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The Concept of Grace in Ralph Cudworth's Unpublished Freewill Manuscripts

Introduction

As Stephen Darwall has noted, the fundamental ethical motive in the moral philosophy of Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688) is love. It is fundamentally an ethics of motive and character, rather than of duty or law (*The British Moralists and the Internal Ought*, 128–29).¹ However, in Cudworth's view, it is God's love that makes morality possible. In his exegesis of 1 Corinthians 13 in *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678), Cudworth states that God's love is the 'source, life, and soul of all morality'. It is the 'inward life' of humans, without which they are destitute of 'true morality, virtue, and grace' (*True Intellectual System*, 205). Cudworth does think that by the development of virtuous habits humans can affect the degree to which moral goodness manifests in them, but he is clear that true righteousness is not attainable by free will alone but only with the assistance of divine grace. However, he has little to say about grace in his published works. By contrast, he discusses

¹ For an account of love in Cudworth, see Armour, 'Trinity, Community, and Love', and Leech, 'Cudworth on Superintellectual Instinct'.

grace at some length in a large collection of manuscript writings on the topic of free will, most of which remain unpublished (British Library Additional MSS 4978–4982, hereafter by number and folio only), and these unpublished writings will be the main focus of this essay.²

On the one hand, as Darwall notes, Cudworth wants to counter the view that the will blindly follows the understanding. He insists instead that moral agents act not just on speculative ('notional') beliefs, but on motivational states (*The British Moralists and the Internal Ought*, 136). To use Cudworth's own expression, 'The first principle by which good and evil are distinguished is vital and not notional' (4982, 9r). In other words, inclination/instinct determines the will, not mere speculative intellect, otherwise (as Cudworth says) achieving perfect moral goodness would be just like learning the demonstration of a theorem in Euclid (4982, 10r).³ Belief that such and such an action is best is impotent to prompt action, which only inclinations/instincts can achieve.

On the other hand, Cudworth wants to resist moral voluntarism or the view that morality is the creation of the will of God or of secular magistrates. Instead he defends an innatist view of morality (*The British Moralists and the Internal Ought*, 117–118). He is always very clear that human beings are not self-makers morally speaking, but true righteousness is something they find within themselves:

² These manuscripts currently remain unpublished except for 4978, which has been edited by Sarah Hutton and published as *A Treatise of Freewill* together with his *A Treatise concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*. Selections from the other volumes are being prepared for publication by the *Cambridge Platonists Project*, for which see <https://cambridgeplatonists.org/>. This essay focuses particularly on volumes 4980, 4981, and 4982, all of which have been under-studied. All citations from the manuscripts, as from Cudworth's and Henry More's published works, are in modernised spelling and capitalisation, with some silent editorial punctuation to increase clarity. Passmore, *Ralph Cudworth* remains the fullest treatment of the manuscripts. Carter, *The Little Commonwealth of Man*, and Darwall, *The British Moralists and the Internal Ought* also discuss the manuscript writings at some length. I wish to express here my great indebtedness to my colleague Mark Burden both for his transcription of the long passage on grace from volume 4981 as well as for his many astute comments on an earlier version of this essay.

³ See Darwall, *The British Moralists and the Internal Ought*, p. 137. See also Carter, *The Little Commonwealth of Man*, pp. 114–118 on Cudworth's contrasting accounts of morality as founded in love, versus the more 'geometrical' approach in his *Treatise concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*.

righteousness and holiness are not things produced by man's self-activity or free will, not artificial or self-made things, but they are a life nature or spirit and that free will is only a power whereby we can promote ourselves toward it . . . or remove and estrange ourselves from it.

(4982, 47r)

This innatist conception of moral goodness was shared by his fellow Cambridge Platonist Henry More, who offered a general definition of virtue as an 'intellectual power of the soul' in chapter 3 of his *Enchiridion Ethicum* (1667) – translated by Edward Southwell as *An Account of Virtue* (1690) – adding the following explanation:

it seems fit . . . to call virtue rather a power than a habit...because a habit is not essential to virtue. For if a man had this intellectual power born in him, he would doubtless be virtuous, though it came not to him in the way of repeated actions, such as constitute a habit. For it is not the external causes, but the internal, which make the essence of a thing.⁴

(More, tr. Southwell, *An Account of Virtue*, 12)

In other words, for both Cudworth and More, virtue is not something 'self-made' like an acquired skill. Instead, however obscured by sin, true righteousness is pristinely fully formed in humans, as if the excellence of a musical skill was fully formed in somebody without their having had to learn it.

