

Etty Hillesum's Learning to Live and Preparing to Die: *Complacentia Boni* as the Beginning of Acquired and Infused Virtue

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NOT ALL READERS APPROACH DUTCH JEWISH DIARIST AND HOLOCAUST victim Etty Hillesum (1914–1943) appreciatively. Some find her too passive in the face of the Nazi terror. Literary scholar Rachel Brenner, however, praises Hillesum as embodying a “stubborn conviction that love is an inclusive force” for overcoming hatred. In this essay I accept Brenner’s reading of Hillesum and attempt to theologize it. That is, I see in Hillesum’s writing a deeply theological understanding of what love is and how it works in a human life. After defending Hillesum against her critics, I read her writings through the Thomistic categories of acquired and infused virtues and claim that Hillesum’s writing could help Christian ethics recover a voice with which to speak helpfully about love in our day.

Introduction: Why I Am Doing This Study

Dutch Jew Esther (Etty) Hillesum, born in Holland in 1914 and murdered at Auschwitz in 1943, has left a remarkable collection of diaries and letters that recently received their first unabridged English translation.¹ I say more about Hillesum and her writings in a moment. First, however, I articulate my own interest in her. In the final meeting of an extended joint study of Hillesum’s writings, a Jewish man asked the Christian participants (of whom I was one), “I still don’t fully understand why this woman appeals to you. Is she an acceptable Jew to you because she cites some New Testament texts? Can you say again why you are so interested in her?”

In this essay I seek to answer the man’s question. I am seeking a connection between Hillesum and me (us) that neither “sentimentalizes horror,” in the words of Hannah Arendt,² nor baptizes Hillesum *post mortem*. The immediate draw for me to this woman is that although she is very bright, she begins her writing as rather a personal mess. She writes at the very beginning of her diaries, “I am blessed enough intellectually to be able to fathom most subjects. . . . I

seem to be a match for most of life's problems, and yet deep down something like a tightly wound ball of twine binds me relentlessly, and at times I am nothing more or less than a miserable, frightened creature" (*Etty* [diary, March 9, 1941], 4).

Holocaust scholar David Patterson reads journal entries such as this as evidence that Hillesum was "narcissistic . . . [and] egocentric . . . too focused on herself to feel much accountability for others. . . . [She] voyeuristically and vicariously experienced each horror as part of a self-centered fascination with the world around her, and not as something she must attest to as a witness . . . [As a witness to the Holocaust she is] of dubious interest."³ Against Patterson, I read such entries as evidence that Hillesum might speak to us. As she begins writing, she is bright, self-absorbed, and lost: just like us.

Like her, we also are bright enough; more or less competent; but also confused, frightened, and, to borrow Walker Percy's term, "lost in the cosmos."⁴ Moreover, at just this time our churches are largely failing in their role as moral instructors. Catholic theologian (and later cardinal) Walter Kasper put the matter dramatically: "Today we are unfortunately bound to say that in the souls of many believers the church is dying. . . . Twenty years after the council, there are already renewed signs of certain forms of monopoly on the part of the magisterium."⁵ In our own ways we are lost, and the dominant religious approaches do not help us find our way back to ourselves.

I argue that Hillesum shows us a way back to ourselves. To borrow words from Jean Porter, she is a "flawed saint" for our times.⁶ We can benefit from letting ourselves "be read by" Hillesum, as Dutch writer Denise De Costa recommends: "To read Hillesum is to be . . . transported out of the familiar into a world that rewrites you. . . . Her texts push beyond to a 'second innocence.' Letting oneself be read by Etty Hillesum means reestablishing contact with the other and the alien both inside and outside oneself."⁷

To be read by Hillesum means first to read her and to try to name what one finds in her writing. I attempt to do this naming in three steps. In the first section of this essay, I borrow much from Rachel Feldhay Brenner's recent literary-ethical appreciation of Hillesum and suggest the need for a complementary theological reading. In the second and third sections, I carry out that theological reading by engaging Hillesum with the Christian theological tradition of virtue ethics. In the second section, I look for a connection between Hillesum and the foundations of virtue; in the third I look for a similar connection between her and what the Christian tradition calls the virtues infused by God's grace. In the conclusion of this essay I suggest what we Christians might learn from Hillesum about our own understanding of virtue's foundations; I then return to the question of whether a Christian may—without sentimentalizing or appropriating what is not his—engage the writings of Hillesum the way I do.

Approaching Hillesum: A Literary-Ethical Analysis and the Need for a Complementary Theological Analysis

The new and first complete English translation of Hillesum's writings has occasioned responses other than David Patterson's. One study flowing from this new translation is an essay by Rachel Feldhay Brenner, professor of modern Hebrew literature at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Brenner's 2004 essay, "Etty Hillesum: A Thinking Artist," begins with a biographical sketch of Hillesum, a summary of which serves well here:

Hillesum was born in Holland in a middle-class, assimilated, highly educated Jewish family. Her father was a classicist and a high school headmaster. Her mother was born in Russia. Hillesum had two younger brothers, both extremely talented. In 1933 she moved to Amsterdam to study law and Slavic languages. She also studied and taught Russian language and literature. She read voraciously, with special emphasis on Tolstoy, Dostoyevski, Rilke, Jung, and the New Testament, especially St. Matthew and St. Paul. In 1941 she met Julius Spier, a chiropodist and a Jungian, who became her mentor and lover. Under his influence, Hillesum started writing her diary. . . . Hillesum went to Westerbork [the transit camp in eastern Holland from which she was eventually deported to Auschwitz] for the first time on July 30, 1942. Though serious illness forced her to go home [several times in the next year] she was back at her request in the beginning of June 1943 and remained there until the end. She continued to write letters to her friends in Amsterdam until the last moment. Her final letter is from September 7, 1943, which she wrote on the deportation train [to Auschwitz].⁸

I add more biographical details throughout this essay. It is worth adding at the start, however, that Hillesum's family also was psychologically troubled. Her mother seems to have barely escaped Russia with her life during a 1907 pogrom and struggled to maintain her equanimity through the rest of her life. Each of Hillesum's brothers—Jaap, a physician, and Mischa, a piano prodigy—was hospitalized for mental illness at least once.⁹

Brenner's literary-ethical reading of Hillesum's life is the base on which my reading is built. In particular, I appreciate Brenner's response to the harsh critique by Patterson and others.¹⁰ Rejecting Patterson's reading of Hillesum's diaries as narcissistic, Brenner sees in them a process of maturation, "a lucid, unsparring self-analysis [that was] . . . the initial phase in her consciously devised plan aimed at self-formation."¹¹ Brenner reads Hillesum chronologically, seeing a two-stage process of growth evident in her writing. The first stage is largely evident in Hillesum's diaries written before her detention at Westerbork, and the

second stage is evident in her letters from that camp. According to Brenner, “The first stage, which I call the stage of preparation, evolved in Amsterdam; at this stage she prepares to face the reality of the ultimate destruction through self-exploration as thinker and artist. The second stage, which I call the stage of the test, began with Hillesum’s first departure for Westerbork. At this stage, in the reality of the deportation camp, Hillesum put to test both her ethical perspective and the art she had been striving to shape in defiance of the increasing Nazi horror.”¹²

Noting what Hillesum calls her desire “to catch and stop [her fellow sufferers] in their flight from themselves and then take them by the hand and lead them back to their own sources” (*Etty* [diary, June 8, 1942], 399), Brenner thinks this desire is “the core of Hillesum’s ethical vision, which she taught to herself and wished to teach to her fellow-Jews; it is a message of redemption in self-worth and self-dignity. What she wished to defeat is not the physical force of terror, but rather its insidious psychological objective of dehumanization.”¹³

