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TEMPTATION, reflections on *Matthew* 6.13

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Abstract

I distinguish temptation to do what we think we shouldn't, temptation not to do what we think we should, and the difficulties we experience in customary religious practices like prayer. I ask whether temptation requires a tempter, also whether the phenomena we call 'weakness of will' can be explained without postulating a non-cognitive faculty of will. I look at Plato's claim that training the emotions is the main function of education. Finally I consider how obstacles to prayer can be understood consistently with seeing a continuous development from the natural to the supernatural.

Keywords

Distractions, Original sin, Satan, Faculty of will, Education, Plato

'Lead us not into temptation': So we are accustomed to translate words *Matthew* 6.13 puts into the mouth of Jesus when instructing us how to pray to our Father in Heaven. What exactly, we may wonder, is temptation, and why should we ask God not to lead us into it? Might he sometimes want us to be tempted? I shall start by considering what we mean by the word 'temptation', and discuss later whether that coincides exactly with what Jesus had in mind.

Everyone knows that we are often strongly tempted to do what we know is immoral or illegal or contrary to our long-term interests, or what we recognise to be unkind or lazy or cowardly or in some other way bad. Often too we are averse to doing something we think we ought to do, for instance if it seems dangerous or troublesome, and say we are tempted not to do it.

These are common experiences of everyone. Christians are taught that the whole natural order is created and sustained by the Judaeo-Christian God, and that God created human beings, in the words of the old 'penny' catechism, 'to love and serve him in this world, and to be happy with him in the next.' Preparing ourselves for happiness with God in the next world by loving and serving him in this one seems to involve not only ordinary good behaviour and loving our

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neighbours as ourselves, but praying to him and engaging in various spiritual exercises, and we may find this difficult because we have unwanted distracting thoughts, feelings that we are getting nowhere, and even doubts about our Christian faith. These obstacles are different from temptations to do what we shouldn't and temptations not to do what we should, but they have a similar effect, and may make us feel that there is something, either external to us or within us, that is trying to stop us from reaching a higher level.

We like to think that the source of our failures lies outside us, and men and women have traditionally blamed each other for tempting them into sex from which it would have been better to refrain. Christians have sometimes attributed both temptations and other obstacles to malevolent spirits. There are pictures showing demons tempting and distracting the first monks in the Egyptian deserts, and C.S. Lewis develops this idea very readably in *The Screwtape Letters*. Sometimes, however, Christians have identified an internal source of our shortcomings in our corrupt nature. The corruption was originated, indeed, by an external agent, the snake (Greek *ophis*) in Eden; but it is now innate, transmitted by propagation and it consists in impaired mental powers and an inclination to sin (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* ss. 404-405).

Readers have often identified the snake in Eden (*Genesis* 3. 1-25), with a being referred to in *Job* 1. 6-12 and 2. 1-6, 1, in *Chronicles* 1. 21. 1 and in *Zechariah* 3. 1 as Satan or 'the' Satan, a word meaning an enemy or accuser. It is not clear that Zechariah or the author of *Chronicles* 1 meant to refer to the same being as the Satan in *Job*, since *Job* appears to be a work of fiction, and none of these texts connect their Enemy or Accuser with the snake. The identification may be accepted by the author of *Wisdom* 2. 24, who in place of 'Satan' uses *diabolos*, the Greek word for an accuser, from which our 'devil' is derived. But it is more plausible to connect the *Genesis* snake, as Joseph Fitpatrick does in *The Fall and the Ascent of Man* (Lanham, University of America Press, 2012), with the snake in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which deprives Gilgamesh of the plant which would have given him and others immortality (Tablet 11, the tablet which also contains Noah's Ark). Jewish writings after the Exile, and especially after Alexander's conquests had spread Greek thinking through the Middle East, show a tendency to blame human weaknesses on a single non-human person. Greek mythology ascribes all our troubles to Pandora, a female miraculously formed out of clay by Hephaestus. Ben Sira when writing critically about women in *Ecclesiasticus* 25–26 blames Eve for sin and death (25. 24, a passage echoed by Paul in 1 *Timothy* 2. 14 and 2 *Corinthians* 11. 3) though earlier (21. 17) he says that when the impious man curses Satan, presumably as the source of his impiety, he is really cursing something in his own soul.