However, although Cudworth does state clearly that moral goodness is not itself a production of human free will, his rejection of theological voluntarism and his defence of an innatist conception of morality left him open to accusations of Pelagianism. This is because his innatist conception may nevertheless give the impression that humans have the full resources to be moral within them, and in this sense are morally autonomous from God. In the freewill manuscripts, Cudworth explicitly repudiates 'Pelagians'⁵ as those who are:

⁴ 'Malui definire virtutem *vim* quamdam quam *habitus*...quia habitus non est de essentia virtutis; quoniam si quis natus esset cum hac *intellectuali vi* quam describo, proculdubio virtute esset praeditus, tametsi ex crebris actibus non esset profecta. Causae enim externae non sunt de essentia rei, sed solummodo internae' (More, *Enchiridion Ethicum*, pp. 9–10).

⁵ Post-reformation, the category 'Pelagian' becomes very wide, and gets used polemically against anybody who offers a robust defence of the role of human freewill in the work of salvation and true righteousness. More strictly, following Rees, a Pelagian may be defined as somebody who denies original sin, denies that God's grace is necessary for salvation, and affirms

supposed to assert an absolute independence of the creature upon God as to all moral good . . . and introduce that impiety that God is not to be prayed to at all for any inward perfection of the mind, nor thanked for it afterward, but it is to be ascribed to ourselves.

(4980, 33r)

He is quite explicit that:

Liberum arbitrium . . . doth no way exclude the assistance of divine grace and providence without which it would be insufficient of itself to keep men in a state of virtue but much more [insufficient] to recover any that are deeply lapsed into wickedness.

(4980, 36r)

However, Cudworth does appear to lean to the Pelagian side of the grace/free will controversy in many passages, especially when he offers an account of what it must mean for humans to enjoy free will, as for instance here in MS 4980:

Though the essence of freewill be not . . . mere indifferency and contingency, these being no active powers, yet it is most true that contingency or non-necessity is a *pathos* or affection that intimately belongs to this natural power in a certain sense. For it is impossible to conceive self-power (that is a power of actuating, intending and exerting of one's self more or less) without a freedom from inward natural necessity . . . that is, without contingency or an ambiguous possibility both ways Motives and considerations and outward circumstances may {sometimes} incline to the intending and exerting of one's self, but they do not thereby impose an absolute necessity upon *all* the consequent degrees of self-intention, but it is still in the {hands of that} power *of that* which comprehends the whole soul . . . the τὸ ἡγεμονικόν or ruling principle to continue to actuate or put forth itself more or less.

(4980, 39r–38v)⁶

that by the right use of free will, a baptised Christian can remain sinless (*Pelagius*, 90). See also Leech, 'Cudworth on Superintellectual Instinct', pp. 12–14.

⁶ All of this quotation except for the first sentence appears on folio 38v, and is probably a slightly later insertion to the passage on folio 39r, which it faces. Here and elsewhere, text which appears in { } has been crossed out in the manuscript, whereas text written in *italics* has been added as superscript or subscript.

This seems to imply that despite what Cudworth wants to say, the element of indifference implied by freedom means that it is hard for him to account for how grace could be *necessary* to the achievement of true righteousness without thereby negating human freewill. Indeed, Michael Gill states that Cudworth's 'official' position that God's grace is necessary to the achievement of true righteousness and salvation 'just doesn't fit with anything else Cudworth says about "Real Inward Righteousness" . . . the externality and passivity of this need clash with the insistence on internality and activity that underlies everything else he says'. If righteousness is internally accessible to humans, humans should in principle have the capacity to overcome sin (*The British Moralists on Human Nature*, 71 and 59).⁷

However, Gill's analysis does not take account of what Cudworth says about grace in the unpublished freewill manuscripts. Turning to the manuscripts, it is evident (in a way in which it isn't in the published writings) that Cudworth *does* here bother to give philosophical reasons for his claim that human freewill is only a necessary but not sufficient condition for the achievement of true righteousness. Nevertheless, despite the fact that Cudworth seeks to justify the necessary role of grace at some length in these unpublished writings, I nevertheless end up concurring with Gill that this still clashes with the general drift of his thinking. I will return to this point towards the end of this essay.