For Brenner, the dehumanization that Hillesum taught herself and then her fellow sufferers to avoid is that which results from hating. She claims that Hillesum held that “it is absolutely necessary to get rid of the feelings of self-hatred and degradation as well as of the responses of hate and violence toward others.”¹⁴ In support of this claim, Brenner cites Hillesum’s invocation of the apostle Paul in one of her letters from Westerbork. Hillesum wrote: “It has been brought home forcibly to me here how every atom of hatred added to the world makes it an even more inhospitable place. I also believe, childish perhaps but stubbornly, that the earth will become more habitable again only through the love the Jew Paul described to the citizens of Corinth in the thirteenth chapter of his first letter” (*Etty* [letters, December 1942], 590–91). Brenner sees in this text Hillesum’s “faith in the redemptive power of love . . . [her] stubborn conviction that love is an inclusive force that will erase hatred between religions and races.”¹⁵ Brenner ends her essay by referring to the postcard citing Psalm 18—“The Lord is my high tower”—that Hillesum threw from the transport train after her deportation from Westerbork (*Etty* [letter, September 7, 1943], 659). The postcard indicates that Hillesum carried her beliefs to the end, leading Brenner to conclude, “Hillesum’s clarity of reasoning in her writing to the very end proved her unrelenting defiance of the terror of hopelessness and despair. As far as this book allows us to follow . . . we are privileged to see her living up to the ultimate test of human values that she set up for herself.”¹⁶

For Brenner, Hillesum passed the test she had set for herself and remains a teacher for us across religious divisions in the redemptive power of love. Hillesum has left us what she herself was looking for: “new thoughts and insights radiating out from the camps, spreading lucidity, crossing the barbed wire.”¹⁷

I accept Brenner’s literary-ethical interpretation completely. What I seek to do here is complement her analysis with an ethical-theological interpretation of

Hillesum. Although Brenner's thesis that Hillesum teaches that the redemptive power of love is surely right, we have no further word from Brenner on what, foundationally, this love is and how it works. In a word, I want to theologize Brenner's interpretation.¹⁸

More particularly, I seek an alternative to two other theological readings of the love at work in Hillesum's writing, as well as in her life and death. I call them "naturalist" and "super-naturalist" understandings. Dutch scholar Denise De Costa's reading of Hillesum can be labeled naturalist. De Costa writes, "Etty Hillesum's God was born the very moment Etty chose to be herself. She experienced this God not as a father figure but as her own essence, her innermost being, her deepest self. The moment she canceled a few appointments, after realizing they were not for her, she opened up to the God inside her. She refused any longer to fulfill other people's expectations of her and saw it as her duty to become herself; in other words: to fulfill her potential, to grow personally, to use her talents. This is . . . becoming divine."¹⁹ In the second section of this essay, I reject De Costa's reading as a partial understanding of the love at work in Hillesum.

I see a supernaturalist explanation of the workings of love in Hillesum in Oliver Davies' book *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition*. Along with texts from Edith Stein and a letter from an unnamed heroic woman caught in the horrors of Bosnia in 1993, Davies mines the writings of Etty Hillesum to find what he calls "narratives . . . [for] a transcendental analytic of compassion . . . [for] a kenotic ontology."²⁰ Davies writes, "The ultimate compassionate love of Etty Hillesum . . . for [her] suffering neighbors is but the most radical example of a self-risking life orientation which for all this extraordinary character is generally expressed in a multitude of quite ordinary ways. . . . In the act of compassionate love there is mediated to us a sense of the possibility of an infinite kenosis. . . . In other words, the act of compassion opens to us a horizon of encounter with God in personal form."²¹

If De Costa understands love in too small a way, Davies makes of it something all too big and humanly unreachable right from the start. In the two succeeding sections of this essay, I look to the Christian theological tradition on virtue for an alternative to De Costa's self-affirming love and Davies' self-effacing love as descriptions of how love works in Etty Hillesum—and in us.

Engaging Hillesum from the Tradition of Christian Ethics, Part One: *Complacentia Boni*—A Resting in the Good—as the Foundation of Virtue

Where De Costa claims that Hillesum's struggle to love gained her God, I want to develop an idea from Christian theologian Frederick Crowe's 1959 essay on *complacentia boni* to claim that what Hillesum gained was not God but love as the

foundation of her life. Love, in its first and primary sense, is “passive, complacent, quiescent . . . affective consent, . . . acceptance of what is good, . . . concord with the universe of being.”²² In his essay, Crowe says he is working through to its completion an idea of Thomas Aquinas: “*Complacere* is the first act of love, which is the basic act of will and the principle of all others. . . . Thomas’ theory of love was never completed. . . . [But] will’s first response to the good is not movement towards it but a simple change in the subject, a complacency. . . . [T]he will first rests, then seeks as viator, and finally comes to permanent rest in beatitude.”²³

In this section, I develop Crowe’s idea to suggest the tradition’s first answer to the question of what love is. My desire here is to understand love in Hillesum—and in us through her—in a less overreaching way than De Costa’s. I go far from Etty Hillesum now in developing this idea of *complacentia boni*, in hopes that it will give us words to understand her.

Diana Fritz Cates’s book *Choosing to Feel: Virtue, Friendship, and Compassion for Friends* introduced me to Crowe. Cates finds in Crowe’s idea of complacency a “depth dimension” to Aquinas’s understanding of the affective foundations of morality that is missing in Aristotle: “(Aquinas) points to a needed openness toward the power of being itself that prepares us to be captivated and penetrated by a particular other’s being, allowing careful reason to be momentarily caught off guard.”²⁴

Cates is doing much to help Christian ethics think about its foundations in affective love.²⁵ She writes that her own thinking has been influenced by the work ethicists such as Paul Wadell and Simon Harak have done on passion as the beginning of virtue.²⁶ This further idea that love is fundamentally a passion has been critiqued by Jean Porter. Porter claims—with justification—that calling love a passion cuts off love (and therefore ethics) from its foundation in reason.²⁷ One might suggest that De Costa’s understanding of love finds a parallel in the work of contemporary Christian ethicists who regard virtue as already contained in passion: All short-circuit the move toward virtue in a human life.

Porter is right but has not—as far as I know—followed Crowe’s and Cates’s further analysis and therefore has not noticed Crowe’s insistence that complacency in rational love (rather than in passion) is at the base of the moral life.²⁸ If Crowe and Cates are right, however, there is already in Aquinas an emphasis—missing in Aristotle—on morality’s foundation in complacent, affective rational love.²⁹

In his *Commentary on the Nichomachean Ethics*, Aquinas was troubled by Aristotle’s description of moral truth depending on right appetite—but right appetite in turn depending on truth in the intellect.³⁰ Aquinas proposed a solution to what he terms Aristotle’s “apparent vicious circle” (*quaedam circulatio*): “There seems to be some problem [in Aristotle’s text.] If the truth of the practical intellect is determined by comparison with a right appetitive faculty and the rectitude of the appetitive faculty is determined by the fact that it agrees with right reason,

an apparent vicious circle results from these statements. Therefore, we must say that the end and the means pertain to the appetitive faculty, but *the end is determined for man by nature*. On the contrary, the means are not determined for us by nature but are to be investigated by reason. *So rectitude of the appetitive faculty in regard to the end is the measure of truth for the practical reason.*"³¹

I contend that Crowe's idea of *complacentia boni* explains how "ends" are "determined by nature" in a person's concrete life. I show Crowe's reasoning in three steps. First, Crowe accepts the point insisted on by Porter and others that will is logically dependent on intellect in all human knowing because will is only able to go out to a known good, but Crowe adds a nuance: "There is no possibility of knowing whether a thing is, unless we know in some way or other, perfectly, or confusedly, by proper quiddity or genus or accidents or negations, what it is of which we ask whether or not it exists. . . . The basic fact is that will follows intellect and regards the object as intellect presents it. But a second-degree principle is that intellect is structured in a way will is not. The objective of intellect is knowledge of what is, but it arrives by stages at this goal, puzzling, getting an insight, formulating the idea in abstract concepts, testing the concepts, pronouncing the judgment of existence. Will awaits the outcome of this process and responds to the object presented on its completion."³²

Hence, although Crowe accepts will's dependence on intellect, he also notes that intellect moves slowly, "by stages," toward adequately describing what it contemplates; it often describes what it sees only partially.³³ So how do we come to the "ends given by nature?" Evidently, our intellect and will work together to name well the end "given by nature."

