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Eric Richard Griffin
Wilfrid Laurier University

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STOICAL SANCTITY: THE ETHICS OF VIRTUE AND
THE THEOLOGY OF ROBERTSON DAVIES

by

Eric Richard Griffin

B.A., University of Guelph, 1982
M.Div., Wycliffe College, 1985

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Robertson Davies is, by his own definition and admission, both a religious novelist and a moralist. His writings evince a consistent theology that, aside from one or two departures, is quite within the liberal protestant tradition, despite his own claims to unorthodoxy. His theology is a moral theology, and the ethical theory or method most in keeping with Davies' approach is the "virtue" or "character" model. His claims of dualism and unorthodoxy have been seen to exhibit a "contemporary gnostic spirit," but it is my assertion that they do not; the teachings of the ancient Stoics, however, are much in evidence in Davies, and Stoic philosophy itself is primarily a moral philosophy rooted in the development of virtue and character.

This thesis describes the current state of the theological discussion of "virtue" ethics; abstracts a systematic theology from the novels and writings of Robertson Davies (excluding his plays), with special emphasis on his ethics; and integrates these with a discussion of the tenets of classical Stoicism.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

PREFACE

For many years I have been interested in, and enriched by, the theological perspective of the stories of Robertson Davies. During the process of systematizing that theology, it became clear to me that it was a moral theology of the virtue type. As I prefer the virtue model of ethics myself, I originally intended therefore simply to write about virtue ethics and Davies' unique version thereof. But during my research, when I read Brian Thorpe's dissertation, I realized that, if he is correct, it is not possible to assert as I do that Davies is neither unorthodox nor dualist, and I felt that at certain points Thorpe's argument was mistaken and vulnerable to alternative interpretation. Having been reminded that the ancient Stoics equated God with Fate, as does Davies, I examined their teachings more closely, and was astonished to hear Davies' words coming back to me across the centuries from them. Thus Chapter 3 of this thesis grew large from what was initially intended to be a simple comment on a difference of scholarly opinion. My intention here is to provide an alternative and, it is hoped, a more correct reading of the theological aspects of Davies' work.

There are two ways to look at this present essay. One is to see it as primarily being about Virtue ethics, with Davies used as an example and model. The second is to see this primarily as a discussion of Davies and his theology, with an examination of the Virtue ethics model used to illuminate and expand Davies' moral view and his locus in the Christian tradition. This latter view is probably more to the point. Therefore the present focus will be primarily on Davies, and secondarily, but nonetheless integrally, on the systematic presentation of Virtue ethics, which, though of great interest of late, has ancient roots, and in fact provides for us the means whereby literature becomes a source of both morals and theology.

CONTENTS

Ducunt volentem fata, nolentem trahunt.

Seneca

The glory of God is Man fully alive.

Irenaeus

O Lord make me a saint, and do not spare me in the making.

Anon.

INTRODUCTION

As a storyteller Robertson Davies has been labelled a
humorist, a satirist, and a moralist. And as a moralist he
teaches us, quite frankly, whether we want to be taught or
not: in 1960, Kildare Dobbs wrote that Davies has "...a
passion for putting people right about almost any subject
under the sun."[1] Though this is bluntly put, one finds it
difficult to disagree.

Besides being a humorist, a satirist, and a moralist,
Davies is by his own definition a religious novelist:

> ...Somebody who writes as if his characters
> were responsible to law and society, *but above
> all else,* to a divine ruling power, and were in
> danger of falling under the sway of the
> constant and implacable enemy of that power.
> In short, a novelist who is conscious of God
> and the Devil. [2]

Although several have commented on religious themes
in his writing, no one has yet called Robertson Davies a
theologian, and as one reads his work it is hard not to come

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[1] Kildare Dobbs, *Saturday Night* 75, #12 (1960): 42,
quoted in Elspeth Fisher, "Robertson Davies: Canadian
Moralist," (M.A. Thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1965),
1.

[2] Robertson Davies, "Phantasmagoria and Dream Grotto,"
in *One Half of Robertson Davies* (Markham: Penguin, 1977),
206-207, [italics his].

away with a sense of his belief in God and the spiritual
nature of humanity. Davies forcefully sets forth his own
ideas of God and religion in his stories, and the theology he
expresses is quite consistent throughout. Moreover, it is
also quite consistent with the theological version of a
particular type of ethical theory known as Virtue Ethics.

It is my contention that Robertson Davies, being both
moralist and religious novelist, expresses in his writing a
moral theology which, despite his protestations of being
dualist and unorthodox, is by and large well within the
liberal Protestant mainstream; and the modern discussion of
Virtue Ethics provides extremely helpful categories for
identifying that theology. The moral theology Davies
expresses is, I believe, very much that of Virtue Ethics, and
therefore before an examination of Davies is started, it
would be well to discuss just what it is that "Virtue Ethics"
is about.

CHAPTER 1

VIRTUE ETHICS

Ethics is an act of faith. Our desire to live morally good lives shows that we have a belief in goodness, and when we use the word "ought" we show our desire to strive for it. Since there seems to be no logical or moral argument which can arrive at the conclusion that people ought to be moral people,[3] a person's desire to make ethically sound decisions and to do right things betrays a fundamental optimism towards life and the world which affirms that life is worthwhile, and that our relationships with one another ought to be and, we hope, can be, affirmations of the goodness of our common lives together. It cannot be proved that one ought to behave morally, but when one does, one expresses this optimistic faith.[4]

If it is generally agreed that we shall be moral people, how are we to decide what constitutes good and bad

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[3] David Tracey, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Minneapolis: Seabury, 1975), 102.

[4] Ibid., 9.

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behaviour? There have been three basic answers to this question of how we may discern right from wrong.

The first is the understanding of morals as an a priori sense of duty and obligation either to laws which authoritatively determine right behaviour from wrong or to broad, but nonetheless binding, principles of action. This approach is referred to as "deontology," and at its heart is the agent's obedience to an external command.

The second way to determine right from wrong examines actions a posteriori, the two major forms of which are utilitarianism and so-called situation ethics. Good and bad are determined by the context and circumstances of one's actions, and the rightness of an action depends on its possible consequences. Hence this second form of moral deliberation is often referred to as "teleological ethics," "contextualism," or "consequentialism."

Deontological ethics and consequentialism have at least two things in common. First, behaviour is justified by appealing to an external authority, and both of these types of ethics assert that authority over the moral agent. The rules, principles, or the exigencies of context demand compliance. Having decided what the right action is, the person is morally obliged to do it or be morally culpable. Secondly, both of these forms of ethical theory are act-centred. Their primary focus is on discrete decisions and actions. The autonomy and subjectivity of the person as

agent is not considered, because "objectivity" is deemed
necessary for the imputation of either merit or guilt.

It has been argued, however, that the ethical question
ought not be "What shall I do?" but rather, "What shall I
be?" It is I who act, and it is I who am responsible for my
actions. What I do is both a function of who I am, and a
determining influence on whom I shall be. As a result, a
third form of ethical discourse has re-appeared, commonly
known as "virtue ethics" or "ethics of character."

Although the concepts of virtue and the character of
the moral agent have ancient beginnings, talk of them by
philosophers and theologians dwindled away to almost nothing
by the beginning of this century, and only comparatively
recently have they begun to be taken seriously as ethical
theory again. The present discussion of Virtue Ethics has
grown in the past few years to enormous proportions, and
although the modern interest may be seen simply as a passing
fad, there are some who believe that this recapturing of an
ancient understanding of goodness is nothing less than a
revolution against the hegemony (and, some have said,
impotence) of deontic and contextual ethics.

The quantity of literature available at present is so
large (one 1987 bibliography runs to some 27 pages[5]) that the
whole field cannot adequately be addressed here. Therefore

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[5] Robert Kruschwitz and Robert Roberts, eds. *The
Virtues: Contemporary Essays on Moral Character* (Belmont:
Wadsworth, 1987), 237-263.

apart from one or two notable exceptions, this present work shall be restricted to a survey of the theological work on Virtue Ethics, and chiefly that of Stanley Hauerwas.

The modern Virtue Ethic model finds its origins in the ethical teaching of Aristotle. Fifteen hundred years later, when Thomas Aquinas squeezed Christian theology through Aristotle's sieve, virtue theory became central to moral theology. Even as recently as last century Schleiermacher listed the virtues as one of three ways of making moral decisions.[6] But by the start of this century, talk of the virtues disappeared. Schneewind believes that virtue theory's own weaknesses led to its neglect;[7] others say that the rise of the neo-orthodox demands for a faith utterly dependant upon Grace made people suspicious of any talk about virtue and the development of character.[8] MacIntyre chalks it up to the failure of the "Enlightenment Project of Justifying Morality" which has led to today's "emotivism."[9]

The essay which is generally agreed to be the springboard for the modern philosophical discussion is

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[6] Eilert Herms, "Virtue: A Neglected Concept in Protestant Ethics," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35 (1982): 484.

[7] J.B. Schneewind, "The Misfortunes of Virtue," *Ethics* 101 (October 1990): 63.

[8] Herms, "Virtue: A Neglected Concept," 485.

[9] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d.ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 50.

Anscombe's 1958 "Modern Moral Philosophy" in which she advocated a rejection of all contemporary ethical theory as having reached the point of uselessness and called for a return to an Aristotelian understanding of the moral virtues.[10]

This was followed by Von Wright's *The Varieties of Goodness* (1963).[11] Iris Murdoch's contribution of the idea of moral vision expanded the field, and is a recurring theme in both the philosophical and theological versions.[12] In 1977 Geach's book *The Virtues*[13] looked at Aquinas' seven virtues from a philosophical perspective; in 1978 appeared Philippa Foot's collection of essays and Wallace's highly technical work, both called *Virtues and Vices*;[14] and finally in 1981 one of the two cornerstones of the current model of Virtue Ethics was published by Alasdair MacIntyre, namely *After Virtue*, which was, and continues to be, enormously influential.

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[10] Anscombe, G.E.M. "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33 (January 1958): 1-19.

[11] Georg Henrik von Wright, *The Varieties of Goodness* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963).

[12] For example, Iris Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good," *Chicago Review* 13 (1959).

[13] Peter Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

[14] Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); and James Wallace, *Virtues and Vices* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1978).

For theology, talk of the virtues was also deeply rooted in the thought of Aristotle, but as adapted by Aquinas. For that reason it is not surprising that the first two modern books on them were Roman Catholic, with Josef Pieper's *The Four Cardinal Virtues* in 1964[15] and Guardini's *The Virtues* in 1967.[16] During the early 1970's however, the main figures were James Gustafson[17] and Stanley Hauerwas,[18] the latter of whom remains pre-eminently the central figure in theological ethics of character. In 1973, the first issue of *The Journal of Religious Ethics* dedicated half of its volume to the debate, chiefly between Hauerwas and Frankena. More recently Gilbert Meilaender, following Pieper, has offered a slightly different version as an

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[15] Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965).

[16] Romano Guardini, *The Virtues: On Forms of Moral Life,* trans. Stella Lange. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1967).

[17] James Gustafson, *Christ and the Moral Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968); idem, *Christian Ethics and the Community* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1971); idem, *Can Ethics Be Christian?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

[18] Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974); idem, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1975); idem, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); idem, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

alternative (or perhaps, some think, a corrective[19]) to Hauerwas.[20] In 1973 Harned's *Faith and Virtue*[21] appeared, but it had not nearly the impact of Hauerwas' *Character and the Christian Life* (1974). This latter work remains the second of the two cornerstones for the discussion of theological Virtue Ethics. Like MacIntyre, Hauerwas develops a narrative-based ethic of virtue. There are of course many more thinkers in the field, but this brief sketch highlights the history of the present day discussion.

Rather than survey the basic position of individual theologians (which has already been partly done[22]) I shall outline the basic themes and formulations of the Virtue Ethics model as a whole, drawing on individual authors as appropriate. Most of the secondary literature examines specific works and authors, and there is no need for that work to be reproduced here.

The central issue for Virtue Ethics is that of human character, and Hauerwas roots his concept of character in the idea of human agency. In deontological or consequentialist

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[19] Don Zinger, "Are Grace and Virtue Compatible?" *Lutheran Forum* (February 1989): 12.

[20] See especially Gilbert Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

[21] David Harned, *Faith and Virtue* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1973).

[22] John Crossin, *What Are They Saying About Virtue?* (New York: Paulist, 1985).

ethics the individual as moral agent is subordinated in the
discussion to the rightness and wrongness of particular
actions. Hauerwas notes that for Aristotle the proper
subject of ethical inquiry is not how an observer determines
whether or not a specific action is good or bad, but rather
how the agent becomes good or bad through the action.[23]
Ethics is properly about the formation of an agent. To be an
agent, says Hauerwas, is central to the idea of personhood,
and the idea of agency means that we are responsible not only
for what we do but for who we have become. Who we are
affects what we do, and conversely, what we do will affect
who we are. Thus to act, to be an agent, means that we are
self-determining.

On the other hand we are not entirely free and
unconditioned. Much of who we are is determined by where we
have come from, and there is much in human life that is given
and inescapably part of who we are. We are both self-
forming, and yet formed. The specific issue of the problem
between our apparent freedom to be self-determining, while at
the same time being conditioned by our socialization is still
an area of some debate.[24]

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[23] Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life:
A Study in Theological Ethics* (San Antonio: Trinity
University Press, 1975), 37.

[24] Paul Nelson, *Narrative and Morality: A Theological
Inquiry* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University
Press, 1987), 34-37.

But we are neither simply the sum total of our
actions nor the passive victims of our environments. The
moral direction and form our agency takes in choosing some
things and not others, Hauerwas calls "character." If Virtue
Ethics is rooted not in what we shall do but in what kind of
people we shall be, then character can be understood simply
as "the sort of people we are," as Gustafson puts it,[25] and
Hauerwas concurs.[26] Character is:

> ...the qualification of man's self-agency
> through his feeling, intentions, and actions,
> by which a man acquires a moral history
> befitting his nature as a self-determining
> being.[27]

Character is not an external manifestation of a deeper
"self"; we are our character.[28] Character is our individual
distinctiveness, and it is shaped both through the practice
of the virtues and by the formative nature of being a member
of a community. In other words, we are responsible for our
character, for the sorts of people we have become, even those
parts we have inherited.[29]

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[25] James Gustafson, *Can Ethics be Christian?* (Chicago:
University of Chicago Press, 1975), 9.

[26] Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*, 9.

[27] Ibid., 4.

[28] Stanley Hauerwas *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in
Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame
Press, 1983), 39.

[29] Robert Audi, "Responsible Action and Virtuous
Character," *Ethics* 101 (January 1991): 321.

> By our actions we not only shape a particular
> situation, we also form ourselves to meet
> future situations in a particular way. Thus
> the concept of character implies that moral
> goodness is primarily a prediction of persons
> and not acts, and that this goodness of persons
> is not automatic but must be acquired and
> cultivated.[30]

Character, in a nutshell, is the link between what a person

is and what a person does, the acquisition of which is a

never-completed process of development.

A weakness in this idea of character is its internal

circularity. In order to behave virtuously, one must have

good character; but paradoxically, in order to have good

character, one must form that character by virtuous

behaviour. This may partly be the result of the problem

noted above of the tension between our self-determination and

the external formative power of the communities from which we

come. Perhaps to understand this as a spiral rather than a

circle would be more helpful: the more good we do, the more

our character is shaped to better enable us to do good. Of

course the spiral works in a descending way as well: the

more we practice vice, the worse we become, and so on.

Another objection which has been raised to this idea

of character is that of hypocrisy, that is, we are encouraged

to "act like someone else" in order that we might become

something other than we are. Meilaender notes that although

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[30] Stanley Hauerwas, "Towards and Ethic of Character,"
Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection
(Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), 49.

some behaviors may indeed be ill-fitting at first, and "out of character," by their formative power they become over time naturally part of who we are and are incorporated as authentic parts of our identity.[31] And, as shall be discussed later, if we decide to adopt and be faithful to a life-narrative other than the one we have inherited or at present possess (as, for example Christian conversion would require) then such behavioral and character changes would in fact be honest expressions of the fulfillment of that story.

Connected closely with character is the idea of moral "vision" brought to prominence by Iris Murdoch and taken up enthusiastically by Hauerwas, Meilaender and Dykstra. Dykstra in fact calls his version of Virtue Ethics "visional ethics."

The metaphor of vision is used in what may be called Murdoch's aesthetical approach to ethics. For her, "moral differences are differences of vision rather than choice."[32] Hauerwas agrees that moral behaviour is primarily about seeing, not choosing. The moral life consists in broadening our range of vision—changing how we "see" reality—so that we may see the world as it is.[33] The world, according to the ethics of obligation, is seen as a series of problems,

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[31] Gilbert Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 77-78.

[32] Paul Nelson, *Narrative and Morality*, 32.

[33] Stanley Hauerwas, "The Significance of Vision" in *Vision and Virtue*, 34, 44.

whereas in fact we must learn to see it as mystery, in the theological sense.[34] Just as artistic vision sees through the technique of art into the truth of art, that is, the manifestation of the mystery called the Good, so moral vision also sees through the "problems" about which ethics is usually concerned into the Good.[35]

Character is entirely connected with vision; what we are able to see depends very much on who we are and what we believe. Conversely, what we see changes us, and whenever our attention is directed to perception we are broadened. Thus vision is also wrapped up with action. Who we are affects what we see, and therefore what we perceive needs to be done. "True vision occasions right conduct...."[36]

One acquires good character through the practice of the virtues, but there is little consensus as to what, exactly, a virtue is, and secondly, which virtues are most important. The word "virtue" does not now mean what it once did. The greek word used by Aristotle commonly translated as "virtue" is $\dot{\alpha}\rho\varepsilon\tau\acute{\eta}$, meaning an excellence pertaining to the subject's end, or $\tau\acute{\varepsilon}\lambda o\varsigma$. For example, strength is an $\dot{\alpha}\rho\varepsilon\tau\acute{\eta}$ of a horse; accuracy the $\dot{\alpha}\rho\varepsilon\tau\acute{\eta}$ of a map. Thus an

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[34] Craig Dykstra, *Vision and Character: A Christian Educator's Response to Kohlberg* (New York: Paulist, 1981), 41.