Grace in the Freewill Manuscripts

Cudworth is clear throughout the freewill manuscripts that it is a mistake to think about grace as 'a thing clapped *on* upon the soul from without, a thing wholly foreign to the nature of it'. He denies that grace comes 'wholly from without', that it is not just an 'assisting form', but it is an 'informing form' (4982, 48r–49r). The point is one about righteousness originating from something which at least feels 'external': regeneration to true righteousness feels like an incursion of an alien power from without, but in fact it is a human's

⁷ Cf. also: '[Cudworth] doesn't even bother to give any philosophical reason for this claim [that our active participation] is a necessary condition of our salvation but it is not sufficient . . . without the addition and assistance of Divine grace' (*The British Moralists on Human Nature*, p. 74).

reversion to their own true self as made in the image of God. In 4981, 70–115 he elaborates at more length on his understanding of grace. Here Cudworth speaks about special grace/power (or ‘peculiar’/extraordinary providence) as that form of ‘assistance’ given by the divine love, by which God (as he says) ‘casts a very compassionate eye’ on humans struggling to turn themselves to the path of true righteousness (4981, 78r–79r).

Firstly, I would like to present the essential outlines of Cudworth’s position. In presenting the nature of God’s grace, i.e. the action of divine love, he distinguishes between God’s external assistances (especially, Christ’s propitiatory sacrifice), and internal assistances (or ‘divine grace of inward assistance’: 4981, 80r) as two ways in which God expresses his love for humans (let us call these external and internal grace). I will be interested in this essay chiefly in the latter kind of grace which works inwardly in the individual. Because God wants humans freely to love him, he has given humans free will. In other words, Cudworth’s anti-Calvinist position means that he posits a basic anti-compatibilism between free will and determinism. God cannot determine human wills (more generally) to do good or (more specifically) to love him, but at most he can only constrain their external acts. But instead of forcing humans to love him by ‘violence’, God only tries to coax humans to love him by persuasion (4981, 79). He can assist by inclining humans to good without destroying their freedom. It is also an aspect of his love for humans that he sometimes strategically overrides their freedom, but this does not destroy human freedom *tout court*.⁸

Nevertheless, he states, humans are not the cause of their own good/salvation. Humans need God’s assistance because they are not on ‘even ground’ due to their fallenness, i.e. they are not equally inclined to good and evil but are born already biased toward evil. He states that it is an ‘absolute impossibility . . . or a thousand to one’ that humans could achieve true righteousness by their own efforts (4981, 77r).⁹ The free human contribution is the smallest part, but it is also a necessary condition, it is just not necessary and sufficient.

⁸ Indeed, he states that it is compatible with freedom that God might even miraculously ‘metamorphose’ human souls from vice to virtue, prior to their having true faith and conversion to him. In other words, he allows for the (occasional) possibility of irresistible grace, even though he also states that saving *all* in this way would be incompatible with God’s wisdom (4981, 74r).

⁹ It is not entirely clear why Cudworth thinks that a prior bias to evil should exclude the possibility of at least a few, through heroic efforts, achieving true righteousness unaided (which Cudworth’s addition ‘or a thousand to one’ even seems to suggest).

By 'grace' here, Cudworth *seems* to mean some superaddition to human capacities by an external power (i.e. special/'peculiar' providence), rather than an intrinsic power deep within humans' true selves. What he appears to say is that special providence, not just general, is also a necessary condition for achieving true righteousness – but it is not necessary and sufficient, except in exceptional cases (e.g. the (few) cases of irresistible grace (see above, footnote 4)). This understanding seems to be implied in his 'parental' model of God's love:

God deals with mankind something on that manner as parents do often with their children *that will* let them have something in their own custody as their own, but *yet* not so much as to make them forget themselves and think themselves independent in those of whom they received it, and to whom they *owe* their Being but *will* keep them in continual expectation of new . . . voluntary *supplies and* superadditions, that they may not grow insolent[.]

(4981, 83r)

The obvious interpretation of this passage would be that God loves parentally in the sense that he does not give total moral autonomy to humans, but gives some measure of it while exercising heteronomy overall. This is meant to contrast with Calvinist theistic fatalism, which Cudworth portrays here (and elsewhere) as unloving, because it would imply salvation and damnation by God's mere will/power without justice.¹⁰

But again we also find the contrasting presentation of God's grace and human free will in MS 4981 as resistant to the idea that grace comes from without. God, Cudworth also states, wants humans to love him freely – whereas a righteousness and devotion 'clapped on from without' would not come *from* humans. Instead, 'in truth God desires from his creatures something that is inwardly in themselves; that freely and naturally flows from them and is *activity . . . in them*' (4981, 84r).

