A year before her death, Trudy wrote the following letter:

\begin{verbatim}

\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{266} There are far too many examples of this already, from institutional settings, through compassion fatigue or burnout, in the actions of disengaged staff, or within abusive relationships.

\textsuperscript{267} Ibid., 406.

\textsuperscript{268} Kittay, \textit{The Personal Is Philosophical Is Political}, 405.

\textsuperscript{269} Eva Feder Kittay, "Why We Should Care about Caring," in \textit{Regulating Family Responsibilities}, ed. Craig Lind, Heather M. Keating, and Jo Bridgeman (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2013) quoted in Simplican, 220.
If this letter has been opened and is being read, it is because I have been seriously injured or killed by my son, Sky Walker. I love Sky with my whole heart and soul and do not believe he has intentionally injured me...

~ Trudy Steuernagel (Connors 2009)

Simplican describes Sky as having complex dependency. On the one hand, Sky was deeply reliant on Trudy and other caregivers and professionals. In this sense, Sky was vulnerable. At the same time, those same caregivers – Trudy primarily – were at risk of being seriously injured by Sky. He was vulnerable to Trudy, but Trudy was also vulnerable to Sky. It was a relationship of complex dependency, not simply one-way.

I have spent time with parents listening to them talk about the difficulty of describing the caregiving relationship. They want to be honest about their experiences. They know that these conversations are the way to preserve their own health and to get the support that they need. On the other hand, they do not want to stigmatize disability further nor perpetuate stereotypes of their children by describing negative interactions. Even when seeking additional assistance, they may be perceived as “part of the problem,” contributing to ableist perceptions of disability in society! Generally, these parents admitted to painting an idealized picture for friends and family rather than describe what life looked like for them. As can be seen with Trudy, a hope and longing for a better relationship than currently exists may be internalized as reality. It becomes difficult to see the actual state of affairs because one is so invested in the relationship, believing that they must completely put their own desires and needs aside in the caregiving relationship.

In reading the rest of Trudy Walker’s letter, it is apparent that she is determined and fearfully committed to saving her son from the perception that he acted maliciously, and the resultant consequences that might occur. She essentially attempts to release Sky from ethical accountability through her writing. Together with Simplican, I cannot help but wonder how the situation with Sky may have resolved differently if Trudy had not been so fearful of the ethical implications of the stories that she tells of life with her son.

Simplican turns to philosopher Judith Butler to provide another approach to care ethics, one that does not rely on a myth of transparency, or hubris of insight, within
which to ground morality. Simplican observes that Kittay’s emphasis on interdependence in her models should leave more room for opacity and mutuality in caregiving relationships. Kittay calls into question Enlightenment emphases on the primacy of reason yet, “In this regard, Kittay’s transparent self closely resembles the liberal self from which her theory means to depart. Both selves idealize cognitive capacities.”

Following Butler, Simplican notes,

> In attempting to have mastery over knowledge of another, we foreclose the ways in which identities are never closed but always in flux. In contrast, when opacity grounds our relationship with another we make room for each other—room to flourish, regress, hurt, and surprise.

> In examining the myth of the transparent other, our goal is not to foreclose the possibility of knowing others in profound ways. Rather, as we create space for the mysterious and opaque, we open doors to getting to know one another in more complex and authentic ways. The person I encounter, created in God’s image, always exceeds my ability or capacity to understand them or interpret their actions transparently. It is not that I need to create this “distance” from another in response to my calling: I will always have a certain distance from those I encounter. In acknowledging this distance, we open ourselves to the discovery of who each other is— to the possibility of revelation. We can no longer assume our initial accounts of others’ experiences do justice to the world that they inhabit or the bodies in which they dwell. We must “push back” against the presumption to mastery that appeals to our intellectual hubris, whether in philosophy, theology, or our interactions with those we encounter. As we require humility in interpreting the image of God, so we must embrace humility as we meet one another.

Chapter Five began with an exposition of the myth of transparency implicit in Henri Nouwen’s writing on Adam. Nouwen’s book is an example of the ways that people with intellectual disabilities are misrepresented, and the story of their lives can be interpreted through the lens of their able-bodied storyteller.

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270 Ibid., 221.

271 Ibid., 226.
Then, we examined how unaddressed projection colours our encounters with others who are different from us. The Incarnation demonstrates that even when God came in the flesh, those around him did not “recognize” him as the Son of God, in part due to his outward appearance and earthly embodiment. According to Kierkegaard, this “incognito” is essential to encountering Christ, who cannot be grasped by the intellect – only through faith.

Finally, in the writing of Stacy Simpican, the progression from the “other” to the “self” is complete. We come “to see” that it is indeed our understanding of ourselves, and the ways our needs and desires shape our encounters with others, that prevents us from recognizing our encounter with the divine image in people who are different than us. How our story shapes and determines the story that we tell about others has never been far from our investigation. It is to this story and the myth of the transparent self that we now turn.
CHAPTER SIX: The myth of the transparent self

a. Telling stories, giving an account

“The truth about stories is, that’s all we are.” 272

~ Thomas King

As human beings, we process our recognition (that is, our understanding) of others and ourselves primarily through stories – through the accounts we give. These accounts help us to make sense of the world around us. Autobiographical accounts framed the first chapter on being called to an other. We noted that every great philosophy, and perhaps every great theology, is “a confession of faith on the part of its author, and a type of involuntary and unself-conscious memoir.” 273 No project, no matter how well argued, is exempt from the intentions and directions of its author – conscious or unconscious.

At the intersection of theology and disability, it becomes apparent that Western, post-Enlightenment accounts do not do justice to the myriad voices and stories from within disability communities. Experiences of marginalization and stigma are often a direct result of practices of normalcy that tell stories about who human beings need to be. People whose accounts fall outside of these standards quickly experience rejection and prejudice. In churches, opinions on healing and prayer and how one is “supposed to behave” become problematic for similar reasons. Those who fall outside of these expectations may face difficult questions or be asked to leave. In short, stories that demand that one “give an account” according to a specific framework, without leaving room for mystery or openness to new experiences, have the potential to be oppressive to those who fall outside of said framework.


273 Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, 8.
The initial overview of imago Dei theology, then, draws from accounts shaped by the stories of people with disabilities. Rather than emphasizing intellectual competence as a defining characteristic of the image of God, or the ability to perform functions expected of those created in God’s image, this account stresses the relationality at the heart of God and the human experience. Rather than emphasizing autonomous individuality, this account focuses on community. Rather than highlighting the glory of able-bodied perfection, it considers how limitation brings people together to resemble Christ’s body on earth more closely. We discovered that our account regarding the *formal* image of God is remarkably limited. We must approach this image in one another with profound humility.

In the previous chapter, we came to understand that the account of the other that I “see” is also remarkably limited and deeply entwined with my own story. As we will continue to explore, the accounts we give of ourselves — particularly concerning our moral reasoning — are themselves limited and problematic. Alasdair MacIntyre has long been the forerunner in the philosophical exploration of *narrative ethics*. Just as our accounts of the *imago Dei* often overreach and leave little room for an ethics of responsibility, so we will see that our narratives tend to do the same. We presume the “intelligibility” of our own stories and look to the accounts that we give of ourselves as the litmus test for ethical accountability.

Our accounts of moral actions are problematic insofar as they attempt or claim to be “transparent” in their intentionality and understanding of our impetus to act. As such, we discover that we are not unlike people with intellectual or developmental disabilities when it comes to our intellectual clarity regarding our actions. The assumption that typically able persons can give a “reasonable” account of moral behaviour and the conditions that led to their actions is highly suspect.
1. MacIntyre and the intelligibility of our stories

According to Alasdair MacIntyre, “Narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions,” and “any specific account of the virtues presupposes an equally specific account of the narrative structure and unity of a human life and vice versa.” Human beings are “story-telling animals,” and one’s ability to situate oneself ethically in the world depends on the story one tells about oneself, and the stories one has been told.

The question I wish to raise is not primarily whether we are story-telling animals, rather the role mystery and opacity play in story-telling. MacIntyre admits that we find ourselves “in the middle” of stories. The narratives one finds oneself in will never be simple or easy to interpret, as one is always a co-author and never the sole author of one’s story. “We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making.” Similarly, ‘actors’ are not able to proceed exactly as they would see fit; “Each character is constrained by the actions of others and by the social settings presupposed in his and their actions...” We encounter a great deal of unpredictability, as we “do not know what will happen next.”

Despite these agreements to the limits human beings face in the act of story telling, MacIntyre emphasizes the intelligibility of actions. Not only do we need to know

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274 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 242.
275 Ibid., 243.
277 In After Virtue, “What the agent is able to do and say intelligibly as an actor is deeply affected by the fact that we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives” (MacIntyre, After Virtue, 248) or “In evaluating a life what kind of unity are we ascribing to it? It is the unity of a narrative, often a complex narrative, of which the agent who enacts it is at once subject and author, or rather coauthor.” Alasdair C. MacIntyre, Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 231.
278 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 248.
279 Ibid., 249.
280 Ibid., 150.
which intentions are at work, but also “Where intentions are concerned, we need to know which intention or intentions were primary.” Substantial moral credibility is determined by this intelligibility. Where transparency concerning the intelligibility of action serves to determine ethical value, people with intellectual disabilities are susceptible to being seen as “second-class moral agents.” According to this view, people with intellectual disabilities face difficulty determining the intent and intelligibility of their action in the accounts they give of their lives. Now, if MacIntyre was able to demonstrate that our actions are, in fact, intelligible and this should be the core determinant of the morality of an action, then we must resign ourselves to this reality. I argue that MacIntyre’s account is more problematic than he leads us to believe.

To illustrate his position, MacIntyre provides the example of a man gardening. One must know whether he is primarily gardening because it is a healthy activity or because it pleases his wife. In order to understand this, MacIntyre continues, we would need to

know the answer to such questions as whether he would continue gardening if he continued to believe that gardening was a healthful exercise, but discovered that his gardening no longer pleased his wife, and whether he would continue gardening, if he ceased to believe that gardening was healthful exercise, but continued to believe that it pleased his wife, and whether he would continue gardening if he changed his beliefs on both points.

Until we can answer such questions, MacIntyre asserts, “We shall not know how to characterize correctly what the agent is doing.” However, unless a man’s gardening ends in a court conviction, there are few instances in which his explicit and primary intent is vital to ascertain. Most of the time we are unconscious of our intentions in

281 Ibid., 240.
282 Ibid., 241.
283 In a similar vein, MacIntyre later poses the question of an autobiography of the life of Thomas Becket: what genre does it belong to? Should it be medieval hagiography? Perhaps saga hero, or a tragedy? “Now it clearly makes sense to ask who is right, if anyone... The answer appears to be clearly the last. The true genre of the life is neither hagiography nor saga, but tragedy.” Ibid., 247.
carrying out activities to such an extent that we would be able to determine precisely our primary motivation.284

The stories of our lives can be told, understood, and re-told in countless ways. Some of these ways of storytelling have greater or lesser degrees of coherence to them. These stories reveal clues as to our intent to varying degrees, yet all reveal certain aspects while simultaneously leaving much of the account hidden and opaque.

As supporters of people with intellectual disabilities, the stories we hear from those we support may not match what we understand to be “the facts.” If intelligibility is the ultimate priority, then the process of separating fact from fiction could be an all-consuming task.

However, as social psychology demonstrates, difficulty in determining the intelligibility of stories is not confined to those of people with intellectual disabilities. Everyone has a propensity to see their own actions as being in the ‘right’ and the other’s actions less charitably.285 We judge other’s actions by the effect that it has on us, rather than by any genuine indicator as to their motivation. In conflict mediation, it often takes hours of hard, emotional work to get close to a believable intent behind actions taken. In many situations, those undergoing mediation do not even have a semblance of clarity regarding their own intent or the interests that are driving their positions, until far into the process.

As we look to the Christian tradition of moral formation, Christ references this propensity to view ourselves differently than others in Matthew 7,

And why worry about a speck in your friend’s eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying to your friend, ‘Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,’ when you can’t see past the log in your own

284 MacIntyre would not claim that this same investigative practice needs to be undertaken regarding all intents, as our practices are determined by our independent practical reasoning and so much of our acting is done precisely without specifically questioning our intentions. However, according to MacIntyre, in order to establish the morality of any of these accounts, the intent must be “clear.”

285 This area of inquiry is known as attribution theory.
We have a deep natural tendency to see the world through rose-tinted glasses rather than in light of our moral failings. We are quick to judge the intent, the intelligibility, or the ethical shortcomings of others’ actions and slow to reflect on our own shortcomings. We each confess along with Paul that “we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.”

2. The myth of the transparent self

László Tengelyi’s critique of MacIntyre in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* further illustrates MacIntyre’s treatment of *opacity*. Tengelyi draws on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty; in meeting the embodied other, we encounter what is “beyond the objective body as the sense of the painting is beyond the canvas.” There is *something* that cannot be recognized, comprehended, or understood in the other. Within the Christian tradition, Chapter Four points to our fundamental ethical obligation to one another as created in God’s image as this incomprehensible dignity. Levinas would point to the *trace* of the infinite, the trace of God, as that which holds us responsible to the other. Tengelyi likens this “strangeness” in our encounters with one another to the “strangeness” in a painting. We may try to domesticate this strangeness – what Tengelyi refers to as a “wild region” of human life – within our framework of understanding. Ultimately, we will be unable to do so. On Tengelyi’s account, this region is beyond all culture and cannot be comprehended within an intelligible story. Tengelyi argues that “the ground of selfhood is to be sought not in the unity of a narrated life story, or in life as a complex of told stories, but in life as a totality of lived

286 Matthew 7:1-5, NLT.
287 1 Corinthians 13:12, NASB.
experiences.” There are always aspects of these experiences that escape narrativity. Parts of these experiences may be ignored, dismissed, or repressed in story “but they leave significant traces in our lives and may reemerge in striking ways.” For Tengely, “To understand life in narrative terms is to confer upon it a coherence that it does not possess and to disguise that which belongs to the wild.” In the context of this project, Tengely’s argument points to a mystery at the heart of the human experience that goes beyond our ability to tell a coherent, intelligible story about it. This mystery is present in our self-awareness, and it is present when we attempt to make precise judgments about the intentionality of others.

In *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, MacIntyre responds as follows,

Tengely is of course right in holding that there are in every life experiences whose significance we do not know how to spell out, let alone to reckon with, experiences that threaten the coherence of our lives. He is right too in stressing our tendency to disguise from ourselves our awareness of their significance and in pointing out that one way in which we do this is by telling stories that conceal their place in our lives. Yet none of this is incompatible with my central contention. For how we reckon or fail to reckon with such experiences is a central issue for all of us, and there is always a story to be told about it. We can acknowledge the incoherence and unintelligibility of this or that aspect of our lives in a coherent and intelligible narrative without disguising or misrepresenting the incoherence and unintelligibility. Indeed, there is no other way of acknowledging them adequately.

Within MacIntyre’s frame of reference, he has addressed the problem that Tengely poses. The best way to understand the incoherence and unintelligibility of “this or that aspect of our lives” lies in either attempting to describe and understand it better or acknowledging the incoherence and unintelligibility *within* the account that one gives

289 Tengely, xix.
290 MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 239. Note the similarity of “trace” language with Levinas.
291 Ibid.
292 Ibid.
of oneself. Put differently, the intelligibility and transparency of the story continue to be the primary value of MacIntyre’s framework. It is not that the incoherence needs to be understood, rather “giving an account” of those areas of incoherence is deemed enough to render intelligibility again. We must “acknowledge” this incoherence, and this is adequate in the quest for a coherent account.

My intent here is not to call into question the role of story in learning about one another, in discovering who people are or even in wrestling through teleological understandings of “the good” in this or that aspect of the human experience. Indeed, to learn how best to imitate Christ relies upon the account given of his life, ministry, and words as contained in the pages of the New Testament. I am rather attempting, along with Tengelyi, Levinas, and Kierkegaard, to establish limits on our epistemic hubris. The weight of moral obligation — the root of moral motivation — arises from our initial givenness, not our ability to describe our actions in an intelligible way. It our encounter with the imago Dei in one another that grounds ethical action, not our ability to recognize this imago. This being said, intellectual investigation can serve to confront myths of transparency that cloud our recognition that this encounter with the imago grounds ethical action and response.

It is evident how the “tyranny of transparency” plays out in the lives of many people with intellectual disabilities. Unable to meet the demand of intelligibility, their stories are often relegated to the realm of the “incomprehensible.” Rather than expressing the profound dignity of the human experience, contradictory or ambiguous account-giving relegates people to second-class humanity. This is precisely what the Christian conception of the formal imago Dei seeks to confront. We must begin to hear these stories as expressions of the mystery of what it means to be created in God’s image.

Making space for the incoherence and un-verifiability of stories and intent is not only necessary for people with intellectual disabilities, however. Our accounts often cannot bear the weight of the ethical accountability we prescribe. Human beings are not only story-telling animals but in many ways irrational story-telling animals. The function of our stories is not primarily to express intelligibility or rationality. Studies on game theory, performative contradictions, cognitive biases and even the research
referenced previously on first impressions, prejudice, and consciousness make this abundantly clear.\textsuperscript{293} Robert Wright notes in \textit{The Moral Animal}, “Human beings are a species splendid in their array of moral equipment, tragic in their propensity to misuse it, and pathetic in their constitutional ignorance of the misuse.”\textsuperscript{294}

The strength of Tengelyi’s critique of MacIntyre lies not in revealing a contradiction in MacIntyre’s thought, instead in exposing the possibility and primacy of transparency as one of its implicit assumptions.

\textbf{3. Dependent Rational Animals}

In \textit{Dependent Rational Animals}, MacIntyre makes great strides in connecting his previous work to the vulnerability of human beings and the role of community. “We human beings are vulnerable to many kinds of affliction and most of us are at some time afflicted by serious ills. How we cope is only in small part up to us.”\textsuperscript{295} He goes on to describe how in moral philosophy, people with disabilities are almost always described as subjects of benevolence “by moral agents who are themselves presented as though they were continuously rational, healthy and untroubled.”\textsuperscript{296} MacIntyre proposes that habits of the mind tend to neglect the bodily aspects of our existence, as we like to see ourselves as significantly different from other animals. Human thought and rationality, rather, is closely connected to our animality and is the thinking of one species of animal. “[I]t is true of us that we do not merely have, but are our bodies.”\textsuperscript{297} MacIntyre notes

\textsuperscript{293} This research has now made its way into popular books such as \textit{Predictably Irrational} by Dan Ariely, \textit{You are Not as Smart as You Think You Are} by David McRaney, \textit{The Happiness Hypothesis} by Jonathan Haidt, and \textit{Willpower Instinct} by Kelly McGonigal to name a few. As Machiavelli observed, “the great majority of mankind are satisfied with appearances, as though they were realities, and are often more influenced by the things that seem than by those that are” [as quoted in Jonathan Haidt, \textit{The Happiness Hypothesis: Putting Ancient Wisdom and Philosophy to the Test of Modern Science} (London: Arrow, 2006), 61.] This may not be significant if it were only certified narcissists and sociopaths who choose to bend reality to suit their own gain, however as Jonathan Haidt writes, “From the person who cuts you off on the highway all the way to the Nazis who ran the concentration camps, most people think they are good people and that their actions are motivated by good reasons.” [Ibid., 62.]


\textsuperscript{295} MacIntyre, \textit{Dependent Rational Animals}, 1.

\textsuperscript{296} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{297} Ibid., 6.
that Aristotle failed to give weight to the experiences of great swaths of people who were in some way dependent or afflicted, and sets the standard of “the magnanimous man” who does not need aid or consolation from others.

However, at the heart of MacIntyre’s claim in *Dependent Rational Animals*, and arguably his work as a whole, lies the premise that “[T]he exercise of independent practical reasoning is one essential constituent to full human flourishing.” To be incapable of “reasoning soundly” at the level of practice is “a grave disability” and it is “also a defect not to be independent in one’s reasoning. Going further, “One cannot then be an independent practical reasoner without being able to give others an intelligible account of one’s reasoning.” MacIntyre admits that one can flourish to a certain extent if independent practical reasoning is unattainable. Indeed, their individual flourishing “will be an important index of the flourishing of the whole community.” In MacIntyre’s writing, however, those who cannot give an intelligible account as an independent practical reasoner will never experience *full* human flourishing. This intelligibility – the ability to provide a coherent story about the intentionality of our actions – is indeed the fundamental ethical task.