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Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae* 1a q. 94 a. 3 and q. 95 a. 2–3 reasons that human beings were created with actual knowledge of all things necessary for governing their lives, which he identified with all things they are naturally capable of being taught, and also that they had all good qualities of character, and no emotions like anger, fear or desire 'not totally subject to reason.' That is a natural speculation on the assumption that each species was created separately, and that the first members of each species were created as adults. If that were right, the first human beings needed to know what adult human beings need to know to survive, and to have characters to enable them to provide for their families. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* ss. 400-405 accepts the idea of 'original holiness and justice', and says 'the harmony in which they [the first human beings] had found themselves, thanks to original justice, is now destroyed; the control of the soul's spiritual faculties over the body is shattered' and human nature is 'inclined to sin'. Adam and Eve, we are to suppose, started life with the harmony of the 'Reasoning', 'Spirited' and 'Desiring' parts of their souls which Plato identified with justice or righteousness [*dikaiosunê*] in *Republic* 4 441–2. *Genesis*, however, does not represent Adam and Eve as having knowledge of what we need to survive and also good, strong characters. It represents them as totally ignorant of good and evil, as having the knowledge and, for all that is said to the contrary, the emotions, of little children. They get out of their state of animal dependence upon the environment to keep them warm and fed, by eating the fruit of a supernatural tree. In the Epic of Gilgamesh the feral Enkidu becomes a civilised human being through a civilised priestess who introduces him to sexual intercourse, but the idea that the transition from animal to rational life was effected through female influence, which is developed in William Golding's story *Clonk Clonk*, did not appeal to the authors of *Genesis* with their tradition of nomadic rather than urban life.

Jesus in the Gospels says nothing about an original sin of disobedience and a resulting corruption of human nature as God originally created it. His silence is consistent with an interpretation of *Genesis* 3 as an imaginative explanation of why human are different from animals and morally responsible. The Evangelists use the words Satan and 'devil' (*diabolos*) in recording Christ's temptation in the desert and (*Luke* 22. 3; *John* 13. 27) the treachery of Judas; and they put 'Satan' in Christ's mouth as a name for a tempter in several places. Christians have speculated that it refers to an angel who rebelled against God before human beings were created, and Dante and Milton have made this speculation into immortal poetry, but there is no Biblical authority for it. In *Job* Satan appears among the 'sons of God', whoever they may be, and seems on easy terms with God; and when Christ says (*Luke* 10. 18) that he saw 'Satan falling like a thunderbolt from heaven'; he is commenting on the successful mission

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of the 72 disciples. I think it is impossible to say whether the Evangelists thought Jesus was tempted by a non-human person or merely personified a tempter to make their record of the temptations more vivid; and that it is equally impossible to be sure that Jesus is doing more than speaking figuratively when he uses the word 'Satan' in *Matthew* 16. 23, *Mark* 4. 15, *Luke* 13. 16 and *Luke* 22. 31.

Certainly human beings exist who tempt us to misbehave and distract us from behaving well, but there are theological difficulties in the idea that there really are non-physical persons that are enemies of mankind and allowed by God to wander throughout the world (as *Job* puts it) tempting human beings and trying to bring accusations against them. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 391 refers to the Lateran Council of 1215 which assumed the existence of such beings, but insists that they were created benevolent and chose to become evil. But do they continue to exist independently of God? If they exist because God wants them to, does he also want them to tempt people? If there were no such persons, would human beings never be inclined to evil actions or distracted from good?

It is no mystery why we are inclined to do things we think bad, and disinclined to do things we think good. We have a variety of different motivations, and think things good or bad in different ways. Like all sentient beings we fear pain and also hunger and thirst, and think it good to avoid them; and we desire feelings of warmth when it is cold and coolness when it is hot, and sensations caused by sex and substances like alcohol, and think it good to seek them. In a similar way we enjoy exercising our powers, mental and bodily, and think it good to continue until the exercise becomes tiring or boring, when we think it good to stop. We have these motivations as individuals. But rationality requires living in society and as social beings we think it good to do what is obligatory or customary in our society and bad to do what is forbidden. As social beings we desire admiration from other people, success in competing with them and what Hobbes (*Leviathan* 1. 13) called 'dominion' over them, and we fear being despised, insulted, downgraded or excluded. So we think it good to do what will bring success and honour, and what will prevent scorn and derision. And besides these social motivations we have personal friendships with other individuals and concern for them for their sakes. We think it good to do what will promote their well-being, and bad to do what will injure them. What is good in one way may be bad in another. What is pleasant for me as an individual may be against the law or bring me into disrepute; what will enhance my social status may be injurious to a friend or require me to forego much that is pleasant.