[35] Ibid., 41.

[36] Iris Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good," 42, quoted in Dykstra, *Vision and Character*, 40.

Aristotelian understanding of virtue requires a concept of human teleology and that which would contribute positively to it.

The Latin word *virtus* means literally "manliness," implying strength of character.[37] In this sense, even such a strict deontologist as Kant could speak of virtue with approbation and held that virtue consisted in one's moral strength to do one's duty, a view which Häring adopts today.[38]

The word "virtue" is defined by modern writers in myriad ways: habitual acquired skills (Harned); pre-linguistic religious attitudes, i.e. ways of being in the world which have both religious and moral dimensions (Evans); persisting tendencies to act in characteristic ways leading to ends proper to being human (Gustafson); dispositions to act involving judgement leading to human excellence (Yearley); a character trait enabling us to fulfill our potential (Kruschwitz); a character trait enabling us to fulfill our highest potential (Pieper); traits of character which not only suit us for life but shape our vision of life,

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[37] It is interesting to note that the Anglican Book of Common Prayer has retained this understanding of virtue, when baptismal candidates are exhorted to "fight manfully under the banner of Christ." Despite the martial imagery, the understanding of "manfully" as "virtuously" helps us to understand the exhortation somewhat better.

[38] Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ: Moral Theology for Clergy and Laity*. Vol. 1, *General Moral Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 196.

helping to determine not only who we are but what world we
see (Meilaender); corrective human excellences belonging to
the Will (Foot); and so on. The most philosophically complex
definition is that of MacIntyre:

> *A virtue is an acquired human quality the*
> *possession and existence of which tends to*
> *enable us to achieve those goods which are*
> *internal to practices and the lack of which*
> *effectively prevents us from achieving such*
> *goods.*[99]

This definition is predicated of course on his understanding
of "practices" and "internal goods" as a modern substitute
for a common social $\tau\acute{\epsilon}\lambda o\varsigma$. Hauerwas does not have a formal,
functional definition (for which vagueness and lack of
precision he has been justly criticized), and calls virtues
those traits which causes a thing to perform its function
well, "character traits," etc.

Thus we get several common ideas regarding the
virtues. First, as character traits, they are acquired
skills but not merely technical skills alone. They are
perduring habitual ways of behaviour. They tend towards the
fulfilling of human teleology, excellence, or potential.
They are indicative of, and formative for, good character.

On the other hand there are habits and character
traits which are formative of bad character, and tend towards
the frustrating of the fulfillment of human potential. These
traits are the vices, the best known list of which is that of

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[99] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 191 [italics his].

the Seven Deadly Sins: Pride, Lust, Wrath, Gluttony, Avarice, Sloth and Despair.[40]

Rosenthal in *A Good Look at Evil* proposes a narrative understanding of good and evil: evil is that which deliberately thwarts the fulfilling of our life story,[41] and good consists in finding our way back to the story we originally meant to live.[42] Perhaps a narrative definition of virtue would follow similar lines, as well as incorporating all the other qualities listed above. Such a definition might look like this: a virtue is a human character trait, acquired by and exercised in habitual practice which contributes to the fulfilling of the potential towards which our life stories are tending. The eschatological nature of Christian life is by this affirmed, as the virtues tend towards the Kingdom of God. Hauerwas seems to support such an understanding when he states that the $\tau \varepsilon \lambda o \varsigma$ of our life stories is in fact a narrative.[43]

Apart from defining what "virtue" means, we must ask which character traits are to be considered virtues. The

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[40] There has in times past been included the eighth of *accidie* or *acedia*, a fact which Capps and Robertson Davies make good use of. See Donald Capps *Deadly Sins and Saving Virtues* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); and Robertson Davies "The Deadliest Sin," in *One Half of Robertson Davies* (Markham: Penguin, 1977).

[41] Abigail Rosenthal, *A Good Look at Evil* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), ix.

[42] Ibid., 221.

[43] Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 119.

ones of greatest tradition are the four Platonic virtues,

commonly known as the four Cardinal Virtues of Temperance,

Justice, Fortitude, and Prudence (φρόνησίς , or practical

wisdom). Aristotle expanded the list, and divided the

virtues into the "intellectual" and the "moral" virtues. To

the traditional four, Aquinas added from I Corinthians 13 the

Three Theological Virtues of Faith, Hope, and Love; the

former virtues being "natural," i.e. able to be acquired by

human effort, and the latter being pure gifts of Grace.

Each writer has his or her own list of virtues, and

unique exposition of what these virtues might mean, and

which ones take priority over the others. Very often

φρόνησίς is seen as the one upon which all the others

depend. There are of course many other virtues than these.

For example the Homeric and Aristotelian virtue of

μεγαλοψυχία is not listed amongst the traditional; and its

apparent opposite, humility, is a Christian virtue also

absent from traditional formulations.[44] Some see the virtues

as having specific implications for human development, and

work has been done to correlate them with Erikson's

developmental theory and Fowler's stages of faith.[45]

Finally, the modern formulation of Virtue Ethics

differs from the Aristotelian form in one important way. In

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[44] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 182.

[45] Capp, *Deadly Sins and Saving Virtues*; also Crossin, *What Are They Saying About Virtue?*

ancient thought, the virtues were entirely mutually
presupposed and interdependent. The virtues were of a unity
and it was not considered possible to possess some but not
all. Today it is generally agreed that although the virtues
have much in common, a person may be, for example, at once
courageous and greedy. Perhaps what Aristotle understood as
the unity of the virtues is what modern formulations call
Character.

The practice of the virtues alone is insufficient for
living a moral life, and very few writers call for a "pure"
virtue ethic. There is a necessary place for moral rules of
obligation, so long as they do not take priority in moral
discourse. Rules and virtues should be seen as
complimentary, as "adding up" rather than cancelling each
other out.[46] MacIntyre affirms this, as does Hauerwas, who
states that virtue and obligation are interdependent and are
not to be contrasted.[47] Hauerwas has pointed out that
Aristotle himself recognized the importance of rules and
principles, but the important thing for him was not their
objective authority, but rather how they were applied by the
agent.[48] Thus as virtue theory develops, most writers have

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[46] Robert Louden, "On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics,"
American Philosophical Quarterly 21 (July 1984): 235.

[47] Stanley Hauerwas, "Obligation and Virtue Once More,"
The Journal of Religious Ethics 3 (Spring 1975): 27.

[48] Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*, 59.

affirmed that it must be qualified by duty ethics in order to redress some of the weaknesses its critics have observed.

Because our actions and vision have a self-reflexive nature, our character continually changes and, one hopes, develops. The idea of "having character" in the sense of moral strength or integrity really means to have a virtuous character, one that is habituated in acting virtuously. Character, then, has a history, a development over time, and is therefore properly understood only by having a narrative understanding of the self. MacIntyre in *After Virtue* states: "...to adopt a stance on the virtues will be to adopt a stance on the narrative character of human life."[49] This concept of a narrative approach to the understanding of human life is pivotal to both MacIntyre's and Hauerwas' formulation of Virtue Ethics, and is the source of their ideas concerning agency and character.

The idea of human life as being essentially narrative in nature is derived from H. Richard Niebuhr's use of "story," says Hauerwas.[50] Human beings do not live their lives as a series of propositions, but as stories. Ask a person who he or she is, and you will be told a life story. We are our stories, and our stories give intelligible shape to our lives. Virtue Ethics is not about propositions, but

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[49] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 144.

[50] Nelson, *Narrative and Morality*, 64.

about an understanding of the self that takes into account the self's history and potential future.

Narrative simply means story, specifically the constitutive stories of our communities and personal identities. Narrative is the fundamental way we come to understand ourselves, and is how we come to understand the world; it provides a sense of history, and provides unity for human life. Narrative is how our self-understanding is embodied and communicated.

Narrative is fundamental to ethics because of its connection with agency.

> My agency consists not in discrete free will
> causes and effects, but rather in fitting what
> I do, or what happens to me, into my ongoing
> story....to be an agent means I am able to
> locate my action within an ongoing history and
> within a community of language users.[51]

Through the narrative tradition of our community, we learn what the virtues are, how they work, and how to use them. We learn what is good and bad character, and what the purpose of our lives is, in the ending or goal towards which our community aspires. Thus not only are our lives shaped and molded by narrative, our lives become a narrative and moral situations are events in a purposeful narrative which affect our character even if these events are not of our choosing. We are both what we make ourselves and what

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[51] Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 42.

happens to us: we both write, and are written into, our own stories.

This of necessity involves a social understanding of the self, for we do not live in isolation. We are raised in and are formed by communities. These communities too have their stories, which we have inherited and from whose formative influence we cannot divorce ourselves. We inherit our stories and thereby our identities from the communities to which we belong. To discover the self requires the discovery of the stories of which we are a part. To belong to a community means to incorporate its story into one's own, and also to let one's own story become part of the community's.

This however does not mean that we are victims of our stories. Although we must deal with their influence and can never simply excise them from who we are, we can resist and object, and even reject.[52]

A "character" is a narrative expression of the self, and it is the idea of character which links "dramatic and moral associations"[53] says MacIntyre. Selfhood requires a narrative linking of all of life together, and we are responsible to others for the intelligibility and coherence of our stories.[54]

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[52] Gene Outka, "Character, Vision and Narrative," *Religious Studies Review* 6 (April 1980): 115.

[53] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 27.

[54] Ibid., 216.

We are people of stories, and the Christian faith is essentially a set of stories comprising a tradition around which a community has formed.[55] We come to know God and ourselves through the recounting of stories: "...the narrative mode is neither incidental nor accidental to Christian belief."[56] Doctrines are stories in "point form": tools to help us tell the story better,[57] says Hauerwas. This is not unlike D.Z. Phillips' definition of theology as the "grammar" of our religious discourse.[58] To have faith is to locate our stories within God's story, and this means becoming part of God's people.[59] Narrative and community are entirely interdependent. The church does not have, but is a social ethic--a people of virtue--specifically those virtues for remembering and telling the story of Jesus.[60] Because we have had our characters formed by Christian community, our vision of the world will be different than that of others, and hence Christian ethics is significantly and qualitatively different from other forms.

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[55] Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 24.

[56] Ibid., 25.

[57] Ibid., 26.

[58] D.Z. Phillips, "Philosophy, Theology and the Reality of God," *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 6.

[59] Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 33.

[60] Ibid., 102-103.

Narrative is a hermeneutical approach as well as a literary genre.[61] The Christian narratives, especially the Biblical narratives, make us unique and give to us our particular vision of the world. Much work has been done by Hans Frei and others towards the recovery of a way of reading the Scriptures which would get at the narrative, plain sense of the Bible in a way which might be more fruitful than present technical approaches.[62]

The recent theological discussion of the concept of Narrative has pointed out to us how much stories contribute to making us human. Whether these stories are the great archetypal myths, the religious traditions around which we gather in worship, the family stories which tell us where we come from, our cultural and national heritage, or a deeply engaging novel, we learn, and our character is shaped and formed as we listen and read. Who we are is changed by the stories which we inherit, and which we choose to adopt as our own. As Hauerwas says:

> To be agents at all requires a directionality
> that involves the development of character and
> virtue. Our character is the result of our
> sustained attention to the world [i.e. vision]
> which gives coherence to our intentionality.
> Such attention is formed and given content by
> the stories through which we have learned to
> form the story of our lives. To be moral

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[61] Paul Nelson, *Narrative and Morality*, 79.

[62] Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Idem, *Types of Christian Theology* ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

persons is to allow stories to be told through us so that our manifold activities give a coherence that allows us to claim them for our own.[63]

One of the strongest affinities between Virtue Ethics and the study of narrative and literature is the recurring theme of Tragedy. Since Aristotle, tragedy has been understood as the result of a flaw in character. MacIntyre widens this understanding in a way Aristotle's belief in the fundamental unity of the virtues would not permit: tragedy is often the result of being caught between the claims of incommensurable virtues, and *Antigone* is used as a prime example.[64]

Hauerwas too discusses the presence of tragedy as a constituent part of human life which our ethics must not fail to take adequately into account. He distinguishes between the idea of the moral life inherently involving tragic choices, and having a sense of the tragic character of human life itself:[65] the recognition that horrible things necessarily happen about which we can do nothing, but for which we as fallen humanity must nevertheless take responsibility.

Barbour's investigations into tragedy and virtue are very helpful analyses of tragedy in literature and ethical

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[63] Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, 74.

[64] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 143.

[65] Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 145 (n).

reflection, and he examines both of these understandings of human tragedy:

> Two aspects of literary tragedy seem to me of particular moral significance: the depiction of a character's virtue leading to evil, and the representation of irreconcilable conflicts between different moral values and between different virtues.[66]

Christian ethics cannot be separated from the story which gives them meaning and context, and that story is very often tragic.

The fact that many serious efforts have been made toward the developing of an ethic of virtue does not mean that there has been a mass conversion to this way of thought. There are many who object to the formulation of Virtue Ethics on many grounds.

The first objection of note belongs to Martin Luther, who held that Aristotle's concept of virtue was pernicious. Luther saw in it the implication that human beings could become good and acquire merit apart from utter dependance on the grace of God. According to Meilaender, Luther's understanding of humanity as *simul justus et peccator* left no room for any idea of development of character or progress in virtue.[67] Nonetheless, Luther did formulate a version of moral virtue which Meilaender explores, and accordingly

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[66] John Barbour, "Tragedy and Ethical Reflection," *The Journal of Religion* 63 (January 1983): 1.

[67] Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue*, 109.

there are those who prefer this emphasis on Grace rather than Hauerwas' emphasis on Sanctification.[68]

It was briefly noted above that Schneewind believes that virtue theory has been neglected for so long because it is not viable in the modern world, and that its own internal weaknesses were the cause of that neglect. First of all, he says, Aristotle's theory is of no help in a society as fragmented as ours, nor did Aristotle deal with issues such as how a person of virtue is to deal with those who disagree concerning a particular judgement. There are no criteria for determining who is and who is not virtuous; and furthermore if two virtuous people disagree, the implication is that one of them is necessarily morally defective. Most damningly, Schneewind points out that when people disagree, virtue theory offers no way to engage in a moral dispute leading to a rational resolution except to attack one another's character.[69]

William Frankena, an advocate of ethics of obligation deeply interested in Virtue Ethics, is highly critical of the lack of specificity regarding moral action and of the lack of philosophical clarity, for example in Hauerwas' rather imprecise use of the word "virtue."[70]

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[68] Zinger, "Are Grace and Virtue Compatible?"

[69] Schneewind, "The Misfortunes of Virtue," 62.

[70] William Frankena, "Conversations with Carney and Hauerwas," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 3 (1975).

Robert Louden has noted even more "vices" of Virtue Ethics, some of which are: a) It is weak in casuistry (i.e. specificity in particular cases) and applied ethics. One still may be left wondering what to do, because Virtue Ethics is not problem oriented, and is therefore of little help in real-life dilemmas. b) Even good people make mistakes and wrong choices. Virtue Ethics may miss badness of action by focussing too sharply on the goodness of character. c) There are some actions which are always intolerable, and must be forbidden prior to any consideration of moral character. d) Virtue Ethics does not adequately address the fact that people change, he says, and that character changes and skills become rusty. e) Moral backsliding may result, and agents may risk overlooking occasional bad actions, excusing them as being "out of character." And Louden has other, perhaps more incidental, objections as well.[71]

The largest complaint against Virtue Ethics is that despite being community-based, it lacks the means for a public or social ethic. In fact some say that Virtue Ethics is of necessity private and individualistic and not adaptable to a concept of public morality. Nevertheless, others are working to solve even this problem.[72]

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[71] Louden, "On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics."

[72] John Barbour, "Religious *Ressentiment* and Public Virtues," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 11 (Fall 1983): 264-279.

These criticisms have helped greatly to refine the Virtue Ethic model, and many of the objections have been answered by the general agreement that the ethics of virtue must be qualified by, but not subordinated to, an ethics of obligation. Even so, for some this is not enough: Ogletree, though sympathetic with Virtue Ethics, prefers to apply it only when rules and principles are insufficient due to the ambiguity of a particular situation.[73]

The greatest theological concern is that of Pelagianism, of which Hauerwas has been accused.[74] Meilaender points out that one of the dangers of virtue theory is that its self-reflexive nature and continual reference to the agent acting may lead to narcissism and self-centeredness.[75] Zinger has noted that Hauerwas' formulation undermines any concept of Grace in favour of human perfectionism, and he advocates Meilaender's account of the virtues as being more theologically sound.[76] This is perhaps an unfair reading of Hauerwas: admittedly some of

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[73] Thomas Ogletree, "Values, Obligation, and Virtues: Approaches to Bio-Medical Ethics," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 4 (Spring 1976): 121.

[74] Thomas Ogletree, "Stanley Hauerwas. *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics; Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection;* and with Richard Bondi and David B. Burrell, *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations into Christian Ethics,*" *Religious Studies Review* 6 (January 1980): 26.

[75] Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue*, 14.

[76] Zinger, "Are Grace and Virtue Compatible?," 13.

Hauerwas' reasoning needs to be made more internally cohesive, as some have pointed out, but he certainly has not sold out Grace for Sanctification. Moreover, I do not think that Virtue Ethics is at any greater risk of self-satisfaction and "works-righteousness" than is deontology. This issue of grace and sanctification is really a matter of one's teleological focus which shall be further explored below.

Despite the caveats and objections, the virtue ethic model is continuing to grow and develop, and is stubbornly refusing to go away. A "second generation" of thinkers has emerged who are integrating the model very successfully with other strains of theological thought,[77] and it seems that Virtue Ethics is beginning to "come of age."[78]

It is not simply a coincidence that Gustafson's book *Christ and the Moral Life* includes the discussion of virtue in the chapter called "Jesus Christ, the Sanctifier." The major theological doctrine for Virtue Ethics is that of Sanctification, and Hauerwas especially emphasizes it. The appeal of Virtue Ethics is for this reason hardly surprising, considering his Methodist background, and he says that the doctrine of Sanctification and of Wesley's view of

[77] The best book of all, in my opinion, is Paul Nelson, *Narrative and Morality: A Theological Inquiry* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987).