MacIntyre rightly establishes the need to reclaim our role as dependent rational animals along with our role as independent practical reasoners in philosophy and ethics. His account of “full human flourishing,” however, carries with it the potential to both perpetuate the myth of the transparent self and to minimize the flourishing of people with intellectual disabilities.

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298 Ibid., 105.
299 Ibid.
300 Ibid., 108.
4. A rational account?

The universe is an immense allusion, and our inner life an anonymous quotation; only the italics are our own. Is it within our power to verify the quotation, to identify the source, to learn what all things stand for?\textsuperscript{301}

\textquote{Abraham Joshua Heschel}

MacIntyre’s criteria for providing an intelligible account of actions and motivations as independent practical reasoners includes “understanding [one’s] animal identity through time from conception to death.”\textsuperscript{302} However, if human beings have difficulty fulfilling this basic ethical request then perhaps being “human, all too human” is an even more vulnerable and dependent proposition than originally anticipated. What would it mean for the self to be unable to provide a story about itself in this way? What would it mean for someone to fail to recognize oneself in this way? As American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler asks in \textit{Giving an Account of Oneself}, “Does the postulation of a subject who is not self-grounding, that is, whose conditions of emergence can never fully be accounted for, undermine the possibility of responsibility and, in particular, of giving an account of oneself?”\textsuperscript{303}

We return to Chapter Four’s discussion of the ethical import of the \textit{imago Dei}. Does one’s responsibility emerge from their ability to provide an account of their actions and motivation based on the “higher calling” of a teleological goal? Or does responsibility always arise before our ability to give an account — in the very nature of what it means to be created in God’s image? I suggested that the possibility of any later, intelligible responsibility only gains its ethical “weight” out of the prior, initial external grounding in God’s action. Judith Butler’s work further demonstrates that our accountability to other human beings arises \textit{before} we can give an account of this responsibility.


\textsuperscript{302} MacIntyre, \textit{Dependent Rational Animals}, 83.

The point that I wish to make in the pages that follow is not that practical reasoning is a futile ambition within humble epistemological limits. We can indeed become more transparent to ourselves through social relationships. Yet the fullness of who we are as people created in the imago Dei will always exceed, overwhelm, and mystify attempts to render the self transparent. If MacIntyre had taken the impact of acknowledged dependence to its logical and experiential conclusions, he would not primarily understand our relationships with one another as channels through which to attain common or personal goods or to become independent practical reasoners. In a qualified sense, these are beneficial outcomes of being embedded in social networks that value justice, sound judgment, and open dialogue about practical reasoning. Instead, the mystery and opacity at the heart of our relationships and interdependence is not something merely to acknowledge as incoherence. In ways that are impossible to make transparent or intelligible, we are radically relationally constituted. The tragedy of lost or forfeited relationships is not primarily that of losing access to goods or becoming a faulty reasoner, although these may be byproducts. To undermine our relational connection with others is to chip away at the ethical foundation of our very identity, an identity held as much in “between” others and ourselves as it is held in our own consciousness. The opacity and mystery that MacIntyre wishes to relegate to a minor plot may be, in fact, the thread that holds the whole story together.

b. Encountering the imago Dei in my Self

“All autobiography is storytelling; all writing is autobiography.”304

~ J. M. Coetzee

From the hints of transcendence in vocational calling, through the necessity of grounding direct support in the narrative in which it finds itself, we arrived at recognizing the distinctly relational imago Dei that forms the basis of equality and moral obligation in Christian direct support. From there we have explored the challenges to this recognition in encountering others who are made in God’s image, the

significance of the incarnation, and the need to reclaim mystery at the heart of our
discovery of one another and, in turn, in the stories we tell of ourselves. We now proceed
to explore how the mysterious relational grounding of the self, created in God’s image,
points to an interdependent basis for mutual responsibility.

1. The self as relationally composed: Social emergence

MacIntyre begins in the direction of a relationally-composed self in his emphasis
on relationality: “There is no point then in our development towards and in our exercise
of independent practical reasoning at which we cease altogether to be dependent on
particular others.”305 Here MacIntyre acknowledges the impact and range of human
social dependency. However, MacIntyre stops before this theme of dependency might
challenge the premises behind his emphasis on independent practical reasoning or his
ethical project as a whole. Judith Butler takes dependency further, and it is to her
writing that we now turn. If there is something non-narrativizable within the account
that one gives of oneself, due to being relationally constituted in our dependence upon
others, this has far greater import than MacIntyre affords it. To find oneself unable to
give an account means “the very meaning of responsibility must be rethought on the
basis of this limitation, it cannot be tied to the conceit of a self fully transparent to
itself.”306

Butler builds this case by starting where it seems that MacIntyre is also
beginning, where “there is no ‘I’ that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of
its emergence...” Butler goes on to say, though, “this self is already implicated in a social
temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration.”307

However, here Butler already breaks from MacIntyre in claiming that the social
reality out of which the self emerges “exceeds its own capacities for narration.” One
finds oneself a social theorist without a language. This is not in the sense of After Virtue
in which one needs to recover a way to discuss the goods of the narrative one finds

305 MacIntyre, Dependent Rational Animals, 97.
306 Butler, 82.
307 Ibid., 8.
oneself in, but in a way that this social reality is already before and above the language one can use. “The very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making.”

It is not only that the subject finds itself within a social matrix that requires critique, but that the norms “decide in advance who will and will not become a subject.”

The subject is herself always already in a space that is epistemologically pre-determined by the norms. “[T]he very being of the self is dependent,” not only a singularity of the other as in Levinas, but “also on the social dimension of normativity that governs the scene of recognition.”

Butler is quick to note that,

the subject is opaque to itself, not fully translucent and knowable to itself, it is not thereby licenced to do what it wants or to ignore its obligations to others. The contrary is surely true. The opacity of the subject may be a consequence of its being conceived as a relational being, one whose early and primary relations are not always available to conscious knowledge.

We then return to the importance of the social “other” as in MacIntyre, only this time at a more fundamental level. Relationships in MacIntyre are what help one develop in independent practical reasoning, which is the basis for ethical discourse – the account we give of ourselves. Butler follows a different direction. Relationships may help us to learn more about ourselves on a conscious level, yet our fundamental constitution as relational beings “unsettles” us in a way that makes it impossible ever to be fully transparent and knowable to oneself. Rather than obligation and responsibility to one another being based on our ability to give an account to one another, it is through these opaque primary relations that we are “before” one another, always responsible to one another.

308 Ibid., 21.
309 Ibid., 9.
310 Ibid., 23.
311 Ibid., 20.
312 Butler’s project does not include reference to God or religion. The primary relations to which she refers are confined to the immanent sphere, though in such a way to radicalize this sphere. Rather than being “transcendent” relations, these relations are almost subterranean, profound in their depth rather than their height. I point to Kierkegaard and Levinas in my use of being “before” one another.
Concerning moral traditions and premises, MacIntyre points to encounters with rival traditions as an opportunity to recognize incommensurable moral claims and strengthen or revise one’s positions.\(^{333}\) Butler, similarly, wishes to highlight inconsistencies, interruptions, and challenges to recognition that happen through the story-telling process on a more personal level. She sees these disruptions not simply as an opportunity to come to greater self-awareness, but to appreciate how the other always already disrupts us. “Sometimes the very unrecognizability of the other brings about a crisis in the norms that govern recognition.” \(^{314}\) The exceptions, the freaks, and the misfits are those who remind us that the “cult of normalcy” makes recognition possible for some and not for others. These exceptions also highlight the existential vulnerability of our tentative place in the “regime of truth.” \(^{315}\) Butler observes that our desire to be recognized by others and to recognize others in ways not acknowledged by the regime of truth calls this regime into question.

The questioning of truth regimes that arise out of our encounters with one another also has the potential to overturn the ethical tyranny of transparency – the demand that others’ accounts comply with a pre-structured expectation of how those accounts should be formed. It opens us to discovering the other in new ways. In the context of direct support, understanding that our ultimate moral obligation is not something that any of us fully comprehend allows us to enter into others’ journeys as a fellow wanderer rather than a guide on the road to human flourishing.

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While Butler does not use this phrasing, the intent is similar. For both Kierkegaard and Levinas, however, reference to “height” or the transcendence of these relations (including God) are crucial.

\(^{333}\) This can be observed between the second and third stages of the rationality of traditions in *Whose Justice, Whose Rationality?* [Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 80, 166.] In *After Virtue*, contemporary moral debate is defined by incommensurable premises of rival arguments. For fruitful ethical discussion to take place, these places of incommensurability are opportunities to explore the “goods” towards which rival traditions are working. Rather than requiring an external, objective criterion which is unobtainable, ethical positions must be critiqued from within their tradition, and the clash with alternate traditions can be the site of useful reflection. In this sense, MacIntyre views moments of opacity or mystery as a “clash” that can lead to greater transparency.

\(^{314}\) Butler, 24.

\(^{315}\) Ibid., 23. She references Foucault here.
Whether in philosophical ethical traditions or moral obligations, MacIntyre and Butler both acknowledge the value of confronting viewpoints and alternate stories. Butler would likely concur with MacIntyre that these disruptions are opportunities to challenge preconceptions and systemic factors that marginalize and exclude people or populations. Where they differ is that for MacIntyre we find ethical responsibility within the account given, whereas for Butler ethical responsibility is grounded beyond the point at which we are unable to give an account.

**We are (fictional?) story-telling animals**

It is quite true what philosophy says: that life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other principle: that it must be lived forwards. Which principle, the more one thinks it through, ends exactly with the thought that temporal life can never properly be understood precisely because I can at no instant find complete rest in which to adopt the position: backwards.\(^{316}\)

\(\sim S\o re n\ K i e r k e g a a r d\)

MacIntyre agrees with Butler that narrative never starts at the beginning. We are always in medias res.\(^{317}\) We find ourselves part-way through the narrative and are forced to author an account of ourselves to ourselves and others, having already been given the tools with which to do so. The situation that we find ourselves in has already determined us, and we are mostly opaque to our origins and the reasons behind why we ended up where we are. As Butler describes, “I am always recuperating, reconstructing, and I am left to fictionalize and fabulate origins I cannot know... My account of myself is partial, haunted by that for which I can devise no definitive story.”\(^{318}\)

While MacIntyre does not explicitly acknowledge our opacity to ourselves in the same way that Butler does, he is aware of our inability to give “full” accounts. This is where Butler and MacIntyre diverge. To ascribe responsibility within partial accounts,


\(^{318}\) Butler, 39.
MacIntyre proceeds in the direction of *authorship*. “The difference between imaginary characters and real ones is not in the narrative form of what they do; it is in the degree of their authorship of that form and of their own deeds.”\(^{319}\) MacIntyre is not interested primarily in the *personal* authorship of our own stories, as though they are drafted strictly from our own action. After all, “They do not begin where they please, they cannot go on exactly as they please either; each character is constrained by the actions of others and by the social settings presupposed in his and their actions.”\(^{320}\) Instead, MacIntyre’s interest is in the stories that must come before questions of authorship: “Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?”\(^{321}\) It is within these stories, within these accounts of “the good” that fruitful dialogue around ethical responsibility can take place.

Butler, on the other hand, believes that even these stories-behind-stories fail to reach the degree of authorship required to place ethical weight on these story-telling practices. Butler asserts that this failure “gives rise to another ethical disposition in the place of a full and satisfying notion of narrative accountability.”\(^{322}\) Again, the disruption of the ethical norm is what leads Butler to seek another mode of address, another ethics. “Precisely my own opacity to myself occasions my capacity to confer a certain kind of recognition on others. It would be, perhaps, an ethics based on our shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves.”\(^{323}\) While Butler does not call attention to her word usage, even the language of discourse is upended when *blindness* finds itself as the catalyst for ethical responsibility, rather than as a metaphor for ethical transgression.

According to Butler, the constant demand to “give an account” of oneself and to present a coherent and continuous self-identity is a certain kind of “ethical violence.” Norms always determine the space that these accounts take place in and balances of power affect the weight of each account given. Accounts are deemed as more or less reliable due to the person’s status or ability to align with the cult of normalcy, whether

\(^{319}\) MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 215.
\(^{320}\) Ibid.
\(^{321}\) Ibid.
\(^{322}\) Butler, 40.
\(^{323}\) Ibid., 42.
in relation to their body capital or social capital. The one with the weight of “the crowd” behind their account may never be asked to “give an account,” whereas one who is pre-judged by their ability, skin colour, ethnicity, gender, etc. may always be called to give an account in frames of displaced power. These norms and regimes of truth allow for all-too-quick judgments of intent and genre of the stories of those who find themselves “marked.” One may condemn the other and seek to moralize oneself “by disavowing commonality with the judged.”

In each of these scenarios of prejudice, power, and the cult of normalcy, “recognition sometimes obligates us to suspend judgment in order to apprehend the other.” Butler points instead toward an ethics of mercy:

To acknowledge one’s own opacity or that of another does not transform opacity into transparency. To know the limits of acknowledgement is to know even this fact in a limited way; as a result, it is to experience the very limits of knowing. This can, by the way, constitute a disposition of humility and generosity alike: I will need to be forgiven for what I cannot have fully known, and I will be under a similar obligation to offer forgiveness to others, who are also constituted in partial opacity to themselves.

It is important to note Butler’s distinction from MacIntyre yet again: To acknowledge one’s own opacity or that of another does not transform opacity into transparency. There is still something “there” that cannot be made intelligible, and what is “there” cannot be apprehended by one’s account even if one makes room for it within the account. The significance of what is there but cannot be spoken is the basis for a profound humility and generosity, and to relegate this mystery to an account of “full disclosure” is not to do it justice, nor to give it the weight that it demands.

324 Ibid., 46. This judgment plays into the human propensity to see oneself as moral and the other as immoral, or at best indifferent. Butler acknowledges this judgment as a way of externalizing the opacity that we see in ourselves. If we were to admit that the one giving an account may not be able to give a transparent account, we too may need to question the account we have given of ourselves, and we may not like what we discover.

325 Ibid., 44.

326 Ibid., 42. We recall the words of Christ, “Forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” [Luke 23:34, NLT]
The account of Joe Arridy: Storytelling gone wrong

In 1937, Joe Arridy was convicted of murdering 15-year-old Dorothy Drain. He had confessed to the murder, though many discrepancies in his account should have clued in authorities that he had not committed the act. Arridy had an IQ in the 40’s and had been born to Syrian immigrants. The authorities already had convicted Frank Aguilar, who had concealed the axe used in the attack in his apartment. Dorothy’s sister, who was brutalized during the attack but survived, testified that Arridy had not been present. Despite all evidence to the contrary, Arridy was executed on January 6, 1939. Prison Warden Roy Best called Arridy “the happiest prisoner on death row.” He requested ice cream for his last three meals, and seemed unaware of his imminent death, spending most of his time playing with a toy train. Arridy was posthumously pardoned in 2011.

Joe Arridy had given an account of himself. It was a flawed account, to be sure, but it was an account. To those who interrogated him, it had enough indicators of ‘authorship’ to hold Joe accountable. He found himself at the mercy of prejudice and significant power differential. While we may never know exactly why he confessed, many people with intellectual disabilities attempt to provide the “accounts” that they think a questioner is requesting. They determine their response based on the question, and the power of suggestion is significant. Perhaps Arridy’s way of saying that he did not want to cause trouble was to say the words he felt were expected of him. Maybe it had become his natural way of getting by in the world. In any case, Arridy gave an account of himself that got him killed, despite having the intellectual capability of a young child.

The man you kill tonight is six years old,
He has no idea why he dies,
Yet he must die in the room the state has walled
Transparent to its glassy eyes.327

~ Marguerite Young

327 Marguerite Young, ”The Clinic,” in Moderate Fable (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1944), 14.
In today’s legal system, Arridy would not have been convicted due to his intellectual disability. However, as the Netflix original *Making of a Murder* brought to public consciousness, the way courts and the legal system handle intellectual disability still leaves much to be desired. In the case of Brendan Dassey, with an IQ of around 70, obtaining a confession by merely asking questions in a complicated or confusing way is very much a possibility.328

How might our examination of MacIntyre or Butler relate to the case of Arridy or even Dassey? The practical, investigative side might follow MacIntyre’s independent practical reasoning to pursue greater justice. It is evident that those involved in these cases did not look suitably into intent, authorship, or independent practical reasoning ability. They did not take into consideration the degree to which people are dependent on one another and the systems in which they find themselves. They did not even establish facts clearly, to the point that the account could be verified or dismissed. Independent practical reasoning would have gone far in these cases.

With both MacIntyre and Butler, the inability of Arridy to give an account highlights glaring challenges in the way criminal processes fail to take into consideration human vulnerability and the range by which someone may be able to provide an ethical account of their action. There is a system of power and implicit bias at work that stands to be challenged and rightly condemned, whether one examines cases from the 1930’s or the 2000’s.

Thus far, MacIntyre and Butler agree on process and conclusions. The fundamental question at stake here is *where do ethical obligation and responsibility lie?* This project began with the desire to examine the ethical motivation of direct support professionals in working with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Identifying the crux of this responsibility to one another is a crucial concern. Both MacIntyre and Butler point to dependency and vulnerability as essential

components of what it means to be human.\textsuperscript{329} Where the \textit{beginning} for both MacIntyre and Butler lie in relational dependency, the \textit{response} of each varies. For MacIntyre, the ethical project continues to revolve around the virtues of independent practical reasoners and the virtues of acknowledged dependence. These virtues arise out of a motivation to keep both \textit{independent} practical reasoning and \textit{dependence} at the forefront of the ethical conversation. The way to determine accountability still lies along the path of transparency in giving an account of oneself. It is through this transparency of account that account-ability can be determined. According to MacIntyre, narrative continues to be at the heart of ethics and accountability:

\begin{quote}
...unlike dolphins, gorillas, and wolves, each of us may at any time be asked to give an account of ourselves, to say just what it is that we did, are now doing, or plan to do, to make our actions intelligible by explaining what motives and reasons we have or had for acting, and to justify our actions by showing that those reasons were sufficiently good reasons.\textsuperscript{330}
\end{quote}

Butler argues, to use MacIntyre’s words, that acknowledged dependence must go further. We are relationally constituted to such an extent, and our obligations to others are so ingrained, that we find ourselves always “with” one another and yet unable to accurately or transparently give an account of the morality of our actions. In this state of loss, we face a subjective undoing which is “a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure,” she admits, but it is also “a chance – to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient ‘I’ as a kind of possession.”\textsuperscript{331} It is thus not through a composed sense of \textit{authorship} that I act or find my ethical responsibility, but rather in those moments when I seem unable to call myself “author.” “[M]y very formation implicates the other in me . . . my foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{329} In \textit{Dependent Rational Animals}, MacIntyre asks the question, “What difference to moral philosophy would it make, if we were to make the facts of vulnerability and affliction and the related facts of dependence as central to the human condition?” [MacIntyre, \textit{Dependent Rational Animals}, 4.] For MacIntyre, moral philosophy has not been sufficiently impacted by the import of this realization.

\textsuperscript{330} MacIntyre, Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity, 232.

\end{flushleft}
connection with others.”332 It is in our inability to express ourselves, in our moments where we fail to recognize one another or ourselves in the stories that we tell, that we reveal our true humanity – a humanity composed by and sustained by our connections with one another.333

We need not completely discard the virtues of giving and receiving that MacIntyre proposes when we consider the stories of people like Joe Arridy. However, we must also take into consideration the virtues of discovery in those moments where neither giving nor receiving are appropriate. We must explore the virtues of simply being with, of being comfortable with one another in the midst of our confusion and inability to give an account of ourselves. Perhaps if Joe or others like him were given this space of mutuality, a place without being called to “give an account” within systems of power and coercion, the ethical violence that can take place in moral models of interrogation, then he and many others would be listened to and understood in a very different way.

Where pragmatic and systematic aspects of justice must be carried out in ways that at times demand more of us than humanly possible, torturing the “grey” until it becomes black-and-white, for Butler these systems of power, coercion, control, and retributive justice do not lie at the heart of ethical accountability. Stories like Arridy’s provide the disruptive opportunity to recognize the failure of transparency myths and to look for a better way. Indeed, the gentle and interdependent relationality of Arridy’s subversive response may itself point to new ways of being human, just as Christ’s vulnerable incarnation and gruesome crucifixion challenge humanly constructed systems of condemnation and punishment. There must be another way of establishing moral responsibility than demanding that one give a transparent account of one’s life in the form of a narrative.

