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Emotions and Christ-Shaped Philosophy

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Abstract: *This paper proposes that the components of Christ-shaped philosophy are somewhat like the components of a child-parent relationship. What must be true of emotions in order for this proposal to be convincing? The conception of emotions I am employing is robust. A thin conception of emotions would conceive them simply as high-pitched passion, as unstable, coming and going independently of our wills, as disruptive to our true aims in life, and cheap. With a robust conception of emotion, large parts of the inner terrain can be explained in terms of emotions, including the key components of Christ-shaped philosophy.*

Paul Moser makes use of a number of important concepts that can, I believe, be unpacked in terms of emotions. He employs the idea of the “resurrection life” in his assertion that it should be manifest “in all areas of our lives” (2). This resurrection life involves possessing a “Gethsemane union with Christ” (7), “being renewed” in the image of God (3), and possessing the “power of the inward Christ” (6).

Moser’s main claim is that Christian philosophers should engage in what he calls “Christ-shaped philosophy,” which involves the realities mentioned in the last paragraph—a union, a renewal, and an inner power. In what follows I shall suggest that these realities consist, at least in part, of having certain emotions.

To make this thesis plausible, I need to do two things: say some things about emotions in general, and say some things about the particular emotions that these realities consist of. I also want to make it plain that I am not challenging or attacking Moser’s claims. I am simply enlarging them and making them more intelligible to those who might wonder what a Gethsemane union with Christ, a renewal, and the power of the inward Christ amount to. I am explaining, in terms of emotions, part of what happens when someone engages in Christ-shaped philosophy.

Before I proceed I need to refer to Moser’s statement about a “mysterious inward union”: “the authority seeking maturity in Christ aims for a mysterious *inward union* (or, communion) between the exalted Christ and the people yielding and belonging to him as Lord” (3). This statement makes it look as if the union with Christ that Moser says is involved in doing Christ-shaped philosophy is mysterious. This may be so. But I shall say nothing about

the idea of a mysterious union, since, I presume, nothing can be said about it, if, that is, Moser is using “mysterious” in the sense in which mystics customarily use it, namely, being non-rational and ineffable. What I shall be unpacking in terms of emotions is the idea of a non-mysterious union with Christ, a non-mysterious renewal in the image of God, and a non-mysterious conception of the power of the inward Christ. These non-mysterious realities can, I believe, be part of Moser’s Christ-shaped philosophy, without impugning whatever counts as a mysterious union. I leave it to others to say what the connection is between the mysterious union and the non-mysterious union.

As a way of getting at the non-mysterious union, renewal, and power involved in Christ-shaped philosophy, let us look briefly at an ordinary instance of union, renewal, and power that can be conceived in terms of emotions. One such instance is the relationship between children and their parents—a good relationship, that is. Consider the emotion of joy. When both child and parent find joy in each other’s presence, there is something of a union between the two. If either one has fallen on hard times prior to experiencing that joy, there is a renewal for the prospects of one’s life, which itself consists of having new or revitalized emotions, such as hope and trust. The joy also produces a power, a strength or energy, to face difficulties and to keep on pursuing the good things of life. This inner power itself consists in part of emotions.

My proposal, then, is that the components of Christ-shaped philosophy are somewhat like the components of a child-parent relationship. What must be true of emotions in order for this proposal to be convincing?

Sometimes emotions are thought of as short bursts of high passion. Besides the fact that it is nearly impossible to maintain high passion for very long, it is hard to picture the resurrection life with its union with Christ, renewal, and power as consisting of short bursts of high passion. What is needed for these is something that is both long-lasting and energizing. Long-lasting emotions fit this requirement. Although nearly all emotions are short and intense on occasion, they are also often long-lasting. Smoldering anger is an example. So is “smoldering joy,” or, better, burning joy—sometimes burning brightly and vigorously but most of the time without a large blaze, yet steadfastly and revitalizing.

This steadfast burning gives a person energy because of the desires it contains. Anger at being wrongly hurt contains a desire to hurt the offender or for the offender at least to repent. Compassion contains a desire to aid a victim. Feelings of sympathy or empathy without a desire to aid a victim are not compassion, but with such a desire they become compassion. And with that desire comes the power of Christ that Moser says is part of doing Christ-shaped philosophy. The power just is the energy-producing component of emotions. Desires, of course, do not always energize us, but often they do.