However, this is tempered by Cudworth's insistence that God always gives 'preventing' (i.e. prevenient, enabling) grace, which humans only subse-

¹⁰ Mindful of the difficulties of squaring God's justice with natural evil, and the unequal distribution of grace to non-resistant humans, Cudworth here toys with (without endorsing) the possibility of pre-existence as a possible explanation in addition to 'the secrets of divine justice' (4981, 87r–88r).

quently cooperate with.¹¹ Moreover, in the middle of the passage, Cudworth suddenly surprises the reader by making a much more extreme claim (and one which seemingly brings him into the camp of his orthodox Reformed opponents): the achievement of true righteousness is ‘*wholly and* entirely to be {described} *ascribed* to God’ (4981, 81r). He justifies this claim by stating that ‘freewill itself is in some sense a divine grace’ (4981, 89r).

This is quite arresting, since Cudworth elsewhere clearly distinguishes free will from grace. In MS 4980, for instance, he distinguishes three factors which conjointly make true righteousness possible:

- (1) First something of nature by which is to be understood common grace, for if God in nature had not planted in us a participation of the το θειον, holiness and righteousness would have been violent and preternatural things and consequently no good at all.
- (2) Secondly there is something also of our own self-exertive conation requisite thereunto to repress the vigour and impetuosity of lower appetites and actively to protrude ourselves towards the higher principle which the Greeks call το καλον, that which is fair and lovely and worthy of our endeavours
- (3) And lastly the assistance of special grace to make our endeavours and activity effectual.

(4980, 84r: numbering and spacing added)

In other words, (1) picks out creation grace, or God’s general providence; (3) picks out special grace, God’s special providence; and (2) is human free will. But his claim that free will itself is ‘in some sense a divine grace’ collapses the grace/self-exertion distinction, and effectively makes his threefold model of creation grace, free will and special grace in 4980 a model of three species of grace.¹² What is doing the work here is a Christian metaphysical intuition about humility – humans are strictly speaking causally impotent, they can create nothing but instead receive everything as a gift from God, whether

¹¹ The notion of prevenient, or enabling, grace – associated particularly with Arminianism – is a form of grace which precedes all human initiative. It enables humans to overcome the effects of sin, so that they can freely cooperate with God’s grace in striving for true righteousness. By contrast, this latter form of grace which cooperates with human free will rather than precedes it, is what Cudworth calls ‘corroborating’ or ‘promoting’ grace. On Cudworth’s distinguishing the types of grace, also below, p. 8.

¹² For a more detailed discussion of this model, see Leech, ‘Cudworth on Superintellectual Instinct’, pp. 4–7.

that gift is naturally or supernaturally given. When (he says) we employ our natural capacities as we should, God is 'justly entitled to the causality of those effects' (4981, 88r).

However, Cudworth's apparent agreement with orthodox reformed defences of irresistible grace is of course only verbal. In fact, as Carter has noted, Cudworth reveals himself in the manuscripts to be a compatibilist about infallible divine foreknowledge and human free will. Much exercised by the problem of theological fatalism, Cudworth wants to offer an account of how God knows the contingent future and acts providentially in humans' lives while nevertheless preserving human free will.¹³ He states his position as follows:

before Pelagius started up it was generally received doctrine of the ancient catholic Christian church & St Austin himself *consenting* that predetermination to glory and election was by prescience and foreknowledge of men's faith and repentance . . . predestination is not the cause of justification and glorification, but foreknowledge is before predestination according to that of the scripture whom he foreknew them he also predestinated.¹⁴

(4981, 85r)

To this position he adds the following precision that divine prescience also includes knowledge of what humans would do *with* divine assistance (preventing and subsequent: see below), not just what they would do through their own natures without the assistance of divine grace, which latter position he attributes to Pelagius.

In other words, *contra* those orthodox Reformers who would wish to retroproject Calvinism onto the early witness of the church, Cudworth wants to establish that antiquity *did not* ignore freewill as a necessary factor in the achievement of true righteousness.

I would like to return now to Cudworth's closer characterisation of internal grace. Cudworth describes this internal grace as follows:

¹³ Cf. also Carter *The Little Commonwealth of Man*, p. 76.

¹⁴ The scriptural verse in question is Romans 8:29, a key battleground in the perennial Reformed debates over predestination. The second part of the quotation ('predestination is not . . . predestinated') is a translation of Origen's gloss on this verse in the *Philokalia*, ch.25. In 4980 Cudworth also claims the authority of 'all the ancient doctors of Christianity' for this synergistic model of free will and grace, which (he states) are 'not contradictory to one another . . . as many men suppose, who when they hear of freewill think grace is possibly excluded and when they hear of grace think freewill is destroyed' (4980, 37r–38r).