332 Simmons, 84.

333 Butler almost sounds Kierkegaardian in that “we must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human.” [Butler, 136. Quoted in Simmons, 88.]
2. The self as relationally composed: Established by God

Is it possible to evade the ultimate issue by withdrawing within the confines of the self? The awareness of wonder is often overtaken by the mind’s tendency to dichotomize, which makes us look at the ineffable as if it were a thing or an aspect of things apart from our own selves; as if only the stars were surrounded with a halo of enigma and not our own existence. The truth is that the self, our "lord," is an unknown thing, inconceivable in itself. In penetrating the self, we discover the paradox of not knowing what we presume to know so well. 334

~ Abraham Heschel

We now turn to Kierkegaard to connect the mystery of the relationally composed self to the God-relation. 335 Kierkegaard wrote *The Sickness Unto Death* under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus. 336 After beginning by describing human beings as *spirit*, Anti-Climacus goes on to clarify,

Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation’s relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation’s relating itself to itself. 337

While a human being is a synthesis between tensions, such as the infinite and the finite, the temporal and the eternal, and freedom and necessity, it is at that point still not a *self*. The self is not only these relations but that which relates these syntheses to

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335 With his emphasis on the *single individual*, many perceive Kierkegaard to be the father of a kind of solipsist existentialism where individualism runs rampant. One only needs to read passages such as the ones quoted earlier in *Works of Love* to recognize that this assessment falls woefully short.

336 One must pay particular attention to pseudonyms in Kierkegaard’s writing. Works by Anti-Climacus are described by translators Edna and Howard Hong as pseudonymous in the sense that “[T]hey do not bear Kierkegaard’s name as author, because his own existence did not correspond to the claims of higher ideality they express.” JP, 4:761. Anti-Climacus reflects Kierkegaard’s views that he does not feel that he attains, or lives up to. This is very different from Johannes de Silentio, who was used by Kierkegaard to pen works by a writer who was unable to make the leap of faith. In this respect, Anti-Climacus’ views can be taken to mirror Kierkegaard’s own to a greater degree than those of Johannes de Silentio.

itsel. Note the significance of relation in Kierkegaard’s thought here, recalling descriptions of the relational imago Dei from Chapter Four. At this point, however, it is a self-contained relation. No extrinsic relation guides or constrains how the self might relate itself to itself.

Anti-Climacus goes on to observe that this relation (the self) must have either established itself or have been established by another. “The human self is such a derived, established relation.” In this case, the self “is yet again a relation and relates itself to that which established the entire relation.” In relating itself to the one that established it, the third is dependent on the Other and is unable “to arrive at or to be in equilibrium and rest by itself,” but must also relate to the one that established it.

To demonstrate the similarity between the views of Anti-Climacus and Kierkegaard’s non-pseudonymous thought we can look at a similar passage from his Journals of 1848, a year before Sickness Unto Death was published:

In the composite of the eternal and the temporal, man is a relationship, in this relationship itself and relating itself to itself. God made man a relationship; to be a human being is to be a relationship. But a relationship which, by the very fact that God, as it were, releases it from his hand, or the same moment God, as it were, releases it, is itself, relates itself to itself…

Kierkegaard goes on to observe that the self may in this way misrelate to God as their establishing Power. Denying one’s radical dependency and relationality results in a state of unrest: despair. The arrogance that we are autonomous (self-established) may help to loosen one’s ethical bonds, but Kierkegaard describes this position as being a king without a country, building castles in the air. The remedy for despair, and the

338 Ibid.
339 Ibid.
340 Ibid.
341 Ibid., 14.
343 Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, 69.
opposite of being in despair, is to have faith. To have faith is to rest in God as one’s establishing relation.344

In Kierkegaard’s journal, he goes outside the language of Sickness Unto Death to put the concept of dependence forward as an anthropological principle: “[T]o need God is man’s highest perfection... Man’s highest achievement is to let God be able to help him.”345 According to Kierkegaard, human beings are radically dependent upon God. To live into this dependence, to embrace it, is to be complete as a human being. Dependence is a perfection, not a concession.346 Encountering the self as radically dependent is not a theoretical principle that helps one achieve independent rationality. Instead it lies at the core of what it means to flourish as a self created in the imago Dei.

**Disposessed in the imago Dei**

According to both Kierkegaard and Butler, there can be no question that, in Pauline language, “You are not your own; you were bought at a price.”347 We are always, already “unsettled” or disposessed in our own bodies in the accounts that we give of ourselves. To claim transparent authorship for our lives is at best ignorant and at worst, hubris. We are challenged that to reject our fundamental dependency upon God (Kierkegaard) and one another (Butler) is to deny our own constitution, the fabric of who we are and who we are becoming.348 If we were to begin to provide a narrative

344 Precisely, “in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it.”344 [Ibid., 49].


346 In *Point of View*, Kierkegaard reports that throughout his own life he has sensed his dependency on an Other: “[F]rom the very beginning I have been as it were under arrest and every instant have sensed the fact that it was not I that played the part of master, but that another was Master.” [Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, 69. Kierkegaard also recognizes what has happened when he has tried to ‘take back the reins,’ so to speak: “Without God I am too strong for myself, and perhaps in the most agonizing of all ways am broken.” PVWA, 70.]

347 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.

348 It is the reality that we are not our own that occasions the *giving of an account* in the first place. Selfhood is possible only as a dispossession from oneself in relation to the other. “It is only in dispossession that I can and do give any account of myself.” [Butler, 37].
account of our lives, “this narrative will be disoriented by what is not mine, or not mine alone.”

In Butler the self is unable to give a complete account of itself because it is radically relationally constituted by human others and conditions prior to narrativity. In Kierkegaard, the God-relation constitutes the self as its establishing Power. We recall that for Kierkegaard, the posture of the self is “before God,” and it is this posture that establishes every human other in eternal equality before God. To tie these threads together, the language of “encounter” and the “imago Dei” connect radical relational constitution with human others to the divine relation. Drawing from Chapter Four, we see that the “trace” of God (Levinas) in the formal imago Dei also postures us “before” our neighbour, responsible to God, and responding to God’s calling by responding to our ethical obligation to our neighbour. This is an ethical obligation grounded not in intellectual recognition, but in the encounter with God through the imago Dei in human others and as the establishing Power of our existence.

Calling has come full circle. What was first identified as being called to people with intellectual disabilities through a “higher calling” turns out, in the Christian tradition of the imago Dei, to be the same Voice that calls to us through the person with an intellectual disability. To come face-to-face with our neighbour with intellectual disabilities is to come face-to-face with the imago Dei who calls, who summons, who compels. To be called to another is bound up in being called by another. In the complex relational circles of the community of the imago Dei, we are pushed towards ethical response as the trace of God in those to whom we respond draws us.

Faith in God, particularly in the language of Sickness Unto Death, is to rest in and depend upon one’s relation to God. There is a kind of trust present in this faith that is reminiscent of Butler’s ethics of mercy, “a disposition of humility and generosity

349 Ibid.

350 One must remember that I attempt here a constructive theology and do not claim that Butler, Kierkegaard, or Levinas would ascribe to the ways I have integrated their respective positions.
To be “dispossessed” opens us to profound humility without negating the gift of who we are and our response-ability to those around us.

As we go on, we will discover the poignant beauty of being created and sustained in the image of a God who simultaneously reveals and conceals himself. Recognizing the roots of our dependency and selfhood grants a perspective that allows us to take ourselves less seriously, taking a “step back” from our own causes and concerns. This acknowledgment and “dispossession” opens us to enter more readily into the causes and concerns of others. In resting in our constitutive relations, we are not so quick to impose the criteria of ethical accountability on the stories of those around us. We can enter the lives of others with grace and mercy without constantly demanding an intelligible account of their actions and intentions.

In the pages that follow, I proceed to unpack the ways that the myth of transparency has infected our views of God – or perhaps began with our view of God. Is it any wonder, then, that we project these views onto those who are created in God’s image? If ethical service provision is to find a motivational and formational force in the Christian tradition, we must turn to the ways we have overestimated our ability to comprehend the God who calls.

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351 Butler, 42.
CHAPTER SEVEN: The myth of a transparent God

a. Mystery and the divine

Thou art far above, and I am far below. What then, brethren, shall we say of God? For if thou hast been able to comprehend what thou wouldest say, it is not God; if thou hast been able to comprehend it, thou hast comprehended something else instead of God. If thou hast been able to comprehend Him as thou thinkest, by so thinking thou hast deceived thyself. This then is not God, if thou hast comprehended it; but if it be God, thou hast not comprehended it. How therefore wouldest thou speak of that which thou canst not comprehend?\textsuperscript{352}

\textasciitilde{} Augustine, Sermon 2 on the NT, #16

The biblical narrative exhibits a complex interplay between mystery and revelation. In downplaying the role of mystery in theological investigation, we have granted revelation primacy. The revelation we profess is not our \textit{dependence} upon God to reveal Himself to us, however. Instead, we declare comprehension and mastery of the revelation we have already received concerning who God is. In Chapter Four we examined how a lack of intellectual humility has shaped contemporary Christian discussions on the \textit{imago Dei}. In the pages that follow, we find that this same inclination carries the myth of transparency into our understanding of \textit{who God is}.

In Mark 4:11-12 and similar passages in Matthew and Luke, Jesus’ followers ask him why he speaks in parables. He answers, "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables, so that while seeing, they may see and not perceive, and while hearing, they may hear and not

\textsuperscript{352}St. Augustine, \textit{Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: St. Augustine}, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. Volume VI, First Series (New York, NY: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 263. Augustine goes on to write about “distance resemblances” of Memory, understanding, and will. “I am asking, I am speaking remember of a distant resemblance. So let no one say, See what he has compared to God! I have advertised you of this already, and by anticipation have both put you on your guard, and have guarded myself. The two are indeed very far removed from each other, as the lowest from the Highest, as the changeable from the Unchangeable, the created from the Creator, the human nature from the Divine.” \textit{So even the acknowledgment that we are created in the image of God is an act of faith}, for our creation in God’s image is surrounded in mystery just as our knowledge of precisely who God is will always be comprised of both revelation and mystery.
understand, otherwise they might return and be forgiven.” The paradox of this passage is that even those who are “insiders,” those who follow Christ as Lord, may very well continue to wrestle with why these parables hide their truths from those who do not follow Christ. Why would a God “who wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth”\(^{353}\) simultaneously reveal and hide himself through the same parables? So, within a passage intended to clarify a mysterious story-telling practice, further questions are raised. *At the heart of the revelation lies mystery.*

In the Old Testament, we read of a similar dance of revelation and mystery even for those who knew God best. To Moses, the Lord said,

> “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” Then the Lord said, “There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.”\(^{354}\)

It is this sense of “having passed by” that Levinas carries into his discussion of the trace of God. This passage perhaps best demonstrates the Old Testament picture of a God who wills and desires to be known, to reveal himself to others, yet knows that this revelation will be too much to comprehend. To come “fully” face-to-Face with God exceeds our capacity to “take God in.” We can never profess mastery over the God whom we serve, because God always exceeds our capacity for narration or comprehension.\(^{355}\)

No matter how open human beings are to God’s presence in the biblical account, He is simultaneously revealing and concealing himself. In Elijah’s encounter with God,

The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful

\(^{353}\) 1 Timothy 2:4.

\(^{354}\) Exodus 33:19-21.

\(^{355}\) Reminiscent of Anselm’s "that than which nothing greater can be thought" yet with the acknowledgement that nothing greater can be thought precisely because God exceeds thought.
wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but
the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but
the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but
the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When
Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at
the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”356

The NRSV translation of “gentle whisper” in this passage is “a sound of sheer
silence.” Abraham Heschel literally translates qol dmamah “a voice of silence.”357 We
are reminded of Job’s exclamation: “how small a whisper do we hear of [God]! But the
thunder of his power who can understand?”358 The image of a thundering, demanding
deity is perhaps the picture many people have of the God of the Old Testament. In these
and other passages, even when God reveals, God conceals. “The secret things belong to
the Lord our God.”359

The suggestion here is not that God is only mysterious and incomprehensible. It
is rather that God is never confined to the comprehension of our intellectual faculties.
Yet theological discourse prioritizes that which can be comprehended, and so privileges
the place of intellectual understandings of God. We receive Job’s question as a challenge
rather than the rhetorical device it is: "Can you discover the depths of God? Can you
discover the limits of the Almighty?”360

Via negativa and theopoetics: Modes of telling the story of God

Via negativa is one way philosophers and theologians have attempted to uphold
the mystery of the divine while thinking epistemically about what can be known about
God. Theologians of the “negative way” build on the work of Plotinus and Neoplatonist

358 Job 26:14.
359 Deut. 29:29.
360 Job 11:7.
philosophy. Some of the first theological work along these lines came from Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite of the late 5th to early 6th century. In contrast to cataphatic theology that affirms attributes about God in order to better understand him (as indeed the pronoun “him” does), apophatic theology seeks to describe God by means of negation. It acknowledges that any language attempting to ‘capture’ who God is will always miss the mark. In Dionysius, for example,

[W]e maintain that [God] is neither soul nor intellect; nor has he imagination, opinion, speech, or understanding; nor can he be expressed or conceived, since he is neither number nor order; nor greatness nor smallness; nor equality nor inequality; nor similarity nor dissimilarity; neither is he still, nor moving, nor at rest; neither has he power nor is power, nor is light; neither does he live nor is he life; neither is he essence, nor eternity nor time; nor is he subject to intelligible contact; nor is he science nor truth, nor a king, nor wisdom; neither one nor oneness, nor godhead nor goodness; nor is he spirit according to our understanding, nor a son, nor a father; nor anything else known to us or to any other of the beings or creatures that are or are not; ...³⁶¹

The practice begins by denying those things that are lesser and more typically antonyms used of God (e.g. “God is not evil”) and works through descriptions until denying those aspects typically attributed to God (e.g. “nor is he spirit according to our understanding”). Tertullian observes,

That which is infinite is known only to itself. This it is which gives some notion of God, while yet beyond all our conceptions – our very incapacity of fully grasping Him affords us the idea of what He really is. He is presented to our minds in His transcendent greatness, as at once known and unknown.³⁶²

The temptation when seeking to probe the mysteries of the divine is to echo Wittgenstein, “What can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about

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³⁶¹ Dionysius, The Mystical Theology, and the Celestial Hierarchies of Dionysius the Areopagita: With Commentaries by the Editors of the Shrine of Wisdom and Poem by St. John of the Cross (Fintry, Eng.: Shrine of Wisdom, 1965), 16.

we must pass over in silence.” For Dionysius, this was indeed the highest form of divine contemplation:

The higher we soar in contemplation, the more limited become our expressions of that which is purely intelligible; even as now, when plunging into the Darkness which is above the intellect, we pass not merely into brevity of speech, but even into absolute silence...

We will return to focus specifically on the virtue of silence and “quiet attentiveness” later in this project, not only before God, but as we love those who are created in God’s image. One must be silent in order to hear the Voice of silence. Similarly, when God responds to Job out of a whirlwind, he quickly silences Job, “Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge?” Silence is an appropriate response to mystery. Once again, we encounter the tension of speaking the unspeakable. How can one provide a narrative of that which is beyond narrativity?

With the Judeo-Christian belief that God is revealed through the pages of scripture, however, mystery cannot be “all there is.” Instead, when gesturing toward God in speech and language, we beg a grace that is best expressed in C.S. Lewis’ *Footnote to All Prayers,*

He whom I bow to only knows to whom I bow
When I attempt the ineffable name, murmuring Thou,  
And dream of Pheidian fancies and embrace in heart  
Meanings, I know, which cannot be the thing thou art.  
All prayers always, taken at their word, blaspheme  
Invoking frail imageries a folk-lore dream;  
And all men are idolaters, crying unheard  
To senseless idols, if thou take them at their word,

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365 Job 38:2.
And all men in their praying, self-deceived, address
One that is not (so saith that old rebuke) unless
Thou, of mere grace, appropriate, and to thee divert
Men’s arrows, all at hazard aim, beyond desert,
Take not, oh Lord, our literal sense, but in thy great,
Unbroken speech our halting metaphor translate.366

The words written or uttered by theologians or lay people alike are merely unskillful arrows that miss their mark. Our prayers are in the spirit of Pheidias, the Greek sculptor who created the great statue of Zeus at Olympia. Any outline of God we might aspire to sculpt falls far short of God’s image. We recall here Levinas’ objection to understanding human beings as a living icon. There is no icon, only a trace of the divine.

To speak of (or to) God, we must cling to confession and forgiveness, moving toward God in courageous humility – virtues that I will explore later in the context of direct support. We beg pardon for our faltering prayers, and in humility speak only with the courage that we will be forgiven for our inappropriate and bumbling phrases.367

In recent postmodern approaches to theology and literary theory, we can observe examples of how language has been employed with humility to ‘gesture’ toward the divine Stanley Hopper, David Leroy Miller, and Amos Wilder all share principles with negative theology through their work on theopoetics. Theopoetics differs from merely writing poetry about the divine because it questions how the “logos” of theology (logic, order, rationality, etc.) dominates the conversation. It challenges fixed meanings and ultimate realities and “has a heavy emphasis on the importance of aesthetic, sensual, and experiential knowing,” without concluding that nothing can be known or descending into skepticism.368 John Caputo, Peter Rollins, and others draw on these late-20th century texts to expand further upon the role and importance of theopoetics.


367 One might even suggest that Lewis’ use of disability metaphors (deaf, limping, etc.) call for forgiveness even as he relates to people, let alone in speaking to God.

Within recent theopoetic writing lies the understanding that words about God contain a *gesturing* toward God, an appreciation for mystery and the awareness that,

a. talking or writing about God changes our understanding *of* God and
b. Each person will relate to this talking and writing about God differently, based on the experiences of God and others that has brought her to this place.

It is important to note that theopoetics does not so much replace theology as it provides a different way of *doing* theology, one which bears the “accent of someone whose first tongue is not academic but sensual, whose dialect betrays an origin of flesh.”369 Put differently: it is theology that attempts to take mystery and embodiment seriously in not only its outcomes but also its methods. Recalling Chapter Five, it is one way that theologians have attempted to take the incarnation seriously in form as well as content.

Walking the path of *via negativa* or embracing theopoetics may draw one to emphasize mystery *without* revelation. We now turn from these approaches to the revelation of Christ as the model for *imitatio Dei*. In what way is Christ the “image of the invisible?” In the section that follows, we examine some of the biblical texts that best display God’s revelation of himself in the pages of the New Testament.

**b. The hidden revelation of Christ**

Within the Christian tradition lies a rich moral teleology of *imitatio Dei*. Theologians have grappled for millennia with what it means to grow to imitate Christ and “resemble God in loving.” For reasons that will be explored, their insights cannot be captured merely in rulebooks or codes of conduct. Within even this “material” image of God, we find a rich complexity of revelation and mystery. Intellectual capacity, while it might grasp revealed precepts of the Christian faith, is not privileged in receiving either mystery or revelation. Because there is no easily intelligible rulebook to follow, those who aim to follow Christ cannot calculate their way into his image. We must learn to

369 Ibid.
step forward with courageous humility to love our neighbour, without fully comprehending who the neighbour is whom we are called to love.

The Apostle Paul writes of Christ that “[t]he Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.”370 In Romans, he states that Christ is the “revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past,”371 and it is through Christ that God has “made known to us the mystery of His will.”372 The writer of Hebrews begins by describing how Christ is greater than the prophets that came before him. Whereas God previously spoke through prophets in various ways, God has now spoken through his Son, “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.”373

However, there are important differences between the revelation of Christ and the myths of transparency that presume to come to know the truth by way of intellectual capacity. In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul writes,

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”

Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.374

How is it that the Christian message, that theology itself, so easily becomes that which can only be received by people with significant intellectual ability? The Good

370 Colossians 1:15.
371 Romans 16:25.
372 Ephesians 1:9.
373 Hebrews 1:3.
374 1 Corinthians 1:18-21
News of the cross is not complicated; it is difficult. To believe the message of the cross is not to grasp a sophisticated algorithm, it is to receive God as the suffering Christ: to encounter the God hidden in suffering according to Luther’s theology of the cross.\(^{375}\) It is those who love wisdom, glory, and power who hate the cross – those who prefer the acclaim and sense of competence that a sense of intellectual mastery provides, for instance. To receive the message of the cross is to acknowledge our fundamental dependence and the absence of self-mastery.

