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**“Don’t You Know that Friendship with the World Means Enmity against God?”
Platonism, Stoicism, and Virtue Theory in Interpretations of James's Epistle**

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He [James] properly calls adulterers those whom he rebukes for having abandoned the love of heavenly wisdom and turned instead to the clutches of worldly friendship.... Indeed he had said above concerning the open enemies of God, *Do not the rich oppress you by their power and drag you to judgments? Do they not blaspheme the good name that has been called down upon you?* But that you might not consider enemies of God only those who openly blaspheme him, who persecute the saints for their faith in him, and condemn them by unjust judgments, he shows that they are also enemies of God who after faith and confession of his name become slaves to the delights and love of the world, who are faithful in name only and prefer earthly to heavenly things.... Whoever, therefore, wishes to be a friend of this world is an enemy of God. Therefore, all lovers of the world, all seekers after trifles, are enemies of God; all belong to those of whom it is said [in the Psalms], *Look, how your enemies, O Lord, will perish.* They may enter the churches, they may not enter the churches, they are enemies of God. For a time, they are able to flourish as grass, but when the heat of judgment appears they will perish and the loveliness of their countenance will vanish.

—Bede the Venerable¹

Bede the Venerable (672 – 735 CE) sets up my own approach to the question, “don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity with God?”—a question found in the fourth chapter of James, which is a Christian epistle found toward the end of the canonized New Testament—in at least three ways. First, he specifies the vice that

¹ Bede the Venerable, *Commentary on the Seven Catholic Epistles*, trans. Don David Hurst, O.S.B., (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1985), 48-49.

most concretely makes one an enemy of God: intemperance concerning money or “wealth.” Second, he raises a philosophical question concerning the connection between enmity with God and “unjust judgments.” Third, he makes the helpful and interesting observation that enemies of God can be found both in and outside of “the churches.” I pursue all of these avenues in the present essay.

In this essay, I argue that interpretations of James tend to fall in line with the “schools” of ancient philosophy. What do I mean by this? The category of the “world” in James 4 gets interpreted in (at least) three different ways by modern interpreters: (a) the “world” as signifying some whole, (b) the “world” as signifying the priority of particular vices over a set of required virtues for Christians, and (c) the “world” as signifying passions and pleasure over discipleship. The first interpretation of the “world” resembles Platonism; the second one reads James’s Epistle through the lens of Aristotelian virtue theory; and the third interpretation of the “world” resembles Stoicism.

For the conclusion, I defend one of the interpretations found in of one of the commentators. This commentator, however, offers both an Aristotelian and Stoic interpretation of James 4. My thesis statement is best put as a question: Don’t you know that friendship with the wealthy makes you an enemy of God?

The Odd Sense of James 4

Upon an initial reading, the first ten verses of the fourth chapter of James’s Epistle sounds quite odd or strange:

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to

be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.” Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. (James 4:1-10, in the NIV)

What do I mean by calling this passage odd or strange?² First, concerning the pertinent verse for this essay, the author of the epistle answers his own question but does so without an argument: “don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.” The address of “you adulterous people” offers a metaphor for who might become “an enemy of God,” but it does not provide a reason for why this metaphor ought to be used. The reader is left either accepting the author’s reasoning through the method of authority or having to make several inferences to understand the conceptual connections and logical reasons for the strict dichotomy between “friendship with the world” and “enmity with God.”³

Second the author raises another question that does not really make sense,⁴ at least in this specific context, as a question: “do you think Scripture says without reason that he

² I call it the odd sense instead of the more traditional phrase, the plain sense.

³ For me, it becomes difficult to ask this question, “don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God?” without thick sarcasm in one’s tone, one’s voice. From the fourth chapter of James’s Epistle, which is canonized toward the end of the New Testament, the author comes across throughout the letter as anything but sarcastic. After raising this specific question, for instance, the author immediately answers: “Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.” Such an answer might be warranted, but readers have to search for connections and reasons: conceptual connections between friendship with the world and enmity with God, and logical reasons justifying this seemingly false dichotomy.