For grace and providence does not content itself to act . . . remotely *only* but it makes nearer approaches and closer assaults upon the fort and garrison of man's heart. It besieges it, by inward motions and suggestions . . . *cogitations* solicitations and attractions[.]

(4981, 79r)

These higher inward attractions – which take the form of higher impulses, feelings, and thoughts – do battle with ‘contrary powers’ (i.e. lower attractions) to work on humans’ imaginations in a perpetual war between lower and higher inclinations. Cudworth describes a ‘triple divine grace’, distinguishing three moments in the workings of internal grace:

1. ‘preventing’/‘exciting’ grace preceding all human initiative
2. a subsequent ‘corroborating’ and ‘promoting’ grace
3. a final ‘completing’, ‘confirming’ grace

(4981, 80r)

Notwithstanding his robust defence of free will, Cudworth explicitly states here that ‘the inward change of men’s minds towards good’ happens *mostly* by grace (4981, 83r). The immediate model for all this is Origen as he makes explicit here and also in MS 4980.¹⁵ Cudworth, following the Alexandrian church father, states that the true good of rational beings depends ‘mixedly’ (i.e. conjointly) of their own *prohairesis* and divine power/grace, with ‘need of both of these’ (4981, 81r).¹⁶ Cudworth’s defence of free will in an orthodox Reformed context put him under pressure to differentiate his position from ‘Pelagianism’. In MS 4981 he attempts to exonerate Origen from suspicion of the Pelagian heresy. Origen, according to Cudworth, is *not* Pelagian, for the following reason: whereas Pelagius had said that inward grace is not necessary but only useful, Origen had explicitly stated that it was *necessary*, but also that free will was necessary too (although it plays the smaller part).

In effect Cudworth wants to avoid two extremes: one the one hand, ‘Calvinist’ theological fatalism,¹⁷ and on the other, the ‘Pelagian’ view that humans

¹⁵ See for instance 4980, 36r–37r, 59r. On the Origenist influence on Cudworth, see Fuerst, ‘Autonomie und Menschenwuerde’; Kobusch, ‘Die Idee der Freiheit’.

¹⁶ The reference here is to Origen, *Philokalia*, ch.26, 99.

¹⁷ See for instance: ‘But to think as some do that man’s will must be totally excluded as to any activity of endeavour whatsoever towards God and that all must be done upon him but an irresistible grace . . . this is but a rude and rustical conceit and far from the truth’ (4981, 84r).

are infinitely free, i.e. they have the capacity for absolute self-determination (both views are to some extent his own invention). He denies that these two extremes exhaust the options, as though there were no intermediate positions between these. He states rather that providence wants '*gently* to prolicit and draw forth the free principle in men that it may *from* within its self activity display that life *of its own* which is at once virtue piety . . . and happiness' (4981, 84r). Cudworth has a very particular reason for insisting on this, which is connected with his basic model of grace, namely, the abovementioned Calvinist theological fatalism.¹⁸ This is of course a familiar Cudworthian motif. God wants humans to love him freely: something added by force from without isn't *from humans* and humans cannot freely give it, nor can they offer 'hearty love' and 'devoted affection' in such a condition (4981, 84r). They are instead like manikins who have been constrained by God to love him, whereas in reality what God wants from humans is 'something which is inwardly in themselves, that freely and naturally flows from them and is activity in them' (4981, 84r).

In other words, just like contemporary theistic defenders of the free will defence for moral evil, Cudworth stresses that God wants humans to love him freely, and indeed a world containing free human agents but with the possibility (even actualised) of moral evil, is better than a world without free human agents but without moral evil. Love, for Cudworth, implies freedom, and a love which was forced or determined would be no love at all.

Interestingly, however, Cudworth wishes to play down the extent of the role of human effort in achieving true righteousness, while nevertheless preserving a necessary role for it. I would now like to focus on what Cudworth says about this effortful turning or conversion of the soul which is in humans' power but nevertheless only a minor ingredient in the achievement of moral goodness.