It is possible, of course, for the same thing to be good and bad in the same way. Benefiting one friend may harm another; the pleasant sensations of wine, we are warned by Shakespeare, may prevent

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pleasant sensations of sex; and the Bible largely concerns people belonging to a sub-society with rules and customs conflicting with those of the larger society within which it exists: the Jews were such a sub-society through most of their history and the followers of Christ formed such a sub-society within the Jews.

Good behaviour consists in doing not just what is good in one of these ways, but what is best all things considered. To be good people we certainly need the intellectual ability to discern what is best in the situations in which we find ourselves. Many people, however, think this is not sufficient; it seems obvious to them that we often see clearly that it is best on the whole not to do something, but nevertheless do it because we have a strong desire to do it. We may also see clearly that it is best on the whole to do something dangerous or illegal or injurious to a friend but refrain from doing it because we are afraid or squeamish. If that is right, in order to behave well, besides being able to *see* what is best, we must be able to control desires, fears and reluctance. The ability to see what is best is intellectual, but the ability to control desires and fears is not – if it were, the ability to see what is best would be sufficient. So human nature must include a non-intellectual capacity to control desires to do what, all things considered, we think it best not to do, and fears to do what, all things considered, we think it best to do. This faculty is what we call the 'will'. Since desires and fears can be very strong, to behave well you need a strong will, and if you do what you think you shouldn't, or refrain from doing what you think you should, your will is weak and defective. Weakness of will is the internal source of our yielding to temptation. It may also account for our letting ourselves be distracted from what we think we should be doing.

The concept of the will is appealing to penologists, since if bad behaviour were due solely to an intellectual mistake about what it is best to do or not to do, it would be hard to justify punishing it. What wrong-doers would need is instruction, not suffering in return for suffering inflicted, *antilupêsis* as the Greeks called it. But does postulating a mental but non-intellectual faculty solve the problem of why we do what we think we shouldn't? Why not say simply that we do what we think we shouldn't, and fail to do what we think we should, because *we* are weak. We need to distinguish between bodily strength which enables us to left weights and resist being pushed and pulled, and what we might call 'moral' strength, which enables us to resist strong desires and fears. We may try to conceive moral strength on the model of physical, but modelling the mental on the physical can be not just unhelpful but misleading. When I resist being pushed or pulled there are two physical entities involved, I and whoever or whatever is pushing or pulling me; but if I try to overcome a desire or aversion, are there two non-physical entities involved, one acting against the other?

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Is the faculty of will exercised only in combating desires to do what we think wrong, and aversions to doing what we think right? What if I have a strong desire to do something I think it best to do, for example to give money to a poor person for whom I feel pity, or to embrace my spouse when my spouse wants to be embraced? Sometimes we think it best to do something about which we have no feelings one way or the other, like saying, when asked, what time it is, or accepting an invitation to some gathering. Is the will involved at all in acting in these cases? If it is needed to give a go-ahead to a desire, or to act upon any judgement that it is best to do something, as it were by turning a switch that converts thoughts into action, it begins to look like a homunculus, a little agent dwelling within a human being that needs an intellect and will of its own. What makes it turn the switch or stops it from turning it? Hume entitled one of the most important chapters in his *Treatise* (2. 3. 3) 'On the influencing motives of the will'. And could a will be not just weak but evil, smothering scruples about doing what seems bad or cruel and urges to do what seems good or kind?

We can explain temptation to do what we think we shouldn't and temptation not to do what we think we should, and we can also explain the overcoming of such temptations, without introducing a non-cognitive faculty of will. People appear to be born with different propensities for feeling. Some, it seems, are timid in the face of physical danger or when in company with strangers; some quicker tempered than others or more resentful of slights, and some feel sexual attraction more readily than others, or feel it more strongly. Our feelings influence our judgement about what it is best to do in a situation. When we have a strong desire to do something, we tend to underestimate the dangers of doing it, both to others and to ourselves, and to exaggerate the likely benefits; and conversely when we are unwilling or afraid to do something, we exaggerate the difficulty of doing it and minimise the bad consequences of refraining. Our feelings also influence our interpretation of other people's behaviour. If something you do angers me, I may think you did it on purpose; if I greatly desire to do something disadvantageous to you I may think you won't really mind, and if I greatly desire you to do something agreeable to me, I may not recognise your reluctance - be unable to believe that your 'No' means 'No'.