⁴ Biblical scholar, Sophie Laws, backs up my puzzlement and fleshes it out more than I do here: James’s sentence, “Or do you think that Scripture speaks to no effect?” lacks an actual “correspond[ence] to any passage in the OT. Its meaning...is uncertain in three respects: it may be read as a statement or a question; ‘the spirit’...may be the subject or object of the main verb; and this ‘spirit’ indwelling men may be understood as the spirit given at creation...whether seen as good or evil, or as the special endowment of the

jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?” What is the “reason” Scripture gives us? Why does God “jealously long” for what God has “caused,” or given to, Christians (I infer that the “us” means Christians)? An analogy might be that if I give my daughter a new car, I become jealous of her because of her new car—the same car that I gave to her? What kind of God functions with this level of pettiness?

Third, in order to recommend ways to avoid becoming friends with the world, the author gives some very counter-intuitive—and perhaps counter-productive—advice to change one’s “laughter [into] mourning” and to go from “joy to gloom.” Inferring a strong connection between enmity and friendship, which means inferring that avoiding being an enemy with God entails enjoying friendship with God (for the “us”), then why would one wish to be friends with God if that friendship involves and requires “gloom” and “mourning”?

A Variety of Modern Interpretations of James 4

In order to address some of this oddness and strangeness, what American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce would label as the “remediable vagueness” of James 4, I outline various interpretations of the passage—with a special emphasis on the phrases “friendship with the world” and “enmity of God.” I focus on modern interpretations of James 4, and I base my explanations on three philosophical lenses that seem to shape those modern interpretations: Platonism, Stoicism, and Aristotelian virtue theory. Some interpreters approach James 4 with what I consider a Platonist lens, evidenced by versions of wholesale dismissals of “the world” rather than particular features of “the

Holy Spirit... These ambiguities cannot...be solved by appeal to the original context of the ‘quotation’ when that cannot be identified” (174-175).

world.” Emphasizing passion and pleasure, other interpreters read the phrase “friendship with the world” through a Stoic lens—by which, I mean, suggesting that the temptations of the world revolve around the invitation toward unnecessary passion and pleasure. Finally, other interpreters take a virtue-centered approach to the categories of enmity and friendship—which involves treating friendship with God and with the world in an Aristotelian way and/or identifying the virtues and vices required for enmity with God and friendship with the world.

Platonism

The famous Evangelical Christian theologian, N. T. Wright, offers an interesting representation of the Platonist interpretation of James 4. Wright writes:

[W]hat does he [James] mean by ‘the world’ here, and how does ‘friendship’ with the world in that sense relate to what he’s been saying about war, fighting, and asking for things in the wrong way? By ‘the world’ he seems to mean, as often in scripture, ‘the way the world behaves’, the pattern of life, the underlying implicit story, the things people want, expect, long for, and dream that drive them to think and behave the way that they do. If you go with the drift, if you don’t reflect on what you’re doing but just pick up habits of mind and body from all around you, the chances are you will become ‘friends’ with ‘the world’ in this sense.... So why is ‘friendship with the world’ at the root of war and fighting? Because in ‘the world’ in this sense, the ultimate argument is a fist. Or a boot. Or a gun. Or a bomb. Violence, force, power—that’s what counts. People may smile and appear friendly and civilized; society may appear open and generous; but if you go against them, if you challenge cherished assumptions, there are ways of making you feel their displeasure.... Violence, and the threat of more of it, is the way the world ultimately works, whether it’s with small-town criminals or large-scale dictatorships. So what would it mean to be a friend of God instead? It would mean, for a start, taming the desires that are agitating inside you..., the desires that push you to fight, and even to kill or to make war.⁵

Wright gives readers a set of premises to draw a conclusion defending a type of Christian pacifism—a Christian pacifism that construes the world as necessarily violent along with

⁵ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone: James, Peter, John, and Judah* 27-28.

