

PURITY OF HEART

Stephen R. Munzer

'Blessed are the pure in heart: they shall see God.' (Matthew 5:8)

'Purity of heart, if one could attain it, would be to see clearly and to act with grace and self-command from this point of view'.¹

PURITY OF HEART may be considered as both a Christian and a secular ideal. It is a familiar theme in biblical, monastic and spiritual literature, and the quotation from John Rawls above hints at a possible secular project. My aim is to explain purity of heart in a fresh way that helps to pinpoint its significance in Christian life by using a wide-ranging approach that brings together theology, moral philosophy and moral psychology. I begin by recasting purity of heart in an idiom familiar to contemporary analytic philosophers. Later I say something more about its nature and significance. In so doing I hope also to recover for contemporary use some ascetic and monastic understandings of purity of heart.

Purity of Heart Reformulated

Purity of heart, as understood here, has at least the following dimensions in a person's interior life and external behaviour: thoughts, motives, desires, dispositions, emotions, decisions and actions. For each dimension it is possible to identify examples that promote purity of heart and examples that fail to do so. Kierkegaard claims that purity

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¹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 1971), 587. By 'this point of view' Rawls refers to the 'perspective of eternity', which is 'a certain form of thought and feeling that rational persons can adopt within the world'.

of heart is to will one thing.² His claim does not belong to the ascetic and monastic tradition and requires separate consideration elsewhere. Whilst I disagree with many aspects of Kierkegaard's view, I would argue that purity of heart, as he understands it, requires a singleness of purpose for its attainment.

Thoughts

So far as *thoughts*³ are concerned, letting go of judgments of others, guarding against unkind opinions of others, and having in mind a compassionate perspective on others and their difficulties tend to promote purity of heart. Sometimes thoughts have a propositional content (for example, believing or hoping that an acquaintance will be able to overcome her depression) and sometimes they do not (for example, forearming oneself against developing unkind opinions). Another example is letting go of ideas as *my* ideas in point of originality and ownership; releasing such ideas in this way can produce a sort of detachment. At the margin are some forms of contemplation and prayer that are wordless; here 'thoughts' approach non-thinking asymptotically as a limit. Judging others or rejoicing in their misfortunes frustrates purity of heart and can make its attainment impossible.

Motives

A *motive* is a stimulus that prompts a person to act in a particular way. One's motives are sometimes obvious, but often hidden or unclear. Motives that tend to promote purity of heart may be guileless, unsullied, compassionate, empathetic, sympathetic, considerate, peaceful, straightforward, authentic, disciplined, restrained or transparent. Because one's motives can be hidden or unclear, motives that are transparent, prayerful, purged of improper desires, clear in intent and purpose, or

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, translated by Douglas V. Steare (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1956).

³ Thoughts, as understood here, include the contents of memories, dreams and daydreams. This exposition and these examples of thoughts are, however, much narrower and less elaborate than the 'thoughts' (*logismoi*) of Evagrius Ponticus (c. 345–399), which include items from other dimensions listed above. Evagrius discusses his eight *logismoi* in various works, including the *Eulogios* and the *Praktikos* (see *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, translated by Robert E. Sinkewicz [Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2003]). Evagrius drew on earlier desert monks and influenced later monastic reflection on purity of heart, especially that of John Cassian. The best overall discussion lies in five articles by Juana Raasch, 'The Monastic Concept of Purity of Heart and Its Sources', *Studia Monastica*, 8 (1966), 7–33, 183–231; 10, (1968) 7–55; 11 (1969), 269–314; and 12 (1970), 7–41.

examined with care (but not obsessively) can further purity of heart. In contrast, a person whose motives are devious, opaque, duplicitous, admixed in intent or purpose, tainted by self-deception, or replete with improper desires will find it much more difficult, if not impossible, to attain purity of heart. Those motivated by greed, which Evagrius Ponticus calls *philargyria* (Latin *avaritia*), will find that it disturbs their relationship with God in so far as it bespeaks a lack of faith in God with respect to material needs. I doubt that motives have to exhibit impassibility



Evagrius Ponticus

(passionlessness), which Evagrius calls *apatheia*: in this and other respects his account depends on an outdated understanding of the mind.⁴ Even if there is a passionate part of the soul whose motives require restraint, the motives once appropriately restrained still have some admixture of passion.