Crowe continues (in the second of his steps): "[W]hile intellect heads for the concrete through the mediation of a distinct abstract moment, will has a relative simplicity in its orientation to the concrete. . . . [T]he creativity of intellect [is important here]. It envisages possibility. But, because of the orientation to being, this possibility must be concrete, emerging from the matrix of the actual situation and bearing some relation to the operative range of actual resources. Will responds again to the object presented by the completed judgment, but now the object is concrete only by an extension of the actual to its concrete possibilities (*Summa Theologiae* I-II. 28. 5c)."³⁴

Thus, our intellect moves toward true judgment about what exists. The will's spontaneous resting (or failure fully to rest) indicates, however, whether an abstractly true judgment also is possible in an individual's life. Will has a role in the self's searching for what is real; it does not become complacent in a judgment that, however intellectually coherent, is not possible in the individual's life.³⁵

Crowe adds a third and final step in describing how complacency is achieved: "Once true contemplation of being has been re-established, whether by the intellectual purification described or by other means, I do not think any further operation is per se required in the human soul to excite the affectivity of will.

To know that the world is intelligible is to be automatically complacent and, unless patterns of resentment and hostility have taken shape to block the emergence of peaceful moods, that complacency should be discoverable to reflective consciousness. . . . What if the will is not in the ideal state? What relation has complacency to the divided heart which Scripture and the spiritual writers describe? . . . [We] can be concerned about complacency, intent on fostering it, and perhaps thereby correcting an imbalance in our psychological life."³⁶

Complacency is gained in a process of the "melting" (*liquefactio*) of a human heart: "Of (the proximate effects of love) the first is melting, which is opposed to freezing. For things that are frozen are closely bound together, so as to be hard to pierce. But it belongs to love that the appetite is fitted to receive the good which is loved, inasmuch as the object loved is in the love . . . melting denotes a softening of the heart, whereby the heart shows itself to be ready for the entrance of the beloved (*Summa Theologiae* I-II. 28. 5c)."³⁷

Crowe has described the best understanding of the tradition on the relationship of intellect and will, of knowing and loving at the foundation of ethics; yet the tradition has all too often lost its foundation in rational, affective love and too often has settled for an arid and formal intellectualism. Jesuit philosopher William Lynch, himself influenced by Crowe's essay, describes the "Catholic neurosis" that results when this happens: "Nothing creates as much hopelessness as an ideal that is not human, an ideal that seems to be commanded and that is also hopeless. . . . It sets up a self that cannot be reached. The striving self cannot reach the ideal self. The project is hopeless. Thus there can be no taste of the self, and no rest. . . . Benedictine Father Sebastian Moore writes about the possibility of 'A Catholic Neurosis.' . . . He imagines a Catholic acting and feeling under the following burden: 'Between him and what *he* feels and, fumblingly, thinks about life there comes what great and noble souls have thought about it. . . . So he oscillates between two standards. This oscillation is not the same thing as the tension between good and evil, between the dictates of conscience and the importunities of the flesh. It is a division of the mind rather than of the will. It is better described as a neurosis than as a straight spiritual conflict."³⁸

Crowe's development of the idea of the *complacentia boni* gives us the beginnings of a theological language with which to appreciate Hillesum as a teacher of growth in love. She teaches us that there is no other way to love than through reconnecting with the good "given by nature" in our own lives. Far from accepting the judgment of Hillesum as a narcissist, we should read the diaries as recounting the process of the "melting" of a human heart.

Hillesum began therapy with "psycho-chirologist" Julius Spier on March 7, 1941.³⁹ The next day she began her diary. Her words, cited at this essay's beginning, about feeling like a "tightly wound ball of twine" are from the opening paragraph of that diary's first entry. Here are some words from well into that diary: "Life is hard, but that is no bad thing. If one starts by taking one's own

importance seriously, the rest follows. It is not morbid individualism to work on oneself. True peace will come only when every individual finds peace within himself; when we have all vanquished and transformed our hatred for our fellow human beings of whatever race—even into love one day, although perhaps that is asking too much. It is, however, the only solution” (*Etty* [diary, June 20, 1942], 434–35).

With Brenner, I read the pages of Hillesum's diaries as intensive self-analysis. In the context of Brenner's contention that love is at work in Hillesum's diaries, my foray into Crowe's idea of *complacentia boni* provides a more precise theological description of how this love works. It does two things: First, love affirms the self by refusing to start from anywhere else than in the self's own life. Second, love engages in deep self-critique, acknowledging the false places the self has tried (always unsuccessfully) to rest.

I end this part of my essay with a summary collage of texts from Hillesum describing both of these themes in her struggle to find a foundation for herself. (Both sets of texts are arranged chronologically.) First, her affirmation of her own life as the starting point:

You must continue to take yourself seriously (*Etty* [diary, August 13, 1941], 86).

There is a really deep well inside me. And in it dwells God (*Etty* [diary, August 26, 1941], 91).

You cannot heal disturbed people without love (*Etty* [diary, November 11, 1941], 147).

And I listen in to myself, allow myself to be led, not by anything on the outside, but by what wells up from deep within (*Etty* [diary, December 31, 1941], 212).

To take yourself seriously and to be convinced that it makes sense to find your own shape and form (*Etty* [diary, June 8, 1942], 398).

When I pray . . . I hold a silly, naive, or deadly serious dialogue with what is deepest inside me, which for the sake of convenience I call God (*Etty* [diary, July 16, 1942], 494).

My life is one long hearkening unto my self and unto others, unto God. . . . The most essential and the deepest in me hearkening unto the most essential and deepest in the other. God to God (*Etty* [diary, September 24, 1942], 519).

Second, her deep self-critique that goes along with it:

I wanted to own him, and I hated all those women of whom he had spoken to me; I was jealous of them. . . . Just another way of “owning,” of drawing things in more tightly (*Etty* [diary, March 16, 1941], 24–25).

Sometimes I am [in that deep well of mine], too. But more often stones and grit block the well, and God is buried beneath. Then (God) must be dug out again (*Etty* [diary, August 24, 1941], 91).

Things ought to be called by their proper name. If they can't stand it, then they have no right to be. . . . Things [must be] stripped down to their naked reality (*Etty* [diary, June 19, 1942], 426).

I suddenly said to myself, if you really believe in God, then you must surrender yourself completely and live in faith (*Etty* [diary, July 21, 1942], 498).

In the past, when I felt like I was cracking up, I used to do silly things: go out drinking with friends, contemplate suicide, or read right through the night, dozens of books at random. . . . One must have the courage to call a halt, to feel empty and discouraged. Goodnight! (*Etty* [diary, October 12, 1942], 549).

What Hillesum gained by taking herself seriously was not God.⁴⁰ It was not even goodness. It was the ground on which she could begin to pursue good in her own life.

Engaging Hillesum from the Tradition of Christian Ethics, Part Two: *Complacentia Boni* as the Beginning of the Virtues Infused in Us by God's Grace/*Caritas*

Oliver Davies cites nearly two full pages of Hillesum's texts in support of his "kenotic ontology" of love. None are texts in which Hillesum describes her struggle to find the ground of her life. All of what Davies cites comes from the end of her diaries—from the brief and beautiful "exercise book eleven" that comprises the last of her known diaries, written in the fall of 1942 when she was in Amsterdam between stays in Camp Westerbork.⁴¹ All of what he cites belongs to Hillesum's description of her first month-long stay in that camp and her desire to return. Here is a summary sample of the texts from Hillesum that Davies cites: "How is it that this stretch of heathland surrounded by barbed wire, through which so much human misery has flooded, nevertheless remains inscribed in my memory as something almost lovely? . . . I was sometimes filled with an infinite tenderness, and lay awake for hours letting all the many, too many impressions of far too long a day wash over me, and I prayed, 'Let me be the thinking heart of these barracks'. . . . I have stopped making plans and worrying about risks. Happen what may, it is bound to be for the good."⁴²

In failing to connect these texts to Hillesum's earlier struggles to find her life's foundation (or even to mention those struggles), Davies' reading misses

half of her story. These passages provide a partial account of her life, or of anyone's life.⁴³ Below I show that what Davies cites does not do justice to Hillesum even at this "late" period of her writing. Before I go further with Davies' particular interpretation of Hillesum, however, I take another trek into the Christian theological tradition to ask about love—this time to the tradition's distinction between acquired and infused virtue. This trek will show that Davies has not helped us fully understand what love is and how it works in Hillesum's life.