Paul goes on in chapter two to proclaim that he did not come to the Corinthians “with eloquence or human wisdom,” but rather, “resolved to know nothing… except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”\(^{376}\) Through the remainder of the passage, Paul goes on to contrast the world’s wisdom and God’s wisdom, “a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.”\(^{377}\) No one knows the mind of God, Paul asserts, yet the Holy Spirit searches even “the deep things of God,”\(^{378}\) and in having the mind of Christ, the Spirit reveals these deep things of God. “What we have received,” Paul writes, “is not the spirit of this world,” and so it is not “words taught us by human wisdom” that we speak, rather words taught by the Spirit.\(^{379}\)

Paul is clear that the revelation of God comes through the person of Jesus Christ. In having the mind of Christ, the Holy Spirit searches out the deep and mysterious wisdom of God and makes it known to those who love God. Those things which “no human mind has conceived… are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.”\(^{380}\) However, “no human mind has conceived” indicates that human knowledge cannot

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\(^{375}\) Martin Luther draws inspiration from the same passages in 1 Corinthians, writing, “Because men misused the knowledge of God through works, God wished again to be recognized in suffering, and to condemn wisdom concerning invisible things by means of »wisdom concerning visible things«, so that those who did not honor God as manifested in his works should honor him as he is hidden in his suffering (absconditum in passionibus)” [Martin Luther, "The Heidelberg Disputation," 1518 Heidelberg Disputation, #20, accessed June 28, 2018, http://bookofconcord.org/heidelberg.php.]

\(^{376}\) 1 Cor 2:2-4.

\(^{377}\) 1 Cor 2:7.

\(^{378}\) 1 Cor 2:10.

\(^{379}\) 1 Cor 2:10-13.

\(^{380}\) 1 Cor 2:10.
manufacture the wisdom of God and the fuller passage reveals that even within God’s revelation resides a great mystery.

**1. Faith: Christ as Paradox**

We have already touched upon Kierkegaard’s insistence on the *incognito* of the God-man. Precisely because the concept of God is so foreign to the reality of a lived human life, there is an incomprehensibility in the united dichotomy of the God-man that makes Christ the Paradox. In conceptual form, the idea of the infinite taking on the finite, perfection becoming imperfect, the One becoming one of the many confounds human wisdom. As paradox, the mystery of God in Christ is not only “an objective uncertainty” for Kierkegaard, but also a necessarily objective uncertainty. There is no way to arrive at this faith apart from a leap of faith, or as Kierkegaard describes faith in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ”An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness”.

Kierkegaard does not rule out the possibility of evidence that makes Christianity more palatable to the intellect. The work of apologists may be effective to a certain point. Fundamentally, however, the offense of Christ lies purposefully at the heart of the Gospel message so that no one may enter the Kingdom of heaven by intellect alone. Kierkegaard has harsh words for those who mislead others into thinking they attain heavenly truth by worldly measures:

> Woe to him, therefore, who preaches Christianity without the possibility of offense. Woe to the person who smoothly, flirtatiously, commandingly, convincingly preaches some soft, sweet something which is supposed to be Christianity! Woe to the person who makes miracles reasonable. Woe to the person who betrays and breaks the mystery of faith, distorts it into public wisdom, because he takes away the possibility of offense!

Karl Barth follows Luther’s theology of the cross and Kierkegaard’s writing above, insisting on the failure of reason to grasp faith in Christ. “There is no such thing as a

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mature and assured possession of faith: regarded psychologically, it is always a leap into
the darkness of the unknown, a flight into empty air.” Barth emphasizes that Christ is
the revelation and the Word of God, yet he is also clear that we only encounter Christ by
faith and not by a logical or rational “way” to God.

The revelation which is in Jesus, because it is the revelation of the
righteousness of God, must be the most complete veiling of His
incomprehensibility. In Jesus, God becomes veritably a secret: He is made
known as the Unknown, speaking in eternal silence; He protects Himself
from every intimate companionship and from all the impertinence of
religion. He becomes a scandal to the Jews and to the Greeks
foolishness.

The beauty of this scandal is that Christ is accessible to all. It is not those with
greater wisdom or intelligence who are primed to follow Christ. Indeed the call to “trust”
may find greater resistance among those who seek intelligibility and transparency in all
matters. Similarly, Christ is not only accessible to those who understand themselves,
who are able to account for their actions. Those who understand their life as moral and
upright may more fully resist the call of Christ to “follow me.” Christ is the basis for
morality and spirituality that in no way relies upon intellect or education, the beginning
of moral formation that requires trust and commitment without hubristic aspirations to
knowledge and competency.

2. Love: Christ as pattern

Faith is a key aspect of the Christian life that goes beyond intellectual
transparency. “Now faith is the reality (or assurance) of what is hoped for, the proof (or
conviction) of what is not seen.” Love, which was examined in Chapter Four as the
heart of the relational imago Dei, similarly transcends intellectual accounting. Because
“love is blind,” in its blindness love moves into territory unattainable by sight. We recall

University Press, 1980), 98.
384 Ibid.
385 Hebrews 11:1, HCSB.
Judith Butler’s use of blindness as a metaphor and the basis for her ethics of responsibility. There are ways in which the presumption that “one sees” actually prevents one from encountering revelation. Where justice may be said to be objectively “blind,” love is blind in its passionate subjectivity. As N.T. Wright has observed,

The point about love... is that it transcends the object/subject distinction. Of course it does: when I truly love, whether the object of my love is a planet or a person, a symphony or a sunset, I am celebrating the otherness of the beloved, wanting the beloved to be what it really is, greater than my imagining or perception, stranger, more mysterious. Love celebrates that mystery: in that sense, it is truly “objective;” but it is also of course delightedly "subjective."

For Kierkegaard, there is always a risk or an investment in faith, because it is not assured in its intellectual powers of its object. Faith requires a leap, and the God-man can only be an object of faith, not of intellect. Love is a similarly a risk, for what is loved may cause suffering. Where faith takes a leap towards that which lies beyond the subject/object divide, love falls toward the object of its desire. Where the intellect attains to what is higher, love passionately plunges toward the one it loves. Where loss of faith may entail an intellectual and existential crisis, a lost love causes deep suffering, and one often suffers on behalf of the one it loves. Love reaches for what is best in the other, believes in the other, hopes in the other, and in doing so frees the other to live into their potential even when the other does not see that potential themselves.

**God with us: The mystery of suffering love**

The striking thing about the Precious Blood is the bond it establishes between love and suffering in our experience, a bond that has become so

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386 I attempt here, again, to employ blindness as a positive metaphor that subverts metaphors of blindness as negative limitation, loss, and ignorance. In this context blindness is prerequisite to ethics.

close that we have come to think of suffering accepted with joy as the most authentic sign of love with any depth at all.  

~ Gabriel Marcel

There is a form of mystery in the story of Christ that is distinct from the philosophical question of Kierkegaard’s leap of faith. Looking beyond the intellectual paradox provided by the question of “how” the Word became Flesh, the question arises of “why” the Word became Flesh. The answer seems to lie in the well-known verse spoken to Nicodemus, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” At first glance, this appears to be a comprehensive rationale. As one continues to read John’s account of the life of Christ, however, this answer may provoke more questions than it answers. Why did Christ have to go through the pain and suffering that he did so that people might be saved? Why does God love the world so much if humans caused him so much pain? Here, intellectual answers fail. In Paul’s words, we are struck by fear and trembling before a God who would die for humanity. This is love that we cannot grasp, a love that can never be fully responded-to. It can only be received.

The mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection, the power of sacrificial love, draws more than it answers. Thomas Reynolds reflects on Christ’s death,

[I]n the lowly destitution of the cross we find what we are looking for – a God who comes to us, welcoming us into the divine presence in and through direct solidarity with us, both as temporarily non-disabled persons and persons with disabilities. God’s power is loving, vulnerably present in the depths of the tragic, both in terms of being victimized by instruments of dominion as well as in terms of identifying with death itself. This is why Moltmann calls Christ crucified humanity’s ‘true theology and knowledge of God.’

388 Source unknown.
390 Reynolds, 204.
In light of Christ’s death and resurrection, Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians begins to take shape. No one has seen, heard, or conceived what God has prepared for those who love him, and yet in Christ the mystery of God’s love has been revealed in Christ’s death on the cross and the miraculous resurrection that followed.

We have stumbled upon the profound difference between intellectual understanding and relational knowledge, two types of “knowing.” Moltmann wrote, “To know God in the cross of Christ is a crucifying form of knowledge, because it shatters everything to which a man can hold and which he can build... and precisely in so doing sets him free.”\(^{391}\) To believe in Christ’s death on the cross is to receive meaning that human rationality cannot attain. Indeed, it is to believe that the ultimate model for humanity is not detached intellect but sacrificial love. The cross does not seek to convince by profound arguments but by sacrificial example, a demonstration of the “resurrection power” of God’s love.\(^{392}\) We cannot fully comprehend or articulate this love in human words. It is a love that we find we have always already received, a love that has “come before” us and in which we are radically constituted. \textit{We love because he has first loved us.}\(^{393}\)

Hans Urs Balthasar in \textit{Love Alone is Credible} writes, “The totally-other, the ever-greater appears and seizes hold of us in the very act of overwhelming us through the ultimately incomprehensible character of that love.”\(^{394}\) According to Barth and Balthasar, there is no \textit{via negativa} by which one may reach God. One must be reached \textit{by} God: out of God’s great love we have come to know Him in the person of Jesus Christ, the Word become Flesh. Knowing God through the love of God, however, will always be deeply mysterious, both because of the paradox of the God-man and because of the mystery of the “ultimately incomprehensible character” of God’s love.


\(^{392}\) Philippians 3:10.

\(^{393}\) 1 John 4:19

c. Love before us, love behind us.

*Part II: Encounter* began with the premise that the *imago Dei* is critical to any account of ethical motivation or formation within the Christian narrative. The interpretation most promising for this project was determined to be a *relational* image. The relational *imago Dei* functionally operates in two ways. The first, following Levinas and Reinders, is a “formal” image whereby every human being has always already received this divine image. The second, following Brunner and Kierkegaard, is the *material* image that describes the course of moral formation for Christians in line with *imitatio Dei*.

In the project of investigating moral motivation and formation in a Christian service setting with people with intellectual disabilities, *moral obligation* is established with the *formal image* as we encounter the *imago Dei* in “the face” of our neighbour. We are bound by an ethical obligation that goes beyond – and comes before – any rational articulation of ethical theory. We are “called” by our neighbours with intellectual disabilities, created in the *imago Dei*.

The chapters that followed sought to follow the link between this initial, opaque moral obligation and the ethical motivation and formation that flow from this radically relational account of the *imago Dei*. Myths of transparency, and the tyranny of demanding intelligible accounts, are significant barriers to recognizing that we encounter God’s image in one another, and the ethical responsibility that arises in these encounters. Following Butler, we discover a responsibility grounded in the partial opacity of *giving an account* rather than in the primacy of transparency. The weight of our moral obligation and motivation lies in our fundamental responsibility to God (Kierkegaard) and one another (Butler) that come before our ability to articulate what this responsibility “looks like.”

Even within a more classically *teleological* conception of learning to resemble *God in loving* that we receive based on the knowledge that “God is love,” intellectual capacity does not determine the path to ethical response. Receiving Christ as paradox (the incognito God-man) and the mystery of Christ’s suffering love call us to rely upon the gifts of *faith* and *love* as we discover our calling to live into his loving image. In this
way, the material image of God has come full circle to reflect the initial givenness of our existence, the fundamental responsibility of “being called.” The practice of Christian ethical motivation and formation does not occur through rational account-giving, but by acting in love toward my neighbour to whom I am called.

The story of Christ is one that subverts the easy association of education, knowledge, or intellectual ability with moral uprightness. It is a story that calls, draws, and attracts those whose stories remain opaque to themselves and others. The relational imago Dei is the basis for the weight of all moral obligation, the root of ethical motivation. Christ’s mysterious suffering love, on the other hand, serves as the basis for moral formation that is just as accessible to those with intellectual or developmental disabilities as it is to the direct support professional that provides care. Any Christian theological anthropology must arise out of this mysterious love. Any virtues that seek to develop Christian attitudes of care must be grounded in humble recognition of Christ’s sacrifice and our inability to intellectually grasp what is received only through faith. It is to the possibility of these virtues that we turn next.
PART III: RESPONSE

CHAPTER EIGHT: Discovering the virtues of ethical care

What it is to be human is not a bundle of capacities. It's a way that you are, a way that you are in the world, a way that you are with another.

~Eva Feder Kittay\textsuperscript{395}

In the previous chapters, we have explored the mysterious, radical relational composition of our identities. We are always already responsible to one another. We are called to one another and are part of one another’s stories in often-inexpressible ways. This primal ethics precedes even our comprehension of ethical forms and systems.

To claim that the root of moral responsibility, and thus the instinct for ethical motivation, precedes conscious thought (and perhaps even ontology, according to Levinas) does not, therefore, mean that thought is purposeless in moral formation as we care for and serve others. It does say, however, that intellectual capacity is not privileged in determining the moral weight of one’s action. We may cautiously begin to re-interpret moral reasoning on the basis not of transparency myths, but in humble acknowledgment of our shared and partial opacity to others and ourselves. Alasdair MacIntyre was right to begin to think through virtues of acknowledged dependence, however here we do so recognizing that our dependence goes far deeper than MacIntyre recognized.

In this way, we return to the language of virtues. We pick up not only on MacIntyre’s initial definition of an “acquired human quality” possession and exercise of which enables “us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices,”\textsuperscript{396} but also his later clarification that no human quality is to be accounted a virtue unless it satisfies the conditions at three stages:”\textsuperscript{397}

d.) Qualities necessary to achieve the goods internal to practices;

\textsuperscript{395} Kittay, The Personal Is Philosophical Is Political, 16.
\textsuperscript{396} MacIntyre, After Virtue, 191
\textsuperscript{397} MacIntyre, “Postscript to the Second Edition,” After Virtue, 264.
e.) Qualities contributing to the good of a whole life;
f.) Qualities that enable the good for human beings, “the conception of which can only be elaborated and possessed within an ongoing social tradition.”

Indeed, it was the elaboration of the nature of human beings within the ongoing social tradition of Christianity and *imago Dei* theology that facilitated the critique of MacIntyre and the presuppositions of transparency contained in this project.

The way we give accounts, and the way that we listen to the accounts given by others, is a litmus test of our willingness to acknowledge not only our own dependence but also the interdependence of humanity. Do we attempt to construct a narrative history from birth to death, making the details fit along the way? Alternatively, might we approach one another with a sincere appreciation for the opacity of these stories? There will be times when I, or the person I encounter, is unable to give an answer to the questions we ask. This is not an ethical failing or lack of the fullness of human morality. It is an opportunity for ongoing relational trust and discovery. Our narratives are more poetry than factual autobiography, gesturing towards the deeper realities of our experience and our establishment. Love and gratitude, grief and despair, hope and peace often leave us struggling to make sense of ourselves or to articulate our experience.

The beauty of this mystery is that moments of discovery, moments of revelation, will occur along the way as we journey with others. These moments of revelation will take place not only as we discover whom another is, but also as we experience ourselves in new ways. If we understood one another as far as the myths of transparency would have us believe, there would be little room left for genuine discovery.

We begin to glimpse the importance of virtues that depend not only on what we know about our history, our traditions, and one another, but that also take delight in those aspects that lie in silence.

\[\text{Ibid.}\]

\[\text{399} \text{ The word “anthropoetics” occurs to me here. Just as theopoetics acknowledges the importance of poetry and “weak” language to gesture at the nature of the divine, so we hint at, guess at, and gesture towards our own accounts and the accounts of others.}\]
The secret of discovery

In Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, pseudonym Johannes de Silentio attempts to write the story of faith – faith that cannot be adequately expressed or articulated. This is a faith that seems absurd to those like Johannes de Silentio who do not share it. Abraham is caught between the temptation to speak, to try to explain, to “give an account” for his choice to sacrifice his son Isaac at God’s command. “Abraham cannot speak, because he cannot say that which would explain everything... that it is an ordeal such that, please note, the ethical is the temptation.”⁴⁰⁰ It was not possible for Abraham to put into words the faith, or the reasons for his commitment to his faith, which led to his decision. There is a sense in which each, and our relations to one another, are “secret.” We each carry with us histories and stories which we are not conscious of, let alone able to put into words.

Jean Vanier recounts the story of Claudia:

She lived in our community in Honduras, in Suyapa, near Tegucigalpa. She was autistic and blind. She rarely spoke any word. She was strikingly beautiful and delicate. I recall that one day, when I was sitting across from her at table, I asked her in Spanish, “Claudia, why are you so happy?” She replied after quite a long pause, “God.” When Claudia says one word, there is no need to ask another question! One word from Claudia is verbose! Afterward, I went to see Nadine, who had founded the community, and I said, “Did you hear what Claudia said?” Nadine said she had. “How do you interpret her response? I asked. She said, “It’s her secret.” We each have a secret in the depth of our beings, in union with God and with others.⁴⁰¹

Caught up in an existence that is so dependent upon the relationships that have made us who we are, every person is an extraordinary singularity. We cannot capture this singularity, this secret, in language. Derrida writes, “as soon as one speaks, as soon


as one enters the medium of language, one loses that very singularity.”

Any account that we give of ourselves is immediately reduced to the language in which it finds its expression. It attempts to give an expression of the singularity, the “authorship” of the life of which it speaks but is unable to do so. There are times when to attempt to “give an account” would betray the very givenness of our experience. In these moments, perhaps all we can do is respond as Claudia did. After reflecting on her answer, Vanier observes, “The good shepherd is called to respect that secret within each one and help that secret to grow and to deepen.”

As we walk alongside people in direct support, we become a part of their secret and they, ours. We must resist ethical accountability that attempts to do violence to this secret, breaking it apart to stand as judge and juror over the story of another. Any “account” of virtue must display a profound respect for this secret at the heart of the life of others and the secret at the heart of our own life. In this secret place resides “God,” that is the *imago Dei*, beyond comprehension and narrativity. In this secret place lies, hidden, the root and weight of all ethical action and discourse.

This project does not attempt to establish an ethical system, or to prove our ethical obligation to one another rationally. Instead, it suggests that in our places of dependency and vulnerability, our contemplation of the related rootedness of what it means to be created in the image of God, we are always already toward one another. While what MacIntyre calls “independent practical reasoning” continues to be helpful to work through the best choices and responses in particular situations, the motivation and openness to ethical formation is already here. When we ask with Cain, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” we stand condemned already: it is in our shared, radical relational constitution that we “keep” one another. We are always already keeping our brothers and sisters, kindred in the *imago Dei*.

What we have demonstrated in the preceding chapters is that myths of transparency distance us from the very virtues that would open us to resting in the

402 Derrida, 60.

ethical responsibility that lies at the heart of what it means to be human. It is not in scrupulous ethical accounting that we find the motivation to act with and toward others in a moral fashion, rather it is in a profound humility and love in response to this mysterious life that we have received, a mysterious life that is entwined with the lives of those around us. In this recognition of how much remains unknown, we discover that we have no moral advantage over those who process information in different ways or who experience the world in bodies with different abilities and limitations. We are freed to encounter one another as equals, deeply relationally rooted in the *imago Dei*.

In this last section, we will look at what it means to build upon ethical motivation to be formed in virtue with one another, whether in positions of direct support or with our friends and loved ones. According to MacIntyre, these virtues must be acquired qualities that are necessary to achieve the goods internal to practice of direct support, contribute to the good of a whole life, and enable the good for human beings as understood in the Christian tradition and social practice. However, throughout Part II we have come to see that the “good” for people, ethically speaking, in light of Christian tradition, cannot be separated from the need to give and receive love. As this love troubles and complexifies any rationalistic account of the good, the virtues we seek are those that display a profound respect for the hidden “secret” of the other and, as such, are open to humbly discovering good in the lives of people with intellectual disabilities.

### a. Love, the unspoken wellspring of virtue

The Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus,

“Your roots will grow down into God’s love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.”

“Love,” often in the guise of care or calling, has wound its way through the threads of this project in ways often present but seldom explicit. This is how love works.