[78] James Keenan, "Virtue Ethics: Making a Case as it Comes of Age," *Thought* 67 (July 1992).

Christian Perfection are the most helpful towards an
understanding of the ethics of character.[79] Outka too has
written that the ethics of character provides for us the most
intelligible account of the doctrine of Sanctification.[80]

The central theme to both sanctification and Virtue
Ethics is the idea of the change in a person's direction of
life. Sanctification is understood as the actual formation
of our character in the saving act of Christ.

> To be sanctified is to have our character
> determined by our basic commitments and beliefs
> about God....To have Christian character is to
> have our "seeing" of the world directed by the
> fundamental symbols of the language of faith.
> Thus to learn the language of faith, in the
> sense of being qualified by it, is to become a
> different kind of person, e.g., to acquire a
> new character....[81]

Sanctification is not simply a mysterious divine
imputation apart from how we live our lives, but is
"...worked out in and through our beliefs and actions."[82]
Through faith the Holy Spirit changes who we are and how we
live our lives, drawing us closer toward the pure love of
God, which is what Wesley meant by "Perfection." For Wesley,
says Hauerwas, sanctification is a process of growth and
development of person, that is, the process of being formed
in Christ. We are not instantly transformed into being

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[79] Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*, 195 ff.

[80] Gene Outka, "Character, Vision and Narrative," 111.

[81] Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*, 203.

[82] Ibid., 207.

perfect saints, but we are transformed and developed through what we believe and do.

Perfection must not be understood as something that has been accomplished, but rather as a continual growth[83] towards the pure love of God, and this vision contributes a necessary teleological focus to Christian life.[84] Perfection understood in this way addresses well Louden's condemnation of Virtue Ethics as Utopian.[85] I would reply that what he calls Utopian, Christians would affirm as Virtue's eschatological thrust, which is one of the reasons it is a particularly good model for Christian ethics.

Becoming better and better is not an end in itself: the chief end, or τέλος of the Christian life of perfection is "to glorify God and to enjoy him forever" as the Shorter Catechism puts it. Thus understood, Perfection, or in this sense, Virtue itself, must be its own reward. To seek virtue for any other purpose is an unacceptable τέλος . Even to seek virtue so that we may become virtuous people is a denial of grace, an attempt to become wholly good by dint of our own efforts. This sort of perfectionism is to be

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[83] Stanley Hauerwas, "Characterizing Perfection: Second Thoughts on Character and Sanctification," *Wesleyan Theology Today* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1985), 251.

[84] Ibid., 260.

[85] Robert Louden, "Some Vices of Virtue Ethics," 235.

rejected as Pelagian, and ignores the reality of both tragedy and human sinfulness.

The problem is whether sanctification is to be understood as an imputation of pure Grace, or whether we participate in a progress in sanctity by cooperating with Grace, i.e. is it conferred, or is it acquired? Luther held the former view, Wesley the latter. But even Meilaender tempers Luther's strict view to a degree. If our being is shaped by our doing[86] then our character develops, and we progress in sanctity, though it must be firmly asserted that this cannot be done apart from grace, nor can it be fully accomplished this side of the fulfilled Kingdom of God.

Another recurring motif in the discussion of Virtue Ethics is that of the saints as embodiments of sanctification. Again and again by many authors they are set forth as patterns or exemplars of the sanctified life, as embodiments of Virtue, or at least of some particular virtues. "In such ways virtues that were expounded as principles took on flesh and blood."[87] In this sense, the many "Lives of the Saints" which have been written serve as narrative moral handbooks. As one learns their stories, one incorporates their virtues into one's own life story. It is as if to say: strive to live as they did and you will be

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[86] Meilaender, *Theory and Practice of Virtue*, 104.

[87] John Stratton Hawley, ed., *Saints and Virtues* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), xiv.

holy as they are holy. Put this way, it does not matter whether or not the legend of a particular saint is "literally" or "factually" true, because the story itself embodies and serves as the vehicle for the transmission of the moral and religious beliefs of the community in which it exists.

Saints are: "...persons from whom one can learn patterns of life for which no principle or code can serve as an adequate representation."[88] Virtues, it is seen, antedate the saints, for it is because they are examples of virtue that they are remembered. On the other hand, as narrative symbols, the saints become mediators of God's transforming and sanctifying power as we incorporate their stories into our own life narratives.[89]

John Coleman has noted that modern fiction can provide us with saints for our time, characters who point to the hiddenness of God,[90] and it is precisely here that the idea of narrative makes the strongest connection between theological ethics and the work of Robertson Davies. Just as the "Lives of the Saints," literature can function as narrative accounts of virtue which contribute to the

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[88] Ibid., xiv.

[89] Ibid., xxi; also John Coleman, "Conclusion: After Sainthood," *Saints and Virtues*, 211.

[90] Coleman, "After Sainthood," 223.

formative nature of the community informed by those
stories.[91]

In his article "Constancy and Forgiveness" Hauerwas,
following MacIntyre's use of Jane Austen in *After Virtue* and
exploring some facets of the novels of Trollope, states that
"...novels are an irreplaceable resource for training in
moral virtue."[92] This is most emphatically not to be
confused with the pious moralizing often found in mediocre
sentimental art,[93] yet since the moral significance of the
virtues can be understood and appreciated only when depicted
in narrative, the novel may be a "School for Virtue."[94]

Robertson Davies is not, strictly speaking, a moral
theologian, but as a novelist he portrays "good, bad, right,
wrong, and ought" narratively through his characters rather
than in the propositional discourse of philosophy. What
MacIntyre and Hauerwas have done with Austen and Trollope, I
hope to do here in a different way with Davies. It is
through his stories that Davies teaches us right from wrong
and what constitutes the virtuous life. Thus it is

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[91] See John D. Barbour, *Tragedy as a Critique of Virtue: The Novel and Ethical Reflection* (Chico: Scholar's Press, 1984) for a treatment of fiction, the virtues, and the tragic aspects of moral experience; especially in comparison with MacIntyre's treatment of tragedy in *After Virtue*.

[92] Stanley Hauerwas, "Constancy and Forgiveness: The Novel as a School for Virtue," *Notre Dame English Journal* 15 (Summer 1983): 23.

[93] Ibid., 43.

[94] Ibid.

reasonable to assert not only that Davies' works are an
excellent source of moral theology, but also that it is
possible to extract and systematize that theology. Such
shall be the task of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

THE THEOLOGY OF ROBERTSON DAVIES

> ...somehow I've drifted into a world where
> religion, but not orthodoxy, is the fountain of
> everything that makes sense. [1]

Robertson Davies professes to be a Christian
believer,[2] though not of the conventional or orthodox sort,
and confesses: "...if I were asked to nail down and defend
what it was I believed and why, I would be in a pickle like a
lot of people."[3] Nowhere does he systematically set forth a
credo or theology, but from a careful reading of his novels,
essays, stories and addresses, a fairly extensive and
consistent theology may be gleaned.[4] To accomplish this will
entail more than a simple sifting through the writings of
Davies to extract his theological statements (and there are
plenty to be found) and then a piecing together of some

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[1] Robertson Davies, *What's Bred in the Bone* (Markham:
Penguin, 1985), 455.

[2] Robertson Davies, "A Talk with Tom Harpur," in *The
Enthusiasms of Robertson Davies,* ed. Judith Skelton Grant
(Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979), 315.

[3] Ibid.

[4] For the purposes of this essay, the plays of Robertson
Davies will not be considered.

theological pastiche. It would be better from a systematic point of view to see how well, or even if, the writings of Davies fit into traditional theological categories. I believe that he does provide answers to foundational theological issues, and that his answers are perhaps not so unorthodox as he would like to think. His thought, if it must be categorized, has much in common with liberal Protestant theology, e.g. that of Tillich, Bonhoeffer, and Bultmann, and he has aptly been labelled a writer of "Christian apocrypha."[5]

Through the novels there is a progression and development of religious thought as well as an ever-increasing emphasis on religious themes and the religious life, and this progression is easily discerned when one examines his novels from the earliest to the latest. Theology as an enterprise in itself does not, however, seem to attract Davies, and he launches a few well-aimed but friendly barbs at that profession. "It is notorious that if you give a theologian an inch, he will have you bound and gagged in fifteen minutes, unable to voice a doubt."[6] One would think that theology should be chiefly concerned with eternal and unchanging truths, and he quite rightly points

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[5] Peter S. Hawkins, "Robertson Davies: Shaking Hands with the Devil," *The Christian Century* 103 (May 21-28, 1986): 518.

[6] Robertson Davies, "Gleams and Glooms," in *One Half of Robertson Davies* (Markham: Penguin, 1977), 243.

out that "wisdom is never outdated";[7] nevertheless he
ironically notes that "nothing changes fashion so quickly as
theology,"[8] and further that "Goethe [is] worth a regiment of
your theologians."[9] That is to say, poetry and great art are
perhaps better able both to discover and to express the
deepest truths. There comes a point where the philosopher
must become a poet in order to assert the non-rational yet
most profound truths of human existence. Yet theological
discourse has value all the same, and Davies is certainly not
hostile to the "queen of the sciences." In fact he has said
that our churches need to become more firmly, but not
uncompromisingly, theological in their expression.[10] He has
also said however that theology needs scholarly calm and
philosophical clarity; his approach may not satisfy
theologians because his answers are "infected" with the
intense feeling of the artist. Theology, he says, is a
discipline, and literature is not a discipline but an art; it
is the "heated and sometimes rowdy" approach of literature
which Davies takes.[11]

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[7] Robertson Davies, *Tempest Tost* (Toronto: Clarke,
Irwin & Co., 1951), 181.

[8] Ibid., 191.

[9] Robertson Davies, *Murther and Walking Spirits*
(Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991), 24.

[10] Davies, "A Talk with Tom Harpur," 316.

[11] Robertson Davies, "The Devil's Burning Throne," in
One Half of Robertson Davies (Markham: Penguin, 1977), 181.

The methodological problem which is true for the analysis of all writers of fiction arises: how does one discern between Davies' own thoughts and beliefs on one hand, and those of his characters on the other? It would be terribly presumptuous, and wrong, to attribute everything he puts into the mouths of his characters to Davies himself, and to accept that everything he writes is in fact what he himself professes.

At the same time because of Davies' work as a journalist, much of his fiction carries with it an air of editorial. Claude Bissell has noted in his review of *Leaven of Malice* that:

> Robertson Davies...has clearly not been impressed by the critics who hail the "disappearance of the author" as the distinguishing characteristic of the best modern fiction. Mr. Davies insists upon obtruding himself frequently and at considerable length. Fortunately, he has a good deal to say, and he has a delightful way of saying it.[12]

John Mills concurs, and states that it is easy to distinguish Davies' own voice, because his own pronouncements are made by the characters of whom he approves.[13] It is here maintained that Davies casts a sufficiently favorable light on many opinions his characters express, and these opinions

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[12] Claude T. Bissell, "Letters in Canada II, Fiction," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 24 (1955): 264.

[13] John Mills, *Robertson Davies and his Works* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1982), 41.

are reiterated frequently enough, that it is fairly easy to get at which opinions are Davies' own.

Much work has been done on the examination of Davies' enthusiasm for Jungian thought and psychology, and though an examination of Jungian concepts and Davies' expression of them might lead to the extraction of a certain theology, I do not propose to do this. Of course Jungian categories cannot be easily avoided in an examination of the theology of Robertson Davies, nor should they be, but I think it would be more fruitful to see them as providing a vocabulary for what Davies wishes to say, rather than to make yet another examination of his works for Jungian content.[14]

Finally, before we begin, we must understand what Davies means by "orthodox." Literally, the word means "correct teaching," but it has a technical connotation of being theologically conservative, and the opposite to "liberal." This is, however, not the way Davies uses the word. In common usage, "orthodox" usually means "within the received tradition," or "not heterodox." In this sense both liberal and conservative theological opinion, though differing, can both be "orthodox," and it is in this latter sense that I understand and shall use the word. It is also in this sense that I think Davies uses it most often, but not always: sometimes he uses it to refer to the ordinary sort

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[14] For example, Patricia Monk, *The Smaller Infinity: The Jungian Self in the Novels of Robertson Davies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).

of popular or conventional religion of which he disapproves.

This distinction between the technical use of "orthodox" and its common use is important because Davies often refers to himself as being "unorthodox." By this he seems most often to mean not that he considers himself to be a theological liberal, but rather that he considers himself to be on the theological fringes; that his opinions are occasionally outside of the received tradition, and perhaps heterodox. The opinion that I shall express is that Davies is in fact not all that "unorthodox" in this latter sense, and apart from two or three points, he is well within the received, liberal Protestant tradition.

That Davies believes in God is patently obvious. He has said so himself, and in his novels the existence of God is affirmed time and time again. But from Davies' perspective, it is futile either to attempt to prove God's existence, or to attempt to define God strictly. Nowhere does Davies do either. He simply asserts that God, whatever God is, is:

> Defining God has always seemed to me a pompous
> and self-defeating exercise. I am content that
> God should encompass me: I do not think it
> likely that I shall encompass Him. Where God
> is concerned, I am the object, not the
> subject.[15]

Nor does he think himself to be under any compulsion to

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[15] Davies, "Gleams and Glooms," 243.

justify his belief in God. He uses a marvelous analogy in his interview with Tom Harpur:

> ...you're not asked if you say you've fallen in love, to give an absolutely water-tight and world-convincing explanation of what you're doing. In a very different way, it's the same with religion. I don't see why it should be demanded that you justify, explain and excuse it to people of another opinion. [16]

Nevertheless, to uncover what a writer means by "God" would be the first task of an analysis of his theology, and this is not entirely easy to do for Davies. His early writings contain little which would explain what he means by "God," but in an address to Glendon College, York University in 1968, Davies said: "[I use the name]...God...to comprehend all the great and inexplicable things and the redemptive or destructive powers that lie outside human command and understanding...."[17]

In *The Rebel Angels* there is a clue of what will come later, when God is referred to (and toasted) as the "Rum Old Joker."[18] This is repeated in *The Lyre of Orpheus*, when God is called the "incorrigible old joker,"[19] but only a few pages earlier, the same words had been used regarding Fate.[20]

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[16] Davies, "A Talk with Tom Harpur," 316.

[17] Robertson Davies, "The Conscience of a Writer," in *One Half of Robertson Davies* (Markham: Penguin, 1977), 127.

[18] Robertson Davies, *The Rebel Angels* (Markham: Penguin, 1981), 101.

[19] Robertson Davies *The Lyre of Orpheus* (Markham: Penguin, 1988), 67.

[20] Ibid., 32.

Fate and Destiny do seem to be equated by Davies with the eternal mystery at the heart of all being which is called "God":

> Very well, simpleton, don't call it God.
> That's only a shorthand term anyhow. Call it
> Fate or Destiny or Kismet or the Life Force or
> the It or any damned thing you like but don't
> pretend it doesn't exist! And don't pretend
> that Whatever-You-Call-It doesn't live out a
> portion--a tiny portion--of its purpose through
> you.[21]

In his thesis on Fate and Destiny in Robertson Davies, Webster wrote:

> Fate connotes a tragic necessity that confines
> men to conditions they would never willingly
> choose...Fate may be distinguished from
> scientific determinism by its quality of
> mystery, and from destiny by its
> pessimism...Destiny tends to imply an inner
> aspiration that corresponds with the external
> influences on an individual's life--that
> is...destiny is something we choose as well as
> something that is chosen for us...Destiny
> suggests that each of us has a role to play in
> the drama of life, and that life's purpose is
> to discover and fulfil this role.[22]

Davies often speaks of Fate as something infinite and all-encompassing, and of Destiny as something more personal to each of us. Fate and Destiny are closely related, and in having them equated with God, both the Transcendent (Fate) and the Immanent (Destiny) aspects of God are affirmed as realities. "God," then, not to put too fine a point on it,

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[21] Ibid., 231.

[22] David Webster, "Fate and Destiny in Robertson Davies' Plays and Novels" (M.A. thesis, Guelph 1973), 2.

is perhaps best defined as a metaphor for the mysterious

transcendent and immanent forces which shape human life and

existence. This is not a definition as such, for definitions

seek to set finite limits on a concept; God is certainly

much more than just Fate and Destiny, but Fate and Destiny

too are human metaphors for spiritual realities. Perhaps the

best theological word for Destiny might be "vocation" but the

import is the same.

Nevertheless, these are ineluctable realities, Davies

repeatedly asserts. At first glance this assertion may

perhaps appear to be a spectre of Calvinist Predestination

from Davies' Presbyterian youth. Though he advocates neither

strict determinism nor foreordination, Davies is not

sympathetic to the concept of human self-determination. We

are free to cooperate with Fate, and to take up our destinies

as part of ourselves, but not much more. Paradoxically,

this brings with it true freedom:

> "...your pretensions to live your own life by
> the dictates of your own intelligence are just
> so much nonsense, flattering to fools."
> "No Free Will then?"
> "Oh yes. Freedom to do as you are told, by
> Whatever-You-Call-It, and freedom to make a
> good job of it or a mess, according to your
> inclination. Freedom to play the hand you're
> dealt, in fact...And don't imagine you can
> escape. If you don't ask God which is my word
> --my professional word--for what we are
> talking about, what he wants of you, God will
> certainly tell you, and in no unmistakable
> terms, and if you don't heed you'll
> be...miserable...."[23]

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[23] Davies, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 231.

Dunstan Ramsay in *Fifth Business* says much the same thing:
"...I had become conscious that I was being used by powers
over which I had no control for purposes of which I had no
understanding."[24] In *What's Bred in the Bone*, similar
sentimei .s are expressed by the two angels.[25] Although there
is an element of randomness in our lives (we are cautioned
not to equate good luck with God's grace),[26] there seems to
be much that is inescapable, much that seems to be more a
meaningful convergence of coincidence. Davies here makes
much use of the Jungian idea of synchronicity to explain the
irresistible nature of Fate. "Coincidences are a spiritual
sort of pun."[27] Or as in *Fifth Business*, Ramsay refers to
"one of those coincidences that it may be wiser to call
sychronicities."