A society will always, though perhaps not consciously, educate children to respond emotionally to situations in ways that make it easy to conform to its customs. There are many ways in which it does this. Plato in what scholars consider his early dialogues (for instance *Protagoras* 352-7) attributes bad behaviour to intellectual weakness, inability to see what it is best to do in the situation; but in his later work, the *Republic,* the *Laws* and the *Statesman,* he attaches increasing importance to educating the emotions. In *Republic* 2 375–6

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he gives education the objective of blending in people impetuosity with gentleness, and looks for this to public festivals, to music, song and dancing, to athletic training and displays, and to literature. By these means natural ferocity (*agriotês*) is reduced and a temperament created that is calm and orderly. The ultimate effect aimed at, he goes on to say, is that we should receive the laws of our society like a dye, and acquire a belief, out of which we can neither be tricked (sc. by desire for pleasure), nor forced (sc. by fear of painful consequences), that what the laws prescribe is right and what they forbid is wrong (*Republic* 3. 410-11, 4 430 A; *Laws* 2. 659 D). It is significant that he speaks of firm opinion (*doxa*, *dogma*), not knowledge. That is because he maintains that 'law can never prescribe accurately what is best and most right for everyone'(*Statesman* 294 A-B).

Plato looked to public festivals to train people's natural propensities and produce this firm belief. An important educative factor he did not mention, perhaps because he spoke only Greek, is the vocabulary of a society. Emotions are not blind sensations like pain. They involve thoughts, and the thoughts are expressed in words not for natural kinds like 'giraffe' and 'water' but in psychological and social or political terms. Different societies pick out different characteristics. In reacting emotionally we think of people as devious, sly, open, bigoted, exclusive, sensitive, arrogant, dashing, inconsiderate, understanding, snobbish, loyal, serious, frivolous, and these words are laudatory or pejorative, carry with them ideas of what is good and bad according to local custom. Words like 'doctor', 'priest' and 'soldier' signify social roles which have different duties and rights attached to them in different societies, as do 'husband' and 'wife', 'father' and 'son', 'man', 'woman' and 'child' and, in many societies, single words for an old woman and an old man. The language of a society impresses on its users definite practical norms.

The customs of a society, obviously, are good, if they prescribe what is best for the members, and forbid what is best avoided. And a good society is one with good customs. If the customs are good, the members will have little difficulty in knowing, on most occasions, how it is best to behave, and their emotions will have been so trained that they are likely to have moral strength. Human beings, we think, have sufficient ability to see what is good and what bad in the social and geographical circumstances in which they grow up, for good societies to arise and get better, whereas societies with bad customs disappear. This general improvement in the customs of societies and the prudence of individuals will be natural. Although Plato may be right that nobody can formulate a rule that it is best for everyone to obey always, the rules of a small society like a primitive village are agreed collectively and since people of bad character are likely, thanks to education, to be few, their judgement is likely to be outweighed. In large societies, of course, where laws are made by a

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few persons who form a minute fraction of the population and who may be ambitious and self-interested, laws may deteriorate, but the society then contains in its bad laws seeds of decay.

If we think that God ordered creation so that intelligent species should arise out of species that are merely sentient by a continuous process of evolution, a process which includes the formation of societies, we may think that he ordered it so that good societies should arise naturally, and not just by the blind working of natural selection, but through the efforts of members themselves, the improvement of laws and that of individuals proceeding by mutual reinforcement.

I now return to the petition with which I started, 'Lead us not into temptation.' The English word 'lead' suggests some communication between the leader and those led, and some willingness on the part of the latter. There is no such suggestion in the Greek verb it translates, *eispherein*, which (unlike *eisagein*) means rather to *bring* or *carry* into something than to *lead*. And *peirasmos*, the word translated 'temptation' means 'putting to the test'. The course of nature goes on, natural processes generally go on, because that is what God wants, and the petition is that they should not carry us into situations in which we as human beings are put to the test. The notion of testing is that of testing gold for genuineness or a tool for sharpness; applied to human beings it is testing to see if they are good human beings, genuine in their devotion to God and to good behaviour. The classic case of testing is that of Job, whom God declares to be 'genuine', *alêthinos*, a claim challenged by Satan the Accuser. Job is tested by being deprived of all his possessions and his children and afflicted with itching sores to see if he cracks up and curses God.