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404 Ephesians 3:17-19, NLT
The story of the divine through the Christian tradition is of an unrelenting, mysterious, sacrificial love. Thus, love is at the centre of the response arising out of the recognition of people created in God’s image. In this final part, we turn to discover the forms of love that are “called for” in recognizing the *imago Dei* in our neighbours with intellectual disabilities. We do so, not in light of the tyranny of transparency but in appreciation for the mysterious gift of divine love. We will explore virtues that are shaped by acknowledging divine relationality and partial opacity – virtues of discovery.

We also recognize that love is an undercurrent running beneath the surface of professional care for people with intellectual disabilities. To *speak* of love – to put it into words as such – risks defying the ethical expectations of the field, yet if it were not present there would be no moral substance to caregiving in the first place. Love is the heart of the profession, yet it must not be professed.

In the Christian tradition, there is a reason that love for God must supersede all other loves. The source of love is God, for “God is love.”\(^{405}\) As noted in Chapter Three,

> Just as the quiet lake originates deep down in hidden springs no eye has seen, so also does a person’s love originate even more deeply in God’s love. If there were no gushing spring at the bottom, if God were not love, then there would be neither the little lake, nor a human being’s love.\(^{406}\)

It is because one loves and follows Christ that one responds to Christ’s command to love one’s neighbour as oneself, even the neighbour who is not instinctively lovable. Kierkegaard builds on John’s words in 1 John 4 in *The Duty to Love the People We See*:

> A person should begin with loving the unseen, God, because then he himself will learn what it is to love. But that he actually loves the unseen will be known by his loving the brother he sees; the more he loves the unseen, the more he will love the people he sees.\(^{407}\)

In their emphasis on the importance of receiving divine love first, Kierkegaard and Hans Urs von Balthasar agree. Balthasar calls God’s love “absolute love” throughout

\(^{405}\) 1 John 4:8.
\(^{407}\) Ibid., 160.
the pages of his Love Alone. There is a qualitative difference between human love and this divine love. Chapter Six of this project considered the mystery of suffering love through the death of Christ, and Balthasar’s observation that “the totally-other, the ever-greater appears and seizes hold of us in the very act of overwhelming us through the ultimately incomprehensible character of that love.”\footnote{Balthasar, 48. Quoted in Miner, A Dialogue on Love and Charity, 508.} The love of God is ultimately \textit{incomprehensible} and unexpected. To be seized by this love is also to love one’s neighbours in ways that might appear incomprehensible or illogical. While constrained by bodily limitation, human beings acting out of this love might demonstrate qualities of the divine \textit{agape}. To do so, however, Balthasar maintains that one must first experience it. It is a love that reveals, “in the light of this love one has never loved” and convinces each person that he or she must “start from the beginning to re-learn what love really is.”\footnote{Balthasar, 51. Quoted in Miner, A Dialogue on Love and Charity, 508.} To love One who is “totally other” means that the human being cannot be the one to initiate this love. Rather, each person must first \textit{receive} this love.\footnote{Or, as the Apostle John conveys, “We love each other because he loved us first.” (1 John 4:19)}

In being incomprehensible and “foreign,” the love of God is a \textit{revelation}. It must come from outside and in this sense is a \textit{discovery}, though not discovered through our own power. Indeed, this speaks to our own inadequacy of ability to grasp God’s love by intellect. It cannot be thought, only received. The love of God defies all expectations of what one has previously known as love. Robert Minor describes that for Balthasar,

\begin{quote}
God’s love will strike people “as a ‘shock,’ a \textit{scandalum} that cannot be assimilated to our notions of love. A person must first be scandalized; he must first experience a "pitfall" that God has prepared for the rational creature. Only then can he possibly see that he lacks any real foothold, any center in his own being.\footnote{Minor, 514.}
\end{quote}

We discover again a sense of “dispossession,” lacking a centre in one’s own being, at the heart of relational Christianity. It is only through this “unsettling” scandal that we are re-oriented to love others in a new way. Whereas we may have previously viewed all

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\footnotetext[408] {Balthasar, 48. Quoted in Miner, A Dialogue on Love and Charity, 508.}
\footnotetext[409] {Balthasar, 51. Quoted in Miner, A Dialogue on Love and Charity, 508.}
\footnotetext[410] {Or, as the Apostle John conveys, “We love each other because he loved us first.” (1 John 4:19)}
\footnotetext[411] {Minor, 514.}
\end{thebibliography}
others through the perspective of our own priorities and desires, this scandalous re-orientation points us to a new kind of love that *lays down its life* in service to others. Indeed, it is only when one’s own priorities are displaced that one is truly fulfilled in loving service to others.

The givenness of our existence out of the love of God, created in the image of God, is foundational to ethical obligation and motivation within the Christian tradition. Traced back to the formal *imago Dei* in chapter four, this constitutive relation and responsibility arise pre-consciousness. However, we also know that the *imitatio Dei* towards which we are to work is the mysterious and scandalous love of Christ as uncovered in chapter seven. Thus, mysterious divine love in various senses supplies both the moral *motivation* and the impetus for the moral *formation* of direct support professionals within the Christian tradition.

Before further exploration of the virtues that arise out of this pattern for moral formation, however, we must first understand how preference and proximity shape and structure our love for others. Is it possible to love everyone equally, as seems to be demanded of us? How do strangers, neighbours, friends, and family fit into this picture of relational responsibility? Are we called to respond differently to some than others?

### 1. Loving every other

According to Kierkegaard, Christian love “teaches us to love all people, unconditionally all.”\(^{412}\) This was demonstrated in the equality of each person being “before God” in Chapter Two and in light of “the command to love” in Chapter Five. Where love for family and friends is *preferential love*, Christ commands *neighbour love*, which relates to the *un-lovable object*. The “ugly... is the neighbor, whom one shall love.”\(^{413}\) This is a harsh way to describe those whom we do not naturally care for or “prefer.” Here Kierkegaard acknowledges an often-unamed truth. In projecting onto others our own prejudices, stereotypes, and baser instincts, there are many in this world whom we fear or avoid, although we may not even admit this to ourselves. The

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\(^{412}\) Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 50.

\(^{413}\) Ibid., 373.
“ugliness” we see in others is often a product of our fears and unacknowledged vulnerability.

Henri Nouwen’s relationship with Adam exemplifies that when we spend time with people and get to know them it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain our prejudices. Eventually we open ourselves to “falling in care” with them. The experience of “falling in love” is often spoken or sung about, yet we also find ourselves “falling” for people for whom we thought we would never learn to care. As our preconceptions disappear, we come to recognize each person’s gifts and discover that they have made a difference in our lives. Nouwen describes the change, as Adam became his confidant, “I began to talk to Adam... It didn’t seem to matter to me anymore that he could not respond in words. We were together, growing in friendship, and I was glad to be there. Before long Adam became my much trusted listener.”

There are those whom we “naturally” prefer. This may be because of similarities in interests and passions, shared history, or any number of reasons – often related to the ways in which we are like someone else. Friendships and romantic relationships are often born out of these preferences. However, Kierkegaard describes that we need to be commanded to love our neighbours to grow to love those whom we do not prefer. In following Christ’s command to love, and demonstrating care and presence with people whom we do not initially prefer, we often grow to care for them as well. This is not a magical formula. There will always be people we do not prefer, those who require a continued effort. In these cases, we are still commanded to love. Preference may grow and fade, which is precisely why love must be commanded.

In Chapter Six it was acknowledged, as evident in the writing of Judith Butler, that we are mutually and profoundly responsible to and dependent upon one another. Following Christ’s command to love one’s neighbour opens us up to the possibility of change on a subconscious level as well. Butler’s contribution is the recognition that we are already bound together in mutual responsibility on a pre-conscious level. We may

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414 Ibid., 47
not be able to “give an account” of these deep ties yet. However, is this a responsibility that we can ever hope to live up to?

2. The paradox of absolute duty

In Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes de silentio wrestles with Abraham’s troubling willingness to sacrifice Isaac in light of Abraham’s faith in God. How might one choose between God’s command and the life of another? How might one make an ethical choice in such a scenario? There are no easy answers, yet Abraham is praised as “having come as the single individual into an absolute relation to the absolute.”

In *The Gift of Death*, Jacques Derrida deconstructs this “absolute relation.” Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac would not be a sacrifice unless Abraham loves his son deeply. “[I]t is indeed this love for Isaac that makes his act a sacrifice by its paradoxical contrast to his love for God.” There is a sense, though, that in encountering Isaac’s absolute singularity he is also an “absolute other” and also demands ultimate accountability. “Duty or responsibility binds me to the other, to the other as other, and ties me in my absolute singularity to the other as other.” Ultimately, for Derrida,

I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others. Every other (one) is every (bit) other [tout autre est tout autre], every one else is completely or wholly other. The simple concepts of alterity and of singularity constitute the concept of duty as much as that of responsibility. As a result, the concepts of responsibility, of decision, or of duty, are condemned a priori to paradox, scandal, and aporia.

Every time we respond to a particular other in ethical responsibility, Derrida is saying, we sacrifice every other “other”. The time, money, energy, devotion we pour into

415 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling, and Repetition*, 86.
416 Derrida, 65.
417 Ibid., 68.
418 Ibid.
one (whether that one is family or a friend, or a complete stranger) are time, money, energy, and devotion that are not being invested into others.\footnote{According to Derrida, Søren Kierkegaard and Emmanuel Levinas essentially stress the same obligation in different ways. Whether one is referencing the “infinite alterity” of every human other (Levinas) or God (Kierkegaard), one suspends other ethical obligations in order to give to either. In this way, Levinas’ philosophy is just as religious as Kierkegaard’s. “[F]or his part, in taking into account absolute singularity, that is, the absolute alterity obtaining in relations between one human and another, Levinas is no longer able to distinguish between the infinite alterity of God and that of every human. His ethics is already a religious one. In the two cases the border between the ethical and religious discourses becomes more than problematic, as do all attendant discourses.” [Derrida, 84]}

The violence of the demand of a transparently coherent ethical narrative unity lies in its unfulfillable demands. The dilemma that Derrida leads us to concerns calculation of the “most ethical course of action.” How might we give an account for those we have sacrificed when “every other is absolute other?” When one’s responsibility is to every other, \textit{all others}, all of the time, there is no possibility of living up to or even giving an account of one’s choices.

How might we consider our obligation to love “every other” in a way that is not paralyzing? Is it possible to acknowledge our profound responsibility and respond to \textit{an other} without becoming guilt-ridden and overwhelmed with our obligation to \textit{every other other}? With Derrida’s critique in mind, it would seem that anything we do requires sacrificing all other responsibilities and duties.

Kierkegaard’s \textit{neighbour love} is an approach that seeks to move us beyond the scope of preferential love to respond to “every other.” We are challenged to act with a greater understanding of equality and commitment to loving even those we do not prefer. Even here, perhaps especially here, in a posture of generous hospitality, we face Derrida’s paradox. To give to one other seems to be to sacrifice \textit{every other} other on the altar of preference or choice, even if that choice is toward loving one’s neighbour.

**Giving an Account: Divided Loyalties**

In my work, I teach workshops on resiliency, compassion fatigue, and self-care to teams of direct support professionals. One point that hits home with many is the reminder that compassion fatigue impacts those we love first. We
often feel that they can "take it" because they love us, while we put efforts into our work relationships.

Another aspect of my work involves conflict resolution. I was connected with two women who acknowledged that tension around work conflicts had begun to impact their home lives and relationships. During a mediation session, it became clear there was one incident that severely fractured their relationship. One employee worked on administrative support, while the other worked direct support. Pam, who worked direct support, was supporting one woman when Julie, who worked admin, approached her about bringing a jacket to another woman who was at home with family. Due to staffing pressures and ultimately, lack of sector funding, there was not another DSP working that day. Pam felt that she should handle both responsibilities as the DSP, but also felt that the woman she was with was the priority at the time. Julie knew that the family of the woman who was missing a jacket already had a fraught relationship with the support team, and felt that getting one to her needed to be a priority. She was willing to take the jacket herself but thought that she needed permission from Pam who was the one working direct support. Poor communication followed and, building on previous negative encounters, a harassment report was filed between the two parties.

While multiple issues impact these kinds of fraught relationships, this particular scenario – one which led to stress and anxiety at home for both parties – was built on the sense of duty Pam felt towards two people simultaneously. She was unable to “let go” of what she felt was a profound obligation to meet the needs of everyone around her, which resulted in inadequate care for people she supported, broken relationships with staff, and I’m sure the anxiety even impacted her ability to care for her daughter with autism at home.

Most people working direct support would not classify staffing shortages and tough decisions around caregiving as “the tension of divided moral obligation,” or express that “the concepts of responsibility, of decision, or of duty, are condemned a priori to paradox, scandal, and aporia.” However, we see Derrida’s critique in action in this one practical area. Pam faced paralysis at the thought that it was her moral obligation to meet the needs of both people that she was responsible to, and this led to interpersonal conflict. This example demonstrates the paradox at the level of direct care, but what about all of the other nonprofits in which Pam could have been involved? What
about pursuing a lucrative job to donate money to other organizations doing great work? If every other is “absolute other” and demands our attention and care, should she go home to care for her daughter with disabilities or to volunteer with neighbours who live on the street, or in halfway homes, or prisons, or orphanages around the world?

3. A debt too great or a gift already given?

To begin to address the dread that our ethical debt to love our neighbour is too great to fulfill, we recall the words of Emil Brunner:

Thus the original nature of man is being in the love of God, the fulfilment of responsible being, the responsibility which comes not from a demand but from a gift, not from the law but from grace, from generous love, and itself consists in responsive love. ⁴²⁰

Brunner reminds us that the call to respond to the other is always in response to a gift that has been given. This is true whether viewed through the lens of the divine gift of life (God) or the giftedness of a life woven together in deep relational dependency with others (our neighbour). The call to live into full humanity is not first response to law, but to grace. All that we have, we have been given. In turn, we are called to give this grace-gift to others.⁴²¹ This gift is outside of a system of exchange. To borrow an observation from MacIntyre, what we have received from others is incalculable, and so, too, our ethical response defies measure. Instead, it is our telos to give to others in love, out of the love that we have already received. Relational reciprocity is central to human flourishing. To exercise our givenness is to celebrate the gift, to give back only out of a sense of obligation is to nullify it. At the core of response-ability lies not only a summons but also the received ability to give, to respond, and to meet the needs of

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⁴²¹ Noting here that the biblical Greek for Paul’s reference to “spiritual gifts” in 1 Corinthians 12:4 is “charisma” out of the root “charis” (grace).
another whom we encounter. It is this gift that we “face” in our neighbour; in the call of the person who experiences disabilities; in the call to love and serve one another.

An unobtainable demand on every side may lead to paralysis or abstraction and utilitarianism. Caught between the options, paralysis sets in because we cannot fulfill our duty to love every other. Alternately, we distance ourselves from the situation we find ourselves in and begin to calculate how to do the most good for the greatest number of people in the shortest amount of time. To do so, we must betray the singularity of each other and ourselves in the abstraction of utilitarian calculus.

Kierkegaard’s writing on the importance of subjectivity in one’s experience of the truth reminds us that objective abstraction does not adequately reflect the human condition – the condition of being in a position to respond to another. Yes, there are times to calculate. Throughout our lives, we encounter complex dilemmas – situations for practical reasoning and consultation with our loved ones and community to make the best decisions we can given the information we have at hand. However, acknowledging our givenness also means that we find ourselves in a particular place, with specific resources, surrounded by particular – and peculiar – people. Indeed, we would not have the same degree of ethical responsibility if we were not uniquely situated in this way. In my particular place, time, history, and ability, I have physical limitations and limited knowledge about others and myself. In my particularity, there will be times when I will be the only one who is “in a place” to respond to another’s need and in other times I will not be in a place to meet the needs of another. “I” have a unique ability to respond – a responsibility that speaks to the gift and opportunity of this encounter. This is an ability available to all; an ability carried in the very nature of the gift and the encounter with the neighbour created in the imago Dei.

On the contrary, if we recognize that to give back out of obligation is to nullify the pure grace of our givenness, then we are opened to act towards others to express our gifts rather than to repay an ethical debt. The gift is entrusted to us and

422 Note that “response-ability” is used here to draw a helpful distinction, yet is necessarily supported directly by the etymology of “responsibility,” although the condition of being responsible does in a sense also imply the ability to respond. The suffix “-ity” does not.
comes with responsibility, but that responsibility is not to repay the gift. If we comprehend our limits, then we know that it would be futile to think that we have infinite resources to give to others, and in our dependency, we work to give what we can out of gratitude, not debt. In critiquing Derrida, Judith Butler goes on to describe how his position presupposes what I have previously called the myth of transparency:

What is striking about such extremes of self-beratement is the grandiose notion of the transparent 'I' that is presupposed as the ethical ideal. This is hardly a belief in which self-acceptance (a humility about one's constitutive limitations) or generosity (a disposition towards the limits of others) might find room to flourish.  

Generosity recognizes that others have needs and, without presumption, approaches to listen to how these needs may be met. At times meeting these needs will involve our contribution and agency, at other times it may not. Recognition of our limits, including the limits of our self-understanding, is the kind of self-acceptance that opens us to give not out of demand, but out of gift. It is this unassuming generosity that points us to the virtue of courageous humility.

b. The virtues of discovery

1. The virtue of courageous humility

The moment you have a self at all, there is a possibility of putting yourself first – wanting to be the centre – wanting to be God, in fact... What Satan put into the heads of our remote ancestors was the idea that they could 'be like gods' – could set up on their own as if they had created themselves – be their own masters...

~ C. S. Lewis

423 Butler, 80.

424 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Pub., 1952), 53-54. Lewis’ language of “being their own masters” recalls Kierkegaard’s emphasis on relating to one’s establishing power in *Sickness Unto Death* and his related writing in his journals.
Humility is arguably the first virtue that was lost in the biblical creation account. After the serpent questions God’s account of the situation they find themselves in, it is the desire to “be like God, knowing good and evil” that propels Adam and Eve to commit the first sin. The serpent seeks to “have their eyes open” to see transparently that which was beyond their limits. It is our sense of givenness and limitation that helps us to remain objective to ourselves and subjective to others, willing to question our own accounts and be open to the stories of others. This same posture recognizes that we will not be able to respond to everyone. When we answer the call to serve another, we are turning down the call to serve another other, or every other other. Our embodiment comes with limits, yet this makes the gifts we give that much more significant. The call to love others brings us to the realization that everyone is equally worthy of love, yet we will never be able to love everyone equally or unconditionally. In giving to others, we also recognize that there are other others giving as well, and we are not alone in meeting the needs of the world.

Throughout this project, I have established that the example of Christ is the imitatio Dei of the Christian tradition, the telos that arises out of what it means to be created in the imago Dei. Christ is therefore the example who displays the virtue of courageous humility in loving the people that he encountered throughout his life and ministry.

i. Encountering Christ: Loving those we see

It is a paradox indeed that those who want to be for "everyone" often find themselves unable to be close to anyone. When everybody becomes my “neighbor,” it is worth wondering whether anybody can really become my “proximus,” that is, the one who is most close to me.

~ Henri Nouwen

425 Genesis 3:5, NLT.
426 We recall here Deborah Creamer’s limits model of disability as referenced in Chapter One.
Kierkegaard reflects on the human need for love in *The Duty to Love the People We See*. He begins by proclaiming, “How deeply the need of love is rooted in human nature!” The drive to love and to be loved requires a profound and courageous humility as we encounter one another. Even Jesus Christ, he reminds us, “humanly felt this need to love and be loved by an individual human being.” Kierkegaard points to the story of Christ asking Peter if Peter loves him – three times. There is a certain paradox in Christ’s approach, “What an appalling contradiction that the one who is God loves humanly, since to love humanly is to love an individual human being and to wish to be that individual human being’s best beloved.”

To be human, Kierkegaard is saying, even to be the God-man, is to need to love and be loved by particular human others. It takes humility to recognize that we need love, and it takes courage to ask for this love from others. Even Christ failed the duty of “unconditional love,” if this is understood as an obligation to love every human being in the same way, all of the time. This does not mean that Christ saw some as worthy and others as unworthy of love, but in human form, he invested more time in his disciples than others, and expressed his love to each person in a different way. The duty to love the people that we see, as John instructs in 1 John 4:20, is “the duty to find in the world of actuality the people we can love in particular and in loving them to love the people we see.” Repeatedly, Kierkegaard calls his readers back to actuality. Love as an ideal, calculation, or even desire is not love until it acts toward the people we see. We are called to love *humanly*, which is always to love the particular other.