Davies is rough on people who claim to be atheists,
because they miss the point: "If foolish people want to
define a silly God, and then declare that he does not exist,
I am not interested in their game."[28]

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[24] Robertson Davies, *Fifth Business* (Markham: Penguin,
1970), 110.

[25] Robertson Davies, *What's Bred in the Bone* (Markham:
Penguin, 1985), 248.

[26] Robertson Davies, *The Manticore* (Markham: Penguin,
1972), 223.

[27] Ibid., 255.

[28] Davies, "Gleams and Glooms," 243.

In *Fifth Business*, there are three atheists of note:
Sam West, Boy Staunton, and Denyse Hornick. Sam is one of
those common atheists who treats the Bible as literally as
any fundamentalist, then shows that since such beliefs are
absurd, religion is absurd. Ramsay says:

> If he hoped to make an atheist out of me, this
> is where he went wrong; I know a metaphor when
> I hear one, and I liked metaphor better than
> reason. I have known many atheists since Sam,
> and they all fall down on metaphor.[29]

Boy Staunton's atheism is of another sort. His great
religion was the narcissistic worship of himself and worldly
power. When he confesses to Dunstan that he no longer
believes in God, Dunstan replies:

> I'm not surprised...You created a God in your
> own image, and when you found out he was no
> good you abolished him. It's a quite common
> fc_m of psychological suicide.[30]

Staunton is a victim of the "vain pomp and glory of the
world," for he believed in nothing larger than himself.
Being without humility, when he discovered his own mortality
he lost his god. Of Staunton's second wife Denyse, Davies
said: "Like many people who are ignorant of religious
matters, she attributed absurd beliefs to those who were
concerned with them."[31] Her atheism is simple philistine
ignorance, seeing religion as a sort of feeblemindedness

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[29] Davies, *Fifth Business*, 54-55.

[30] Ibid., 241.

[31] Ibid.

which humanity has mostly outgrown, despite the fact that it

has "engaged the lifelong attention of men and women of the

highest intellectual quality."[32]

Furthermore, atheism solves nothing:

> Freud did not believe in God. Very well:
> perhaps God as the nineteenth century knew Him
> was an illusion--or nine-tenths illusion....For
> Jung, God was a fact for which evidence existed
> in the mind of man--which is not to say that
> God is nothing more than that.[33]

> Saying that God is dead is like saying there is
> no Santa Claus; the jolly old man with the
> white beard may vanish, but the gifts are under
> the Christmas tree just the same....Santa has
> gone, but parental love is just where it always
> was.[34]

Nor does atheism solve the problem of evil,[35] a topic which I

will later discuss more thoroughly.

Atheists are not to be confused with those who do not

overtly profess faith in God and who yet have spiritual

depths, such as Frances Cornish. Further, there are those

who have found conventional religion inadequate, yet have

nothing with which to replace it, e.g. David Staunton and

Hector Mackilwraith. These are the victims of shallow

religion, the sort of religion that is closer to being

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[32] Robertson Davies, "Preaching Selfishness," in One
Half of Robertson Davies (Markham: Penguin, 1977), 72.

[33] Davies, "Gleams and Glooms," 243-244.

[34] Ibid., 247.

[35] Ibid., 245.

irreligion, and perhaps truly atheist, despite its use of religious language.[36]

Davies professes to be Christian, specifically Anglican, though not in the strictly orthodox sense. This would seem to imply at least some acceptance of the Christian understanding of Jesus and his role as the Christ, yet apart from a few scattered references, Davies has surprisingly little to say about him. He distinguishes sharply, as Bultmann did, between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. The Christ-myth, says Davies, is of infinite value, but "the symbolic Jesus and the historical Jesus are just not the same creature."[37] In his interview with Tom Harpur he says that he does not see Jesus as the unique Messiah for mankind, and that Jesus probably didn't see himself this way either.[38] The Christ is the symbol of what is best in humanity, says Davies, and Christians are to follow his example of spiritual wholeness.

> Perhaps what was imitable about Christ was his firm acceptance of his destiny and his adherence to it even when it led to shameful death. It was the wholeness of Christ that had illuminated so many millions of lives and it was my job to seek and make manifest the wholeness of Simon Darcourt.[39]

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[36] Robertson Davies, *A Voice From the Attic* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1960), 72.

[37] Davies, "A Talk With Tom Harpur," 318.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Davies, *The Rebel Angels*, 56.

Spiritual wholeness is the goal of religious life for Davies, and he focusses little on what Christian orthodoxy would call the saving grace of God through Christ, or the Atonement. Davies would certainly reject any Anselmian or Calvinist sense of substitutionary propitiation.

In an address in 1977, Davies says "I seem to have emerged as a moralist; my novels are a moralist's novels."[40] Many theologians, such as Stanley Hauerwas, David Tracey, and Karl Barth, amongst others, hold that theology and ethics are mutually dependant endeavors, and that theory must be lived out in practice. Ethics is "theology on the hoof" as it were, and Davies' theology and moral vision are closely related.

The underlying principles of Davies' ethics are well summed up in *A Mixture of Frailties,* when Domdaniel asks Monica about her politics:

> There are, the world over, only two important
> political parties--the people who are for life,
> and the people who are against it. Most people
> are born one or the other, though there are a
> few here and there who change their coats. You
> know about Eros and Thanatos? No, I didn't
> really suppose you did. Well, I'm an Eros man
> myself, and most people who are any good for
> anything, in the arts or whatever, belong to
> the Eros party. But there are Thanatossers
> everywhere--the Permanent Opposition. The very
> worst Thanatossers are those who pretend to be
> Eros men; you can sometimes spot them because
> they blather about the purpose of art being to
> lift people up out of the mire, and refine them
> and make them use lace hankies--to castrate

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[40] Robertson Davies, "Ham and Tongue," in *One Half of Robertson Davies* (Markham: Penguin, 1977), 16.

them, in fact. You've obviously been in
contact with a lot of these crypto-Thanatossers
--probably educated by them, insofar as you
have been educated at all. But there's a
chance that you may be on the Eros side;
there's something about you now and then which
suggests it.[41]

This passage is probably the heartbeat of all of

Davies' novels, but it is particulary applicable to his

ethics. The Good is an orientation towards life, and living

it as deeply as possible, relishing all that it has to offer.

Conventional morality, often wielded by the judgmental and

philistine adherents of hypocritical religion, kills the

spirit though it claims to promote goodness. It's obsession

with appearances, respectability, and moral absolutes takes

many of the risks out of life but turns people into

spiritual cripples.

Davies has no patience for this narrow sort of

moralism, and he claims that he is unorthodox in his

Christianity because he does not believe in the striving for

"Christian perfectionism."[42]   To the contrary, however, it

seems to me that Davies does believe in perfectionism, in

the best and truest sense of the word, i.e. "perfect" meaning

"whole," rather than "juridical innocence." The striving for

spiritual wholeness is a very orthodox Christian stance, and

one he himself advocates. The rejection of the rule-keeping

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[41] Robertson Davies, *A Mixture of Frailties* (Markham:
Penguin, 1958), 108.

[42] Davies, "A Talk with Tom Harpur," 316.

sort of perfection is proof of his orthodoxy, for rule-keeping as the be-all-and-end-all of ethics is the New Pharisaism St. Paul himself condemns, but which conservative Christianity has often fallen into. As Paul says, "the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life." [2 Cor. 3:6, RSV]. Too many people, in the name of the Gospel, have turned Christian discipleship into a New Law, and Davies quite rightly opposes this. Jesus' statement "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" [Mt. 5:48] must mean something other than simply "don't break the rules." The Pharisees whom Jesus condemned were better at rule-keeping than anyone else, yet Jesus said that our perfection must surpass even theirs [Mt 5:20]. Perfection must, therefore, mean something other than the mere avoidance of sin, and that is wholeness.

By his rejection of perfectionism Davies rejects any idea that a person can possibly be wholly good and entirely without moral flaw; because of this he dismisses any idea of achieving perfection as the $\tau\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\wp\varsigma$ of human life. This is a perfectly orthodox understanding of humanity's fallen, sinful nature. The Wesleyan doctrine of Perfection as discussed by Hauerwas is here most applicable.

Morality is not seen by Davies in terms of specific rules and principles; neither does he emphasize contextual or situational ethics. His principle for the good in human ethics is based on what has come to be called Virtue Ethics.

The virtuous life does not consist in the simple avoidance of culpable error, the sort of perfectionism which Davies quite rightly says is impossible, but rather true virtue consists in the active promotion of the Good.

> A VULGAR ERROR/ A man said to me today that what ailed the modern world was that it had forgotten about the Seven Deadly Sins. Not to be outdone in this line of argument I said that I considered that it was far worse that we had forgotten the Four Cardinal Virtues. He goggled, and had plainly never heard of these, so I named them—Prudence, Temperance, Justice, and Fortitude. He was himself an exemplar of what ails the world, with his yelping about sin, and his neglect of virtue. I suppose the poor boob thought that a mere abstention from sin was virtue enough—a common, comical and somewhat criminal error.[43]

Davies is fond of talk of the virtues. All seven of the traditional list appear in *The Rebel Angels*, along with the Seven Deadly Sins,[44] and both the virtues and the vices crop up from time to time throughout much of his writing. He adds three particular vices of Canadian society: Puritanism, Philistinism, and Provincialism.[45] One virtue he mentions as primary, at least for Rabelais, is Honour, for it is said to "prompt people to virtuous action and hold them

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[43] Robertson Davies, *Samuel Marchbanks' Almanack* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1967), 130.

[44] Davies, *The Rebel Angels*, 44.

[45] Elspeth Fisher, "Robertson Davies: Canadian Moralist" (M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1965), 15.

back from vice."[46] He notes also that there are shadow sides to the virtues as well.

But how is it that practice of the Virtues has a self-reflexive, formative nature? Davies does not explicitly say, but he is fond of quoting St Paul: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." (Galatians 6:7, AV). That is, the consequences of what we do cannot be avoided, and these consequences will come back to us, as verse 8 points out: "For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting." What we do changes how we shall live our lives, and to think otherwise is to mock God, and is to try to cheat Fate.

An example of the Virtue Ethic model of moral theory can be seen in Davies' thrice-repeated definition of chastity: having the body in the soul's keeping.[47] The difference between right and wrong is not something which can be determined apart from the character of the person involved, and how honest that person is being to his or her destiny. Even fornication, notes Dooley about Mrs. Dempster, can be an act of Charity.[48]

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[46] Davies, *The Rebel Angels*, 314-315.

[47] Davies, *Tempest Tost*, 237; *A Mixture of Frailties*, 282; and *Rebel Angels*, 53.

[48] Dooley, "Baptizing the Devil," 118.

It is neither rules nor context which determine right

from wrong in Davies. When Simon Darcourt steals the

sketches Frances Cornish left to the National Gallery, his

theft, though technically illegal, was not morally wrong

because he was being faithful to his Destiny.[49]

Humphrey Cobbler, the cathedral organist in

Salterton, was very much an Erosser: "Cobbler was a man so

alive, and so apparently happy, that the air for two or three

feet around him seemed charged with his delight in life."[50]

When Hector Mackilwraith, that poor, pinched soul, says "I

know the difference between right and wrong, I hope."

Cobbler retorts "How nice for you. I don't." Cobbler's view

is the more honest and humane, and with it Davies dismisses

those who claim knowledge of moral absolutes. But this does

not mean that Davies is simply a moral libertarian or

relativist. Virtue is to be, and to act, as an Erosser;

vice is to be a Thanatosser. Davies does make moral

judgments in his books, but he refuses to make dogmatic

generalizations about good and bad behaviors, or to cooperate

with conventional morality for its own sake.

About moral standards Davies says:

> I think that every act must be weighed
> individually, there can be only general
> principles...[arrived at by] an endless
> process, and you just have to do the best you

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[49] Davies, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, *190*.

[50] Davies, *Tempest Tost*, 169.

can...You just have to live one day at a time
and hope you won't make too much of a mess.[31]

This is not to be understood as a "situation ethic,"
but rather as an example of what Hauerwas meant when he
wrote: "The moral importance of character, therefore, begins
to be seen only when the moral problem is taken to be the
agent standing before a decision."[32]

There is one notable exception to Davies refusal to
lay down moral absolutes, and that is in *The Manticore* when
Fr. Knopwood tells David that: "The great sin--quite
possibly the Sin against the Holy Ghost--was to use yourself
or someone else contemptuously, as an object of
convenience."[33] But even this is not so much a deontological
"thou shalt not" as it is a warning against the vice of
using people as means to ends, rather than seeing them as
ends in themselves.

One word which could be used to describe Davies'
moral theology is "incarnational." Body and spirit are not
antithetical, the spirit is not shackled by the flesh. Being
physical is an essential element of being truly spiritual,
for the body manifests the soul.[34] This is a very

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[31] Davies, "A Talk with Tom Harpur," 317.

[32] Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*, 33.

[33] Davies, *The Manticore*, 135.

[34] Patricia Monk, "Somatotyping, Scatomancy, and Sophia:
The Relation of Body and Soul in the Novels of Robertson
Davies," *English Studies in Canada* XII (March 1986): 79.

sacramental approach to existence--the body is the outward and visible (and necessary) sign of inward and spiritual grace. In *The Rebel Angels* especially, the figure of Rabelais is invoked as a symbol of the essential goodness of the earthy, bawdy, and erotic side of the human appetites. The denial of this element of life Davies disparages, often with ironical phrases like "gracious living" or "ghastly good taste." By this he means a sort of middle-class, bloodless refinement which excludes (probably out of fear) human warmth and vigour.[55]

On the other hand, to see the earthy elements as ends in themselves is equally an error. John Parlabane, who affects to be a modern Rabelais, misses the mark because he likes "the mess and the stink" for its own sake. Far from being a true Pantagruelist, he is a narcissistic "gross old bugger," although a very gifted one.[56]

An incarnational theology affirms the goodness of, and the necessity of, corporeal existence; to see the flesh as contrary to the spirit is in fact an implicit denial of the Incarnation of God in Christ. This is the heresy Geraint histrionically falls into while in the hospital.[57] Taking pleasure in the gift of physical existence is good, so long

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[55] E.g.: Robertson Davies, *The Papers of Samuel Marchbanks* (Toronto: Harpercollins, 1985), 248; idem, *Rebel Angels*, 298.

[56] Davies, *The Rebel Angels*, 67.

[57] Davies, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 269-273.

as the body is in the soul's keeping, and to take a true
Rabelaisian delight in life affirms this. Some Christians
mistrust the body, and condemn this approach to life as
"fleshy," because it sees the Kingdom of God in other than
purely spiritual terms. Orthodox Christianity teaches that
God called creation very good. Heaven is not populated by
disembodied spirits (contrary to popular imagery), but
instead Christianity affirms the "resurrection of the body":
a redemption of the flesh, not a mortification or
annihilation of it.

A good example of Davies incarnational theology, or
"spirituality of the body" as it were, can be seen, again in
The Rebel Angels, in his discussion of Sheldonian
somatotyping. If Fate and Destiny are to be equated, at
least in part, with God, then our body type in a sense is an
inescapable given--a sort of "predestination of the body."[58]
Much of who we are and what we must be is determined by our
bodies, and this is one way in which God comes to us in order
to help us become who we really are. To be fully alive, we
must be fully alive in body, mind and spirit, all of which
are gifts from God.

This incarnational theology is also the source, I
believe, of Davies' strong affirmation of the goodness of
ordinary life. The spiritual life is not divorced from the
routines of day-to-day living. Regarding the life of the

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[58] Monk, "Somatotyping," 91.

artist, he wrote: "So get to work, toiling in the bank or wherever it is by day, and serving the Triple Goodness at night and on weekends."[59] This is very much a reflection of his own life as a husband and father, working at a regular job as a journalist and teacher, which is the "ground" out of which his novels and plays are produced. Dunstan Ramsay is not much different: his life's work was hagiography, as he searched for the numinous in his life, but he had the ordinary job of a schoolteacher while he did it. Cobbler's advice to Solly and Veronica puts it best:

> Put first things first. Get married, and plunge into all the uproar of baby-raising, and loading yourself up with insurance and furniture and all the frowzy appurtenances of domestic life, as soon as you can. You'll survive. Millions do. And deep down under all the trash-heap of duty and respectability and routine you may, if you're one of the lucky ones, find a jewel of happiness.[60]

But the Good Life is not, Davies asserts time and again, the search for mere happiness. People who are obsessed with acquiring happiness as the ultimate goal are dismissed as morons, (e.g. Norm and Dutchy Yarrow), and Davies himself says

> Happiness is always a by-product. It is probably a matter of temperament, and for

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[59] Davies, *The Papers of Samuel Marchbanks*, 525.

[60] *Robertson Davies: Leaven of Malice* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co., 1954), 273.

anything I know it may be glandular. But it is
not something that can be demanded from life.[61]

Or again:

Don't imagine for a moment that I am going to
talk about that foolish thing happiness. I
meet all kinds of people who think that
happiness is a condition that can be achieved
and maintained, indefinitely, and that the
quality of life is determined by the number of
hours of happiness you can clock up. I hope
you won't bother your heads about happiness.
It is a cat-like emotion; if you try to coax
it, happiness will avoid you, but if you pay no
attention to it it will rub against your legs
and spring unbidden into your lap. Forget
happiness, and pin your hopes on
understanding.[62]

Happiness, in fact, can do much to interfere with the

development of a good and full life.[63] The Good Life, says

Davies, is

...the fully realized life, the fulfilling of
one's potential. The person who lives that way
can't help but be enormously valuable to an
awful lot of people. And he's not going to do
harm, because he knows himself....The place to
start living a better life is at home....[64]

The ordinary life is the context for the spiritual quest of

fully realizing one's life and potential.

