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Virtue and Suffering

I will start with the vice of sloth. In *Glittering Vices*, DeYoung says sloth is “resistance to the demands of love” because the commitment of love requires a lot of work and change (“sapping our willingness to lay down our old loves for the sake of love of God”, *Glittering Vices* 93). Sloth can present as despair or escapism. Despair and escapism are both common responses to suffering. And some people refuse to love (e.g., they withdraw emotionally or try not to get too attached to people) because they are afraid of the suffering that comes with love. Cobb discusses the results of escapism as a response to suffering: “We can avoid suffering by refusing to love well. We can avoid suffering by failing to care for those who need our love. We can avoid suffering—at least for a time—by isolating ourselves and refusing the path of dependence. But the irony of avoiding this suffering is that it leaves one without love, without others to care for, without those who provide one with the opportunity to love and be loved.” (*Loving Samuel* 24). Isolating ourselves and refusing dependence cuts us off from love (similar to how sloth cuts us off from love). (As a reminder from what we talked about in class, the virtue of love (also called charity) involves desire for the other person’s good and desire to be united with them in their flourishing. While a person who has the virtue of love is disposed to love, suffering is something that can make it harder to give and receive love, so that’s why I’m talking about choosing to love—like any virtue, love takes practice.)

I think that *stabilitas*, the remedy for sloth that DeYoung describes, is also relevant here. The discipline of *stabilitas* is about “not running away from what you’re called to be and do… but rather accepting and staying committed to your true spiritual vocation and identity and whatever it requires” (*Glittering Vices* 97-98). *Stabilitas* is not discussed explicitly as a virtue, but I find it a useful framework here. I think both Wolterstorff and Cobb exhibit *stabilitas* in the sense that they choose to stay committed to what the experience of grief requires of them rather than trying to escape from their grief, and I think that this staying committed is part of what it means to suffer well.

This sense of staying committed in the face of suffering is also related to the virtue of courage. In *Being Good*, DeYoung discusses courage in terms of endurance: “the courageous person can only avoid danger or death if she renounces or betrays the good at stake” (*Being Good* 153). In the following passage, Cobb talks about choosing to endure suffering because to avoid the suffering would be to betray the good of loving and trusting other people with whom we are in relationship. “There are times when the causes of our suffering are written directly into our nature as dependent beings, or into our lives because we have opened ourselves to love and trust others... There are times when we must choose suffering not for its own sake but because we value the inherent worth of life and we choose to love and trust others with whom we are in relationship. While we are tempted to try to protect ourselves from pain, we must instead choose the path of love and further open ourselves to the possibility of pain. This is the better way and it is the only way in which one can seize meaning from seemingly unintelligible suffering” (*Loving Samuel* 29). From that last sentence, I interpret that choosing love contributes to individual eudemonia by allowing us to find meaning in the midst of suffering.

In *Loving Samuel*, Cobb illustrates this choosing love in the face of suffering. Aaron and Alisha Cobb accepted the fact that Samuel would not survive long after birth due to his medical condition. They chose to carry the pregnancy to term and planned for Samuel’s life after birth. Even through the pain of knowing how brief their child’s time on earth would be, they chose to love their child and think about how best he could receive their love (for example, by holding him after he was born). They stayed committed to loving Samuel, even when that love would mean suffering. And they continued loving Samuel and remembering him after his death.

Choosing love in the face of suffering can keep us connected as a community and thus contribute to communal eudemonia. Aaron and Alisha Cobb had close friends who provided support. For example, at Samuel’s birth Father Rusty was there with Aaron and Hope was there with Alisha. Both friends provided comfort, and all four people shared in the joy of Samuel’s birth. Father Rusty and Hope chose to enter into the experience of Samuel’s birth even though it would involve suffering (since Samuel would not live long). And thus they had the opportunity to connect with Aaron and Alisha in a profound, shared experience that all would remember.

Wolterstorff also makes the choice to stay committed and not try to escape grief. Wolterstorff chooses to live with the regrets he has of all the things he wishes he could have done for/with Eric rather than trying to make them go away, and he also chooses not to wallow in regret. “I shall accept my regrets as part of my life, to be numbered among my self-inflicted wounds. But I will not endlessly gaze at them. I shall allow the memories to prod me into doing better with those still living. And I shall allow them to sharpen the vision and intensify the hope for that Great Day coming when we can all throw ourselves into each other’s arms and say, “I’m sorry.”” (*Lament for a Son* 64). In talking about “allow the memories to prod me into doing better with those still living”, we can see Wolterstorff chooses to direct his regrets back into love for other people. Wolterstorff mentions hope here, and Cobb also discusses hope: “The virtue of hope is necessary because we face great difficulties that cannot possibly be overcome in our own lives. Securing ultimate goods as well as victory over these evils is a gift to be received not a conquest to be achieved through strength alone. In the midst of sorrow, it is the virtue of hope that gives one the vision to see the source of these gifts even if they are not at present available to be received” (*Loving Samuel* 95). Hope in the face of suffering means recognizing that we still have heaven to look forward to and evil will eventually be overcome. This on its own may seem distant, but it can be combined with a hope that God will redeem suffering (that good can come out of suffering). This can be related to Roberts’ conception of emotions as concern-based construals. Even in times of suffering, we can construe our situation as including potential for good (since God redeems suffering). And there is also the concept of choosing to love and to find joy even within moments of sorrow (for example, Samuel’s birth). Finding joy can be difficult, but as with any of the emotions the more we practice it the easier it will come to us.

Wolterstorff talks about how to respond to someone who is grieving. There is prudence involved in recognizing that the message of “good will come from this” is not the message the grieving person needs to hear. Instead, “What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close” (*Lament for a Son* 35). If you know the person well, you will have a better understanding of what way you can respond to them in their grief, and if you don’t, then a reasonable response is to provide a recognition of their sorrow and an indication of your presence and willingness to be with them. There is also intellectual humility in realizing that you may not understand their grief, even if you have experienced grief (even from the same source) before: “As each death has its own character, so too each grief over a death has its own character—its own inscape. The dynamics of each person’s sorrow must be allowed to work themselves out without judgment. I may find it strange that you should be tearful today but dry-eyed yesterday when my tears were yesterday. But my sorrow is not your sorrow” (*Lament for a Son* 56). We can’t say “I know how you feel”, but we can say “I’m here for you”.

In conclusion, virtues can help us suffer well and be with those who suffer. The main theme I draw here is the importance of choosing love even when it involves suffering. The virtue of courage can help us stay committed to love even when we know that suffering will be involved (whether our own suffering or the suffering of someone else). The virtue of hope and the practice of choosing joy can help us not to wallow in despair when we are faced with suffering. The virtue of prudence and the virtue of intellectual humility can help keep us from offering words that will be hurtful to someone who is grieving.