This conversion of the soul from lower to higher objects, Cudworth observes, is achieved by a cooperation of 'man's freewill' and 'triple divine grace preventing and exciting[,] corroborating and promoting, confirming and completing'. However, human freewill is 'the least part' of this, grace having 'far the greatest share' (4981, 91r). Making an evident allusion to the allegory

¹⁸ Cf. 'they that needs have all to be saved and made good by an irresistible goodness forced upon them, they must determine also that all shall be damned by an irresistible wickedness which they could not avoid, that is, that either they had a wicked nature or else were made wicked by divine fate. To assert either of which is all one as to say that they had no wickedness at all in them, but are damned merely by will and power without justice' (4981, 84r).

of the cave in Plato's *Republic*, Cudworth states that the moral reformation of a person's soul is just as little attributable to his free will, as is the warmth and light enjoyed by a person who has been lying in a cold and dark cave, and has crawled out into the light and warmth of the sun by degrees. It is to the sun that this is attributed, not to the person's crawling out of the cave, although the latter action was also a necessary condition of experiencing the light and warmth (4981, 92r).¹⁹

Cudworth here stresses the *passivity* of humans in the achievement of true righteousness ('we are passive to this light and life of God acting upon us'), and he is quite explicit that all 'holy and spiritual' actions that are done by humans are by virtue of grace ('that divine life and spirit') working in them, the human role being reserved exclusively to 'converting and turning' to this action of grace within them (4981, 92r). This is analogous to how the person in darkness can turn himself towards the source of light and warmth, but cannot actually produce light and warmth. However, he clearly wishes to distinguish this from theological fatalism, stating both that all 'holy affections pious inclinations and spiritual actions' are not to be attributed to human freewill, but to 'Christ and the Divine Spirit', but also that humans do not 'contribute nothing' toward their own conversion, but they contribute the act of turning. However, in turning, they do not contribute to the 'causality' of true righteousness, just as (he says) the person who opens their eyelids to take in the sun's rays cannot claim to have produced those rays from themselves (4981, 92r). In other words, true righteousness is not (as, for instance, a learned skill is) a *production* of human free will.

However, Cudworth is not always clear about whether the source and cause of true righteousness is the action of God's grace as absolutely distinct from humans (special grace), or whether it is an innate capacity in humans – implanted in them by general providence (creation grace) – which he variously calls 'superior reason', 'intellectual instinct', and 'love' in the manuscripts (Darwall, *The British Moralists*, 144). Cudworth distinguishes clearly between two 'species' of free will: (1), animal, which is

¹⁹ Cudworth further adds: 'We have all by nature as it were backs towards the sun of righteousness and all that we have to do or can do is only to turn ourselves about towards it and open our eyes that we may at once receive the light and warmth of it; and therefore we cannot ascribe neither of these to ourselves, but only to God from whom they flow' (4981, 92r).

an elevation above particular fancies and appetites by a participation of that inferior reason . . . concerning the interest of the animal life together with a power of intending or exerting itself more or less in the use of this inferior reason
(4981, 100r–101r)

and (2), moral, which is:

an elevation above the whole animal life, by the participation of superior reason or the instinct of honesty which is the same thing that the Platonists call the $\tau\omicron$ $\alpha\gamma\alpha\theta\omicron\epsilon\iota\delta\epsilon\varsigma$ or the boniform principle²⁰ in the soul, i.e. a sense of good superior to all private selfish consideration together with a power of intending and exerting itself by self-active conations towards this higher and diviner principle.
(4981, 101r)

The object of the lower free will is 'private good of selfish utility', while the object of the higher free will is 'that universal and unselfish good of honesty or the divine life' (4981, 100r). In other words, we have the capacity to overcome the animal part of ourselves either by inferior reason (i.e. instrumental rationality), where we as it were subdue one part of our animal will with another part of it; or by superior reason/intellectual instinct/'higher' love, where a part of the self which transcends the animal system altogether subdues the animal self.

Cudworth is evidently trying to do justice to the phenomenology of conversion experience, namely, that conversion to true righteousness is experienced as happening outside or beyond the control of the will. He insists that humans, although free, are not 'infinite self-power' – they are not essentially (as it were) self-makers morally speaking, but rather moral goodness is innate. Humans do not freely (i.e. 'indifferently') create virtues, just as God does not freely (i.e. arbitrarily) create moral values, but free will only gives humans the capability of turning towards moral goodness. Contrary to Pelagius as he represents him, Cudworth is adamant that humans are all born in a vicious state, with the will already corrupted rather than a *tabula rasa* (4981, 75r). According to Cudworth, humans do *not* acquire virtuous inclinations by environment and habit only, but instead virtues are innate,

²⁰ This corresponds to Henry More's 'boniform faculty' as espoused in his *Enchiridion ethicum*. See for instance: 'the *boniform faculty of the soul*: namely, a faculty of that divine composition, and supernatural texture, as enables us to distinguish not only what is simply and absolutely the best, but to relish it, and to have pleasure in that alone (*Account of Virtue*, 6–7).

implanted in them by God's general providence (creation grace). The crux of the Pelagian/orthodox controversy, according to Cudworth, is that Pelagians identify righteousness with conformity of actions to outward/written law, which is arbitrarily made. Here he repudiates the voluntarism he also finds in Pelagius: humans do not just have a 'customary propensity' to virtuous actions, which are learned through habituation, but the virtues already reside within them (4981, 89r).