Throughout Davies' works runs a contempt for

hypocritical or philistine religion, especially that of the

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[61] "The Table Talk of Robertson Davies," *McLeans*,
(September 1972) reprinted in *The Enthusiasms of Robertson
Davies*, ed. Judith Skelton Grant (Toronto, 1979), 345.

[62] Robertson Davies, "What Every Girl Should Know," in
One Half of Robertson Davies (Markham: Penguin, 1977), 50.

[63] Davies, *What's Bred in the Bone*, 87.

[64] Davies "A Talk With Tom Harpur," 319.

more Puritan, small-town Ontario sort, because it squashes the life out of people and prevents them--and they in turn prevent others--from fulfilling their potential and destiny. There are several characters who are outwardly religious but of whom Davies deeply disapproves and these characters often seem closer to being stereotypes or caricatures rather than individuals: the rich, but vicious, Anglican ladies of Salterton; the narrow-minded "Thirteeners" with their hick piety; the spiritual meanness of the churches in Deptford; the grim and spiritually suffocating parents of Hulda Schnakenburg; and the Methodist banker-elders who ruin William McOmish are but a few examples. Davies both satirizes and mercilessly attacks religion that is simply an external veneer on a spiritless, or even counter-spiritual core, and much that commonly passes for religion fits into this category. In Deptford, for example, the good Christian folk fail to recognize, and actively scorn, the one person of true sanctity among them, Mrs. Dempster, because their religion is too small. Hypocritical religion has done much to quench the Spirit, and to stunt, or even kill, spiritual growth. At its worst, religion of this sort can be used as a veiled weapon for real wickedness.

But religion at its best is supposed to be a vehicle of life and spiritual growth, and to be a way for people to enter into a relationship with God. Both superficial and constricting religion are in fact irreligion[65] and perhaps

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[65] Robertson Davies, A Voice From the Attic, 72.

even more to be despised than atheism, for they subvert true
religion and blind people to their falseness.

Religion often gets used by people for their own
purposes. A mean form of religion can be used as a sort of
spiritual masochism, if one believes oneself to be a martyr,
or a pretense of simplicity can hide a clever play for
power.[66] It can be simple self-indulgence: "...sweet self-
pity, mingled with tremulous self-reproach and a strong sense
of never having had a square deal from life, which passes for
religion with a lot of people."[67]

Bad religion is all too common (perhaps it is the
prevalent form) and it claims many victims, even among the
clergy. Simon Darcourt says:

> But the religion the world wanted from me
> didn't work, and it was killing me. Not
> physically, but spiritually. The world is full
> of priests who have been killed by religion.[68]

Two notable examples of this phenomenon are Amasa Dempster
and John Mackilwraith.

Davies seems to be sympathetic toward conscientious
clergy, struggling with the realities of a parish vocation[69]
and the realities of being professionally religious, for
parishes can be hard on their ministers. Some clergy cope,

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[66] Davies, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 67ff.

[67] Davies, *A Mixture of Frailties*, 38.

[68] Davies, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 428.

[69] Davies, "A Talk with Tom Harpur," 319-20.

and some don't, and it is interesting to compare the various clerical characters in Davies. His treatment of the clergy is often illustrative of what he thinks about their brand of religion, and he both mocks and approves.

The first is the Rev. Simon Goaste, B.D., the local Rector of Samuel Marchbanks, but we know little about him except that he is literary, and Marchbanks likes him. He sounds very much like Dean Jevon Knapp of Salterton--a worldly innocent in some ways, trying to be urbane, yet lacking the "proper reverence" for Mammon that many in his congregation thought he ought to have. He struggles with the external expectations made of him, and feels a little insecurity about his authority, yet he is spiritually insightful and confident, e.g. when he discusses with the gathered adversaries the true nature of Malice.[70] Pastor Sidney Beamis is a parody of the enthusiastic, poorly educated "holy roller" religious boob, who affects all the external airs of a parson (as he understands them), but is a man of very shallow spiritual substance. He is a very different person from Mr. Joel Surgeoner, the tramp saved by Mrs. Dempster's gracious act of charity, or from Thomas Gilmartin in *Murther and Walking Spirits*. Though they too are both fervent and poorly educated, they are sincere, honest, and in their own ways in touch with that for which Ramsay seeks in *Fifth Business*. Contempt is reserved for

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[70] Davies, *Leaven of Malice*, 266.

George Maldon Leadbeater, who preached that wealth and self-indulgence are what the Gospel of Christ is all about, and his sort of religion is only for those with a "spiritual sweet-tooth."[71]

The clerical star of *Fifth Business* is Padre Blazon, the Rabelaisian Jesuit whose theology owes more to the traditions of Carl Jung than to those of Ignatius Loyola. Here in Blazon's discourses I think that Davies' own religious voice can be most clearly heard as he theologizes about faith, myth, symbol, religion, stories and saints. In Gervase Knopwood in *The Manticore* we are presented with a very different man, serious and austere, but no less wise, and of an introverted rather than an extraverted temperament. The most sustained character is Simon Darcourt in *The Rebel Angels*, *What's Bred in the Bone* and *The Lyre of Orpheus*. It is difficult to imagine that this is not Davies himself as he would like to be were he a cleric. Obviously this liturgical and intellectually liberal brand of Anglicanism, disassociated from a local parish, appeals to Davies. In *Murther and Walking Spirits* (besides the cameo appearance by the real-life Father Boyle) Davies introduces perhaps the best of them all in the character of Hugh McWearie. McWearie began as a Presbyterian minister, but seems in his religious, intellectual, and spiritual development to have outgrown not only denominational affiliations, but mere

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[71] Davies, *Fifth Business*, 122.

Christianity as well, finding deep down the point of all true religion, the deep wisdom at the heart of the soul.

There are also several average clergy who do little real good, but relatively little mischief either. Their flaw is that they are too "churchy," having accepted, perhaps too uncritically for Davies, the respectable clerical identities expected of them by their churches. These include the broad Anglicans Canons Woodiwiss and Tremaine and the "high and dry" Anglican Cephas Willoughby; the rather conventional and strict Catholics Fathers Regan and Devlin; Presbyterians Phelps and Bowyer, the professional victim John Mackilwraith, and his successor James McKinnon; and the Methodist Wesley Gilmartin.

Thus there are four ideals of the professionally religious summed up in Padre Blazon, Father Knopwood, Simon Darcourt, and Hugh McWearie, all of whom are learned, who see religion as vital, and take it personally and very seriously. Of them all only Knopwood is a parish priest, and he only a Curate at that, and all, curiously, are unmarried. None of these four are triflers or dilettantes. They are authentic souls who represent to us the best of religion as Davies conceives it.

While on the subject of the clergy, it is not much of a digression to examine Davies' model of pastoral care. Pastoral care can be offered in several ways. The first is simply to retreat into the offering of perfunctory statements

of doctrine which may apply to the situation. The second is to offer comforting platitudes and sympathy, but little else; what Thomas Merton calls "the routine consolations of conventional religion." Any pastor of worth recognises that as common as these are, they are of little or no help, and may in fact do more harm than good. Davies recognises this too, and there are six specific instances of pastoral care offered by clergy that are of particular note. The first is Darcourt's advice to Hollier when he confesses having had sex with Maria; which bears a remarkable resemblance, in form at least, to Going's confession to Father Boyle at the end of *Murther and Walking Spirits*. In both cases the penitent is taken seriously by the priest, in both cases the same advice is offered, that is "tell your worst enemy what you've just told me," and in both cases absolution is not offered, because it would have been unhelpful in the long run. The third instance is the subsequent conversation between Going and McWearie, and again the pastor refuses to relieve him of a burden that only Going himself can carry.

The remaining three instances of pastoral care are all in chapter V of *The Lyre of Orpheus* when Darcourt listens to the stories of Maria, Arthur, and Geraint regarding Maria's pregnancy. Again, Simon does not offer mere sympathy and comfort, because comfort is not always the point of pastoral care, and an awful lot of comfort is just sugar-candy.[72] The

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[72] Davies, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 243.

common element in all six of these cases is that true pastoral care often amounts to both "a pat on the shoulder and a swift kick in the ass" as a pastor of mine once put it. It is real care, but involves no pulling of punches. The priest listens carefully, then insists that the person be honest with himself. The pastor is able to penetrate to the actual nub of the problem at hand, name it honestly for what it is, and put it into an objective, dispassionate light: a skill that comes only from deep care, long experience, and a healthy scepticism about what people say about themselves. This sort of care may seem to some people to be unsympathetic or harsh, but in fact any other response would allow people to avoid facing squarely who they are and what their problem really is, and this would help no one. Davies does not care for "soft" clergy, because they let people get away with deceiving themselves, and this would forestall any progress towards spiritual wholeness.

But if Davies eschews false religion, what for him constitutes real religion? As Darcourt says, being religious means: "...seeking to know, and to live, beneath the surfaces of life, and to be aware of the realities beneath the superficialities...."[73]

The religious life, as Davies defines it, is the quest towards self-knowledge and spiritual wholeness: living life as deeply and fully as one can. The famous quotation from

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[73] Ibid., 341.

Ireneus' *Against Heresies,* "The Glory of God is Man fully
alive," represents the central theme of all of Davies'
works. His novels are about the process of Sanctification
and the making of saints. His main characters are people
engaged in the process of achieving psychic and spiritual
wholeness and who are thereby becoming more and more alive,
"working out their own salvation in fear and trembling" [Phil
2:12]. *Tempest Tost* ends with Mackilwraith finally becoming
aware of his lack of wholeness, and how much of life he has
denied himself; Solly, Veronica, and Gloster all come to a
greater depth of peace in *Leaven of Malice;* Monica in *A
Mixture of Frailties* abandons false religion for true,
because the false is inadequate for the great mysteries;
Fifth Business is the story of Ramsay's growth towards
wholeness and his search for God; in *The Manticore* David
Staunton is reborn from the womb of the earth, from the holy
place of the ancestors, into a new and larger life; and the
examples continue for each of the novels. It is interesting
to note that in his latest work, *Murther and Walking Spirits,*
spiritual wholeness is achieved, or at least realized and
appropriated, after death. Shallow religion seeks solace and
comfort in order to avoid the risk and difficulty of true
spirituality, whereas the truly religious prays "O Lord make
me a saint, and do not spare me in the making." In his
description of Mary Dempster, Davies tells us that she was
truly religious, unlike her husband whom people said was

"deeply" religious in the conventional sense. She "lived by a light that arose from within" and was entirely without fear.[74]

The notion of saints is a recurring theme in both Virtue Ethics and Robertson Davies. For Davies, especially in *Fifth Business*, the saints are exemplars of the heroic life and spiritual wholeness. As has been noted in the preceding chapter, Saints embody the theological doctrine of Sanctification. This doctrine, besides being of great importance to the theology of Calvin, amongst others, has been a central theme in the Wesleyan, Methodist tradition since its founding. Davies often refers to his own Welsh Methodist heritage, and his recognition of its influence is obvious at least in the religious ravings of Geraint in *The Lyre of Orpheus* and in the narratives concerning the Gilmartins in *Murther and Walking Spirits*. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that because of this connection, Davies' writings might express an understanding of sanctification, and hence affirm a virtue approach to ethics.

True religion brings about what is traditionally called Salvation, which for Davies is expressed by several closely related themes: Spiritual Wholeness, which of necessity requires Reconciliation of Opposites, resulting in Freedom from Bondage.

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[74] Davies, *Fifth Business*, 52.

This reconciliation of opposites is an important theme
in Jung, and is absolutely essential if a person is to come
to wholeness: body and spirit; good and evil; male and
female; conscious and unconscious. Ramsay finds it in the
reconciliation of himself with his Devil; Francis Cornish
finds it in the Mystical Marriage of *animus* and *anima*. Life
in its fullness cannot be found if we ignore or deny whole
aspects of who we are. We must take them up as part
ourselves in order to be whole. The saints have not
eliminated their shadows; they still carry their shadows with
them, and because of this, there is hope for us.[75]

Spiritual wholeness brings with it a freedom to be
what one's destiny calls one to be, and all of the spiritual
forces which strangle the life out of a person are left
behind. When characters in Davies' novels experience this
freedom, it is experienced as a "rebirth" and it is often
accompanied by a renaming, for example Dunstable to Dunstan
Ramsay and Pearl to Veronica Vambrace. The parallel of this
with Christian baptism is obvious: the sacrament of rebirth
to eternal life, and the receiving of a new name in
recognition of the person's new identity. The themes of what
has come to be called "liberation theology" are tempting to
apply here, but are probably not appropriate, for they are
social and collective in nature, whereas salvation for Davies

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[75] Ibid., 172-173.

is much more of the Protestant, individualist nature: "the struggle of the Alone toward the Alone."[76]

Herein lies the greatest defect in the theology of Robertson Davies: it is too individualistic. There is little sense of an active community of faith, or of a "people of God" as a Church, except in a negative sense. His is very much a private religion, and the average parish church is for him a place of spiritual repression. This is not to say that there are no communities of fellowship which are important for developing the virtues; Davies has simply substituted the congregation with the Senior Common Room.[77]

On the other hand, the sort of individualism Davies exhibits and advocates may not necessarily be unorthodox at all. In his essay "The Individual and the Church" Karl Rahner asserts that there is a degree of individualism which Christians have over which the Church must not try to exert control.[78] Collectivism is the repressive nature of the Church, over and against which the individual must struggle. But insofar as he agrees with this, Davies fails to go the next step to the affirmation of the necessary participation in an explicitly Christian community, because religion is for him an entirely private affair.

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[76] From Plotinus, and quoted in *The Papers of Samuel Marchbanks*, 374.

[77] Davies, *The Rebel Angels*, 168.

[78] Karl Rahner "The Individual and the Church," in *Nature and Grace* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 28-29.

Faith for Davies is not merely intellectual assent to a body of dogma, nor, what is perhaps worse, unreflective credulity. McWearie's words sum up well the nature of faith:

> ...a qualified Yes, conditioned by a prudential No....That is to say, a fine credulity about everything, kept in check by a lively scepticism about everything.[79]

Being a believer and truly religious, in Davies' terms, are not necessarily the same as being conventionally religious or being a member of a church. There are those for whom the Church provides a helpful set of symbols, and others for whom it does not. Those "religious" folk who prefer to "keep religion in its place" do not in truth really believe, whereas some people who seem not to be outwardly religious are as "sound as a bell."[80] A particularly good example of the difference is found in the conversion of Monica Gall to real faith during her participation in the performance of Bach's "St. Matthew's Passion." The loss of her "Thirteener" religion was the abandoning of an idol, and the first step towards the true spiritual life.

There are religious depths in our unconscious selves that emerge unbidden from time to time. These are the urgings of Natural Religion, which is often difficult to

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[79] Davies, *Murther and Walking Spirits*, 22.

[80] Davies, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 357.

distinguish from superstition.[91] Some of these
manifestations are humorous, such as Amasa Dempster's baptism
of his infant son; some are profoundly serious, such as
Ramsay's prayer for the soul of Mary Dempster: "I was in the
grip of an impulsion that it would have been spiritual
suicide to deny."[92] This is much the same sort of impulse
that led Monica Gall to invoke in prayer the aid of St.
Genevième.[93]

Prayer for Davies takes two forms: the first is the
traditional form of "petition, intercession, and
contemplation." This means both prayers for others and a
conscious "pondering," by which Davies says he means a self-
examination and contemplation of the tangles of life which
tries to make sense of them, waiting for answers from the
deepest part of the self.[94] The second form of prayer is the
irresistible compulsion which drives people to their knees.
Examples of this are Solly's prayer for his mother's soul,[95]
Ramsay's prayer for Mary Dempster, Monica's prayer to St.
Genevième, and David Staunton's prayer to Maria Dymock. This

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[91] Patricia Köster, " 'Promptings Stronger' than
'Strict Prohibitions': New Forms of Natural Religion in the
Novels of Robertson Davies," Canadian Literature 111 (Winter
1988).

[92] Davies, Fifth Business, 245.

[93] Davies, A Mixture of Frailties, 248.

[94] Davies, "What Every Girl Should Know," 51-52.

[95] Davies, A Mixture of Frailties, 373.

sort of prayer is more like God praying through us, rather than something we do ourselves.

Of course false religion has its false sort of prayer. When Amasa Dempster died praying, he reminded God that he had forgiven his wife for ruining his life. This is a prayer of narcissism rather than a prayer of faith. Besides, it is untrue: it was his congregation that ruined his life, not his wife.

The language of true religion, says Davies, is the language of myth, symbol and archetype, wherein the Bible and the *Arabian Nights* are both true in the same way.[86] The Bible is a narrative source of myth, and therefore of revelation. The traditional expressions of faith, such as the Creed, too, are theological shorthand, containing only that which is barely necessary.[87] One must be able to see beyond the language of the Creed to its essence.[88]

Concerning Davies' understanding of Fate, Galligan writes:

> ...[W]e may think that we are free to do
> whatever we will with our lives, but the truth
> is that the only freedom we have is the freedom
> to play the role that the myth governing the
> story of our lives permits us to play....People
> who need to deny that truth can't stand to read

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[86] Davies, *Fifth Business*, 43.

[87] Davies, *The Rebel Angels*, 120.

[88] Davies, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 357.

Davies; people who can't see that as a comic
truth are puzzled by him.[89]

This understanding of Fate as the "myth governing the
story of our lives" is extremely helpful in getting at
another common element between Davies and modern Virtue
Ethics, and that is the concept of Narrative. Davies does
have a narrative understanding of selfhood. Our lives are
governed by a central myth which is our life story--our
τέλος --and whether we are living well or not depends on
how faithful we are being to this Destiny. Darcourt says in
The Lyre of Orpheus: "I think we all have a personal
myth...that has its shape and its pattern somewhere outside
our daily world."[90] The locus of its shape and pattern is
the realm of archetype and symbol. In order to know
ourselves, we must come to know our story, which is why
Blazon asks Ramsay to discover for himself who Mrs. Dempster
is in his personal mythology.[91] Or again, in order to
discover what was bred in the bone of Francis Cornish, the
angels had to recount his story.