It is not clear whether Davies intends us to understand compassion as a virtue acquired naturally by human beings because he does not use the language of acquired and infused virtue. If Davies is describing compassion as a virtue natural to a human life, however, he does not attend to its development over time. Diana Cates sees the problems in starting from compassion: "The self cannot love [others] *as* itself unless it first loves itself. . . . [I]t is precisely in loving itself (in the right way) that the self discovers itself to be a relational self that is bound to promote the good of included others in the act of promoting its own good. . . . [And] we must remain acutely aware of the ways in which texts [which emphasize compassion as "self-emptying"] have been and continue to be used by certain people in power to render the oppressed and marginalized submissive and obedient."⁴⁴

Davies' idea of compassion as "self-risking" love probably is more in keeping with what Aquinas calls the virtues infused in us by God's grace, through charity. Hence, I begin by asking: What is charity, and how does it work in a human life?⁴⁵ Aquinas writes that charity "is something received in us from God . . . something created in us. . . . The act of charity in human beings works through an interior habit added to our natural powers."⁴⁶ Davies' "kenotic ontology" may be his description of how love works in us, beyond "our natural powers." For this reason, I call his approach supernaturalist.

Aquinas says more about how charity works in us through virtues infused in us by God; he adds that these virtues do three things:

[B]y his natural endowments alone, man can love God more than himself and above all things. . . . [L]oving God above all things is something connatural to man, and even to any creature . . . in accordance with the kind of love which may befit any creature. . . . Thus in the state of intact nature (*statu naturae integrae*) . . . man loved God more than himself and above all things. But in the state of spoiled nature (*statu naturae corruptae*) man falls short of this in the desire of his rational will, which because of the spoiling of nature pursues a private good unless it is healed by God's grace. . . . Charity loves God above all things in a higher way than nature does. For nature loves God above all things inasmuch as He is the source and end of natural good; but charity loves Him above all things inasmuch as He is the object of beatitude, and inasmuch as man has a certain kind of spiritual communion with God. Charity also

gives the natural love of God a certain quick responsiveness and delight (*promptitudinem quamdam et delectationem*) (*Summa Theologiae* I-II. 109.3c. and *ad 1*).

Aquinas says that charity and the virtues infused with it do three things in our lives: First, they “heal” our will, so that we can love and pursue the good that is natural to us as human beings; second, they allow us to do more than what we might do by our nature alone; and third, they bring “quick responsiveness and delight” to our living the moral life.

We can dispense quickly with the second mark of charity—namely, its seeking new ends beyond those of natural love—because here Davies, Hillesum, and the tradition all come together. Aquinas puts martyrdom (the equivalent of Davies’ “self-risking”?) as something beyond nature, only possible by God’s grace in charity (*Summa Theologiae* II-II. 124. 3c.).

Consider, however, the two other characteristics of charity’s work—first, Aquinas’s contention that charity repairs our will, “which because of the spoiling of nature pursues a private good.” Thomist Jean-Pierre Torrell explains the distinction between “intact” and “spoiled” nature: “[For Thomas] the state of intact nature refers to the state of Adam before the fall, and in possession of the privileges given by God at the moment of creation, but taken in abstraction from sanctifying grace. If one recalls that these privileges depended precisely on grace, then this distinction could appear Byzantine; in effect, the state of intact nature and the state of innocence (or original justice) were one and the same concrete reality as lived in the persons of the first parents. That is incontestable. But . . . the unique reality [indicated by intact nature] . . . serves to identify a being abstracted from culture, in its integrity as a natural being.”⁴⁷

Thus, the first effect of grace in a human life is to heal our wounded will. As a practical matter, the most immediate effect of infused virtue in a human life is to help it return to being human. The first thing grace does is to heal the will to make it able to rest—that is, be complacent in true goodness.

Aquinas’s third characteristic of grace is the “quick responsiveness and delight” it brings to one’s whole moral life. The complacent, graced will is deepened in its complacency and quickened in its desire to enact goodness in the world. In sum, all of what I note above about *complacentia boni* applies here. The human will, changed by grace, lives even more complacently in the good.

To bring this theoretical investigation back to Etty Hillesum, then, I should first say that the Christian tradition would not join Davies in regarding Hillesum’s self-emptying as the first sign that she possessed infused virtue. The first sign we should attend to is not to be found in tremendous acts of “self-risking” but in something more ordinary, such as the growth of a person from narcissism to other-regard.

One of my students has pointed out that Hillesum's exercise book eleven (from which all of the texts Davies cites are taken) was written in the month after the death from cancer of her mentor and lover Julius Spier.⁴⁸ As I note above, in a very early text in her diary Hillesum writes of her desire "to own him. . . . Just another way of drawing things in more tightly" (*Etty* [diary, March 16, 1941], 24–25).

Two weeks after Spier's death, Hillesum writes, "Vanity of vanities—but what was not vain was my discovery that I was able to commit myself unreservedly to another, to bind myself to him and to share his sorrow. And did he not lead me to God, after first paving the way with his imperfect human hand?" (*Etty* [diary, October 2, 1942], 540). Hillesum is changed indeed. Early on, this woman's chaotic sexual life demonstrated the truth of her own confession, "It is difficult to be on equally good terms with God and your lower parts."⁴⁹ In exercise book eleven she writes, "love brings so much more happiness than sex" (*Etty* [diary, October 9, 1942], 546).⁵⁰

Infused virtue's third characteristic of delight suggests that we should admire Hillesum's heroism less than her calm and care. One strong critic of Hillesum, on the other hand, has critiqued her precisely for her calm. Tzvetan Todorov writes, "In the end, Hillesum's fatalism and passivity lent themselves to the murderous project of the Nazis. And this is why, despite her uncontested nobility, I cannot commend her position to the downtrodden of this earth."⁵¹

French scholar Sylvie Germaine responds that Todorov has mistaken Hillesum's (infused) calm for passive fatalism: "[Todorov's] suggestion of the 'passive and fatalist' stance of Hillesum from a political point of view is nothing more than a short-term appearance. It returns at another whole level—a spiritual one—where it presents another real (if mysterious) action, desire and will. And far from serving the progression of evil, this attitude cuts evil off at its base. . . . This is the communion of holiness, of justice, of mercy traveling through space and time."⁵²

Etty Hillesum's struggle to live well from her own foundation continues to the end of her writing, although somewhere in the diaries her emphasis shifts from struggle to calm acceptance of a foundation having been given. Her writing shifts from describing her struggles to describing her recognition of and participation in a love that is simply given: Her voice grows calmer and more confident. Although I have worked only a little (and shakily) with the Dutch text of Hillesum, this assessment seems to be borne out grammatically through more passive and impersonal verbal constructions, with Hillesum the indirect object of the action.⁵³

What follows is another sample of Hillesum's writing—this time focusing on her move from the struggle to find a foundation to the acceptance of the

foundation as given. I find these excerpts the best evidence of Hillesum living a life of infused virtue. (Again, I arrange these excerpts chronologically.)

Somewhere there is something inside me that will never desert me again (*Etty* [diary, July 2, 1942], 461).

There are moments when I . . . become calmer and calmer and am filled with a faith in God that has grown so quickly inside me (*Etty* [diary, July 7, 1942], 481).