Herein lies the importance of the neighbour. The neighbour is someone whom I encounter. She and I have “crossed paths,” yet she is not someone I naturally love. She is a near one, sometimes even as close as a spouse or partner, yet someone whom I have may have difficulty loving. It is ironically in some family or marital relationships that it becomes most difficult to “love the people we see.” The category for

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429 Ibid., 155.
430 Ibid., 156.
431 Ibid., 159.
the neighbour for Kierkegaard always draws us courageously beyond our comfort zone, yet never with the hubris that we will be able to love others perfectly. Christ acted in courageous humility in loving the people he saw, which included tax collectors and sinners, Pharisees and teachers of the law, and even his own disciples when they betrayed him. Kierkegaard notes:

Christianly to descend from heaven is boundlessly to love the person you see just as you see him. Therefore if you want to be perfect in love, strive to fulfill this duty, in loving to love the person one sees, to love him just as you see him, with all his imperfections and weaknesses.432

To love the person we see is to retain our humility in our knowledge of them, not overlooking their faults in order to love them but having the courage to love them just as they are – without fully knowing or understanding who they are. It is to be willing to embrace one another knowing that we will continue to discover each other’s gifts and limitations, to commit courageously to caring for one another in and through our embodied humanity.

ii. The reciprocity and simplicity of courageous humility

Humility also recognizes that there are times when I need to receive from others. Sometimes, it is when we feel the most gratitude that we turn around and deny others the opportunity to give to us. We fail to see that opening ourselves to receive the gift of another is perhaps the greatest gift we could give. Consciousness of our limits embraces that there are times when I, too, need to rest in the care of others. It takes courage to ask for help, though, and so humility must always be paired with courage. On its own, humility may keep me from asking for help. It may just as well prevent me from stepping toward or encountering others in the faith that I have something to offer.

Responding to one another in love is seldom found in grandiose, self-fulfilling acts of valour. Neither is it realized in the self-deprecating sacrifice of one’s own passions and interests. Instead, responsive love is profoundly human, remarkably

432 Kierkegaard, Works of Love, 174. Christ in this way is the pattern for the ‘humble courage’ of faith that Johannes de Silentio uses to describe Abraham in Fear and Trembling and Johannes Climacus describes in Sickness Unto Death [FT 41/SKS 4 143, SUD 85/SKS 11 199].
simple, and surprisingly difficult. It means humbly looking in the face of another, becoming attentive to her needs, hopes, and fears, and then taking action. At times the action that is called for looks like being with one another. At other times, acting looks like putting one’s own safety or reputation at risk to support others. Most of the time, it looks like not much at all. As Mother Theresa is reported to have said, “Don’t look for big things, just do small things with great love.... The smaller the thing, the greater must be our love.” It takes the virtue of courageous humility to act with great love in small ways. Humility on its own may be tempted to fade into the background, as we recognize our own limitations in both knowledge and ability. Courage on its own may charge ahead without recognizing these limits and so destroy that which it sets out to change. This is why courage and humility must go hand-in-hand. Recognizing our limits, we nevertheless press on in caring for one another, open to discovering each other’s needs and responding accordingly.

**Giving an Account: Courageous Humility in Direct Support**

In Chapter Two, I recounted my first day of direct support provision, as I met Hiroshi. Where the bigger, stronger gentleman I was hired with decided that he could not handle working with someone with such significant behavioural challenges and requested a transfer, I did not. It was not because I was confident in my ability to respond to Hiroshi’s needs. I sincerely doubted my ability to respond, but I also was not sure that I was able to meet his needs. Going forward required an act of courage, yet it was made easier by the humility that I did not know whether or not I would be able to work with Hiroshi. Indeed, I did not yet know whether I would be able to work with people with intellectual disabilities at all! How many similar stories are there of people who stepped forward with an act that was courageous for them, simply responding to a need that they did not yet know if they could meet? It is not until we take a courageous step that we discover our limits, but this takes the humility of knowing we could fail, we could be embarrassed, we could be wrong yet stepping forward anyway.

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I am struck by the number of times I have been told what a good or special person I am for working with “those people.” It is a common experience of those of us who work with people with intellectual disabilities. What is masquerading as a gesture of humility here (“I could never do that...”) is often, in fact, an expression of pride and fear. Pride, because there is a misguided preconception that it is somehow embarrassing or shameful to journey with people “like that,” and this is not something with which this person wants to be associated. Fear, because they are not willing to take the first step to discover if this is actually something they might be able to do. Their statements are a way of “delegating the call” to others, out of the fear that they may find themselves in a position to respond themselves. The tragic reality here is that, because so many people abdicate the honour of supporting people in this way, the work at times does become difficult due to short staffing or lack of volunteers. "I could never do that" becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and one with significant implications in the lives of countless people with intellectual disabilities. Perhaps an even greater tragedy here is that so many people without intellectual disabilities miss out on the flourishing that can come with getting to know people who experience the world differently.

Working several years in recruitment, I discovered an interesting phenomenon when hiring people into the field. We had people who applied with us who had just completed their Developmental Services Worker diploma, and others who had no formal training whatsoever. Many people came through the local DSW program who were excellent employees, for sure. However, far too many young people applied with the sense that they already knew what they were doing. I would regularly hire people without the DSW diploma over and above those with the degree, knowing that getting to know the people we support requires a profound humility and openness to discovering who each person is, and what they need. Too often I found that DSW’s had just enough training to feel that they knew what they were “getting into,” but not enough wisdom or experience to know that the call to serve could not be answered based on textbooks and classroom study alone.

2. The virtue of loving mercy

Courageous humility means that, in acknowledging our limits, we are open to receive not only the gifts but the limits of others without compromising the profound equality of being created in God’s image. It sets us up to respond to the profound and
significant needs of people with profound intellectual disabilities without believing that we are in any way better than they are. In other words, it leads to the virtue of mercy born out of lovingkindness.

In writing on what he calls the virtues of acknowledged dependence, Alasdair MacIntyre expounds on how one goes beyond familial relations with one’s close community to show “just generosity” to those outside. In doing so, he relies on Thomas Aquinas’ perspective on *misericordia*. *Misericordia* is a kind of mercy that “has regard to urgent and extreme need without respect of persons. It is the kind and scale of the need that dictates what has to be done, not whose need it is.”

One possible translation of *misericordia* is “pity.” However, given modern preconceptions and connotations of pity, it is more accurately thought of as a kind of mercy that includes both compassion and action on behalf of another. This is not merely a compassionate feeling, but concrete action that makes a difference in someone’s life. Whereas envy “sorrows over our neighbor’s good,” mercy “sorrows over our neighbor’s evil.”

Aquinas and MacIntyre are building on Aristotle. In order to have this mercy for another, one must have either a ‘union of affection, which arises by love’ (30.2 co) or a perception of a ‘real union’ (*unio realis*) between the person and another person. We grieve and suffer with those we relate to. Yet, *unio realis* opens us to mercy that goes beyond one’s natural community to feel the pain of those outside. There still must be a

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434 MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 123. We see similarities here with Kierkegaard’s reflections on neighbour-love, in that it is a mercy that goes beyond caring for one’s own “in-group.” MacIntyre believes that “communal life itself needs this virtue that goes beyond the boundaries of communal life.” [Ibid., 124] The difference being, *misericordia* relies on recognition of a profound and significant need and, as we will see, upon a perceived or recognized commonality.


436 Ibid., 73. Robert Miner goes on to describe its origin as follows, “‘For *misericordia* is named from the fact that someone has a wretched heart (*miserum cor*) over the wretchedness of another’ (30.1 co). If one has a ‘wretched heart’, caused by another’s wretchedness, one ‘suffers with’ the other; one has compassion for her, in the literal sense of *compassion*.”

437 Miner, *The Difficulties of Mercy*, 75.
perceived unity or similarity with the one who suffers, and Aquinas observes that this comes more readily to some than others,

So it is that the old and the wise, who consider themselves able to fall upon evil things, are more merciful – as are the weak and the fearful. On the other hand, those who regard themselves as happy and so powerful that they suppose themselves able to suffer nothing evil, are not so merciful (30.2 co).\textsuperscript{438}

It is not surprising that MacIntyre, an Aristotelian and a Thomist scholar, draws upon misericordia in his search for virtues of acknowledged dependence. Acknowledged dependence leads to compassionate action on behalf of/toward others. Aquinas claims that those who are old or wise, weak or fearful, are more likely to have empathy for those in need because they can imagine themselves being in that place. Those who are prideful do not recognize the need to reach beyond their own community to assist, because they have difficulty seeing a connection with the person in need. This also demonstrates why courageous humility leads to loving mercy – compassionate action on behalf of another. It requires humility to recognize shared commonality as people who experience bodily limitation and suffering. It requires courage to enter into the lives of others to meet their needs. We must here acknowledge that suffering does not necessarily accompany disability, and suffering can occur in anyone’s life, disabled or not.

In popularizing the term ‘temporarily able-bodied’ within theological circles, Nancy Eiesland and others who use the phrase are reminding readers and listeners that interdependence does not only take place on a psychological or existential level, but also on a practical level.\textsuperscript{439} Disability is the demographic that anyone can join at any time and most of us will at some point in our lives. In exercising misericordia toward others, one is not only making the world a better place for those with urgent needs but is working towards a world that is better for oneself.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{438} Miner, \textit{A Dialogue on Love and Charity}, 76.
\item \textsuperscript{439} Nancy L. Eiesland, \textit{The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability} (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).
\end{itemize}
According to Aquinas, *misericordia* is one of the effects of charity (*caritas*), which is a theological virtue. “Charity can be in us neither naturally, nor by natural powers that are acquired, but only by an infusion of the Holy Spirit, who is the love of the Father and the Son, whose participation in us is created by charity.”\(^{440}\) In other words, for Aquinas this mercy *flows out of* the love of God through an infusion of the Holy Spirit. Theological virtues are received as divine gift.\(^{441}\)

One must not attempt, Robert Miner argues, to predict the scope of these divine gifts. Thomas “does not restrict *caritas* to the set of self-described Christian believers.”\(^{442}\) God’s mercy can flow through those who do not necessarily profess the Christian faith. One does not need the *concepts* of grace or love to possess them. The error of believing that one must be cognitively aware of these concepts presumes that the operation of divine grace within a person is determined or otherwise limited by her conceptual apparatus. But Thomas would not make this presumption. He knows that membership in the church and residence in the *civitas Dei* never coincide perfectly. The spirit blows where it will.\(^{443}\)

In this way, expression of these theological virtues is not constrained to those who intellectually can “give an account” of the virtues or divine charity. It is clear that even people with profound intellectual disabilities can exercise these Christian virtues. “The spirit blows where it will,” and God is actively at work in the lives of people who

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\(^{441}\) MacIntyre argues that *Misericordia* is still capable of being a secular virtue. He does so by quickly observing that, “Charity in the form of *Misericordia* is recognizably at work in the secular world and the authorities whom Aquinas cites on its nature, and whose disagreements he aspires to resolve... *Misericordia* then has its place in the catalogue of the virtues, independently of its theological grounding.” [MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 124]. Robert Miner seeks to clarify MacIntyre’s hasty dismissal that *misericordia* can operate without its “theological grounding.” Miner points out, “Cut off from divinely infused charity, *misericordia* is no virtue; it is only a passion, and a questionable one at that. Any satisfying reading of Thomas must observe the dependence of *misericordia* on *caritas*, noting that without the latter, the former stands as the matter for virtue, awaiting full formation by *caritas*. ” [Miner, *The Difficulties of Mercy*, 80.]

\(^{442}\) Miner, *The Difficulties of Mercy*, 81.

\(^{443}\) Ibid.
may not fully understand how God is working. Who of us can claim to be fully aware of the work of the Holy Spirit in and through our own lives?

What does this mean, then, for direct support professionals? It means that one does not need to claim to understand the concepts of love and grace to act with compassionate action toward another. It suggests that those who embrace their interdependence and gratitude toward those who have loved and supported them will more naturally express this mercy, as they will be aware of the equality that connects them, the fundamental unity of human beings.

Drawing on not only MacIntyre’s acknowledged dependency, but also Judith Butler’s recognition of our always-partial opacity to ourselves, we might come to understand unio realis in a new way. No longer grounded in the transparency of our dependence, the virtue of loving mercy is rooted in the humble recognition of the shared opacity of the accounts that we give and our mutual responsibility to one another. With Kierkegaard, this is also understood as a profound dependence on God as the establishing Power of the self, a dependence in which every other is similarly constituted. We are relationally dependent, vulnerable to the core. Regarding misericordia, this rootedness as radically constituted, interdependent selves lends itself to a more fundamental perception of our shared unio realis.

i. **Encountering Christ: Mercy and grace in our time of need**

Again, we look to the example of Christ (imitatio Dei) in displaying mercy. The writer of Hebrews stresses, “We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses.”\(^\text{444}\) In light of this, “Let us... approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”\(^\text{445}\) This passage demonstrates that we can approach God with confidence knowing that Christ can relate unio realis. In the Christian tradition, since we have experienced this mercy, we do approach each other not only with the realization of our limits and inability to give a full account of ourselves but in light of the loving mercy we

\(^{444}\) Hebrews 4:15.

\(^{445}\) Hebrews 4:16.
have received at the cross. Just as we have received love, so receiving mercy opens us up to be merciful with others without perceiving ourselves as greater or “better.” We act in compassionate mercy not because we are complete and competent but because we, too, have sought and received mercy in our time of need.

In Christ’s actions on earth, we see ongoing evidence of compassionate action / loving mercy / *misericordia* towards those around him. In Luke 7, he feels compassion for a widow whose son had died, raising him from the dead and “giving him back” to his mother. In the miraculous loaves and fishes account of Matthew 15, Jesus says, “I feel compassion for the people because they have remained with me now three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.”446 He teaches the crowd because he “felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”447 He heals two blind men who request healing because he is “moved with compassion.”448 These are only a few of many examples where Christ demonstrates loving mercy, a kind of mercy that embodies both empathetic compassion and practical action. “A bruised reed he will not break” is the way that Isaiah phrases this *misericordia*.449

**Giving An Account: Loving Mercy in Direct Support**

Being a direct support professional in times of crisis can be a thankless job. So Lisa discovered as she supported Charles through his final days.

Charles had been well known and loved within his community and his circle of friends, yet his sister had little contact with him. She was the one who ended up making decisions on his behalf as his health rapidly deteriorated and he was transferred to the hospital.

Lisa was new to direct support, yet sensed it was a calling for her. She was a devout Catholic with a sincere appreciation for the sanctity of life, yet also respected the boundaries of her role in communicating with Charles' family.

446 Matthew 15:32, NASB.
447 Mark 6:34.
448 Matthew 20:34, NASB.
449 Isaiah 43:3.
She would advocate for his value without imposing her values on Charles’ sister.

The decision was made, rather hastily Lisa thought, to stop providing Charles with food. He lived for another five days before passing away. Through that time, Lisa spent countless hours with him – paid and unpaid. She recognized his distress, and there were times when her presence was his only source of sustenance and encouragement.

While she maintained professional boundaries with the family, never challenging Charles' sister directly on the choices she had made around his care, Lisa was wrecked by the thought that someone who hardly knew Charles could make such a rash decision about his value as a person who experiences disability.

Ultimately, it became too much for her, and as the weeks progressed, she took fewer shifts until she stopped working altogether and resigned.

Lisa’s story is a tragic example of the virtue of loving mercy embodied without a balance of courageous humility – recognizing her limits and needs, and courageously working within them towards resilient, ongoing care. She experienced belonging without the distance needed to sustain her work. Sharing in the suffering of Charles and taking compassionate action to accompany him through his final days exemplifies loving mercy. Some would question her choices within the framework of professional boundaries. However, the needs of another human being and the call of faith transcend our obligations to professional standards. It is not “adhering to work hours” that poses the challenge here, but Lisa’s belief that she had a responsibility to change the situation within which Charles found himself. Humility requires, at times, that we dare to just be with people within and throughout circumstances that will not change. It means that we recognize that we do not have all of the answers and that we do not know Charles’ sister’s story either. Courageous humility enables us to display loving mercy not only to Charles, but also to his sister. It means entrusting the final act of loving mercy to God, and in this humility, we may find peace.
ii. **Receiving the scandalous gift of friendship**

Friends need no justification. Friendship is a gift and, like most significant gifts, it is surrounded by mystery.\(^{450}\)

> ~ Stanley Hauerwas

The loving mercy of God finds its ultimate expression in suffering love on the cross of Christ. Whether this mercy is born out of a ‘union of affection, which arises by love’ (30.2 co) or a perception of a ‘real union’ (*unio realis*) is shrouded in mystery, as Christ’s gift is ultimately inconceivable.\(^{451}\) It is a mercy that calls into question any such distinction of the relationship. Building on Herbert McCabe, Robert Miner writes that the revolutionary effect of *caritas* (charity), out of which this mercy arises, is to subvert the inequality between God and man, making love possible with God “as equals.”\(^{452}\) We recall Christ’s words, “I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends since I have told you everything the Father told me.”\(^{453}\) This charity subverts models of the “more able” giving to the “less able” as it establishes the fundamental gift of equality. If Christ has called us friends, who am I to draw distinctions with another human being? Friendship is the ultimate equalizer.

In *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, Hans Reinders seeks to reframe the conversation on disability and personhood in such a way that the humanity of people with profound intellectual disabilities is no longer looked at as a “moral quandary.”\(^{454}\) From the perspective of Christian theology, our identity as human beings rests not in specific traits or biological capabilities but rather in belonging to God. We have ecstatic personhood as we receive the gift of God’s friendship with us. This has profound implications for the *imago Dei*, as “in an important sense, my being as *imago Dei* is not

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\(^{451}\) Miner, *The Difficulties of Mercy*, 75.

\(^{452}\) Ibid., 81.

\(^{453}\) John 15:15, NLT.

\(^{454}\) Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 30.
to be taken ontologically as a subsistent entity, but as a relationship that is ecstatically
grounded in God’s loving kindness toward me.” 455

The scandal of God’s friendship with us means that no one falls outside of its
purview.

[W]e must insist on the primacy of God’s love as gift from beginning to end. Only the primacy of his self-giving love will answer whether or not we will attain the fullness of life independently from the ‘quality’ of our response. Whatever there is to the fullness of life, it must be God’s gift from beginning to end, unless one is willing to accept that there are human beings who are excluded from it. 456

With theologians previously referenced, Reinders here acknowledges that the gift
of this friendship always begins with God. God first loved. Because we are loved, virtue
is a response to this scandalous gift of friendship. 457 It follows, then, that the distance
God has come to call us friends makes any difference between us and others pale in
comparison. “To know how to receive the gift of God’s friendship is to know how to
receive the gift of God’s friends.” 458

Just as Lisa’s obligation to her faith transcended her obligation to her profession,
so the radical equality of Christ and the friendship of God transcends our professional
labels and discourse. In some incomprehensible way, there can be a real unity between
God and man within which God has called us “friends.” Might this mean that even
within the professional-client relationship we might discover friendship?

Professional training on reducing risk and vulnerability would view as anathema
the description of “friendship” with someone receiving support. It is an understandable
protest. There are significant power differentials at play, perhaps the greatest of which is
the not-so-simple fact that one person is being paid to be with another person. One
should not use the words “care,” “friendship,” or “love” lightly in any relationship where

455 Ibid., 273.
456 Ibid., 301.
457 Ibid.
458 Ibid., 374.
such imbalances occur. Even while recognizing our shared radical dependency and vulnerability, one must not discount the power differentials at play as we encounter one another in systems and norms that define us differently.

To be the one who “gives an account” of the relationship as a friendship may, in fact, betray the friendship. It may confuse why I am here or the expectations of the caregiving relationship. However, who are we to presume to define who we are to another? To impose our understanding of a professional-client relationship on our interactions with another is to impose a pseudo-value system on the life of a person with an intellectual disability. It is to assert not only our power but also the power of the professional system. It may even do a disservice to the recognition of our fundamental equality of being human beings created in God’s image.