Stories embody the truth, quite apart from their
"police-court" factuality. Again in *Fifth Business,* Ramsay
is told by Surgeoner that even stories as palpably false as
his one about the Sailor and the Widow's Mite are true in

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[89] Edward C. Galligan, "Three Times Three: The Novels of
Robertson Davies," *Sewannee Review* 93 (1990): 94-95.

[90] Davies, *The Lyre of Orpheus,* 285.

[91] Davies, *Fifth Business,* 177.

spirit, which is more important for it strengthens faith.[92] This, of course, Ramsay should have known from his study of hagiography.

It is in this way that the Arabian Nights and the Bible are true in the same way, for they embody and transmit the deepest human truths. Thus not only are our lives shaped by narrative, our lives become narratives, and wholeness can come only when we've learned our stories. In *Murther and Walking Spirits,* Connor Gilmartin, the ghost, came to an understanding of who he was by witnessing the stories of his forebears. Life, according to Robertson Davies, can only be understood and lived fully through stories which manifest the great archetypal myths. The Chief End of Man can only be learned by learning, and absorbing, the stories of God.

A central theme for Davies is the aforementioned tension between the formative influence of a person's community and the person's freedom to pursue the fulfillment of his or her own destiny.[93] His heroes rebel against and try to escape from the constricting legacy of their communities' formative power. Nevertheless, they come to realize the unavoidability of accepting that formation as a real and powerful part of the self. Those who remain small of spirit either never rebel, or refuse to be reconciled.

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[92] Ibid., 132.

[93] See pp. 10-11, 22 above.

Another source of revelation for Davies are the arts
of Astrology and even the Tarot, not in the occultic sense,
but in that they are "channels for intuition." In and of
themselves, or if they are attempted by amateurs, they are of
little effect. But their language is certainly that of myth
and archetype, and they therefore contain psychological
truth; and in the hands of a person who treats them with
respect they become vehicles for real intuition and perhaps
even psychic insight.[94] As Coster has noted, Frances
Cornish's horoscope contained several errors, and yet it set
forth admirably his identity in symbolic terms.[95] Because of
the use of mythological language and symbols, Tarot and
astrology can bring one into closer contact with the deeper
and darker parts of the Unconscious.

Some might want to argue that there is a synchretistic
tendency in Davies' treatment of Tarot, Astrology, the
Arabian Nights, the great myths, and the Bible as all being
sources of revelation. This would be so were he trying to
blend them all together into some great single method of
divination. But he does not: rather, they are all
subordinate to the single principle that, as sources of
myths, symbols and archetypes, they are all sources of
psychological truth.

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[94] Davies, *What's Bred in the Bone*, 359.

[95] P. Coster, "A Rum Start: The Redoubled Baptism of
Francis Chegwidden Cornish," *Canadian Literature* 116 (1988).

Myth and symbol, in Jungian terms, are the only way of apprehending the deepest truths of life. Tillich, Otto, Heidegger, *et al.* affirm that symbols, far from being mere signs, are the only language one can use about God. Tillich has said that the only thing that can be said about God without using symbols is that God is. Symbols are non-rational (as opposed to irrational) crystalizations of truth, and arise from the artistic vision.

All of this Davies affirms. Mythic elements underlie our apparently ordinary lives.[96] Drama, painting, literature, music and poetry, and all the arts, are the media of the spiritual language of myth and symbol. Or to put it negatively, "When religion abandons poetic utterance, it cuts its own throat."[97] Poetry and great art are the only way both to discover and to express the deepest truths.

The best example of this is Francis Cornish's painting, "The Marriage at Cana," which is a deeply religious painting because it is Francis' spiritual self-portrait "bodied forth" into the world using symbol and myth. True artists, says Cobbler, "are towers in which the carillon peals whenever God chooses to stir it with his mighty breath."[98] Or as Geraint tells Schnak: "...[M]y God showed himself in art. I couldn't trap God in the chapel. An

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[96] Davies, *Fifth Business*, 46.

[97] Davies, *The Papers of Samuel Marchbanks*, 453n.

[98] Davies, *Tempest Tost*, 248.

artist doesn't want to trap God; he wants to live and breathe God...."[99]

Such revelation cannot be apprehended by the mind alone, but only by strong feeling. When Monica is first exposed to Molloy's command of the "muhd" and the depth of feeling he is able to draw from, she has what can only be described as her first truly religious experience,[100] and having been moved "to a deep and solemn joy," she becomes a disciple of this Way. Or contrarily, when David is taken to the bear-cave by Liesl, he is not moved nor does he share her sense of the *mysterium tremendum* because he cannot feel enough for it to have any meaning.[101] Here we find Davies' one other moral absolute: the neglect of feeling is the deadliest of sins, because it results in spiritual death.[102] Even this moral absolute is asserted as the rejection of the vice of *accidie*. Deep feeling also has its shadow side: Hollier's cursing of McVarish in *The Rebel Angels* had power not because of a Gypsy spell, but because spells themselves merely focus the depth of feeling, in this case, Hate resulting from Pride and Envy.[103]

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[99] Davies, *The Lyre of Orpheus,* 416.

[100] Davies, *A Mixture of Frailties,* 111-112.

[101] Davies, *The Manticore,* 274.

[102] Robertson Davies, "The Deadliest of Sins," in *One Half of Robertson Davies* (Markham: Penguin, 1978), 65.

[103] Davies, *The Rebel Angels,* 264-267.

Here in Davies' understanding of art can be seen
again how his theology is incarnational, because he says that
the artist's task is to "body forth" i.e. make concrete, the
mysteries[104] and to find beauty where others have missed it,
then make it visible. Monica Gall first asserts this in *A
Mixture of Frailties*[105] and we hear it again in *World of
Wonders*,[106] but this phrase later becomes Davies' definition
of being truly religious. Simon Darcourt says that religion
is

> [T]he intense yielding to what is most
> significant, but not always the most apparent,
> in life. Some people find it in the Church,
> but I didn't. I found it in some damned queer
> places.[107]

This finding value where others have missed it is a prominent
theological theme in Davies. It is the artistic vision,[108]
and the alchemist's quest.[109] True religion is rooted in the
great mysteries of life, which Darcourt defines as "The
Kingdom of the Father...spread upon the earth, and men do not
see it."[110]

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[104] Robertson Davies, "The Conscience of the Writer," in
One Half of Robertson Davies (Markham: Penguin, 1978), 124.

[105] Davies, *A Mixture of Frailties*, 306.

[106] Davies, *World of Wonders*, 14-15.

[107] Davies, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 428.

[108] Davies, *A Mixture of Frailties*, 306.

[109] Davies, *The Rebel Angels*, 82.

[110] Davies, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 284.

This ties in extremely well with Murdoch's concept of moral vision, and is exemplified in Davies' repeated assertions that great art has a spiritually and morally decisive role to play in human life and the development of good character.[111] But art does not have to be of the best quality for it to be formative. For example, Davies analyzes the popular 19th century English melodramas in terms of their archetypical and symbolic content.[112] In *What's Bred in the Bone* the painting entitled "Love Locked Out" was not a particularly good painting, but it had lifelong, formative associations for Frances Cornish, and it remained amongst his most treasured. Or again, in *The Manticore*, the young David Staunton sneered at an admittedly sentimental painting of Christ and a Boy Scout, but Fr. Knopwood challenged his snobbery, and showed him how truth is not restricted to sophisticated expressions.

The great artists, those who are best able to find and reveal what others have missed, and those with great intuitive insight often have "a strong whiff of the Devil" about them, characters such as Cornish and Revelstoke who create from the inspiration of their own personal daimon, which Davies calls "manifestations of the artistic conscience... wedded to your destiny."[113] Such people are in

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[111] Fisher, "Canadian Moralist," 102.

[112] Davies, *A Voice From the Attic*, 78; "Jung and the Theatre," *One Half of Robertson Davies*, 147 ff.

[113] Davies, *What's Bred in the Bone*, 21.

very close contact with the realm of the Unconscious, which is the realm of the Archetypes and Muses, but also of the Shadow.[114]

As much as he believes in God, Davies also acknowledges the reality of evil. He writes openly about his belief in the Devil, perhaps as Dunstan Ramsay says "In an extremely sophisticated way, which would take several hours to explain."[115] Davies' obvious debt to Jung is nowhere more explicit than in his understanding of evil. His position is most tersely (and amusingly) revealed in his Gaudy Night Ghost Story, "When Satan Goes Home for Christmas." Satan is pouting and petulant because the world is celebrating the birthday of his "younger brother." He is not asked to celebrate Christmas with his family (due to a difference of opinion with his Father), nor does anyone celebrate *his* birthday. In accepting Davies' annual recognition of his birthday, Satan offers him a gift in return, and Davies asks for Santa Sophia:

> "I'll say this for you," said he, "you
> certainly know how to ask."
> "It is for the College, after all," I replied.
> He sighed. "Very well," said he; "but you must
> understand that I have only half that commodity
> you ask for--Ultimate Wisdom--in my possession.
> You shall have it for the College, and it's a
> considerable gift. When you'll get the other
> half I can't say."
> "I can," I replied; "I shall expect it promptly
> the very first time you go home for Christmas."

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[114] Davies, "The Conscience of the Writer," 133.

[115] Davies, *World of Wonders*, 39.

> He laughed for the last time, folded his
> splendid wings, and disappeared.[116]

The Jungian Shadow is the Devil's possession, and it is half
of the Ultimate Wisdom. Wisdom will be achieved and
wholeness will come when the Shadow is made part of the
conscious self; unless one grasps this truth and "shakes
hands with his Shadow" and makes it his own, then life in its
fullness will escape him.

Davies often half-jokingly (but only half) refers to
Satan as Christ's elder brother. This is a reference to the
Book of Job, 1:6 "Now there came a day when the sons of God
came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also
came among them." (RSV; the Hebrew word used here as a
proper name means literally "the adversary.") So Satan is a
son of God, and since the devil existed before Jesus was
born, Satan must be the elder brother. Technically, the way
Davies makes use of this obscurity is both hermeneutically
incorrect (because the word "son" referring to Satan is here
used differently than the way it is used in reference to the
incarnation of God in Christ) and heresy, for it denies the
orthodox Trinitarian position that the Son is co-eternal and
consubstantial with the Father. Davies seems to make this
statement with a wink and a nudge, but it is a very useful
bit of apocrypha for the Jungian description of the
relationship of good and evil one to another.

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[116] Robertson Davies, "When Satan Goes Home for
Christmas," *High Spirits* (Markham: Penguin, 1982), 61.

The Devil, says Davies is

> ...the symbol of unconsciousness, of unknowing,
> of acting without knowledge of what you're
> intending to do....The Devil is the unexamined
> side of life....[117]

The Shadow is the ghost of the unlived life,[118] and a person dominated by his or her shadow is in the grip of a terrible spiritual power and is capable of great evil.

Davies has often accused himself, quite unapologetically, of being a dualist because he affirms the necessary existence of both evil and good. Christian orthodoxy affirms the existence of evil, but teaches that it is an aberration, not a necessary part of existence. Davies, contrarily, asserts that without evil, neither can there be any good. He asks: "Am I a vile Nestorian? Am I a hateful Manichee? It seems very likely....If art makes me a Nestorian, a Manichee, a dualist, and probably a Gnostic, so be it."[119] Despite this, the evidence is that he is not quite so dualist or unorthodox as he might like to think.

Davies is certainly not a Manichee: Manichaeism is radical dualism, teaching that there are two equi-potent, eternally opposed deities of good and evil, thereby preventing one from attributing good and evil to the same source. Spirit and matter are entirely and eternally opposed

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[117] Davies, "A Talk With Tom Harpur," 317.

[118] Davies, "Gleams and Glooms," 240.

[119] Davies, "Phantasmagoria and Dream Grotto," 208.

to one another (Davies' incarnational theology excludes this), and though Good and Evil are mixed together in human life, the purpose of life is to separate them forever, thus rendering evil powerless.[120] No Jungian advocate could accept this. Apart from a superficial resemblance in the assertion of the reality of the distinct power of good and evil in human life, there is nothing in common, and much actively opposed, between Davies and the teachings of Mani.

Is Davies a vile Nestorian? Again, no, for Nestorius taught that there were two separate natures and persons in Christ, one human and the other divine (again radically dividing matter from spirit), as opposed to the orthodox teaching of the "hypostatic union" of the two natures in a single person. The charge of gnosticism shall be examined at length in chapter three.

If Davies must be found guilty of one of the early christological heresies, it is probably a sort of Semi-Arianism: that the Son of God is not fully divine, i.e. not co-eternal and consubstantial with the Father. Yet even Arianism is too dualistic to fit Davies well.

Davies' "dualism" is not of these sorts, for he does not see spirit and flesh as being opposed and hostile to one another. Davies does assert the necessary existence of evil, but in the Jungian sense that for spiritual wholeness one

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[120] Paul Edwards, ed. *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: MacMillan, s.v. "Mani and Manichaeism" by R. McL. Wilson.

must be integrated with one's shadow. Otherwise the shadow

will wreak its revenge in our lives, and we will become truly

evil. As Blazon says to Ramsay:

> Well done, well done! You met the devil as an
> equal, not cringing or frightened or begging
> for a trashy favour. That's the heroic life,
> Ramezay. You are fit to be the Devil's friend,
> without any fear of losing yourself to Him![121]

Those who have lost themselves to the Devil, who

become evil people or do evil things, are not a necessary

element in the world. Theirs is the tragic failure to be

spiritually whole, and the ignored, denied, and unlived part

of their lives gets the better of them. There are truly

wicked people and evil events in Davies' stories, to which we

are by no means to be reconciled, and which we are to reject.

Examples are the malice and shabbiness of Bev Higgin; the

wrath of Mrs. Ramsay as she chases Dunstable with a whip,

screeching in fury; Bill Unsworth's wanton destruction of the

cottage; Willard's sexual enslavement of Paul; Parlabane's

narcissism; and many others. These people are "possessed by

evil"[122] (i.e. their unconscious shadows), and the only way

to avoid this possession is through the conscious acceptance

of one's evil self, and by actively taking possession of it.

Davies' claim of dualism, therefore, ends up being in

fact a call to personal integrity and spiritual oneness, not

a dualistic separation. The malignancy and malevolence which

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[121] Davies, *Fifth Business*, 250.

[122] Davies, *The Manticore*, 154.

he quite rightly rejects is defeated by the holiness, or

sanctity, of spiritual wholeness. Evil in this sense is not

destroyed or eliminated, or even merely ignored, but instead

is transcended and redeemed. Its potentially destructive and

painful power is transformed into being a source of the

vibrant, erotic, vigorous, passionate life-force. This is a

thoroughly orthodox Christian position to take. In the last

resort, Robertson Davies is not a dualist, despite what he

might say. In the end Life eventually wins, though there

are terrible casualties. This is the truth of the Christ-

myth. In fact, Davies himself asserts this very conclusion

in his lecture "Thunder Without Rain":

> ...this union of opposites is something
> different from the dualism which Christian
> theologians have condemned....Dualism is the
> continual opposition of Good and Evil, the war
> in Heaven between God and the Devil, with the
> implication that at some time one of the op-
> posed forces will emerge as undoubted victor--
> but without saying which it may be. The union
> of opposites...is something else; it is the
> merging of apparent opposites to produce a new
> and stronger spirit in man, because it is in
> the soul, or heart, or mind of man--in all
> three we may presume--that the struggle is
> carried on....[123]

I think that in his claim to be a dualist, Davies may

be guilty of an equivocation, that is, using the same word to

mean two very different things. On the one hand, the Devil

is the archetype for the existence of evil, but somehow

Davies seems to have a sly admiration for him. On the other

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[123] Robertson Davies, "Thunder Without Rain," in *One Half of Robertson Davies* (Markham: Penguin, 1978), 263.

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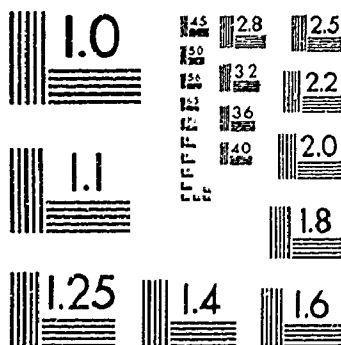
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hand there is the truly demonic, corrupt, malevolent King of the Thanatossers. This latter Devil is not the elder brother of Christ with whom we should wrestle and whom we should eventually befriend. This true malignancy which murders the spirit Davies rejects. The daimonic sort of devil he admires would appear only to the false, philistine religion of the crypto-thanatossers as demonic and evil, because it is in fact so full of the erotic energy of which they are frightened. Ironically, these sorts of religious folk are in fact in the service of the true Father of Lies but do not recognize it.

The problem of evil has long been a stumbling block for theists. The question of theodicy is: how is it that evil exists if God is both loving and all powerful? Evil is either allowed to exist, which means God is not wholly good, or it cannot be prevented, which means that he is not omnipotent. Many apologists have attempted to find a solution, and each is unsatisfying to a greater or lesser degree. Davies solves the theodicy problem by asserting the Jungian view that evil is necessary, and that spiritual wholeness can only be achieved by the acceptance and conscious integration of the Shadow and the self. This is dramatically portrayed by Davies in the fist-fight, resulting in sexual union, between Ramsay and Liesl in the hotel room in Mexico.[124] As with all other solutions to the problem of

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[124] Davies, *Fifth Business*, 223-227.

evil, this answer is not entirely satisfying, and the reason is because of Davies' equivocation on the word "evil." Ramsay tells Blazon that he has met the Devil in Liesl, and has befriended him. But, as much as Liesl may represent the unlived portion of Ramsay's life, she is not herself evil, or at least evil in the same way that Bill Unsworth is evil. Davies' solution is that we must all become one with our Liesls if we are to avoid becoming Unsworths.