How can I thank You, oh God, for all the good You keep showering upon me. For all the friendship, for the many fruitful thoughts, for that great all-embracing love I feel within me, and that I am able to apply at every step (*Etty* [diary, September 20, 1942], 520–21).

I rejoice and exult time and again, oh God: I am grateful to You for having given me this life (*Etty* [diary, October 12, 1942], 547).

Time and again, it soars straight from my heart—I can't help it, that's just the way it is, like some elementary force—the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent, and that one day we shall be building a whole new world (*Etty* [letter, July 3, 1943], 616–17).

Love for one's fellow man is like an elemental glow that sustains you. The fellow man himself has hardly anything to do with it (*Etty* [letter, August 7, 1943], 635).

Everywhere things are both very good and very bad at the same time . . . I never have the feeling that I have to make the best of things; everything *is* fine just as it is. Every situation, however miserable, is complete in itself. . . . All I really wanted to say is this: 'making the best of things' is a nauseating expression. So is 'seeing the good in everything' (*Etty* [letter, August 11, 1943], 637–38).

[S]uddenly I just had to write these few words in my diary, and I now send them to you: "You have made me so rich, oh God, please let me share out Your beauty with open hands. . . ." There are many miracles in a human life. My own is one long sequence of inner miracles, and it's good to be able to say so again to somebody (*Etty* [letter, August 18, 1943], 640).

Opening the Bible at random I find this: "The Lord is my high tower" (Psalm 18.3). . . . In the end, the departure came without warning. On sudden special orders from The Hague. We left the camp singing (*Etty* [letter, September 7, 1943], 658–59).

Here Hillesum very much appears to be living what Crowe describes in a second, shorter essay on "complacency and concern," written for a spirituality

journal. There Crowe suggests that Christians find a model for our spiritual lives in “a balance between a complacency which submits to what is and the wisely moderated concern which is content to play a limited role in bringing to fruition what is not.” Crowe regards Jesus as the “exemplar” of this balance; even more so the creating God, who “even in that work of creation which will go on to eternity . . . proceeds without the slightest shadow of anxiety . . . seeing its worth, using the limitations inherent in His scheme, moving all things serenely to their rich realization.”⁵⁴

I suggest that Hillesum could reteach Christians—beyond both the “magisterial monopoly” lamented by Kasper and Davies’ impossible ideal of “self-negation”—what a life of infused virtue looks like.

Conclusion: What Etty Hillesum Might Teach Christian Ethics

What have we gained by engaging the Christian tradition with Hillesum? Three things, I suggest. First, whatever the differences between the life of acquired virtue and that of infused virtue, we should note their similarity. The complacency we struggle for in the life of acquired virtue is the complacency we delight in (and deepen) in the life of infused virtue. In seeing that *complacentia* is the foundation of both acquired and infused virtue, we may have found the place where Hillesum can help us most. All of us, like Hillesum, begin our lives in the state of “spoiled nature.” Whatever their differences, both acquired and infused virtue work to heal us and lead us toward our “intact nature.”

Moreover, from what Crowe says, the immediate tasks of acquired and infused virtue seem to be identical. In both we are to look for a balance between complacency and concern. In light of this similarity, we can accept with equanimity the observation of Porter and Cates, among others, that Aquinas never fully explained the relationship between acquired and infused virtue.⁵⁵

Second, I suggest—without seeking to defend this thesis in any detail—that Hillesum might be teaching us that all actual virtue in the world may be infused virtue; that the idea of acquired virtue is one to which we owe only “notional assent.” John Newman distinguishes “notional” assent from “belief” or “real” assent by saying that “acts of notional assent do not affect our conduct, and acts of belief do affect it.”⁵⁶ The idea of acquired virtue is useful (and probably necessary) to protect God’s freedom and a human being’s moral agency in one’s own life. We may not (as Davies seems to do) make “self-risking” into virtue’s first task; its task is self-finding—seeking a complacent place to stand in the world.⁵⁷

If Aquinas’s understanding of acquired virtue is a “notional idea,” then no human being has ever actually lived a life of acquired virtue only. Without going this far, Torrell does call attention to Aquinas’s approval of Augustine’s view that pagans who keep the law do so by the grace of the Holy Spirit: “As

Augustine says, do not be disturbed at [Paul's Letter to the Romans] saying that they do by nature those things that are of the Law; for the Spirit of grace works this, in order to restore in us the image of God, after which we were naturally made" (*Summa Theologiae* I-II. 109 4 ad 1).⁵⁸ Hillesum, who lived and died as a Jew, could be teaching Christian ethics in particular to remember humbly and with contrition that God's grace has always been infusing the lives of people without respect to religion (or the lack of it).

Furthermore, if all failure in virtue is failure to cooperate with the healing work of divinely infused virtue, we are given a further reason complacently to resist perfectionism. Porter has pointed out that Aquinas holds that the life of infused virtue, unlike that of acquired virtue, leaves much room for struggle. She writes, "This reformulation leads (Aquinas) to modify Aristotle's claim that moral struggle is incompatible with true virtue."⁵⁹

In a letter five days before her deportation to Auschwitz, Hillesum wrote, "If we just care enough, God is in safe hands with us despite everything" (*Etty* [letter, September 2, 1943], 657). Hillesum teaches us to be content in living our own struggle, bringing to it all the integrity we can find from within. We must—simply though not at all easily—care enough.

The third and final point of this conclusion is to wonder aloud if I have sentimentalized and/or baptized Hillesum in this study. I hope not, although a Christian ultimately is not in a position to give his own answer to the question. I take some reassurance in Rachel Brenner's belief in Hillesum's "stubborn . . . conviction that love is an inclusive force that will erase hatred between religions and races."⁶⁰ I hope to have supported Brenner's belief with this essay and perhaps added some theological specificity on what love is and how it works in a human life. I hope to have shown not a Christian Etty Hillesum but an Etty Hillesum who—sixty years after her death—can teach Christians what we mean when we seek to describe and live a life of virtue.

Notes

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essay) and to the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, whose grant made it possible for me to engage in this study.

1. Klaas Smelik, ed., *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941–1943*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002). I cite this text throughout this essay. References are made parenthetically (*Etty*), indicating whether the text cited is from a diary entry or a letter. I also make reference to the Dutch critical edition: Klaas Smelik, ed., *Etty: De negelaten geschriften van Etty Hillesum 1941–1943*, 4th rev. and repr. ed. (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Balans, 2002). Citations to the Dutch edition are made in footnotes, with the reference reading *Dutch edition*, plus the page number.
2. Arendt critiqued “the world-wide success of *The Diary of Anne Frank* [as a general tendency] to forget the ‘negative’ aspect of the past and reduce horror to sentimentality.” Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968 [1955]), 19. I found the text cited by Rachel Feldhay Brenner, in *Writing as Resistance: Four Women Confronting the Holocaust* (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 178. On sentimentality, see also Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1999), 124; he says sentimentality—which is “sentiment, unguided by reason, . . . and is a sign of moral failure”—is a defect of *misericordia*, a form of the theological virtue of charity. This point is important in the third part of this essay, when I look at Hillesum and the virtues infused by charity.
3. David Patterson, “Through the Eyes of Those Who Were There,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 18, no. 2 (fall 2004): 285–86.
4. Percy writes, “How is it possible for the man who designed Voyager 19, which arrived at Titania, a satellite of Uranus, three seconds off schedule and a hundred yards off course after a flight of six years, to be one of the most screwed-up creatures in California, or the cosmos? . . . The main emotion of the adult American who has had all the advantages of wealth, education, and culture is disappointment.” Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1983), 1, 179.
5. Walter Kasper, *Theology and Church*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Crossroads, 1989), 141, 142.
6. See Jean Porter, “Virtue and Sin: The Connection of the Virtues and the Case of the Flawed Saint,” *Journal of Religion* 75 (1995): 521–39. Porter is referring to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in her essay.
7. Denise De Costa, *Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum: Inscribing Spirituality and Sexuality*, trans. Mischa Hoyinck and Robert Chesal (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 206.
8. Rachel Feldhay Brenner, “Etty Hillesum: A Thinking Artist” (unpublished paper), 1–2. Brenner presented her essay on November 8, 2004, as part of a five-part Jewish-Christian “Etty Hillesum Book Discussion” at the Hillel Jewish Student Center, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. Brenner had included a brief treatment of Hillesum in her book *Writing as Resistance* but says that the 2002 unabridged English edition of Hillesum’s writing “presented me with a full picture of Hillesum’s ethical philosophy, her psychological insights, her struggle as an artist, and her historical outlook; it reinforced and deepened my former impressions of her uniqueness.” Brenner, “A Thinking Artist,” 2.
9. Frits Grimmelikhuisen, “No Human Being Can Flourish Here: A Written Portrait in Vivid Colours of Etty Hillesum and Her Family” (unpublished), March 26, 2004, 7–8, 14–15. This essay was a presentation by the founder of *Etty Hillesum Centrum–Deventer, Holland*. It was part of the 2003–2004 series “Etty Hillesum, Companion on Life’s Journeys” at Wisdom Ways Center for Spirituality, St. Paul, Minnesota.