All this being acknowledged, with profound humility and recognition of ourselves as interdependent and relationally constituted human beings, it is possible that friendship develops even if we do not use the word “friend” to describe this relationship. That God would call us friends means that no one on earth is too different from me, too vulnerable or too powerful to exclude the possibility of friendship and mutual hospitality. There is no one with whom I am foreclosed from experiencing unio realis, from extending mercy toward, from “feeling with” their experiences. To ignore power differentials or pretend that they do not exist is to betray one’s relationship with another. However, to claim that these differences are more constitutive of our identity than our fundamental equality as people created in God’s image is to betray our relationship with the divine.

3. The virtues of confession and forgiveness

Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. And the hard truth is, all people love poorly.459

~ Henri Nouwen

The virtue of loving mercy entails compassionate action. When founded on the recognition of shared opacity to one another and ourselves, and grounded in the virtue of courageous humility, the action that it takes will not be based on the false presumption of transparently understanding the needs of another. In the example of Lisa, it meant simply being present with Charles through his final days.

However, wherever there is action – even compassionate action – there will be mis-action. We are fallible and mysterious human beings, driven by forces that are beyond us and which escape adequate comprehension. These opacities to ourselves lead to errors of moral judgment that often cause pain. These misunderstandings themselves may cause profound suffering. Our instinct is often to write these moments of confusion off, because either the other person “just doesn’t understand” or they are making “too big a deal” out of an incident. Recognition of our responsibility to one another requires taking each other’s pain seriously (misericordia). Our relationships matter. They shape us, and we shape others through them.

In the rush and haste of the day, people with intellectual disabilities are often misunderstood in their communication. Even with much training, it is tempting for direct support professionals to interpret the needs of those they support within certain preconceptions of what is needed, rather than being open to new interpretations. Alternately, support staff may seek coherent stories within which to find practical ways to develop independence and life skills. Person-centred planning approaches can focus on “figuring out” a person without taking the time to celebrate their life as a gift and rejoice in the mystery of who they are. We must confess the sin of presuming a transparent other. Sometimes this means saying “I’m sorry” to someone when we have run roughshod over their attempt to communicate with us, or just be with us, in the rush of any given day.

In the mindset of professionalism, the temptation can be to brush off these hurried interactions as, “Well, it just needed to get done.” Behind this belief, however, often lies a sense that we know better what a person needs than they do. There are times when we need to confess, when we need to be forgiven. It does not mean the interaction goes differently. There are times when we need to take care of other responsibilities. However, a recognition that we have let another down in this prioritization of tasks
helps to restore the humanity of professional interactions, honouring the value of the contribution of the person with an intellectual disability. Confession cultivates humility in our decision-making and relinquishes the power of the interaction, leaving it with the other to extend or deny forgiveness. In this way the moral complexity of the encounter does not remain in the domain of the direct support professional. Instead it is held *between* two unique and mysterious persons created in the image of the divine.

The dance of confession and forgiveness is the lifeblood of human interactions. Butler points to “a disposition of humility and generosity alike: I will need to be forgiven for what I cannot have fully known, and I will be under a similar obligation to offer forgiveness to others who are also constituted in partial opacity to themselves.”460 As with the understanding of *caritas*, whether we understand the theological nature of “confession” or “forgiveness” or we use these words to describe the exchanges is secondary. The posture of opening ourselves to another, of communicating, “I’m sorry” in words or actions, or intentionally letting another know that “we’re okay,” are healing movements born of the Spirit of God.

Jean Vanier, in his reflection on the Gospel of John, observes that Jesus calls his disciples to be “signs of forgiveness” in the world: “The unique role of the disciple of Jesus is to forgive. But forgiveness is not a grandiose act; it is to enter into relationship with the poor and to raise each one up, saying, ‘You are you, and you are important.’”461 It sounds peculiar to say that entering into relationship with “the poor” or those who have been ostracized and marginalized is an act of forgiveness. These acts are as much about receiving forgiveness for ourselves as they are about extending forgiveness to another. Forgiving relationships recognize the mysterious and often troubling forces that shape our lives. They call into question the tyranny of the systems of power and the biased perceptions that separate us from one another and prevent us from entering into relationship with one another *as we are*. “This forgiveness comes through relationship, because we love and welcome the love of one another.”462 What seemingly begins as an

460 Butler, 43.
461 Vanier, *Gospel of John, the Gospel of Relationship*, Loc. 1533.
462 Ibid., 1543.
act of forgiveness toward another turns out to be a step on the path to our own redemption.

**Encountering Christ: Communal healing through forgiveness**

In Mark 2, a man’s friends lower him through the roof for Jesus to heal him. The primary healing that takes place here is not the physical curing of the man’s ability to walk; rather it is Christ extending forgiveness for the man’s sins. In this act of mercy, Christ restores the paralyzed man to his community and his faith. The physical healing that occurs takes place to *demonstrate* that Christ had the power to forgive the man’s sins. Similarly, we must be open to the healing of relationships and communities that takes place through the dance of confession and forgiveness. These relational strands are woven together in the fabric of our lives in such a way that, once cut, our sense of selfhood begins to fray.

In responsibility that arises from shared opacity to one another, it is our formation in the practices of confession and forgiveness rather than the integrity of our accounts that constitutes the hallmark of honesty. We must be willing to confess that our stories are broken and incomplete and that the way we tell our stories may be damaging to others. We must be willing to hold our accounts lightly in order to repair the relational fabric of our lives; then we will have overcome the most significant barriers to “speaking the truth in love.”⁴⁶³ On the cross, Jesus demonstrates this loving truth. As his executioners gamble for his clothes, he cries, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.”⁴⁶⁴ In the midst of crushing pain, to be able to see through one’s suffering to the incomprehension of one’s persecutors is nothing less than an act born of divine love.

**Giving an Account: Extending Forgiveness in Direct Support**

Forgiveness seemed to come easily to me in working direct support. I would regularly be kicked, punched, scratched by people who were in pain, people who were dissatisfied with their support and lacked effective ways to

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⁴⁶³ Ephesians 4:15.

⁴⁶⁴ Luke 23:34, NLT.
communicate – as much due to our inability as their own. "Forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing" could rightly capture my default posture in these circumstances. Perhaps more accurately, it's not that they didn't know what they were doing but that what they were doing was not ultimately about me. It was directed at systems, structures, pain, circumstances, and confusion that was in large part outside of our control. The mysterious aspects of their lives ("Why do I feel this pain?" "Why can't I do x, y, z?" "Why don't they understand me?" etc.) often became understandably overwhelming.

There was one time, though, where it was different. I was supporting someone through his toilet routine. He would require extended time there due to bowel difficulties, and regular interventions were required as he would often experience pain and attempt self-injurious behaviour in the close quarters of the small room. I was accustomed by that time to the kind of "dance" that would take place in intervening, then backing off, and felt that we had developed some rapport through these interactions. He understood when I would step in to prevent self-injury, and when I would step back to give him space and as much privacy as we could. Through these times he would often grab our shirts, or attempt to scratch us, pinch us, or pull our hair – especially for those who had long hair.

Today was different, though. I had felt things had been going relatively well. But as I approached to prevent him from landing a blow to his face, he looked me straight in the eyes for a full second. This was highly unusual. Often, when he was in pain, he was too caught up in his own experience to look directly at us. When he was calm and comfortable, we would share time walking, listening to music, going for van rides, and other enjoyable activities. Eye contact was not unusual in those times. Today was not one of those days. Yet he looked me directly in the eyes. And then punched me. Hard. In the face.

The anger, as much as the pain, was immediate and powerful. Usually, we understood that these interactions were not “about us.” But this time he had looked directly at me. There was no doubt in my mind that this was exactly what he had intended. The situation seemed transparent. He had intended to hurt me. It was a betrayal of the rapport I thought we had built as much as it was an injury to my pride. And face.

Thankfully, I recognized that I had exceeded my limits. I called on a colleague to take over. I "walked it off." It took humility to forgive. I'm not sure I ever
reached the point where I doubted his intention to hurt me. Yet, all of this was caught up in an encounter that was structured more by his pain, his environment, and the professional-client relationship than it was by who we were as persons. In other words, it wasn’t personal. Forgiveness – that’s personal. And it was what I needed to extend that day to reclaim my humanity.

I went back in later, as much to demonstrate there were no hard feelings as to help my colleagues out. In this case, forgiveness looked like continuing to provide support as though nothing had happened. Almost literally “turning the other cheek.”

In case you hadn’t guessed it, this gentleman was Hiroshi. I went back in that day, and countless days in the years that followed. Eventually, I moved on to another role within the organization, yet I stayed in touch with Hiroshi and saw him on multiple occasions. Thanks in part to continued, faithful direct support, reduction of his medication and a strong community of care, Hiroshi no longer needs to wear a helmet as he did in those early days. His self-injurious behaviour is now almost non-existent. Perhaps most significantly, he can connect with people nearly all of the time in meaningful and rewarding sign conversations, both in public and private. To this day I’m not sure I have met anyone with such earnest and probing eyes. He has challenged me and changed me in ways I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to describe fully.

One’s ability to remain calm and “professional” in situations where people with intellectual disabilities exhibit challenging behaviour comes just as much from habits of sincere care and appreciation for the person supported as it does from the hands-on training direct support professionals have received. The moral formation of practising courageous humility and loving mercy, together with regular patterns of confession, lead us into relationships where extending forgiveness is an anticipatory posture rather than

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465 Matthew 5:38. While I don’t believe that this gentleman was an “evil person,” there are moments when any of us may see another as an evil person. In that moment, I had read in his eyes an evil intent. Whether or not I was correct doesn’t ultimately matter. It is the attribution of evil rather than the intention itself that structures our posture towards another. We will never know the true intent, and oftentimes the other person will not come to fully understand their own intent either. Christ’s words here are for our interactions with the Evil Person, that is – the person who we have deemed to be evil, or who in that moment we perceive to be our enemy. To turn the other cheek is to love one’s neighbour, who may also be one’s enemy.
an intentional response. In humility, we understand that the other person is not wholly the author of the pain they have caused or may not comprehend the full impact of their actions. In loving mercy, we feel with the other and begin to understand causes of action that may not be about us. Thus, regular practice of these virtues cultivates relationships of grace – relationships where it is seldom that the other is seen as a villain, communities where miscommunication and pain might find healing in spaces of loving truth-telling rather than vindictive accusation.

4. The virtues of lament and mourning

In messy relationships, beset by circumstances and systems beyond our control, to mourn together is as important as finding joy with one another. In my work with people with disabilities as they are dying and the teams that support them through this process, it strikes me that processing loss defines our lives and relationships as much or more than our successes. These times of processing grief with people and teams often reveal great suffering. These are also some of the most meaningful experiences in my work. People experience profound yet bittersweet joy as they recall the deceased person and the memories that they have shared. These memories are gifts to us that may fade, yet they leave a mark on who we are. As Vanier reminds us, “The body remembers everything.”

The virtues of mourning and lament are closely related to the practice of forgiveness in community:

To look forward, to want life, means we have to be willing to look backwards and become more conscious of all those who have hurt us, all that is broken in us and that has brought us inner deaths, hurts that we may have hidden and stifled.

466 Again, it should be noted that this may or not be conscious and intentional development of these virtues. Moral formation takes place whether or not it is clear to us that this is what’s happening. Certainly, in my own story it is only in looking back that I come to appreciate the formation of moral virtues.

467 Vanier, Gospel of John, the Gospel of Relationship, loc. 948.
It means that we acknowledge the story of our origins, of our own lives, see and accept our brokenness and the times we also have hurt others. When we have accepted who we are and what we need in order to grow in compassion and peacemaking, we can move forward to give life. To forgive is a gift of God that permits us to let go of our past hurts.\footnote{Jean Vanier, \textit{Finding Peace} (London: Continuum, 2006), 47-48.}

Thus, it is often only once we have confronted our pain and loss that we are opened to experiencing joy and celebration. It is when we have faced our fears that we are open to rejoicing in another’s giftedness. Perhaps we do not know how to celebrate because we have not first learned to mourn.

\textbf{Encountering Christ: Friendship with Lazarus}

Jean Vanier reflects on John’s words, “This moment of Jesus’s tears and anguish... is a moment of deep and mysterious emotion.”\footnote{John 11:35.} Vanier observes that the deep emotion of Christ is due both to his profound connection with Mary and her friends who are weeping and to the knowledge that raising Lazarus from the dead will be the “last straw” as the religious leaders decide to eliminate Jesus. Christ is “moved by the terrible reality of his own passion if he raises Lazarus from the dead.”\footnote{Ibid.} I would suggest that at this point it takes no divine foreknowledge to recognize that Christ was headed towards his death – though he was more aware than those around him of how and why this must happen. His disciples remind him, before he goes back to Bethany, that the people in that region had only recently tried to stone him.\footnote{John 11:8.} When they are about to set off, Thomas says to the other disciples, “Let’s go, too—and die with Jesus.”\footnote{John 11:16.} Christ’s friends are aware of the risks he is taking to bring Lazarus back to life.

Repeatedly, in working with people through grief, I have observed that the weight of

\footnote{Jean Vanier, \textit{Gospel of John, the Gospel of Relationship}, loc. 909.}
one’s own mortality is never far from our experience of our loss of another. We face the immediate reminder that death is the fate of us all at the same time as we experience the “death” of a part of ourselves that was the life of our friend or loved one. We are woven together, and when one of these threads is cut, we can quickly come unwound.

There is a mystery in this passage as to why Jesus is angry. His tears follow John’s observation, “When Jesus saw her weeping and saw the other people wailing with her, a deep anger welled up within him, and he was deeply troubled.”474 Upon arriving at the tomb, “Jesus was still angry.”475 However, anger is often bound up with grief. Sometimes when we experience grief and anger, we are not even sure why we are angry. I am not sure that increased intelligence or even divine foreknowledge help us to grapple with these complex human emotions. The people with intellectual disabilities I have supported through grief are every bit as complex and mysterious as any other human being. In moments of profound grief we all break, we all weep, and we all experience waves of mixed emotion such as anger, fear, hurt, love, gratitude, peace, anxiety, and pain. Questions and concerns surround us that do not find straightforward answers. As N.T. Wright observes, “This passage points us forward to the questions that will be asked at Jesus’ own death. Couldn’t the man who did so many signs have brought it about that he himself didn’t have to die? Couldn’t the one who saved so many have in the end saved himself?”476 It is no wonder that Christ is caught up in grief and anger as questions and fears and the pain of those he loves surround him.

Memories and experiences of loss continue to haunt us in dark and compelling ways. These losses may be related to death, friendship, relationships, ability, or identity. Vanier refers to these tragic memories as a tomb. “So, hidden within each of us there is a place that is like a tomb, to which we do not have access. In that place, there are the elements of death: our fears and traumas.”477 Here Vanier touches on aspects of our opaque selfhood that may cause us great pain. Indeed, bringing these fears and traumas

474 John 11:33.
475 John 11:38.
477 Vanier, Gospel of John, the Gospel of Relationship, Loc. 948.
into the open with people we trust can be a source of healing and redemption. Will we ever completely understand the myriad ways that loss has touched our lives? I’m not convinced. However, in the practices of mourning together and in lament before God over losses conscious and unconscious, we find the possibility of moving beyond this grief toward hope in community.

**GIVING AN ACCOUNT: GRIEF IN DIRECT SUPPORT**

She called for what I thought was going to be a five-minute conversation to set up a time to meet for coffee. It ended up being an hour-long conversation.

Grace is a direct support professional who recently helped to perform CPR on someone she supported as they died. This can be a traumatic experience for anyone, but Grace had also experienced significant depression earlier in life and had recently lost other family and friends. She was off on leave and I encouraged her to seek professional therapy, which she planned to do. For the moment, though, I was someone to talk to, someone to talk with through the mysterious complexity of her emotions.

As Grace talked and cried and shared her pain, the resounding theme I heard was that she needed *permission to grieve*. Her supervisor had given her time off, grief supports had been provided, and yet Grace understood herself as a *giver*. She had cared for others, felt for others, as long as she could remember. This was her calling, and she often repeated that God had a profound purpose for her life. That purpose, however, seemed to be defined by “doing great things.” To grieve was a setback, a weakness, a failure to care for others.

I attempt not to give a lot of advice when people are grieving. Generally, it’s not what people need – they need quiet attention. Also, we tend not to hear or process advice or instruction well in our grief. However, toward the end of our conversation, I spoke to Grace about Henri Nouwen’s observation that Christ’s most significant work came not through action but his *passion*.478 Nouwen writes, “All action ends in passion because the response to our action is out of our hands. That is the mystery of friendship, the mystery of

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community – they always involve waiting. And that is the mystery of Jesus’ love.”

To grieve through suffering is to discover perfect strength because it is the gift of allowing ourselves to face the darkest and most mysterious aspects of our loss and brokenness. This strength does not come from ourselves, because we discover it in our weakness. As Grace found encouragement in listening to music, I suggested to her a song containing the phrase, “When the night is holding on to me, God is holding on.” To open ourselves to the experience of grief is to discover the radical equality that we are each sustained in the mysterious embrace of the divine.

Grief in direct support is often disenfranchised. That is, because family or friends may not recognize support staff as needing to grieve, they do not readily find space to process this grief. Employment standards do not grant time following the death of someone supported to process grief. Professional training does not generally know how to handle such emotions. After all, you are not their “friend,” so why would this matter so much? However, it is in these times of grief that professionals, people supported, and often leaders come face-to-face with their shared humanity, their mutual incomprehensibility. A principle from preaching applies here when relating to people who receive support: Share from your scars, not your wounds. The virtue of lament and mourning does not mean that we turn to people we are supporting to make up for the loss we are feeling. Rather, we lament and mourn together in such a way that we point to the possibility of hope and healing. We celebrate the love behind the loss, opening space for those around us to grieve, to mourn, and to recognize vulnerability not as a one-way plea, but as a reciprocal opportunity to demonstrate care from the heart. Some of the most healing gestures of support I have encountered come not from professional staff, but from people too-often perceived as “receivers of care.”

479 Ibid., 72.
480 2 Corinthians 12:9.
481 King of my Heart, John Mark and Sarah McMillan.
5. The virtue of quiet attentiveness

What does it mean to pay attention to another? Among its definitions include “observant care.” To be aware of how our partially-opaque accounts at times unintentionally wound others, to practice the dance of confession and forgiveness diligently, is to bear in mind that we must learn to be “quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”

The stories that we hear and the stories that we tell about ourselves are only gestures toward the “I” that I call myself. This “I” is ever receding, never grasped or captured in language. Insofar as it is “I” that is giving the account, it can never fully be the “I” that is represented in the account being given. Indeed, as soon as I attempt to express myself in language I have already lost the singularity of the “I” who attempts to express itself. According to Derrida, “By suspending my absolute singularity in speaking, I renounce at the same time my liberty and my responsibility. Once I speak, I am never and no longer myself, alone and unique.”

We may give accounts of others or ourselves, yet these are never fully detached and “objective.” They are stories of which we are never fully the author. We heed the truth of Hannah Arendt’s observation: “Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.” We convey meaning by what we say, yet to

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483 James 1:19.
484 Derrida, 60. While the emphasis of this section focuses on verbal account-giving, one may observe similar parallels in non-verbal accounts and expressions – in oneself and related to others. In the writing of Levinas, for example, we read that “Expression, or the face, overflows images” [Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 297.]. The face cannot be “possessed” and “refuses to be contained” [Ibid. 297, 194]. “The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure. . . . It expresses itself.” [Ibid., 50, 51] This expression is both “a source from which all meaning appears” and that which exceeds all definition or interpretation. [Ibid., 297]
attempt to define every sense of meaning would be to overstep our ability, to become ensnared in the myth of transparency.

When we come to appreciate all of the systems and structures of language that define our thought, and our inability to communicate who we are or who another is fully, it is a wonder that we dare to speak at all. When we do, we must retain this sense of wonder at the mystery revealed by others and ourselves through our attempts to communicate. Whether or not it is possible to empty our thoughts, a sincere appreciation for the mysterious layers of meaning released in our mutual expression forms us in a default posture of quiet attentiveness towards God and towards one another. Quiet attention is nothing less than a subversive and revolutionary act in an age of idle chatter and hurry.

i.  

**Encountering Christ: Silence as disruption**

Here is my servant whom I have chosen,  
the one I love, in whom I delight;  
I will put my Spirit on him,  
and he will proclaim justice to the nations.  
He will not quarrel or cry out;  
no one will hear his voice in the streets.  
A bruised reed he will not break,  
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out,  
till he has brought justice through to victory.  
In his name the nations will put their hope.  