Robertson Davies presents in his novels and other writings an extensive and consistent theology, that, although having some defects, is more or less orthodox. The three main departures from traditional Christian orthodoxy are: his denial that Jesus Christ is the unique saviour for humankind; his understanding that Holy Scripture, though the Word of God, is not the unique source of divine revelation; and his individualist, or perhaps better, cosmopolitan, understanding of the practice of faith. Besides these three points he is within the mainstream of modern, liberal Protestant theological thought, whether he likes it or not. He has things to say about the theological subjects of God, Christ, the Devil, atheism and faith, prayer, pastoral care, the problem of evil, true and false religion, revelation, salvation and predestination, and moral theology and the good life, and he hints broadly at ecclesiology and eschatology. On the other hand there are some theological topics he does

not pick up, but then he did not set out to solve all of the problems of systematic and dogmatic theology.

Moreover, this theology addresses all of the dominant themes of the current formulation of the Virtue Ethic theory. The characters in Davies' novels progress in wholeness and sanctity. They progress in the development of their moral character. Artistic vision is a central character-forming concept. Davies expresses a narrative understanding of the self and society, and as a storyteller expresses himself in narrative. He uses the traditional virtues several times, and he has ideal types of persons, such as the clerisy, who display these virtues. The theme of Sanctification runs through the novels; and he often makes reference to the saints, especially in *Fifth Business*, to express a narrative understanding of sanctity. Davies openly rejects rule-based ethics, is impatient with utilitarian approaches to life,[125] and doesn't talk at all about the Good being conditioned by the situation. For Robertson Davies it is clear that the good depends entirely on the character of the person acting, and how faithful that person is being to the story he or she has been assigned by Fate.

The next task is to determine whether Davies fits into any particular theological tradition. It is my opinion that he most aptly described as a modern Christian Stoic, as shall be seen in the next chapter.

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[125] Davies, *Tempest Tost*, 182.

CHAPTER 3

STOICAL SANCTITY AND THORPE'S "GNOSTIC SPIRIT"

I intend in this section to show that Davies' ethics and theology closely parallel that of the ancient stoics, and it is my contention that his melange of Christian, Jungian, and classical Stoical traditions is both coherent and consistent. I do not, however, assert that there is a direct influence of the Stoa on Davies, or that Davies is deliberately reproducing their doctrines in his work.

But before we can begin, one particular issue needs to be addressed. In his Ph.D. dissertation on the novels of Robertson Davies, Brian Thorpe has accepted Davies' own self-accusations of unorthodoxy and dualism, and sets forth the conclusion that Davies exhibits a "modern gnostic spirit." If my thesis is correct that Davies is not so unorthodox as he wryly claims, then Thorpe's conclusions will need to be addressed. I shall argue that, contrary to Thorpe's thesis, Davies does not in fact display any evidence of a gnostic spirit, contemporary or otherwise, and that by appealing to the thought of the Stoics Thorpe's observations will be accounted for.

For the purposes of the present argument I shall provide simply a brief sketch of classical Stoic beliefs and then show they are easily discernable in Davies. This survey is not intended to be an exhaustive description or a detailed analysis, for the tenets of the Stoa are well documented in many places.

The ancient school of philosophy known as Stoicism began with Zeno of Citium (ca.336--ca.265 BCE), who lectured in the marketplace in Athens from the Painted Porch ($\Sigma\tau\grave{o}\alpha$ $\Pi o\kappa\iota\lambda\eta$). The Stoa are generally divided into three periods, Early, Middle, and Later, the latter of which Seneca (ca. 4 BCE-65 CE) and Marcus Aurelius (121-180 CE) are the two most famous proponents.

The Stoics divided the study of philosophy into three main areas *viz.* logic, physics, and ethics, the latter being for them of primary importance, and shall be the only area of interest for the present discussion.

The Stoa taught that the end, or $\tau\acute{\epsilon}\lambda o\varsigma$, of life is Happiness ($\epsilon\grave{u}\delta\alpha\iota\mu o v\acute{\iota}\alpha$) in the technical, rather than common sense of the word. Davies' condemnation of the shallowness of the modern search for mere happiness is not to be confused with the Stoic's understanding of Happiness as ultimate spiritual well-being.

Freedom to live the undisturbed, unruffled, unperturbable life through self-discipline was the Stoic ideal, so that one might be steadfast and strong despite

misfortune and trouble in life. Happiness consisted in Virtue, and the life lived by the Wise Man was the Good Life, lived in conformity to Nature. Here again, "Nature" has a specific meaning, referring not to the desires of one's own personal nature, or even to the laws of the "natural world," but rather to a life lived according to Reason, that is, in conformity to the will of God. The word "God" was used by the Stoics synonymously with Nature, Fate, Destiny, Providence, Reason, Word, Fire, Creative Fire, and Soul of the World amongst others. The virtuous person wills to live according to the Will of God. But this Will of God is inescapable and irresistible, and the Stoics saw life as entirely determined. Whence then Virtue, if one has no choice? The only thing within human power, the Stoics asserted, is the ability to choose to conform with that which shall be. The assent of the will is the only power we have, and we must choose to cooperate with Fate rather than struggle vainly against it. Freedom is to choose consciously that which one would do in any case.[1] Seneca said it best: "Fate guides the willing, but drags the unwilling."

The Stoics used several proofs for the existence of God. The most appealing in the context of the study of Davies is their "proof by consent":

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[1] Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, (new rev. ed.) vol. 1 *Greece and Rome, Part II* (Garden City: Image, 1962), 133.

> We usually attach great weight, writes Seneca,
> to what all men take for granted, and in our
> school universal acceptance of anything is
> evidence of its truth. Even so we infer that
> the gods exist, for this reason, among others,
> that there is implanted in everyone an idea of
> deity, there being no people so far beyond the
> reach of laws and customs that it does not
> believe in gods of some sort at any rate.[2]

This Stoical conception of God and Fate is in every

respect that of Robertson Davies, as described in the

preceding chapter. Although Davies rejects the idea of

attempting to prove God's existence, I think that he would

approve of this "proof by consent," because it is almost

exactly that which Davies notes is used by Jung: "For Jung,

God was a fact for which evidence existed in the mind of

man...."[3]

Stoicism is fundamentally an ethical philosophy which

is based entirely on the virtue/character model. In reaction

to the philosophical schools which emphasized metaphysical

speculation and rhetorical debate, the ancient Stoics held

that all human philosophical endeavour was to develop virtue

and to provide practical ethics for daily living. Seneca

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[2] H.B. Timothy. *The Tenets of Stoicism, Assembled and Systematized from the Works of L. Annaeus Seneca* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1973), 52.
   Another example:
"There is an innate disposition to believe in God; the universal belief in God attests to the existence of this disposition or preconception; to ignore it is to cripple reason, to use it is to believe in God."
   Paul Edwards, ed. *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: MacMillan, 1967), s.v. "Stoicism" by P. Hallie.

[3] cf. note 33, Chapter 2.

taught that philosophy is supposed to teach one how to act, not simply debate.[4] True philosophy is the root of all life and leads to living well;[5] the true "love of wisdom" must be for helping us learn what to avoid and what to aim for, because Wisdom is understood as learning how to discern good from evil.

The $\tau\acute{\epsilon}\lambda os$ of life is the acquisition of Virtue. Virtue is the state in which the one who possesses it will always choose what is right, and its possessor is the Wise or Good Man.[6] For the Early Stoa, Virtue was all-or-nothing. One was either entirely virtuous or not at all. This rigid position had been tempered by the time of the Later Stoa, so that Seneca could talk about being on the path toward Virtue, and that people could progress in the acquisition of it.[7] "No man...is good by accident. Virtue is something that must be learned...."[8] One acquired virtue by imitation of the Wise Man, and by both learning and practicing what one had learned; in short, by observing Virtue in others.

The only evil is vice, the only good is Virtue. All other evils only appear to be evil, for their effects cannot

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[4] Timothy, *Seneca*, 14.

[5] Ibid., 19.

[6] F.H. Sandbach, *The Stoics* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975), 28.

[7] Timothy, *Seneca*, 34.

[8] Ibid., 34.

really harm us, and indeed serve to make us stronger.
Character is formed through hardship. In the Stoical
universe, good and evil require each other,[9] for Fate (i.e.
Providence) has ordained all things to work together for the
best. Fear is hereby removed from life, for what we perceive
to be threatening to harm us cannot.

The Stoic virtues were essentially the Platonic viz.
justice, self-control, bravery, and wisdom ($\phi\rho\acute{o}\nu\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$ or
moral insight), the latter being the one by which the other
three were defined. Hence the virtues were all of a piece,
and though they could be distinguished one from another,
according to classical Stoicism, one cannot be possessed
without the others.

For Davies, the $\tau\acute{\epsilon}\lambda o\varsigma$ of life is Sanctification and
spiritual wholeness: $\epsilon\grave{\upsilon}\delta\alpha\iota\mu o\nu\acute{\iota}\alpha$ in short. And as I have
shown above, his ethics are of the Virtue and Character
type. Like modern virtue ethicists, he parts company with
the strict Stoical position on the unity of the virtues.
Since he does not set up formal systems, he makes no original
list of virtues of his own (though he does mention the
traditional ones several times) and it is clear that in
Davies one may possess some virtues but not them all, Giles
Revelstoke and Frances Cornish[10] being two cases in point.

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[9] Alasdair MacIntyre, A Short History of Ethics (New
York: Collier, 1966), 105.

[10] Davies, The Rebel Angels, 44.

Further, like Seneca, Davies affirms that one progresses and develops in Virtue or Sanctity. Each of his novels is the story of moral and spiritual progression of its hero. For example, Monica Gall's pilgrim's progress is the subject of *A Mixture of Frailties*. Monica becomes a person of great character (though with at least one tragic flaw which led to the death of Revelstoke), and she changes from being a "good girl" into a "virtuous woman" in the truest sense of the words.[11]

Echoes of Stoical ideas are evident in Davies' concept of evil, and in his affirmation that hardship in life can contribute positively to the formation of a worthwhile character. One must learn Virtue at the feet of a master: it cannot be acquired simply by dint of personal effort, as is illustrated in Monica Gall's studies with Domdaniel, Cornish's study with Saraceni, and Paul Dempster's study of Sir John, which, he says, was an "education by observation."[12]

The way to Virtue, taught Zeno, was through self-mastery, detachment from material wants, and freedom from the tyranny of one's passions. Although Zeno himself led an austere and ascetic life, later Stoics taught that it was not the total rejection of material creature-comforts, but personal detachment from them which led to the Good Life.

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[11] Davies, *A Mixture of Frailties*, 281-282.

[12] Davies, *World of Wonders*, 161.

The only Good thing to be desired in life, said the
Stoa, is Virtue, and Virtue must be sought for its own sake
alone. Any other τέλος , eg. to seek to become virtuous for
some personal gain, would be to become vicious indeed. As
Seneca said: what τέλος could be higher than the highest
good itself?[13] All other things are ἀδιάφορον or "things
indifferent." Some adiaphora were advantageous and to be
preferred, like wealth, health, and prestige; others were not
to be preferred (these are the "apparent" evils); still
others were entirely neutral. But in and of themselves, they
were of no importance to the attainment of true Happiness.

We are to use, but not to be enslaved to, the gifts of
Fortune; concerned but not anxious for the needs of the
body.[14] Indifference to Fortune is a way of escape to
freedom from bondage to pleasure and pain.[15]

> Let a man be uncorrupted and unconquerable by
> externals; let him admire himself alone,
> relying upon his mind, ready for one fate or
> another, the architect of his life.[16]

The desire, or even need, for material wants only serves to
disturb life and one's tranquility, because they enslave a
person to the vagaries of Chance.

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[13] Timothy, *Seneca*, 35.

[14] Ibid., 21.

[15] Ibid., 94.

[16] Ibid., 25.

Now it may be argued that the characters in Davies
seldom want for wealth, and the apparent Rabelaisian
indulgence of which Davies obviously approves would seem to
contradict the Stoical ideal of detachment from material
desire. But it must be observed that the Stoa, especially
the Later Stoa, did not repudiate material luxury: they
simply insisted that one should not be so attached to it that
it would be missed should it vanish. Seneca particularly was
criticized for his apparently lavish and indulgent manner of
life while he advocated, hypocritically some thought,
detachment. In fact a truly Rabelaisian approach to life
accepts with delight the gifts of Fortune, but does not
despair when they vanish. Rabelais' own will is a case in
point: "I owe much; I possess nothing; I give the rest to
the poor."[17] So in Rabelais, as in Davies, wealth and
material comforts are to be enjoyed, and preferred to
poverty. But they do not lead to Virtue and Wisdom, that is
to the *Vita Beata*. And though they can make life pleasant
they do not, and cannot, make it Good. Again the example of
Humphrey Cobbler is helpful: he is a man of inspired yet
disciplined talent, but of a Rabelaisian temperament, and
without much money, and yet his life displays a grace and
beauty utterly denied to the wealthy and vicious ladies of

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[17] Clifton Fademan, ed. *Little, Brown Book of
Anecdotes* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1985), 461.
Also Robertson Davies, *The Rebel Angels*, 262.

Salterton. Squalor, we see, is not lack of money, but lack of character.

On the other hand, Parlabane affects to be a modern Rabelais, but we know that he is not, for he is, though poor, truly squalid, and truly enslaved to the externals of life, not to mention intellectual pride. Seneca's warning here applies: "Philosophy has proved perilous to many when employed with insolence and arrogance."[18]

The passions, too, disturbed peace of mind, and were to be disciplined and suppressed. By this, one achieved the virtue of ἀπάθεια. This is not "apathy" as it is understood today as ennui and disinterest. Ἀπάθεια is not acedia, but is rather freedom from domination by the rages, torrents, and caprice of the passions.

This is best illustrated in Davies in a passage from his short story called "A Christmas Cabal." The protagonist, Dr. Fred Scrooge, director of the Great Museum, has acquired the services of a genie so that he might give the gift of a Merry Christmas to his three colleagues (and rivals). Despite his best efforts the genie fails due to the spiritual shallowness of the three intended recipients. At the end of the story the disappointed Dr. Scrooge says to the contrite genie:

> "You are to give me a Merry Christmas. To hell with Merry Christmas to those who are without faith and therefore without joy. Be very

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[18] Timothy, *Seneca*, 14.

> careful because it is my mind, my personality,
> indeed with my very soul, that you will be
> working. I command you, in the name of Allah,
> who alone is great, who sits throned in
> eternity, above the shifts of time, to give me
> a mind free of craving, pleasure and fear. And
> watch your step."
> The genie resumed his true guise, naked,
> splendid and awesome. "I hear and obey," said
> he.[19]

The sentiments in this passage would not be out of place in

any of the writings of the classical stoics. Davies'

reference in this story is, he says, to a quote from George

Santayana: "Happiness is impossible, and even inconceivable,

to a mind without scope and without pause, a mind driven by

craving, pleasure, or fear."[20] This is of course not to

assert that Santayana was a stoic philosopher; yet this

particular passage is perfectly in keeping with the Stoical

spirit, and Davies has selected it because, apart from

whatever else Santayana thought, this represents well the

stoic ideal of the virtue of ἀπάθεια. For Dr. Scrooge, to

be virtuous is be freed from vices, three unruly and

disturbing passions, and this is typically stoic.

A possible objection to the application of Stoical

thought to Davies might here arise over this issue of ἀπάθεια

simply because of Davies' insistence that the deepest truths

are apprehended only by "deep feeling," whereas the stoics

taught that the Wise Man would be purged of all passion. Yet

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[19] Robertson Davies, "A Christmas Cabal" in *The Toronto Star* (Saturday Dec. 22, 1984), H1, H5.

[20] Ibid., H5.

even this can be seen in Davies. Just as Zeno's asceticism
had been tempered by the time of Seneca to "detachment," so
the elimination of passion can be seen to be tempered in
Davies to the *disciplining* of passion: passion under
rational control. And further, the Stoics did not want to
abandon all emotion entirely, just the passions,[21] for there
were "honorable emotions" such as love and joy. The
passions are, according to the Stoics, "excessive impulses"
rooted in error. These were Fear, Desire, Mental Pain
(jealousy, grief and, surprisingly, pity) and Pleasure.
Santayana's list is here assembled. Pleasure as a passion to
be avoided is not simply the experience of pleasant things,
which would be something indifferent, but rather compulsive
hedonistic desire. This is the source, I believe, of Davies'
rejection of the desire for mere happiness. Happiness as
Davies understands it is pleasant, a preferred adiaphora;
but simply because of this it is not to be sought after, or
else the search becomes the passion for pleasure. It is only
the passions, not feeling altogether, which one should not
allow to rule the self.

Finally, keeping with Davies' predilection for Jungian
categories, it could be said that one who is in the ruling
grip of unbridled passion is dominated by the Shadow. True
depth of feeling will only become accessible when the Shadow

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[21] Sandbach, *The Stoics*, 59.

is integrated with the self through discipline and spiritual wholeness.

Therefore it can be maintained that feeling *per se* is not contradictory to Stoicism: just domination by the passions. And Davies certainly advocates that such discipline is vital, especially in the creation of art, which requires deep feeling. For example, Domdaniel and Saraceni represent the highly trained, highly disciplined masters of their craft. Contrarily, Revelstoke, though brilliant, never quite achieves mastery, due to lack of discipline; and Saraceni accuses the pre-Raphaelites of the same problem: despite having lots of feeling, they had little mastery of themselves.[22]

In the end, the Stoical Wise Man transcends the limits of mere political boundaries and the absurdity of local government, and becomes a Citizen of the World[23] or the Cosmopolis. All of Davies' heroes climb to this height.

As was noted in chapter two, the spiritual life for Davies is essentially a private matter, and this individualism might be seen as not entirely in keeping with Stoical ideals, although his individualism is by no means a solipsistic selfishness and therefore neither is it entirely at odds with them. Davies' approach, I think, would be to assert that as each individual progresses more and more in

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[22] Davies, *What's Bred in the Bone*, 271.