10. I know three highly critical reflections on Hillesum that are available in English: Patterson, "Through the Eyes of Those Who Were There"; Lawrence Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), at 69–73; and Tzvetan Todorov, "Nonviolence and Resignation," in *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 197–212. Brenner responds to Langer and Patterson: "As I see it, these judgmental appreciations of Holocaust Diaries are not only highly inappropriate—after all, neither critic was there, in this horrific increasingly hopeless reality—but that, even worse, they are misleading. These critical appreciations derive from the a priori shaped idea of what the Holocaust diary should be. . . . A 'true' Holocaust diarist was an individual deeply steeped in Jewish religion and culture, whose intention was to leave a factual record of Holocaust atrocities for posterity. Hillesum's diary, however, does not fit this prescription; in fact, it remarkably antagonizes these preconceptions. Her response to the Holocaust does not reflect an affinity with Jewish culture; nor does she aim at a factual record of the events. Rather, the diary presents us with a truly extraordinary example of Hillesum's self-education to become a writer of the Holocaust." Brenner, "A Thinking Artist," 6–7.
11. Brenner, "A Thinking Artist," 7. De Costa also recognizes Hillesum's early diaries as a kind of self-analysis and says, "writing and mental well-being went hand in hand: as long as she wrote on a daily basis, she was fairly well in control of herself. Every time she stopped writing for a while, her first new entry was always about mental stress." De Costa, *Inscribing Spirituality and Sexuality*, 145.
12. Brenner, "A Thinking Artist," 2.
13. *Ibid.*, 12.
14. *Ibid.*, 13.
15. *Ibid.*, 14–15.
16. *Ibid.*, 19.
17. *Ibid.*, 16. Brenner is citing Hillesum: "New thoughts will have to radiate outward from the camps themselves, new insights, spreading lucidity, will have to cross the barbed wire." *Etty* (letter, December, 1942), 587.
18. It is not a critique of literature scholar Brenner to say that she does not theologize. The theologizing I have seen done on Hillesum's texts does not seem to press beyond Brenner, however. For example, Francis Hannafey, "Ethics as Transformative Love: The Moral World of Etty Hillesum," *Horizons* 28, no. 1 (2001): 68–80, does not tell us exactly what transformative love is and how it works in a human life. Hannafey does a wonderful job of gathering the available English bibliography on Hillesum.
19. De Costa, *Inscribing Spirituality and Sexuality*, 226, 228. One particular text is key in Hillesum's "becoming divine," according to De Costa. This key text is the following diary entry:

Something has happened to me, and I don't know if it's just a passing mood or something crucial. It is as if I had been pulled back abruptly to my roots, and had become a little more self-reliant and independent.

Last night . . . I babbled out something like this: "God, take me by Your hand, I shall follow you dutifully and not resist too much. I shall evade none of the tempests life has in store for me. I shall try to face it all as best I can. But now and then grant me a short respite." . . . I think it probably started with what for me was that very independent gesture of picking up the telephone, and off my own bat, without consulting him, telephoning that lady and telling her, "I won't do it, it's not for me." Whenever something suddenly wells up inside you, something that is stronger than you are and that "makes" you act and take what steps you have to take, to

which you feel impelled, then all at once you feel that much stronger. And also when you can say with great assurance, "This isn't for me." Etty (diary, November 25, 1941), 154–55.

20. Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), xviii, 26, 29.
21. Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, 44–45.
22. Frederick Crowe, "Complacency and Concern in the Thought of St. Thomas," *Theological Studies* 20 (1959): 3–4.
23. *Ibid.*, 34, 36.
24. Diana Fritz Cates, *Choosing to Feel: Virtue, Friendship, and Compassion for Friends* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 100.
25. See, for example, Diana Fritz Cates, "The Religious Nature of Ordinary Human Emotions," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 25, no. 1 (spring/summer 2005): 35–54.
26. See Cates, *Choosing to Feel*, nn. 6 and 11, p. 244; n. 3, p. 246.
27. See, for example, Porter's critique that "Harak conflates what Aquinas takes pains to distinguish, namely, reason, will and passion, and their respective roles in the production of action and the formation of virtue." Jean Porter, "Recent Studies in Aquinas's Virtue Ethics: A Review Essay," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 26, no. 1 (1998): 206.
28. "If we go directly to the treatise on love as a passion, it is not with the intention of applying indiscriminately to rational life whatever we find there." Crowe, "Complacency and Concern," 26.
29. Joseph Owens suggests the following differences in the ethical approaches of Aquinas and Aristotle: "Aristotle lived in a civilization that had already experienced the triumph of pagan art in poetry, music, sculpture, painting, and architecture, and in the arts and in athletics, as well as in philosophy. . . . Accordingly he lived in firsthand contact with the best of Greek culture . . . [and] he has an exceptionally broad acquaintance with the civilization of his day. . . . In his ethical works he insists repeatedly on the fundamental importance of this cultural habituation for shaping one's practical philosophy. . . . Aristotle seems to recognize clearly the need for correct upbringing from one's earliest years. . . . Aristotle shows no special concern with existence as a philosophical concern. . . . But Aquinas's view of reality was conditioned by reading Sacred Scripture, whose opening words declare that in the beginning God created heaven and earth. . . . God makes human beings in God's own image, and makes them in truth his own children through grace. Aquinas has a pessimistic attitude toward efforts at political change in the world. . . . Aquinas's attitude bears witness to relying on spiritual rather than temporal forces to achieve one's happiness." Joseph Owens, "Aristotle and Aquinas," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Norman Kretzmann and Eleanor Stump (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 40–42, 43–44. Giuseppe Abbà says, "Il modo con cui Dio guida nel dettaglio la condotta dell'individuo non consiste nel fargli conoscere quale sia il *volitum* divinum in ogni circostanza; consiste invece nel mettere l'individuo in grado di definire attivamente la figura individuale della propria condotta, e ciò arricchendolo mediante gli *habitus* virtuosi, grazie ai quali le facoltà operative sono stabilizzate rispetto ai fini delle virtù. La definizione e la costruzione della figura concreta, che per lui deve assumere il bene umano, è opera dell'individuo che fa uso delle virtù." Giuseppe Abbà, *Lex et Virtus: Studi sull'evoluzione della dottrina morale di san Tommaso d'Aquino* (Rome: LAS, 1983), 271.
30. In Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle writes, "Now there are in the soul three things that control action and (the attainment of truth), viz. sensation, intellect, and appetite. Of these sensation is not the origin of any action. . . . [S]o that, since moral virtue is a state involving choice, and choice is deliberate appetite, it follows that if the

choice is to be a good one, both the reasoning must be true and the desire right; and the desire must pursue the same things that the reasoning asserts. . . . To arrive at the truth is indeed the function of intellect in any aspect, but the function of practical intellect is to arrive at the truth that corresponds to right appetite." Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), Book VI, ii. (1139a16–b2), 205.