Obviously we do not want God to let nature bring us into that situation. People are in fact brought into such desperate states by war, plague and famine, and understood as a plea not to be brought into them, the petition is the counterpart of 'Give us this day our daily bread', our *arton periousion,* a phrase meaning the basic food and other supplies needed for day to day survival. As the translation 'temptation' testifies, however, the word is generally taken to cover other forms of testing, including subjection to strong positive and negative emotions.

We may think that testing, understood broadly in this way, is not always a bad thing. We do not want to be put in situations where we have overmastering desires to do what we shouldn't and fears to do what we should. But as it is part of acquiring an athletic skill to have it tested, and the same with other skills like diplomacy, general persuasiveness and problem-solving, so it is part of acquiring strength of character to face testing situations. Seeking out such situations is at the opposite extreme from 'carefully avoiding occasions of sin' and looks like hybris or narcissism; at best it is the moral equivalent to body-building; but perhaps nobody becomes a really good person

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without having had some experience of them. Readers of the Book of Job might think God wants there to be agents that, consciously or unconsciously, give us some tests.

The position is slightly different over the difficulties I said Christians sometimes encounter in praying or engaging in other customary spiritual exercises. Distracting thoughts when we are praying, even if they include ill timed senses of absurdity or unwanted mental images, are not emotional feelings inclining us to do wrong or stropping us from doing right; nor are feelings that we are getting nowhere, or doubts about the existence of God and life after death. They are not temptations to act or refrain from acting. They nevertheless put us to the test. They test not our moral virtues or courage, temperance, and kindness, but what are called our 'theological' or 'godly' virtues of faith, hope and charity. Our doubts test our faith; the feeling that we are getting nowhere tests our hope; and our distractions may be said to test our disinterested love of God. It is not easy to concentrate upon the source of the whole natural order in the way we can fill our thoughts with a created person that we love. We cannot imagine the Creator - trying to do so is counter-productive – and God has no needs; he cannot evoke our pity, and we can serve him only by loving him and being happy.

Christians are divided between two ways of conceiving a human being: as a combination of two things, a physical body and an intelligent immortal soul infused into it, or as a single thing, an intelligent causal agent composed of perishable parts, hands, feet and sense-organs or flesh, bones and skin. For those who take the second view, the promise of eternal life with God after death is startling. How (Hume's simple but forceful point) can an agent whose actions are dependent upon a body exist without one? The emotional training that prepares us to behave well in human societies does not prepare us to act upon this apparently incredible promise. Christ's followers belonged to a society, the Jewish nation, which, unlike other nations, believed in a transcendent creator of the universe, and had cultic practices centred on this Creator. But the practices were independent of a belief in a life after death. Many who shared the practices did not share the belief; they prayed for good things on earth, health, prosperity and political freedom. And those who did look forward to life after death conceived it through bodily resuscitation or reanimation. Cultic practices customary among Christians - prayer, church-going, meditation, religious reading and so forth, - have the function of training people, not just to control their emotions, but to pursue objectives which are independent of their well-being as intelligent organisms living in society. Not only are we are to make the well-being of others an end itself independently of any benefit that may come to us. We are to make it our aim to complete a purpose of our Creator for us that depends essentially for its completion on our

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cooperation. This goes, we might say, against our natural grain. Our constitution as rational social animals is something internal to us that stands in the way of our separating ourselves from bodily existence.

On the non-dualistic view of human nature life after death is intelligible only as dependent upon the Incarnation and union with Christ. The natural spatiotemporal order allows for a continuous transition from the inanimate to sentience, and from sentience to conscious intelligence. So, at least, Aristotle believed, though some Christians have questioned its continuity and, as Mary Midgley observes in *Are You an Illusion* (Durham, Acumen 2014), some philosophers seem to believe that no such transition has actually taken place at all. But the passage from the natural to the supernatural has been rendered continuous, a Christian may believe, because God prepared a natural society, the Jewish nation, for his becoming incarnate in it, and he then communicated in ordinary human speech with people in it. If that, or something like it, is true, faith, hope and charity are bound to be put at times to the test, and we can hope to weather the tests only by invoking God in petitions like *Matthew* 6.13.

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