Desires

The word *desire* has often been a semi-technical term in the philosophy of mind. Here it means an impulse or appetite, which is generally conscious and may be either momentary or enduring, for something whose attainment promises satisfaction. Desires that tend to promote purity of heart are non-harming, generous, loving, peaceful, restrained, temperate, seeking justice or detached from vengeance and ill will. In contrast, desires that are self-centred, hostile, sordid, violent, vengeful

⁴ On *apatheia*, see Jeremy Driscoll, 'Apatheia and Purity of Heart in Evagrius Ponticus', in *Purity of Heart in Early Ascetic and Monastic Literature*, edited by Juana Raasch, Harriet Luckman and Linda Kulzer (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999) 141–159. Cassian avoids the concept of *apatheia* and simplifies Evagrius's exposition of purity of heart somewhat. See Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 37–38, 42–57.

or intemperate frustrate the attainment of purity of heart. As with motives, desires need not be passionless, but often they must be restrained in quantity or extent.

Dispositions

Dispositions are enduring features of character

A *disposition* is a propensity, tendency or proclivity to think, do or feel certain things under given circumstances—such as a proclivity to have a glass of cognac after a formal dinner. Dispositions, so characterized, apply to humans and probably some animals but may not be wholly parallel to dispositions predicated of inanimate objects, such the tendency of a china plate to break if dropped from a certain height on to a hard floor. As understood here dispositions may, but need not, be causal or law-like. Dispositions are neither acquired nor lost overnight. They are enduring features of character. Generally, dispositions predicated of persons can be framed as conditional statements: if she has just finished a formal dinner, she is prone to have a cognac. It remains an open question whether there is some property, intrinsic or not, that disposes her to have a cognac. If there is such a property, it does not seem to be observable, though it is observable that on past occasions she has usually had a cognac after a formal dinner. The word ‘disposition’, as used by some philosophers of mind, is close to the words *habitus* and ‘habit’ as used by medieval philosophers and those influenced by them.

Dispositions associated with purity of heart concern thoughts, actions and feelings that one can characterize as simple, clear in purpose, calm, kind, unassuming, humble, disciplined, non-harming, uncluttered, self-controlled and sometimes detached. Dispositions that run counter to purity of heart have to do with thoughts, actions and feelings that one can characterize as self-centred, unrestrained, pretentious, vain, murky or conflicted in purpose, puffed up, irritable, self-interested or guileful. Identifying these various dispositions hinges most often on seeing what a person *does*. Only to a lesser extent does it hinge on one’s reading of what another person is thinking or feeling, which will frequently involve inferences based on a person’s behaviour, facial expressions and body language. In the case of thoughts and perhaps feelings, it is easier to identify in others dispositions associated with purity of heart than with the lack of it. For the former dispositions are likely to be more accessible to observers than the latter because of

their clarity and simplicity. In one's own case, though, much room remains for inadequate self-knowledge and even for self-deception. Dispositions can be seen as building blocks of one's overall character, and the unaided reformation of one's character is a difficult project indeed.

Emotions

Emotions, as understood here, are conscious psychological states that vary in intensity, are ordinarily directed to some object (for example, sorrow over the death of a friend), usually have broader physical manifestations (for example, weeping), and play a role alongside reason in one's moral and social life. It is unnecessary to take a position here on whether there are distinctively religious or Christian emotions (for example, awe) as contrasted with emotions that have distinctively religious or Christian objects (for example, God). Some emotions promote, or at least are part of, purity of heart: gratitude to God, awe at God's power and hiddenness, pangs of conscience over one's sins, confidence in God's grace and providence, concern for the well-being and happiness of others, instinctive aversion to violence and harming others, and so on. Other emotions thwart or are inimical to purity of heart. Evagrius Ponticus examines some of these in depth: sadness (*lypē*; Latin, *tristitia*), anger (*orgē*; Latin, *ira*), sloth or listlessness (*akēdia*; Latin, *acedia*), vanity (*kenodoxia*; Latin *vanitas*) and pride (*hyperēphania*; Latin, *superbia*).⁵ There are, of course, many other emotions that are enemies of purity of heart: *Schadenfreude*, constant or frequent irritation, envy, jealousy, resentment, malevolence and so on.

Decisions

Decisions are usually, and ought to be, conclusions of practical reasoning. If theoretical reason aims validly to infer true conclusions from true premises, practical reason aims to reach sound decisions or choices. Traditionally, the intellect was linked to theoretical reason and both the intellect and the will were linked to practical reason. But unlike traditional accounts, which conceived of the intellect and the will

⁵ Gregory the Great (c. 540–604) reworked the eight *logismoi* of Evagrius into the seven deadly sins. See *Moralium libri, sive expositio in librum B. Job* (c. 578 – c. 595], part 4, book 6, chapter 45, section 87, in *Patrologia Latina*, edited by Jean-Paul Migne, volume 76 (Paris, 1878), cols. 620–621.