Cudworth, a staunch anti-voluntarist, is quite clear that 'blind indifferent determination' is *not* the freedom or power which God enjoys, but 'Good is the measure of power,' and any capacity to do evil or harm oneself is 'neither power nor liberty' (4981, 99r). In other words, humans do *not* exercise perfect freedom when they act contrary to their own nature – doing good and evil indifferently is not perfect freedom. Instead, freedom is 'intended by God and nature only for Good, and whensoever it acts contrary thereunto it is not properly the power and perfection, but the abuse of the power' (4981, 100r). However, human beings are not essentially good but only in so far as they participate in the goodness of God. At most, humans have:

a certain power over themselves whereby they can intend themselves both in a way of consideration and consultation in order to the finding out of what is best and also of vigorous exertion resolution and appetites irrationally urging a **contrary** way.

(4981, 99r–100r)

So far it appears that Cudworth has steered a middle course between the orthodox Reformed doctrine of irresistible grace on the one hand, and Pelagianism on the other. However, Cudworth (as we have seen) also insists that righteousness is *not* a 'foreign thing clapped upon the soul,' not 'supernatural' in 'this sense'. It is not 'contrary to true nature of the inward man' – so in effect it is *nature* in us, but higher nature (4981, 93r). But he also adds that righteousness *just is* 'the life spirit and nature of God himself, acting upon and communicating itself to rational creatures'. He states as well that God is not outside us, but is 'more properly seated and ought more to be sought for *in fundo animae* . . . in the inmost bottom of our own Soul than in the highest heavens' (4981, 91r).

Particularly interesting here is Cudworth's appeal to heathen authority: the heathens too (he says) saw 'a great cognation betwixt the soul purged from what was heterogeneous and alien to it and God himself' (4981, 93r). Al-

though Cudworth does not cite ancient authorities here, and the intuition that *nous* is divine is of course a common intuition of pagan Greek philosophy in general, we may well suppose that he has foremost in mind the Plotinian doctrine of the undescended intellect. And in a very explicit expression of this stance, Cudworth states that grace is 'nothing but the soul, which was before estranged from God, naturalized again to him, and reunited to its true source and original.'²¹ So it is in this sense, Cudworth says, that grace is 'neither a violent and forced thing, nor yet merely artificial because it is to be ascribed wholly to God' (4981, 93r).

This returns us to Gill's critique. As Gill notes, '[Cudworth] tells us how we can become one with the mind of God through the use of reason alone. There is no need, on this account, for Christ to mediate between humans and God, because the rational faculty inside each human turns out to be a means of direct access to the mind of God itself.'²² Certainly something parallel to this problem reappears in the freewill manuscripts, since Cudworth seems in fact (if not officially) to demote the role of special internal grace. Certainly, if humans have the full resources to achieve true righteousness within them (i.e. innately), there seems to be a problem about why mediation (of Christ, or the Holy Spirit, via special internal grace) should be *necessary*.

By making human free will itself a product of creation grace, Cudworth seems to protect the divine sovereignty and omnipotence and pays lip service to the Protestant *sola gratia* principle. But what is really at stake here is whether the cause of true righteousness is human or divine, and in this respect Cudworth's collapsing of the grace/nature distinction looks like an equivocation, since he effectively says that *everything* in the soul is grace. This would mean that the innate 'superior reason'/'intellectual instinct'/(higher) 'love' in humans is also grace, and therefore humans do not stand in need of a special internal grace, but they only need to reach into or reconnect with the bottom (*fundus*) of their souls.

²¹ Cf. Gill: '[Cudworth] believed that there was a sense in which God is present within each of us, a sense in which a reconciliation with God is equivalent to a reconciliation with oneself. That is why we should look within – because within each of us is present God Himself . . . each of us has within himself a spark of the divine, something that is literally a piece of God' (*The British Moralists on Human Nature*, p. 29).

²² Gill is referring to the *Treatise concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, but the same point applies *mutatis mutandis* in the case of the freewill manuscripts, supplying 'love' or 'superior reason' for 'reason'.