Aquinas understood the soul to have four powers: intellect, will, sense, and sense appetite. See Kevin White, "The Passions of the Soul (I-II. 22-48)," in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen Pope (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), at 104–5. What is present in Aquinas and missing in Aristotle is a notion of the will. Alasdair MacIntyre is helpful here: "The conception of the will was Augustine's—invention? Or discovery? . . . [T]he authors of classical antiquity prior to Augustine lacked any vocabulary and for the most part any conception of the will." Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 156.

31. The emphasis is mine. Aquinas continues, "According to this, the truth of the practical reason is determined by agreement with a right appetitive faculty. But the truth of the practical reason itself is the rule for the rectitude of the appetitive faculty in regard to the means. According to this, then, the appetitive faculty is called right inasmuch as it pursues the things that reason calls true." Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, vol. 2, trans. C. I. Litzinger (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1964), Book VI (I.2. 1131), 546–47.
32. Crowe, "Complacency and Concern," 378, 391.
33. Another Thomist puts it this way: "What St. Thomas is saying is that the intellect attains a quid, a 'whatness,' or essence every time it functions, but that this can be more or less generic, and indeed can be either substantial or accidental. . . . It is not claimed that men usually or normally or easily attain the specific natures even of the most common realities in their environment." Paul Durbin, "The Simple Understanding of *Quidditas*," in *Summa Theologiae*, "Blackfriars Edition," Latin text with English translation, volume 12 (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1968), 171–72.
34. Crowe, "Complacency and Concern," 391.
35. On this point, Robert Pasnau sees something non-Aristotelian in Aquinas's understanding of the reason-will relationship:

However . . . various Aristotelian causes fall into place, it is clear that Aquinas wants to resist the idea that the intellect determines the will's choice in the way 'that which pushes, moves that which is pushed' (I 82. 4c). . . . What Aquinas is introducing, roughly speaking, is higher-order volitions. . . . The will does not simply endorse the passing judgments of reason, in a neutral fashion, but subjects those judgments to the higher-order aims that shape who we are. . . . In such cases it is the will that is in control, in virtue of its fixed dispositions and desires, which hold independently of reason's dictates (considered in the short term). The will cannot entirely repudiate reason, but the will shapes reason just as much as reason shapes will. The will can, for instance, force reason to stop thinking about something. Also, the will can direct reason to look at something in a different way. (For example, don't think about what you might buy with the money you found; think about how happy someone will be to get it back.) In such cases our higher-order desires take charge over the process of deliberation, turning our thoughts in the directions in which we want them to go.

Aquinas gains much from complicating his account in this way. . . . [F]ree decision now takes hold in another dimension. Until now that freedom has seemed to consist entirely in reason's capacity to make one judgment or another—its being open to alternatives. Now we can see how the will might be free to accept or reject that judgment. . . . Ultimately, human freedom remains rooted in reason. This is as

it should be, not just because it is what Aquinas constantly says, but because we should not aspire to give the will the sort of freedom that would sever it from the control of reason. Aquinas views the relationship between reason and will as a back-and-forth, exchange, extending over the course of our lives." Robert Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 226, 228–29.

Cates points out another difference between Aquinas and Aristotle: Whereas for Aristotle the "reasonable mean" of human conduct "is determined with reference to what a person of practical wisdom would choose," for Aquinas that same mean "is defined with reference to the rule of human reason." Cates, *Choosing to Feel*, 14, 28. Cates does not pursue the significance of this difference.

36. Crowe, "Complacency and Concern," 379–80; 224.
37. I cite Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* parenthetically in the text of the essay. I am citing the text from *Summa theologiae*, "Blackfriars Edition," Latin text with English translation (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1964–). See Crowe, "Complacency and Concern," 38. Noteworthy also is Ignatius of Loyola's explanation of one of the primary reasons for desolation in one's spiritual life: "The third reason is because God wishes to give us a true knowledge and understanding of ourselves, so that we may have an intimate perception of the fact that it is not within our power to acquire and attain great devotion, intense love, tears, or other spiritual consolation; but that all this is the gift and grace of God our Lord. God does not wish us to build on the property of another, to rise up in spirit in a certain pride and vainglory and attribute to ourselves the devotion and other effects of spiritual consolation." Louis J. Puhl, S.J., ed., *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: Based on Studies in the Language of the Autograph* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951), 144 (paragraph 322).
38. William Lynch, *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), 55, 56–57.
39. See first note on p. 673 of *Etty* for the background of Hillesum's initial contacts with Spier. Much could (and should) be written about Spier's unorthodox—today we would call them unethical—therapeutic methods. I do not deal with that issue here.
40. Our theology might say that what De Costa is describing is Hillesum's "natural knowledge of God." Jean Porter explains: "Aquinas makes it clear that even without the assistance of grace, the human person is capable of knowing God as the first and preeminently excellent cause of all things, and can even recognize and love God as the good toward which the universe as a whole tends. Hence a naturally good human life will always include some form of intellectual reflection on the ultimate principles of reality." Jean Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 90–91.
41. Hillesum functioned as a secretary for the Jewish Council, first in Amsterdam and then (for a brief period) at Westerbork. Her association with the Council gave her some freedom of movement between Westerbork and Amsterdam. (See the explanatory note—labeled *back to Westerbork tomorrow*—on this point in *Etty* at 744). I do not take up the ethical implications of Hillesum's agreement to work with the Jewish Council for some time. See Hannah Arendt's strong condemnation of the work of these councils: Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1977), especially 115–25.
42. Hillesum, cited in Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, 26–27.
43. I have not studied Davies' book in its entirety and am not attempting a thorough review of it here. One reviewer, however, critiques the book as providing a "partial account" of a human life: "The book's problem is that it is a partial account, presented as the whole. For

- compassion is only half the story. The other half is what could be termed 'free-spiritedness.' . . . The former responds to its perception of need with restless pastoral concern; then turns, perhaps, to social criticism, on the basis of that perception and response. The latter responds to its perception of danger with a commitment to restless social criticism. . . . Pure compassion sets aside the enmities deriving from one's historic identity; it relates us to other people transhistorically. . . . [But it neglects to] construct an all-encompassing history of free-spiritedness." Andrew Shanks, "The Art of Conversation, A Review of Oliver Davies', *A Theology of Compassion*," *Times Literary Supplement* (September 6, 2002).
44. Cates speaks of these among other dangers in seeing compassion as self-emptying. Cates, *Choosing to Feel*, 220–24. The text cited is at 222–23.
 45. This need to be specific about what charity is, is a frequent contention of Jean Porter; she judges contemporary Christian ethics as negligent in this area. For example, Porter writes, "if we claim to have a concept of, say, charity, at all, then we must be able to say what charity looks like—what the charitable person characteristically does, what sorts of actions count as charitable actions, what sort of evidence would count as *prima facie* evidence that a person is not charitable, and so forth." Jean Porter, "Salvific Love and Charity: A Comparison of the Thought of Karl Rahner and Thomas Aquinas," in *The Love Commandments: Essays in Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy*, ed. Edmund Santurri and William Werpehowski (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1992), 254.
 46. The translation is mine: "caritas recipitur in nobis a Deo . . . est aliquid creatum in nobis . . . actus caritatis in homine ex aliquo habitu interiori procedat naturali potentiae superaddito." Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae: De Caritate* Qu. un, ar. 1 (Rome: Marietti, 1942), 755.
 47. ". . . l'état de nature integre désigne l'état d'Adam avant la chute, donc en possession des privileges don't Dieu l'a doté au moment de sa création, *mais abstraction faite de la grace sanctifiante*. Si l'on se souvient que ces privilèges dépendaient précisément de la grace, cette distinction peut apparaître Byzantine; en effet, état de nature intègre et état d'innocence (ou de justice originelle) s'identifiaient en une seule et meme réalité concrète vécue par les personnes des premiers parents. C'est incontestable, mais on ne saurait oublier que cette seule et unique réalité peut être envisagée sous différents aspects; ce serait faire montre d'un esprit sans culture que de vouloir s'en tenir à un seul." Jean-Pierre Torrell, "Nature et grâce chez Thomas d'Aquin," *Revue Thomiste* 101 (2001): 184.
 48. See Jim Newsome, "Exercise Book Eleven and the Virtues of Etty Hillesum"; unpublished paper for the course "Etty Hillesum and the Nature of the Moral Life," College of St. Catherine, St. Paul, Minnesota, fall 2004.
 49. The published English translation, over-politely, reads, "It is difficult to be on equally good terms with God and your body." See *Etty* (diary, August 4, 1941), 70. The Dutch original, however, does not use the word for body; it uses *onderlichaam*. *Dutch edition*, 74. The dictionary definition of *onderlichaam* is "lower parts of the body." I am grateful to Frits Grimmelikhuisen for pointing out the explicit sexual reference that Hillesum intends here.
 50. I have not done justice to the "challenge" of Etty Hillesum's sexuality in this essay. Although he focuses more on "passion" than on the will's affective love, Richard Gaillardetz has helpful insights to share on this issue in "Etty Hillesum: Suffering and Sexuality, Reflections on Passionate Living," *Spirituality* 6 (May/June 2000): 148–52.
 51. Todorov, *Facing the Extreme*, 208–9. Todorov is correct enough about Hillesum's lack of interest in armed struggle, but he totally misses her understanding of her writing as resistance. She writes: "And I shall wield this slender fountain pen as if it were a hammer, and my words will have to be so many hammer strokes with which to beat out the story of our fate and of a piece of history." *Etty* (diary, July 10, 1942), 484. I also don't think Hillesum is making an ideological argument for pacifism as the only acceptable moral stance in the face