as ‘faculties’ of the mind, recent accounts are sceptical of faculty psychology, though they still make room, in various ways, for the capacity to think and the capacity to decide what to do. Decisions associated with purity of heart include determinations to act kindly, to pray, to guard against evil thoughts, to let go of judgments of others, to obey God, to accept what befalls one in light of God’s love and providence, to repent of past misdeeds, to help others, to work for peace and harmony, and to behave calmly, humbly, compassionately and guilelessly. Decisions that frustrate purity of heart and are incompatible with it are determinations to ignore the interests and feelings of others, to seek riches and power, to plot the downfall of others, to engage in devious and manipulative behaviour, to harbour grudges, to resist calls for just treatment, to reject God’s ways, to pray only for what one wants irrespective of whether God wants one to have it, or to act vengefully, selfishly, violently or harmfully.

Actions

Actions are typically the products of decisions. Many actions—such as tying one’s shoes or waving to a friend across the street—are not the upshot of a chain of practical reasoning. Not all bodily movements are actions; ordinary breathing is a case in point, though intentionally breathing deeply in response to a doctor’s request during a physical examination is an action. All or virtually all actions have an intentional component, and in that respect they differ from events such as accidental collisions.

Because actions are typically the products of decisions, one can use the examples in the previous section as a guide for identifying which actions are associated with purity of heart and which are inimical to it. However, the guide is rough. For the person who is well on the way to achieving purity of heart, it may be unnecessary to think much about praying, acting kindly, guarding against evil thoughts and so on. Doing these things might now be second nature. Generally they still qualify as actions, much as tying one’s shoes is an action. But sometimes they are so automatic that they are akin to ordinary breathing, which is a bodily movement but usually not an action. For the person who is so far from attaining purity of heart as to perform actions that are inimical to it, one can make a similar point in reverse.

A quite different point concerns such practices as wordless contemplation in stillness and complete silence. This practice seems to be more nearly a way of being rather than doing, and often might not qualify as an action. Indeed, in some instances wordless contemplation might involve bodily movements—such as digestion and circulation of the blood—only indirectly related to the contemplation itself. And yet, some neurophysiological processes are likely to be going on that are connected with wordless contemplation, and these processes might be accessible for study by functional MRI scans, but they would not qualify as bodily movements in the ordinary sense.



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What Is Purity of Heart?

Anyone who claims to say something truly original about purity of heart is probably a fool or a liar. I make no such claim. If the foregoing exposition says anything new or fresh, it lies in the idiom and mode of presentation, which come from the analytical use of categories from the philosophy of mind to lay out the content of purity of heart.

I adhere to the Christian tradition. Doing so makes me receptive to Cassian's Latin variants—*munditia cordis*, *mundo in cardo*, *cor mundum*, where *munditia* is 'cleanness' and *mundus*, *-a*, *-um* is 'clean'⁶—which have obvious roots in the Vulgate of Matthew 5:8. I am likewise receptive to elements that the Christian tradition shares with some other monastic and even mystical traditions (Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist, Sufi): detachment, simplicity, contemplation, non-harming.⁷

My exposition of purity of heart does not include any claim of unique realisability. Some recent essays seem to suggest that developing

⁶ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 43, 166.

⁷ See many of the essays in *Purity of Heart and Contemplation: A Monastic Dialogue between Christian and Asian Traditions*, edited by Bruno Barnhart and Joseph Wong (New York and London: Continuum, 2001).

purity of heart leads, for each person, to his or her ‘real self’ as ‘the point of meeting between God and the human person’, or involves the ‘re-creation’ of desire such that ‘[b]ecoming aware of our deepest and truest desires is an integral part of becoming who we truly are’.⁸ I do not say that such claims are false. But I wish to leave open the possibilities that no single real self resides within each of us as a sort of homunculus or embryonic homunculus, and that multiple meeting points exist between God and each person. More generally, even if for each person there is some new set of desires (or of other dimensions of purity of heart) that is better than those he or she now has, it does not follow that for each person there is some one set of desires, etc., that is the best. Purity of heart is a sufficiently imprecise concept that each person likely has more than one way of becoming, and being, pure of heart.

I make no attempt to explicate how grace helps one to become pure of heart or consider whether purity of heart enables one to see or understand God in some special way. I stress, though, that purity of heart, while a possible ideal, is nevertheless only part of an admirable Christian life—or secular life—as a whole. To focus on nothing else and to slight the needs of others or to fail to fight injustice and cruelty as a result would amount to a shameful self-absorption.