God's intentions as an alternative to "the world." Interestingly, he does not conclude with a defense of pacifism. However, the lack of that conclusion does not lessen the way that Wright understands "the world." Violence is not a product of a set of sins or vices found within "the world" but, rather, Wright considers it the grand narrative—the defining story—of what "the world" is. What some call an "ontology of violence" determines the reality of "the world."⁶

I consider this a Platonist interpretation of James 4 because it renders the world, as a whole, necessarily problematic. In Plato's own writings, life in the "cave" signifies the whole of this world—a world that must be transcended through illumination in relation to the existence of beauty, goodness, and truth in the other world. Plato characterizes the world through lots of negative descriptions: determined by deception, opinions, lack of goodness, mere representations ("shadows"), performance ("theater"), unjust.

Wright's word is "violent" for how "the world ultimately works." We do not need to establish how violence relates to one of Plato's descriptions of the world—i.e. injustice or lack of goodness—because the point is, rather, the tendency toward identifying the world as a whole through a singular description or set of terms with a negative connotation. Wright utilizes this Platonist tendency in order to interpret the phrase, "the world," in the fourth chapter of James's Epistle.

More recently published than Wright's commentary, Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary Dale Allison translates the word "enemy" as "hostile." He claims that this dichotomy—friendship with the world makes one hostile to God—

⁶ See John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*.

continues “James’ pessimism” about “the world,” found throughout James’s epistle.

Allison says that James thinks

the world—not just human society—is no longer God’s world, which is why the righteous have ‘hated and despised this world of oppression together with all its ways of life and its habits’ . . . , and why God must right its wrongs . . . and even perhaps replace it [the world] Implicit is the transience of the present ‘world of corruption’ . . . and the permanence of the superior world to come.⁷

Like Wright, Allison identifies a singular negative attribute for describing the world.

Unlike Wright, Allison’s word is not “violence” but “corruption.” Allison, however, does not seem to follow all the way through on Platonism in the sense that the world does not need to be transcended—as it does for Plato—but, rather, it needs to be replaced. Allison finds in James’s epistle the suggestion that, despite the fact that (some) human beings have made God their enemy, God will “replace” the “world of corruption” with a superior yet vague “world to come.” According to Allison, this demonstrates God’s faithfulness even if God’s people become unfaithful—hence the adultery metaphor in James 4.

Allison further claims that James utilizes the language of enemy and hostility in order to follow a biblical pattern. James follows the biblical pattern of what happens to “God’s enemies, who in the Bible are requited, defeated, and crushed. Nothing could be more foolish than setting oneself up as an opponent of God.”⁸ Part of replacing “the world” involves crushing and defeating those who make themselves an enemy of God. Allison’s use of the word “hostile” and his identification of the biblical pattern of what

⁷ Dale C. Allison, Jr., *James*, (New York: T & T Clark International, 2013), 609.

⁸ Allison, *James*, 610.

God does to God's enemy provide further warrant for connecting James's Epistle to the Psalms—which I do later in this essay.

In relation to both of these Platonist interpretations of the fourth chapter of James's Epistle, the Eastern Orthodox Archbishop Dmitri Royster offers an interpretation of this chapter that critiques bringing Platonism into one's interpretation. Using the Apostle Paul as a standard against Platonism, Royster argues:

If the world, as was intended, is a means of knowing God [as Paul argues in] Romans 1:19-22..., it is good, but if it becomes an end in itself, it is evil. Thus, it is not so much 'this world' that is condemnable, but rather a 'this world-ism'.⁹

According to Royster, "the world" is not a problem—even friendship with "the world" is not a problem. Why? Because "the world" ought to be understood as "a means of knowing God." Rather, the problem is a "this world-ism"—by which, Royster means, making friendship with the world an end-in-itself and not a means to further knowing God.

Stoicism

Other interpreters approach James 4 with what I consider a Stoic lens, which means that these interpreters emphasize how "the world" offers particular passions and pleasure that lead believers away from friendship with God to "friendship with the world." The clearest representation of this interpretation is found in the *Interpreter's Bible*, which includes a commentary on James's Epistle by Burton Scott Easton and Gordon Poteat. They write,

In the present context..., it [the world] refers particularly to the illegitimate 'pleasures' that tempt the readers; anyone who seeks such pleasures—even if he prays to God to give

⁹ Archbishop Dmitri Royster, *The Epistle of Saint James: A Commentary*, with an Introduction by Rod Dreher, (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2010), 94.

them to him—is making himself an enemy of God.... But to...James, possibly legitimate pleasures are not in mind here; only the wholly evil pleasures of ‘the world’. And God and ‘the world’ are antinomies between which no compromise is possible; the choice between them is the terrible responsibility of every individual.¹⁰

The Stoicism becomes apparent here in a few ways: the focus on individual responsibility, the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate pleasures, and the clarity that accompanies the truth claim concerning the “antinomies between which no compromise is possible.”