They come in degrees. This is just to say that if compassion contains a weak desire to aid a victim, it will not move us to be sacrificial as much as a strong desire would. A resurrection life that contains only weak desires will be less likely to result in Christ-shaped philosophy than would a resurrection life with strong desires. In fact, with just weak desires, a resurrection life isn't much of a resurrection life. But with a deep and abiding joy, one's resurrection life has a great deal of energy.

Emotions are sometimes thought to be raw feelings that are blind to everything else. Blind rage and ecstatic rapture are examples. The truth is that, though emotions are sometimes blind or nearly blind, they are almost always imbued with some conceptual content. Angry people construe themselves as having been wronged by someone. Joyful people construe themselves as being in a circumstance that promotes their well-being. These construals are conceptual and therefore not blind—we conceive our emotions as having definite objects.¹ As such, emotions fit the way in which we envision the power of the inward Christ, which also is imbued with conceptual content and is not just blind energy.

Acquiring certain emotions is not cheap or easy, as some might think. We like to think of ourselves more highly than is warranted, which makes humility and contrition both offensive and difficult to embrace. Our fierce “But what about me?” proclivity makes true love and compassion nearly impossible. This fact about these emotions explains why maturity in Christ requires painful work, indeed, why even becoming born again is painful and arduous.

These ways of regarding emotions furnish us with a way to conceive of the renewal Moser regards as necessary for Christ-shaped philosophy. Renewal consists in part of replacing some emotions with others. These new emotions are stable—if they were present only sporadically, there would be little renewal. The new emotions provide the person who is renewed with an energy that is directed in specific ways. The emotions involve conceiving of reality in different ways. With gratitude, for example, we conceive ourselves to have been given good and loving gifts by God. And the emotions in one's renewal are often difficult to acquire and keep, which makes doing Christ-shaped philosophy something that needs constant work.

Other concepts that Moser employs can also be interpreted in terms of emotions. He refers to becoming “Christlike in moral and spiritual character” (3). Moral and spiritual character consists largely of possessing certain virtues,

¹ I am following the terminology of Robert C. Roberts in his *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Emotions, he says, are “concern-based construals” (p. 64).

many of which consist of emotions.² To be Christlike in moral and spiritual character “demands that one be an intentional agent who freely appropriates the life-giving power of Christ as Lord” (3). This life-giving power consists in part of a network of emotions, which together make one a new creature in Christ and which gives one “the power of Christ to carry out [ethical and juridical] commitments” (4). Christians’ “divine motivation from Gethsemane union with Christ” (7) comes from the energizing component of emotions.

The conception of emotions I am employing is robust. A thin conception of emotions would conceive them simply as high-pitched passion, as unstable, coming and going independently of our wills, as disruptive to our true aims in life, and cheap. With a robust conception of emotion, large parts of the inner terrain can be explained in terms of emotions, including the key components of Christ-shaped philosophy.

There are other elements of the inner life that are part of a resurrection life—attitudes, goals, motives, and beliefs. Sometimes these are part of emotions, though sometimes they are not. I want to say that only a part of what a resurrection life consists of is emotions, but I also want to say that it is a larger part than what we would think if we operated with a thin conception of emotions. The same is true of the inner life in general. By the inner life I include moral and spiritual realities of the sort envisioned by Moser in his Christ-shaped philosophy. He is certainly right to say on page 7 that the resurrection life is not just emotional response. However, if a robust conception of emotions is correct, then his assertion needs to be supplemented with the assertion that a large part of the resurrection life consists of having certain emotions.

What emotions? I have already mentioned some: joy, hope, trust, compassion, gratitude, humility, and contrition. To these we can add peace, patience, kindness, and love. No doubt there are others. Together, I believe, they constitute a large share of what Gethsemane-union, Christian renewal, and the inward power of Christ are, and thus of Christ-shaped philosophy.

Much of what I have said needs expanding. I offer it as a working proposal to cash out Moser’s conception of Christ-shaped philosophy.

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² For an exposition of this assertion, see Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007).