Matthew here points to Christ as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophesy in Isaiah 42.  
Isaiah’s words are profoundly subversive. The Messiah will “proclaim justice” to the nations, and yet “He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets.” Contrary to contemporary political climates where justice is sought through obtaining the loudest voice or the largest audience, Christ’s example is one of quiet love.

Isaiah reminds us, “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is

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silent, so he did not open his mouth.” 487 Christ’s example is one of profound “withness.” 488 He bore the torture of crucifixion, the violence of being commanded to give an account as one who had no voice, as one who was unable to speak up for himself. Christ demonstrates that there are times that responding to a violent system only legitimizes the authority that makes the demand. “The chief priests accused him of many things. So again, Pilate asked him, ‘Aren’t you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.’ But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.” 489

In Pilate’s amazement, in his shock, we encounter a powerful moment of disruption. As though Christ is mute, his silence confronts the demands to give an account according to the terms of the chief priests. “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place,” Christ relays in John’s gospel. 490 It is as though the whole regime of truth that the chief priests are relying on has been called into question. Christ gives no account, as the account that is demanded is rooted in the ethical violence of a system that has no comprehension of those who give no account. In Joe Arridy’s case from Chapter Six, the account he gave confronted the regime of an unjust system. In Christ’s case, it is his silence.

**ii. Encountering Christ: Silence as openness to revelation**

While gentle silence does not always disrupt, it always heals. As we take time to hear from God in silence, we are healed. In turn, we can pass this healing on to others as we demonstrate the care that is quiet attentiveness. Luke records that “Jesus often

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487 Isaiah 53:7.
488 Dr. Neil Cudney at Christian Horizons was the first to draw attention to the relation of “witness” and “withness” for me.
489 Mark 15:3-5.
490 John 18:36.
withdrew to lonely places and prayed.”\textsuperscript{491} This was not an occasional event, but a regular practice for him.\textsuperscript{492}

Before God, silence is often the most appropriate posture. Kierkegaard writes, “When prayer has properly become prayer, it has become silence.”\textsuperscript{493} When we encounter the mystery of the divine, our words often fail us. In reflecting on Christ’s exhortation to “Look at the birds... Consider the lilies of the field,”\textsuperscript{494} Kierkegaard points to silence as a virtue we can learn from the lilies of the field:

...out there with the lilies and the birds thou dost sense that thou art before God, a fact which is generally so entirely forgotten in speech and conversation with other men. For when there are two of us only that talk together, not to say ten or more, it is so easily forgotten that thou and I, we two, or we ten, are before God. But the lily who is the teacher is profound. It does not enter into conversation with thee, it keeps silent, and by keeping silent it would signify to thee that thou art before God, that thou shouldst remember that thou art before God—that thou also in seriousness and truth mightest become silent before God.\textsuperscript{495}

To speak hastily is to miss the revelation of being before God that is critical to Kierkegaard’s foundation for radical equality. Similarly, when we are with one another, silence is often the most appropriate response. To listen to another in quiet attentiveness is to recognize their value, their worth, and to confess that there is much more to discover about them than we perhaps would like to admit. It is to understand in humility that they are not transparent to us and that we always have more to learn, to discover. To be silent is to wonder at the mystery of the other. To listen is to be open to revelation from one another. In these encounters, to speak hastily is to miss the moment in which we may give and receive mutual care:

\textsuperscript{491} Luke 5:15-16, see also Mark 1:45.
\textsuperscript{494} Matthew 6:26 and 6:28.
\textsuperscript{495} Kierkegaard, The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air, 24.
Only by keeping silent does one encounter the moment. When one speaks, even if one says only a single word, one misses the moment. Only in silence is the moment. And this is surely why it so rarely happens that a human being properly comes to understand when the moment is and how to make proper use of the moment.496

While he was not always silent, it is by virtue of Christ’s posture of quiet attentiveness with those whom he encountered that he did not “break a bruised reed” or “snuff out a smoldering wick.” In those moments where he took the time to see and listen to the people whom he encountered, he opened space for the strengthening of bruised reeds, the bright burning of wicks that had been smoldering. Indeed, just as Elijah had to remain silent to hear the still, small voice of God, so we must be cautious of our inclination to speak before we have walked with others, listening to how they communicate. Sometimes this takes eyes to see. Sometimes this requires ears to hear. It always involves the virtue of quiet attentiveness, remaining open to the revelation that may come in a multitude of ways as we patiently and humbly journey with one another and with the divine.

**GIVING AN ACCOUNT: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF QUIET ATTENTIVENESS**

Recently I hosted a support group and grief/loss activity session for a small group of people with intellectual disabilities who had recently lost a friend. One woman, Catherine, was in the process of sharing how much this loss had meant to her. Jane, who was sitting across the table from Catherine throughout her soliloquy, began to interject: “I’m your friend, Catherine.” A minute later, “I’m a good friend, Catherine!” After a couple of these interruptions, a direct support professional asked Jane to be quiet. In subsequent remarks, one or another of the support staff would say “Shhh!” or “Catherine is talking now.”

I put my hand on Jane’s shoulder to acknowledge her contribution, waiting for a pause in Catherine’s story to give Jane an opportunity to talk. “Jane,” I said after thanking Catherine, “friendship is important as we experience grief together. I’m thankful that Catherine has good friends like you to help her through this time.” In the next few minutes, as we gave Jane an opportunity

496 Ibid., 25.
to talk, I hope that I was able to model quiet attentiveness for her support staff.

Following this opportunity to express herself, Jane no longer felt the need to interject. She had been heard and understood. Rather than simply being told to be quiet, she was affirmed as a complex and contributing moral agent who wanted Catherine to know that she was there for her as a friend, someone who could be counted on. In her own way, she was demonstrating the virtue of misericordia with her housemate.

c. The formation of virtues of discovery

1. Virtues as embodied practice

In order to create unity, to live as a body, we need to know how to take time over meals, to eat well, with good wine or beer. We need to know how to tell stories, our own stories, and to laugh and sing together.\(^{497}\)

These virtues of discovery are not to be separated from our physical embodiment. They require physical action and physical restraint. We must learn to be with one another but presence involves proximity (space) and patience (time). To eat together is to invest our lives in one another. It is not to rush, but to linger. Where competencies too often entail being efficient in accomplishing a goal, these virtues resemble fine wine. They take time to mature. To attempt to accomplish or achieve these virtues quickly is to miss the mark entirely.\(^{498}\) Indeed, in being faithful in the presence of people who are different from us and in being open to the mystery of one another, we are formed together in the virtues of this community. Being conscious of the need for them is indeed an aid in being aware of our need for this kind of moral formation, but it is difficult if not impossible to develop these virtues without presence in community.


\(^{498}\) For a more in-depth understanding of the relation of time and being with others, see Swinton’s *Becoming Friends of Time*. 

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It is in this sense that Vanier distinguishes between *compassion-competence* and *compassion-presence*. The virtues of discovery that we have explored here are primarily those of compassion-presence. They are for those moments when we feel that we cannot *do* much of anything. People are not problems that can be solved, and so the virtues that we need are for moments of misunderstanding, of revelation, of grief, of joy – moments when the overflow of the being of another overwhelms us – when we can no longer fit our neighbour into a neat mental compartment. “To be with,’ is the compassion of presence. It says: ‘You are not alone; I am with you... I am with you, in you, to help you rise up.”

The five virtues mentioned above are by no means an exhaustive list. Instead, these are an initial step toward virtues neglected due to myths of transparency. They are virtues established on a more holistic (yet also restrained) picture of the *imago Dei*, rich in both revelation and mystery. These virtues are not intended to replace competencies as dictated by service environments. However, they may call them into question or reshape them. At very least, the grounding of divine love reframes our relationships with one another and opens a space of mutual generosity and compassion.

### 2. Virtues as loving habits

With MacIntyre, we recognize that intellect and rationality alone are not sufficient in forming an ethical deposition. Virtues involve the holistic range of what it means to be a human being, with all of our abilities and limitations. “Virtues are dispositions not only to act in particular ways, but also to feel in particular ways.”

This project began with the intent “to inquire into the role of professional caregivers supporting people [with intellectual disabilities] to discover the basis for ethical motivation and formation with the people that they support.” Throughout the pages that followed, it “became clear” that responsibility to one another (ethical motivation), is always already present in our *givenness* to one another and our radical interdependence. It is primarily our incomprehension of ourselves and others – the

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499 Vanier, *Gospel of John, the Gospel of Relationship*, loc. 1446.
500 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 175.
mysterious opacity in our experience and our experience of others – that binds us together in the response-ability to love one another.

Drawing on the rich tradition of Christian theology and social practice, I have pointed to the relational significance of the *imago Dei*. In Christian theological anthropology, dependence cuts even deeper than MacIntyre recognized. Vulnerability is not a factor to be taken into consideration when deliberating ethical courses of action; rather it is the *source* of ethical obligation. It is only through prior *dispossession* of self – including our conceit of transparent narrative ethics – that we are *already* inclined toward moral responsibility. The flourishing of human societies as a whole may rely upon the exercise of independent practical reasoning, yet it is only by embracing virtues of discovery that we learn to flourish in our relational opacity with God, ourselves, and one another. Without learning to pause, to *be with* one another in loving presence, “human flourishing” leaves no opening toward experiencing the gifts of mutuality and interdependence. Arguably, it is in those moments together, where we are free of the ethical violence of being summoned to *give an account*, that we are most fully alive. Those are the moments of grace, the moments of gift, the moments where we rest in the givenness of our existence and are opened to celebrate the gifts of one another.

With these re-shaped priorities, we recognized that the virtues are not first transforming us into independent practical reasoners, but into interdependent partners in care. Whatever gifts we have are directed towards one another, including the gift of independent practical reason. It is in this context that we are open not to our powers of the intellect, but to the surpassing reality that comes only from outside – from revelation and the gift of our relationship with God and one another.

“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him.”⁵⁰¹

“The wisdom we speak is of the mystery of God,” yet it is not a power understood by earthly rulers or delivered by “clever and persuasive speeches.”⁵⁰² This resurrection

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⁵⁰¹ 1 Cor. 2:9.

⁵⁰² 1 Cor. 2:7, 1 Cor. 2:4.
power is that which comes “in weakness – timid and trembling.”\textsuperscript{503} The message of the crucified Christ is the message, the wisdom, and the \textit{logos} of love. It is the \textit{Mysterium tremendum} – “A frightful mystery, a secret to make you tremble.”\textsuperscript{504} It is frightful because, in its deep secret lie words that can never be spoken only lived in grateful presence with one another. As we journey with one another, we will never be fully understood, yet perhaps we have never fully understood ourselves either. Perhaps this was never the intent. We have ever only seen “things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity.”\textsuperscript{505} We will yet see “face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”\textsuperscript{506}

Therefore, it is that with bumbling steps, with great fear and trembling, that we turn toward one another. It is not in knowledge that we move forward, but in love. Yet, to love God is to know God. Moreover, “if anyone loves God, he is known by God.”\textsuperscript{507} In the end, it is not our knowledge or even our gifting that matters. It is not to “know thyself” or to make one’s actions intelligible to oneself or the world. It is to be known by and loved by God.

Formation of the virtues, then, is the exercise and practice of love. “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”\textsuperscript{508} Love is \textit{eschatological} as it is \textit{teleological}. Faith, hope, and love are those that remain, and yet the greatest of these is love.\textsuperscript{509}

According to MacIntyre, “Without an overriding conception of the \textit{telos} of a whole human life, conceived as a unity, our conception of certain individual virtues has

\textsuperscript{503} 1 Cor. 2:3. \\
\textsuperscript{504} Derrida, 53. \\
\textsuperscript{505} 1 Cor 13:12, NLT. \\
\textsuperscript{506} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{507} 1 Cor. 8:3. \\
\textsuperscript{508} Hebrews 10:24-25, ESV. \\
\textsuperscript{509} 1 Cor 13:13.
to remain partial and incomplete.” The paradox of love is that it flourishes, or perhaps is only a possibility, in that which is “incomplete.” “If you have reasons to love someone, you don’t love him/her” Slavoj Žižek once remarked. At very least, loving in the midst of unknowing is the litmus test of the strength of love. “Let love be your highest goal!” Paul exclaims.

As many practical goals require a degree of independent practical rational thought to be achieved, many of these goals are only achievable by certain types of people with specific abilities. Love is the ability that anyone can exercise, yet it is also the highest achievement and the fullest expression of what it means to be human. The telos of love does not require additional projects or steps along the way – indeed these projects are often what prevent us from the calling to love one another. Within this teleology, MacIntyre’s claim that “[t]he exercise of independent practical reasoning is one essential constituent to full human flourishing” goes unfounded. It is possible to fully flourish without being able to exercise independent practical reasoning. People with intellectual disabilities are complex moral agents who share the partial opacity to themselves and their own intentions that we all do.

Where love grounds the initial imago Dei in which we are formed and the telos of the imitatio Dei, moral formation is not pursued in one’s ability to establish a coherent and intelligible account of one’s actions with the perspective of the unity of one’s life from beginning to end. Instead, we discover moral flourishing in practicing the virtues of discovery with one another: “How do I make space for this person to feel heard and understood and loved in this moment?” Perhaps, the “account” of the virtues of the discovery contained in this project will aid in living into them. Ultimately, however, it is not knowledge of the virtues or any system of ethics that forms us in love of our neighbour. Even the imitatio Dei can be fully embraced and lived out by people with

510 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 235.
511 Slavoj Žižek, ”If You Have Reasons to Love Someone, You Don't Love Her/him,” Twitter, November 20, 2013, https://twitter.com/Slavojiek/status/403149945337044992. This follows the logic of Kierkegaard, for whom faith cannot rest on logical “proof” or else is not faith.
512 1 Cor. 14:1.
513 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 105.
limited intellectual ability. Indeed, some of my friends with intellectual disabilities have been the greatest examples of God’s incomprehensible love and the virtues listed above to me.
CHAPTER NINE: Responding to the call

a. Ending at the beginning

Therefore, we end where we began. In seeking the motivation and formation of care in direct support, in serving one’s neighbour, we discover that within this instinct to care and to love one another, motivation is already always present. Certainly, practices of care are aided by competencies and skills that go beyond the scope of this project, and that is work that is being done by many others. The contribution of this dissertation is to profess that our response-ability to love one another is at the heart of ethical calling. It drives the caregiver forward, and it pulls the caregiver toward the other. It is a love that must never become over-confident in its power, ability, or knowledge. The radical relational dependency at the heart of what it means to be human has endowed us all with profound cognitive limitations. This same radical relational dependency drives us towards one another and has given us to one another in an overflow of gratitude.

It was discovered there are rich resources for exploring this ethical posture within the Christian tradition, for whom being made in the image of God means always being an “us.” Just as mystery and revelation are at the centre of God’s interactions with human beings, so mystery and revelation are at the centre of our interactions with one another. Hyper-cognition and transparency myths have unfortunately obscured the beauty of our mysterious connection, and in doing so have undermined the virtues of discovery required to love well. To reclaim Christian faith-based support means to reclaim these virtues, and to push back against cultural transparency myths and prioritization of professional ideology that may subvert the caregiving call and relational connection.
b. The calling of self-care

Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don’t know. I got a telegram from the home: ”Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.” That doesn’t mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday.514

~ Meursault in Camus’ “The Stranger”

As this project began with autobiographical reflections, so it must conclude. I read Camus’ The Stranger late in 2016. The phrase above stuck with me in a powerful way. In an existential novel that explores the height and depth of ethical transgression through the lens of an entirely indifferent protagonist, it was Meursault’s relationship to his recently deceased mother that had the most significant impact.

“I don’t know.” How is it that one does not know when their own mother has died? How could it be that this most basic of facts is not clear to her own son? Does she mean nothing to him? “Maman” is not so cold and distant as to convey detachment, neither is it so intimate as to indicate profound grief. What is the moral status of the one who does not know or cannot remember, especially as it relates to his own mother?

As the novel continues, Meursault becomes a strangely relatable character yet by the end it is difficult to tease out his indifference from his final, violent, acts. Is there any sin so great as not to care? Does not knowing equate to not caring?

GIVING AN ACCOUNT: MOM

My mother was having severe headaches. Her Naturopath was convinced it was hormonally-related. I pushed her to have it checked out by a doctor. That much I remember. Well, because my family has reminded me that this is how events occurred. I don’t recall the year, though I know it was just before my oldest sister’s wedding. Much of her hair was gone, and she had large stitches sewn across her head for the wedding. She has struggled with self-image for much of her life. Regardless, I imagine it’s hard to be at your first child’s wedding with a glaring head incision.

Four weddings and a dozen grandchildren later, she is still with us. She has not been the same since her first surgery and the chemo that followed. She has gained weight. I know from the pictures. She doesn't talk a lot, and when she does it is slowly and quietly. She can no longer do much around the house, or attend to her beloved gardens. She becomes confused about dates and names and what is happening around her. I suppose she is disabled, though as many whose loved ones are I don't tend to think of her that way.

If you ask her questions, she may or may not provide a coherent story. At least I don't think it's coherent. You see, I cannot remember what she was like before. My mother homeschooled us, invested every day of her life in us, and taught us most of what we know. I know this because we still have the workbooks with her incredibly neat printing across them.

But I can't remember.

I don’t know if this is “normal.” I do know that I have a shockingly poor memory, and perhaps I should have this checked out sometime. I rely on my wife and my friends and my family to remind me of the things I have said and done, where I have been and the highlights and low points of my life. There are a few memories that stand out, it’s true.

But to fail to remember your own mother, when she has forgotten much of her own story?

I don’t know.

I cannot give an account.

It was not until June 2017, after I completed my first draft of this dissertation, when it struck me that my mother was cognitively disabled. Perhaps one of my greatest sources of shame relates to the work I am doing in this project. Of the fundamental relation that gave me life and raised me, I can give little account. My unconscious moral obligation is that my memories would sustain the mother who once was at that time when she has difficulty remembering who she is or what she has done. Yet, I encounter opacity here in my own memories. I face a profound recognition that who she is has made me who I am and yet I am unable to put this into words. How might I forgive myself for my failure to sustain her identity when she has given me mine?
I, too, seek transparency. Yet my violent ethical demand upon myself, a demand that I am unable to live up to, must be subdued by grace if I am to love my neighbours well. I am learning to practise these virtues of discovery with myself. With courageous humility I must continue to embrace the memories I do have, and not despair over the memories that have been lost. I must recognize that my mother is created in God’s image, the image of a relational God who has hidden her identity in Christ. Her character and worth are not dependent upon me to sustain them. It is in loving mercy that I lean my head against her shoulder and stroke the hair beneath which another tumor has recently grown. I must practice confession and face grief to journey with my family through this time. I must be quietly attentive with myself and with her if I am to journey with her through this phase of her life, rather than hurling myself forward and away from the past I cannot remember, a history that grounds my own story.

\[c. \textbf{In conclusion}\]

“Care lies at the very heart of the vocation given to human beings by God.”

\[\text{~ John Swinton}\]515

I have discovered that the God whom I worship does not demand an account in the way that many of our ethical systems do. These laws, codes, and scripted obligations depend on myths of transparency that put our most vulnerable neighbours at risk. They may be at risk due to an inability to “give an account” in the way that it is demanded, or due to a power imbalance that takes away their voice. Either way, it is an ethical system upon which the provision of mutual care will break if not sustained by something deeper.

While this project began by investigating the moral motivation and formation of care providers in a Christian social service setting, its implications take us much further. We discover that the mysterious revelation at the heart of the relational imago Dei must be reclaimed if we are to walk with one another well as image-bearers. We must

\[\text{\footnotesize 515 John Swinton, } \textit{Dementia: Living in the Memories of God} (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 171.\]
confront the violence of ethical systems that demand an account so that we might practise loving listening in everyday care provision with each neighbour. The virtues that flow out of the mysterious and scandalous love of Christ will look different from those that arise from systems of moral assessment and control. We have sketched what some of those virtues may be, yet many others may arise. The work has just begun.

When we respond to the transcendent call of vocation, we respond to particular others, but we also respond to the call of Another. Every encounter with a neighbour is an encounter with the divine. Every stranger, a Friend. As we journey with people with intellectual disabilities, providing care out of an overflow of the overwhelming love of Christ, we respond to the ethical call of both God and neighbour.
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