This third feature—clarity that accompanies the truth claim concerning the “antinomies between which no compromise is possible”—becomes the focus of the British biblical scholar E. C. Blackman’s interpretation of James 4. Blackman argues,

[I]n James, ‘the friendship of the world’ is thought of as a kind of idolatry. Approximation to worldly ways means turning away from the true God; it is a change of loyalty, and in that sense unfaithfulness, [hence] adultery. The metaphor changes for the more obvious and more plainly ethical one of love and hatred, and this enables the author to pose a plain Either-Or. To the love the world is to hate God, and to love God is to hate the world. There is no neutral possibility, no halting between those two attitudes.... In this context, it is mainly pleasures which draw a man’s love away from God and make him hate God. Once he has decided to take the risk and seek his pleasures in pagan company—whosoever would be a ‘friend of the world’—he thereby constitutes himself God’s enemy.¹¹

Within Stoicism, truth can be known quite clearly—with neither confusion nor grey area. Both Blackman and Easton/Potat interpret the fourth chapter of James in this way. For both, the language of enmity and friendship—what Stoic philosophers would call the propositions of enmity and friendship—come with a type of clarity that gives the readers of James’s Epistle no middle ground. In Blackman’s words: “To the love the world is to hate God, and to love God is to hate the world. There is no neutral possibility....”

¹⁰ Burton Scott Easton & Gordon Potat, “The Epistle of James,” in *Interpreter’s Bible: volume XII*, pg. 55.

¹¹ E. C. Blackman, *The Epistles of James: Introduction and Commentary*, 127-128.

Some Stoic interpretations focus intently on the adultery metaphor in James 4. Otherwise quite different in their style and tone, three commentaries demonstrate that the adultery metaphor signifies what it means to be friends with the world in a way that makes one an enemy of God. Professor of New Testament at Regent's College in London, Sophie Laws concludes that unfaithfulness to God means appointing one's self as God's enemy:

There is...indication of the connotations of 'the world' for James...related to human judgments as distinct from God's; here it is associated with human pleasure-seeking. It is not obvious that the pleasures associated with 'the world' are specifically those of pagan society...or that there is an understood contrast between 'this world' with its values and 'the world to come'.... 'The world' for James denotes in general the values of human society as against those of God, and hence the man who pursues pleasure aligns himself with the world and compromises or actually denies his relationship with God, he appoints himself an enemy of God.¹²

Law goes on to argue that the metaphorical use of "adultery" suggest that James especially wants to identify indulging in sexual pleasures as what makes one an enemy of God.¹³

James uses the word "adulterer" in the feminine sense. Southern Baptist preacher and theologian, Kurt A. Richardson, goes out of his way to emphasize this feminine sense and uses it set up several dichotomies:

This sort of religiosity represents the worst of pagan attitudes about deity. Indeed, such a heathen approach to God is at the heart of 'friendship' with the world.... Thus, spiritual adultery is synonymous with being an 'enemy' of God. Instead of being faithfully wedded, James's hearers had...turned their back on God and were having an 'affair' with the world.... The status of unbelievers is enmity toward God and friendship with the world, and this worldly friendship is something Christians can flirt with.... James was not saying conclusively that his addressees were completely the 'friends of the world' rather than 'friends with God'. Rather, they were 'adulteresses', unfaithful lovers.¹⁴

¹² Sophie Laws, *The Epistle of James*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1980), 174.

¹³ See Laws, *The Epistle of James*, 174.

¹⁴ Kurt A. Richardson, *James*, (Louisville, KY: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 177-178.

Richardson prefers the translation of “adulteress,” instead of “adulterer,” because of the feminine sense of the word in the ancient Greek.