[23] Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, 172.

wholeness, then the world as a whole will of necessity become a better and better place. As Fisher observed, the good society for Davies begins with the individual, and is made up of developed selves.[24]

Stoicism reflected a strong political concern for the well-being of the state. The Stoical Wise man must affirm the *res publica* and political life, for the virtues are more than just a means to individual happiness: each person has a duty to promote the good of the Cosmopolis. On the other hand, individualist strains are apparent in Stoicism. It was not a collectivist philosophy: the central stoical emphasis was on the "individual's control over his own soul";[25] and as Coplestone notes, the ideal of stoicism was spiritual self-sufficiency.[26] Kruschwitz and Roberts have put the relationship between the social and individualist natures of the stoics best:

> Stoicism, anticipating modern morality, is a philosophy of individualism, a symptom of the individual's being cut off from a close-knit community committed to a social goal of human flourishing. To be a citizen, in Stoic terms, can only mean to be a citizen of the world at large.[27]

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[24] Fisher, "Canadian Moralist," 60.

[25] Edmund Pincoffs, "Quandary Ethics," in *Revisions*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre (Note Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 96.

[26] Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, 125.

[27] Robert B. Kruschwitz, and Robert C. Roberts, Introduction to *The Virtues: Contemporary Essays on Moral Character* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1987), 11.

One famous tenet of stoicism is that one could embrace suicide as a rational option in life, if one is assured that there is no possibility of achieving Happiness. However, though the individualistic tenor of this act is noted, it must be pointed out that in Davies, suicide is always seen as a stupid act of the spiritually stunted.

Stoical ideas and influences are not entirely contrary or foreign to Christian orthodoxy. Despite the fact that Marcus Aurelius hated Christians, and despite the Christian rejection of certain Stoical ideas such as pantheism and reasonable suicide, elements of Stoicism may be found throughout the history of Christian thought. Some minor Stoical influences have been seen in the New Testament writings of Paul,[28] and many stoical doctrines were simply taken over by Early Church Fathers such as Cyprian, Tertullian, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria. "...[T]he fact is that a Stoic current ran through Christian thought before 250."[29] St. Jerome thought that Seneca himself ought to have been included in the catalogue of saints, primarily due to his "correspondence" with St. Paul, and until the 17th century, these 8 letters by Seneca and 6 by Paul were generally accepted as authentic (although no one today

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[28] *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), s.v. "Stoicism" by V. Cauchy and M Spanneut. For example, Galatians 5: 16-26 could easily be seen as having at least Stoical sympathies, so long as "flesh" is equated with "passion".

[29] Ibid.

believes that they are, or that Seneca was a Christian).[30]
There was much use of Seneca by the Medieval Church (eg. by
John of Salisbury), but by far the greatest adoption of
Stoical thought into Christianity was at the time of the
Reformation. Erasmus' monumental translation of Seneca
provided the springboard for the New-Stoical revival, which
first appeared among French Roman Catholics (though later
opposed by the Jansenists), and then, and most especially,
among the Puritans. Margo Todd's essay on the enormous
influence of Seneca's writings on the development and
vocabulary of Puritan ethics delineates the phenomenon
well.[31] The Bible alone provided the Puritans with little
by way of moral structure and theory, and much of Seneca
appealed to the Calvinist mind, though he was used
selectively, of course. Zwingli, Bucer, and even Calvin
himself approved of and quoted freely from Seneca. His
writings had an immense influence in the new humanism of the
Renaissance, thus on the classical education provided by the
Universities, and consequently on the Puritan divines and
preachers, and eventually, their congregations.

Two particularly good examples of this Stoical-
Christian phenomenon are Bishop Joseph Hall's books *Heaven*

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[30] *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Seneca" by M.
Spanneut.

[31] Margo Todd, "Seneca and the Protestant Mind: The
Influence of Stoicism on Puritan Ethics," *Archiv für
Reformationsgeschichte* 74 (1983), 182-199.

Upon Earth (1606) and *Characters of Vertues and Vices* [sic] (1608). These were the first systematic integration of Stoical thought and Christianity in English, and were translated all over Europe, being the most important Stoical Christian statements of the time.[32]

> By the sixteenth century, then, Seneca had become a deeply entrenched part of Protestant inheritance from the Renaissance, and his works had formed an integral part of the Puritan view of right behaviour.[33]

Considering Davies' Calvinist upbringing (an influence he has said that too few critics have taken sufficiently into account[34]), and with his interest in Renaissance humanism (Rabelais was a devoted fan of Erasmus), does it really come as any surprise that Robertson Davies might espouse a classically stoical point of view?

Hence, many Stoical themes are not at odds with Christian orthodoxy, and the identification of them does not negate the attribution of orthodoxy to Davies. On the other hand, gnosticism is heretical and heterodox: its dualism, its esoteric, synchretistic character, its denial of the goodness of creation, are entirely outside the received Christian tradition. Thorpe does not dispute this: he

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[32] Joseph Hall, *Heaven Upon Earth and Characters of Vertues and Vices*, ed. Rudolph Kirk. Rutgers Studies in English: Number 6 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1948).

[33] Todd, "Protestant Mind," 189.

[34] Robertson Davies, interview by author, 7 October 1992, Toronto, tape recording, personal collection of author.

simply asserts that elements of the gnostic spirit are discernable in Davies (an accusation Davies himself denies, by the way[35]). However, it is not possible to affirm or allow the coexistence of both stoical and gnostic elements in the same work, because they are in many ways incompatible and mutually exclusive philosophies. For this reason, therefore, if one is to assert that Robertson Davies' writings exhibit a more or less orthodox Christianity, and furthermore that this theology has much in common with classical Stoicism, one cannot also admit to the presence of gnostic ideas and understandings. The conclusion that Davies is a Gnostic is not merely different but contrary to the conclusion that he is a Stoic. Hence Thorpe's analysis must be adequately addressed if the present assertions of orthodoxy and Stoicism are to be maintained. In order to do so, a very brief synopsis of Thorpe's argument and conclusion follows.

Thorpe's dissertation is, he says, an exercise in relating theology to literature as "dialogue partners," and the works of Robertson Davies provide a particular case study. The "core symbol" which offers the theologian a "point of entry" into the work of Davies is that of gnosticism.[36] Thorpe is careful to assert that neither continuity nor direct influence of gnostic thought on Davies

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[35] Ibid.

[36] Brian Thorpe, "Discerning the Contemporary Gnostic Spirit in the Novels of Robertson Davies." (PhD. diss., McGill 1989), 60.

is being identified, simply that the similarities between them are indicative of the presence of the gnostic spirit's challenge to orthodoxy, and the goal of his study will be to discern that spirit.

Thorpe asserts that Davies' reaction against Christian orthodoxy appeals to an alternative vision to the repressive Puritanism of small town Ontario.[37] Just as the gnostics rejected the physical creation as corrupt and reacted against the world in a desire to escape, so too Davies' characters react against their worlds and seek to escape their mundane existence in order to find their true selves.[38] Thorpe admits that Davies is not hostile to the material world as the gnostics were, but the gnostic spirit is discerned in the dynamic of the need to escape.[39] This rejection of the existing order leads to the desire to escape through knowledge or *gnosis*. Again, Thorpe admits that Davies does not show the gnostic need to be separated from the world in order to know, but does show the dynamic of *gnosis* as central to the realization of wholeness. This saving *gnosis* is found within the self rather than in the exterior world, and consists in knowledge of the self. Gnostic "revealer figures" needed to begin the awakening process appear in the novels. Thorpe identifies Davies' gnostic resistance toward

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[37] Ibid., 56, 4.

[38] Ibid., 108-109.

[39] Ibid.

communal values and his strong anti-institutional stance;
this individualism is chiefly due to an individualist
understanding of evil.[40]

Gnosticism is essentially dualist, and according to
Thorpe, Davies affirms the Jungian dualism of the self and
the shadow, which need to be kept in balance and dynamic
tension for personal wholeness. To the gnostic
understanding, Fate is hostile, but its grip may be loosened
and one's life pattern changed by the unexpected
introduction of *gnosis*. Thus one may be led to a greater
fulfillment of self, and this Thorpe illustrates with
examples from the novels. Davies exhibits elements of
gnostic scorning laughter in his satirical treatment of the
mundane order, and just as gnostic ethics were either
ascetic or libertine (generally the former), so too the best
characters in Davies deny their fleshly existence, generally
with celibacy. The $\tau \epsilon \lambda o s$ of the gnostic heroic journey is
individual wholeness, and it is just here in Davies'
individualism that the gnostic spirit is most strongly
seen.[41]

Thorpe has stated correctly that the gnostic spirit is
essentially dualist.[42] In the previous chapter of this
present study it was demonstrated that, except superficially

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[40] Ibid., 133, 153, 145, 235.

[41] Ibid., 200-201, 238, 261, 323 ff., 275.

[42] Ibid., 194.

(what Davies calls his "shorthand way"[43]) the works of Robertson Davies do not affirm dualism. Quite to the contrary they are at heart monist. The Stoics, too, had at the core of their philosophy a fundamental monism. Davies advocates a movement towards unity and the reconciliation of opposites, rather than the keeping of them in balance or creative tension. The Gnostics would not generally have accepted the reconciliation of the principles of body and soul, light and darkness, self and shadow.

Secondly, Thorpe has himself admitted that Davies does not exhibit a sense of hostility between the material and spiritual natures of human existence.[44] This present thesis has demonstrated that Davies' theology is essentially incarnational, affirming the goodness and necessity of both body and spirit for authentic human existence and spirituality. By paralleling the gnostic desire to escape from the dominant world of matter with the desire of the main characters in Robertson Davies to escape the dominant social world of repression, Thorpe has done two things. First, he has avoided the real issue of the gnostic matter/spirit hostility by appealing to the metaphor of "escape," as if this were the essence of the gnostic dynamic. But it is not necessarily so. Many philosophical and religious schemata stress escape from one world to another as a central theme,

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[43] Robertson Davies, interview by author, 7 October 1992.

[44] Thorpe, "Gnostic Spirit," 57.

including orthodox Judaism (the Exodus) and orthodox Christianity (eg. Acts 2:40). In fact Thorpe's argument here contains the germ of its own demise. In the thought of the Stoa, the Wise Man became detached from mere locality and belonged to the great Cosmopolis. In his analysis of this metaphor of "escape" Thorpe quotes John Lennox: "Implicitly or explicitly, the vocabulary, idiom and tone of the Deptford narrators claim international citizenship rather than any specific patriotism."[45] Hence the characters are not seeking "escape" in the gnostic sense, but eventually become members of the great Stoical Cosmopolis.

The second point about his use of the escape metaphor is that Thorpe has not adequately taken into account the gnostic spirit's dualistic complete rejection of the abandoned former life in favour of the new, whereas Davies affirms that whatever is "bred in the bone" cannot be avoided if one is to achieve self-knowledge and wholeness. Blairlogie, Deptford, and Salterton could never be simply excised from the lives of Frances, Dunstan and Monica. On the contrary, they had to be taken up as formative parts of these now larger selves. Even the shaping forces of repressive religion cannot be abandoned if one leaves conventional religion in order to enter into the larger religious "Cosmopolis." For example, Dunstan Ramsay

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[45] John Watt Lennox, "Manawake and Deptford: Place and Voice," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 13 (Fall 1978), quoted in Thorpe, "Gnostic Spirit," 29.

remained a life-long Presbyterian, despite being non-practicing. His Calvinism had shaped who he was to become, and to abandon it entirely would be to ignore a very large part of who he really was. Self-knowledge and spiritual wholeness mean, in Davies' terms, the incorporation of one's past, even if one has outgrown it, as an essential part of oneself. This dynamic of reconciliation contradicts, and in fact actively militates against, the attribution of a gnostic element to Davies. "Escape" alone cannot be an adequate criterion for the discerning of a gnostic spirit. It is the sort of escape desired which gives it a gnostic flavour.

Without the twin distinguishing marks of dualism and the rejection of material existence, the attribution of a gnostic spirit would seem to be very difficult to maintain. Furthermore, the sort of *gnosis* traditionally associated with the gnostic tradition is that of esoteric, spiritual, secret revelation, a type of knowledge Thorpe admits is not present in Davies. The self-knowledge which he correctly discerns is common to many traditions. Again, it is the sort of knowledge which is the gnostic mark, not knowledge *per se*. The search for interior knowledge is not necessarily indicative of a gnostic spirit: merely spirit as such. This knowledge, Thorpe explains, leads to escape from bondage to the given order for Davies' characters. In this I think he has made a mistake of causation. The characters who achieve self-knowledge in Davies have done so only after escape, not

before. Escape for them is the precondition for the knowledge which leads to wholeness, not the result of it. In gnosticism, *gnosis* leads to liberation. In Stoicism, as in Davies, freedom leads to knowledge.

With these four pillars of the gnostic spirit gone, the system must collapse. There is now no longer any reason to postulate that the guiding helper-spirits in Davies might parallel the gnostic revealer figures; and as Thorpe himself notes, they do not correspond exactly: in Davies' novels they themselves belong to the material world they are trying to lead others out of. They might just as easily, and in fact more reasonably, be seen as Stoical Wise People and patterns for the development of Virtue.

Thorpe asserts that gnosticism rejects Virtue.[46] Since Davies' moral position is clearly that of virtue, then this too witnesses against the discerning of a gnostic spirit in his work.

Despite Thorpe's analysis, the concept of Fate in Davies is certainly not hostile, as the gnostic attribution requires. For Davies, as for the Stoics, Fate simply is, and though its methods may be rough, and God may be a Rum Old Joker, life is not essentially against us. Our character may be shaped and changed by Fate, with the odd change brought about by Chance in the circumstances of our lives. But we cannot escape it, nor affect it, says Davies, even through

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[46] Thorpe, "Gnostic Spirit," 232.

knowledge. It is Providentially for our own good and wholeness, and this view is classically Stoical. The only thing we can do, and ought to do, is embrace it and hang on, and be as faithful to it as we can be.

Regarding gnostic laughter, it is true that Davies is a humorist and a satirist; and although he laughs, he never laughs to scorn, as one critic put it.[47]

Finally, Thorpe states that Davies' individualism is the strongest evidence for confirming the presence of a gnostic spirit in his novels. However, it must again be pointed out that it is not individualism itself, but the sort of individualism that Davies espouses which matters most. And there is a degree of individualism that is not foreign to Stoicism.

Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self* has noted that the modern sense of identity, fragmented and individualistic as it is, is to a large degree rooted in a self-reflexive language of inwardness which, he says, was an inevitable consequence of the Enlightenment. Though classical stoical theory was not expressed in this subjectivist way, Taylor states that Shaftesbury (who has lent enormous shape to the processes which have resulted in the modern sense of self) embraced Stoical philosophy, and expressed his Stoical

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[47] Köster, "Promptings Stronger," 80.

convictions in this language of inwardness.[48] Thus, if one in the 20th century were to express a stoical philosophy (e.g. Robertson Davies) it would also be in this inward, individualist way. So too I would argue, following Taylor, that the sort of individualism which Thorpe attributes to a contemporary gnostic spirit is simply a sign of the contemporary spirit as such,[49] and could just as easily by Stoical as anything else, and probably more likely so.

Thorpe has realized correctly that a case cannot be made for the discernment of overt gnostic themes in the works of Robertson Davies, so he broadens his criteria, and searches only for a gnostic "spirit." But the criteria he uses have been so conditioned and applied so generally, that they have, unfortunately, become utterly ambiguous, and so loose that they could be used to discern a gnostic spirit in just about anything, and are therefore of little use.

The themes of escape and knowledge, and the presence of "revealer figures," laughter, and individualism are indeed elements of gnosticism, but this does not imply that they are therefore indicative of the gnostic spirit. This is not a case of "where there's smoke there's fire"; but instead the

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[48] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 255-56.

[49] See also Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 232 ff. for another description of the phenomenon of the modern spirit of religious individualism.

fallacy of *post hoc ergo propter hoc.* Although these things are identified in gnosticism, we cannot then infer that they are either caused by it, or that by them the presence of a gnostic spirit is proved as their necessary precondition. The identification of Davies' monism is not simply the removal of one pillar of support for Thorpe's argument, but vitiates his whole project.

Fundamentally, the problem is that Thorpe has accepted Davies' self-characterization of unorthodoxy *prima facie* and has consequently equated small-town Puritan Christianity with orthodoxy. But he has missed the point that conventional "churchy" Christianity is rejected by Davies precisely because he is orthodox and it is not. It is Davies' irony to say: if that is orthodox, then I am "un," as it were. In an interview, Davies said that he uses the word "unorthodox" about himself simple to assert that he is not a "card-carrying" member of conventional religion.[50] "Unconventional" need not necessarily imply "heterodox." Thorpe has unfortunately failed to examine Davies' own claims closely enough, and does not explore just what "orthodox" means and how Davies uses the word. It is conventional religion that is both unorthodox and has the gnostic spirit, according to Thorpe's own observation that dualism is the refusal to recognize the necessity of integration with the Shadow.

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[50] Robertson Davies, interview by author, 7 October 1992.

Despite the thorough arguing of his case, I cannot agree that there is any evidence of a gnostic spirit in the novels of Robertson Davies. There is, however, much to support the characterization of Davies as a modern, liberal Christian Stoic.

CONCLUSION

Robertson Davies is neither theologian nor ethicist, in the formal sense of the words, for he does not assemble systems or argue his positions. But in the stories he tells, a clear theology and a specific moral perspective exist, and it has been the purpose of this thesis to extract and identify that position, and impose a systematic structure upon it. His ethical position is that of Virtue Ethics; and the survey of the present state of the theological virtue argument has provided both an explication of this approach to moral behaviour, and also an approach to the understanding of fiction as a source for moral theology in its emphasis on the concept of Narrative. The identification of Davies as a liberal Christian Stoic has served first to affirm even more strongly his virtue ethics, and secondly to address what I believe to be mistaken identifications of gnostic themes in the works of Robertson Davies.

There are some who would agree that Robertson Davies is, as he says of himself, unorthodox and probably heretical. But I encourage such people to read Davies again, and to take a closer look at what he says. I, for one, find that he is a

trustworthy spiritual guide, and that his answers have a
strong ring of truth.

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