At the basis of this is an ‘innate’/‘infused’ confusion – is true righteousness innate (i.e. residing in the bottom of human souls), or introduced (i.e. ‘infused’) from without by God? Or, otherwise put, there is a confusion between two senses in which grace could be said to be not ‘violent’, either in the sense (1) that it is not forced upon humans by an external agent (God), but only coaxed; or in the sense (2) that it is part of human nature anyway (i.e. it is innate in them). Cudworth does not speak entirely consistently here: on the one hand, his ‘parental’ model presents God’s grace as superadded to human capacities from without, whereas the passages just cited suggest that the capacity to be truly righteous is simply the true nature of humans, and is indeed just part of the divine life.

The basic Cudworthian picture which emerges here, I think, is the following one: (a) human free will does not create moral goodness, but can only make the effort to turn towards it; (b) the source of moral goodness is humans’ true selves=the bottom (*fundus*) of their souls= God (or ‘God in us’); and (c) the actual cause of humans manifesting moral goodness is their true self=the bottom (*fundus*) of their souls=God. Therefore, being passive to the ‘life of God’ acting upon one, and stating that ‘all truly holy and spiritual actions’ are done by grace, is the same as saying that the acquisition of true righteousness, in the end, is not achieved through trying to *create* it through effort, but through allowing it naturally to emerge from one’s true nature. In other words, humans are not good or love God through effort, but innately/naturally; the human contribution is only the (effortful) act of turning to this, which, however, plays the smallest part.

Conclusion

In conclusion, insofar as Cudworth tends to collapse the notion of grace into the innate capacity of ‘superior reason’/‘intellectual instinct’/(higher)‘love’ in humans, I am inclined to agree with Gill that Cudworth does not give a satisfactory account of why humans’ freewilled effort is only a necessary but not also a sufficient condition of the achievement of true righteousness. On this picture, it begins to look like special grace, understood as a power breaking into humans’ lives from without to assist them towards moral goodness, has become superfluous. Verbally Cudworth can claim that he preserves a necessary, and the larger, role for grace, but this is at the cost of collapsing special

grace into creation grace. In other words, grace ends up just meaning everything (including human freewill) which God has created by his general providence.

Passmore notes that for Cudworth, the innate capacity of 'superior reason'/'intellectual instinct'/(higher)'love' is not free, but rather is nature in us: 'we do not choose to love in its spiritual sense any more than we choose to love in its carnal sense'. But he adds: 'this does not mean that we must sit back and wait until the spirit seizes us: Cudworth says that it is our task to 'remove obstacles' to the workings of spirit. We can put ourselves (and other people) in the way of being 'invaded', but we cannot ensure that that invasion will take place' (*Ralph Cudworth*, 57–58). However, Cudworth's claim that grace is 'nothing but the soul . . . reunited to its true source and original' (4981, 93r) rather suggests that special grace, strictly speaking, is superfluous, or at least obsolescent, in his religious philosophy.²³

Manuscripts

- British Library Additional MS 4978: Untitled manuscript treatise on freewill by Ralph Cudworth.
- British Library Additional MS 4979: Part of a work titled 'De libero arbitrio' by Ralph Cudworth.
- British Library Additional MS 4980: Another part of a work titled 'De libero arbitrio' by Ralph Cudworth.
- British Library Additional MS 4981: Writings on freewill by Ralph Cudworth.
- British Library Additional MS 4982: Portions of 3 separate works on freewill by Ralph Cudworth.

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²³ For a parallel claim, see 4982, 50r: 'To find God and return to him by grace is nothing but to find ourselves and to return to that divine principle in the bottom of our beings'.

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Summary

In Cudworth’s view, it is God’s love which makes morality possible, and true righteousness is not attainable by free will alone but only with the assistance of divine grace. However, he has little to say about grace in his published works. By contrast, he discusses grace at some length in a large collection of manuscript writings on the topic of free will, most of which remain unpublished (British Library Additional MSS 4978–4982). In my examination of what Cudworth has to say about divine grace in these manuscripts, I argue that despite the fact that he seeks to justify the necessary

role of grace at some length in these writings, Cudworth nevertheless struggles to give a satisfactory account of why humans' freewilled effort is only a necessary but not also a sufficient condition of the achievement of true righteousness. On this picture, it begins to look like special grace, understood as a power breaking into humans' lives from without to assist them towards moral goodness, has become superfluous. Verbally Cudworth can claim that he preserves a necessary, and the larger, role for grace, but this is at the cost of collapsing special grace into the 'natural' graces (including human freewill) which God has created by his general providence.

Keywords: Ralph Cudworth, freewill, divine grace, morality