Innocence, Purity of Heart and Their Significance

Achieving purity of heart can be thought of as regaining a mature innocence. But even if one attains purity of heart, one does not thereby regain all types of innocence. In fact, one regains almost none of them. To become pure of heart does not bring a lack of knowledge of evil, an absence of sin and moral wrongdoing and guilt, a lack of awareness of moral complexity, or a lack of some significant experience involving evil. Further, being pure of heart does not entail that one is physically or mentally incapable of sin or immoral acts.

But, if the payoff seems meagre, think what this achievement means. To attain purity of heart is to surpass, or in some cases to regain, a

⁸ See, respectively, Cyprian Consiglio, ‘The Space in the Lotus of the Heart: The Anthropological Spirit in the Writings of Bede Griffiths’, in Barnhart and Wong, *Purity of Heart and Contemplation*, 54–70, at 61, 67–70; Bede Healey, ‘On the Re-Creating of Desire and Purity of Heart: An Exploration’, in Barnhart and Wong, *Purity of Heart and Contemplation*, 263–278, at 266.

mature innocence. Such innocence is a confirmed state of character, attained reflectively and by exercise of agency, which in the main holds steadfast despite temptation. With this confirmed state of character, marked to be sure by minor faults, a person is no longer predisposed to sin or moral wrongdoing, and instead seeks to avoid all manner of unkind and vengeful actions, and to pursue the good whenever possible. The pure in heart have put on a 'new self' (Colossians 3:10). They display, in Newman's words, 'the uncontaminated hearts, open countenances, and untroubled eyes of those who neither suspect, nor conceal, nor shun, nor are jealous'.⁹ But no guarantee attaches to this purity of heart and new state of character. One cannot rule out a relapse. Short of that, the pure of heart remain a model of autonomy and self-governance, aided by grace or moral luck.

I close with answers to two questions. One is whether persons who are pure of heart may be a vexation for others. Some might contend that they are cheerless prigs whose mere presence will annoy those around them. Others, taking a cue from Susan Wolf's account of 'moral saints', might regard them as 'unattractive' because their very niceness will make them 'dull-witted or humorless or bland'.¹⁰ Still others, inspired by Hume, might see purity of heart as a 'monkish virtue' that 'stupif[ies] the understanding ... obscure[s] the fancy and sour[s] the temper'.¹¹

I answer that the pure of heart need hardly vex others. One should consider the other personality traits of the former and the personalities and preferences of the latter. Those who are pure of heart could easily have a puckish sense of humour and an open, friendly personality. Those around them will, of course, have personalities and preferences of their own. If some of them are abusive or violent, they may well find the pure of heart uncongenial or off-putting. If, instead, some of them take a keen interest in their children, enjoy travel, or like to play tennis, they may not find the pure of heart vexing at all and perhaps even delight in their company.

⁹ John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (London, Oxford and Cambridge: Rivingtons, 1868), volume 8, nn. 18, 268.

¹⁰ Susan Wolf, 'Moral Saints', *Journal of Philosophy*, 79 (1982), 419–39, at 422, 426.

¹¹ David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* [1751], in *Enquiries concerning the Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966 [1902]), 270. Hume's list of monkish virtues includes 'self-denial, humility, silence, [and] solitude' but not purity of heart.

The second question is what claim purity of heart should have on one's allegiance or devotion. Suppose that these features of character are embodied in someone who is living an admirable life as a whole. From there the answer turns on whether purity of heart is a secular or a Christian ideal. If it is a secular moral ideal, then even if it is a part of overall moral perfection, it cannot command maximal allegiance. As Robert Adams argues, secular morality is not a suitable object of maximal devotion.¹² For morality excludes too many human excellences, such as the capacity to produce great works of art and the capacity to make stunning intellectual advances. Yet to the extent that purity of heart is a specifically Christian ideal, and if it is part of overall Christian perfection in so far as that is realisable, then it *pro tanto* can command maximal allegiance. God is the ultimate object of an overall Christian life, and God is a suitable object of such allegiance.¹³ God, as a lover of beauty and truth as well as the source of morality, is sufficiently rich to be worthy of maximal allegiance.¹⁴ This fact does not entail the exclusion of other allegiances, such as an allegiance to one's spouse or children. Purity of heart as a Christian ideal outstrips but includes morality, and it requires grace for its realisation.

Stephen R. Munzer is a professor of law at the University of California, Los Angeles. He has taught philosophy at Rutgers University and law at several universities. Most of his publications are on legal and political theory. His other interests include philosophical theology and Christian spirituality.

¹² Robert Merrihew Adams, 'Saints', *Journal of Philosophy*, 81/7 (July 1984), 392–401, at 399–400. I use 'maximal allegiance' much as he uses 'maximal devotion'.

¹³ Adams, 'Saints', 400–401, makes a similar point.

¹⁴ Adams, 'Saints', 398, 400–401.