of violence. She frequently writes that her specific way of responding to the Nazi horror is the one she has figured out for her own life—that it is not a conviction about what others must do. For example: “I can only let things take their course and if need be, suffer. This is where my strength lies, and it is great strength indeed. But for myself, not for others” *Etty* (letter, July 10, 1943), 628. Or, again: “. . . there is the need sometimes to be a still, small voice. We must keep one another in touch with everything that happens . . . each one contributing his own little piece of stone to the great mosaic that will take shape once the war is over.” *Etty* (letter, August 24, 1943), 644.

52. Sylvie Germain: “. . . il ne l'est que jusqu'à un certain point: l'inefficacité qui découle de l'attitude 'passive et fataliste' d'Etty Hillesum sur le plan politique n'est telle qu'en apparence et à court terme; elle se retourne complètement sur un autre plan—celui de la spiritualité—où là, elle se fait action, désir et volonté, et efficacité réelle bien que mystérieuse. Et loin de faciliter la progression du mal, cette attitude sape en fait le mal à sa base. . . . [E]lle se joue sur le long terme, et surtout dans l'insondable mystère d'une 'communion' entre les êtres boulement épris de justice, de miséricorde et de paix. Car, comme on parle d'une 'communion des saints,' on peut aussi parler d'une communion des justes, des miséricordieux, à travers et l'espace et le temps.” Sylvie Germain, *Etty Hillesum—Chemins d'ermite* (Paris: Pygalion, 1999), 168–69.
53. I am not qualified to pass judgment on this issue, but there seems to be an increase in passive and impersonal verbal constructions in Hillesum's later diary entries and her letters. For example: “Sometimes it bursts into full flame within me, as it just has done again: all the friendship and all the people I have known this past year rise up in overwhelming number and fill me with gratitude.” The Dutch text has “Soms slaat het opens weer in hell vlammen in me uit.” *Etty, Dutch edition*, 581. Bruce Donaldson's Dutch grammar says the following: “Impersonal verbs are those which only occur in the third person. In the third person singular the subject is always *het* [it].” Bruce Donaldson, *Dutch: A Comprehensive Grammar* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 209.
54. Frederick Crowe, “Complacency and Concern,” *Cross and Crown* no. 11 (1959): 189–90.
55. Cates cites Porter's 1992 study to claim, “Thomas himself does not offer a satisfactory account of the relation of the infused to the acquired virtues in the history and character of the individual whose virtues they are.” Cates, *Choosing to Feel*, 39, citing Jean Porter, “The Subversion of Virtue: Acquired and Infused Virtue in the *Summa Theologiae*,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1992): 38. Porter herself seems to be revising her view, although she does not go as far as I suggest in my second point in the conclusion here. In 1995 she wrote, “the normal context for the application of the account of the virtues is not to be found in the lives of persons of perfect acquired virtue. . . . The normal context of the development and exercise of the virtues is the life of grace, which is mediated in the individual through the theological virtues and the infused cardinal virtues.” Porter, “Virtue and Sin,” 530.
56. John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, ed. I. T. Ker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 64.
57. I am making an argument parallel to Torrell's argument that the nature-grace distinction protects both God's freedom and ours: “la mise en relief de ce qu'est la nature intègre répond avant tout à une double intention. D'une part, il s'agit de mettre en évidence la distinction entre la nature et la grâce: pour que la grâce reste grâce, il importe qu'elle ne soit pas due à la nature; cela signifie que la nature demeure avec ses caractéristiques propres, même si dans la réalité concrète il devait ne pas y avoir davantage d'actes 'naturels' séparés que de nature integer.” Torrell, “Nature et grâce chez Thomas d'Aquin,” 184.
58. Citing this text, Torrell adds, “cet amour naturel (de Dieu par-dessus toutes choses) ne s'accomplit que dans un amour surnaturel.” Torrell, “Nature et grâce chez Thomas d'Aquin,” 196. MacIntyre speaks for the tradition's recognition of charity being at work

outside the Christian church: “Charity . . . is recognizably at work in the secular world and the authorities whom Aquinas cites on its nature, and whose disagreements he aspires to resolve, include Sallust and Cicero as well as Augustine.” MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 124.

59. Porter expands: “One of the most important differences between the acquired and the infused cardinal virtues is precisely this, that the latter, unlike the former, can truly be possessed even by those who consistently experience some difficulty in exercising them. Thus, the life of someone who possesses the infused virtues may be characterized by more actual struggle and imperfection than we would find in an individual of perfect acquired virtue. . . . Aquinas’s theological commitments have led him to develop his overall account of virtue in such a way as to accommodate (at least partially) the case of someone who combines moral struggle with moral heroism.” Porter, “Virtue and Sin,” 530. Porter is basing her argument on *Summa Theologiae* I-II. 65.3 ad 2.

Porter voices a challenge that I do not take up in this essay—namely, that Aquinas’s understanding of infused virtue does not adequately account for people who (like her example of Martin Luther King Jr., or like Etty Hillesum) not only struggle with sin but do commit serious sins and yet remain models of holiness for us. Porter writes:

My own view is that the example of King and of other flawed saints offers nearly conclusive evidence that Aquinas was wrong to say that the life of charity is inconsistent with serious sin. If that is so, and if one finds Aquinas’s account of grace and the life of virtue to be otherwise persuasive, as I do, the question that remains is, why was Aquinas mistaken on this particular point? It would go beyond the scope of this essay to address this question adequately. It is worth noting that Aquinas’s accounts of both virtue and sin are developed in terms of a psychology that is inadequate in many respects, particularly when seen in the light of the scientific psychology which has emerged over the last century. If we were to rethink Aquinas’s accounts of both virtue and sin in the light of this psychology, it might appear that sin in particular stands in a more complex relation to the life of grace than Aquinas can recognize. But this should be taken as a preliminary speculation only. . . . King was a saint. Whatever else he may teach us, he helps us to see that to be a saint is not to be morally perfect, but to be exemplary in love. How can we emulate sanctity, if we do not know it when we see it? (Porter, “Virtue and Sin,” 538–39).

60. Brenner, “A Thinking Artist,” 14–15.



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