Richardson confuses two points. First, “pagans” and “heathens” are not interchangeable words: paganism was around prior to Christianity and, therefore, remains independent of Christianity; the word, “heathen,” arose in medieval Germany and refers to those who actually and directly reject Christianity. James could not have been referring to “heathens” because it was not yet a concept or idea.

Second, Richardson seems to confuse the metaphor of adultery. Richardson claims that enmity toward God applies, firstly, to “unbelievers” and, secondly, to Christians who “flirt” (his verb is deliberate here and might be judged sexist by some readers) with becoming friends with the world. However, “unbelievers” cannot be judged as adulterous because there is no relational bond to break. Unfaithfulness requires faithfulness, and “unbelievers” are not part of the faithful. From a logical perspective, Richardson’s attempt at interpreting this passage in a gendered and sexual way fails.

Interestingly, the Faculty of Theology at the University of Navarre argue that the word “adultery”—in the fourth chapter of James’s Epistle—can be interpreted in either a feminine or masculine sense. Together, they interpret James 4 in the following way:

The sacred writer warns that inordinate love of the world, which stems from ambition, is incompatible with the love of God. ‘World’ here has the meaning of ‘enemy of God’, opposed to Christ and his followers.... The teaching contained in these verses echoes that of our Lord: ‘No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon’ (Matthew 6:24).

The saints have frequently reminded us—by their lives as well as their teachings—that inordinate love of the world is incompatible with the love of God: ‘Worldly society has flowered from a selfish love which dared to despise even God, whereas the communion of saints is rooted in a love of God that is ready to trample of self’ (St. Augustine, *City of God*, 14.28).

‘Unfaithful creatures!’: the original Greek simply says ‘Adulterers’ [in the feminine] and the New Vulgate, ‘Adulterers’ [in the masculine]. This echoes the symbol the prophets often use...of the marriage of God and his people sealed by the Covenant.

St. James, therefore, is not referring to the sin of adultery; he is berating those whose excessive love for the things of this world makes them unfaithful to God.¹⁵

Contrary to Richardson's interpretation, this passage is neither about being flirtatious nor having an affair with "the world." Rather, the Faculty of Theology at the University of Navarre understand this passage in terms of an excessive love for the world—which puts their interpretation more in line with virtue theory than with Stoicism. I put it in this section, however, because it serves as a corrective to Richardson's interpretation of James 4.

Wesleyan theologian and Professor of Scripture at Seattle Pacific University, Robert Wall makes similar interpretive moves to that of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Navarre: towing the line between Stoicism and virtue theory. While I find that Wall's overall interpretation fits best under the category of virtue theory, he concludes his interpretation in line with Stoicism:

The lack of 'pleasure' in one's life...is yet another trial the poor must endure. Their anger toward others, whose source lies deep within them, is provoked by an evil inclination toward envy. Self-destructive anger is spiritual failure, and is the historical and interpersonal precipitate of the ongoing cosmic struggle between the demonic and divine worlds. In this sense, friendship with God against the world, when contentment guards against envy, heralds God's coming triumph over mammon and marks out those who will experience the blessings of the coming age.¹⁶

Like Easton/Poteat, Wall emphasizes the responsibility of the individual to place one's self on the right side within the "ongoing cosmic struggle."

I conclude this section with Wall's interpretation because he gives us a clear sense of the passions and pleasures that tempt us within "the world." First, "the poor must

¹⁵ The Faculty of Theology at the University of Navarre, *The Catholic Letters: James, Peter, John, Jude*, (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 2003); Michael Adams appears to be the commentator, but the official author of record is "The Faculty of Theology at the University of Navarre."

¹⁶ Robert Wall, *Community of the Wise: The Letter of James*, (Trinity International Press, 1997), 204.

endure” a lack of overall pleasure within life; “the world” will tempt “the poor” to seek pleasure, and giving into this temptation turns “the poor” into an “enemy of God.”

Second, and very much in line with Stoicism, Wall considers anger a “spiritual failure.”

Of course, Stoic philosophers call anger a moral failure—not a spiritual one—but the similarity holds. Third, also very much in line with Stoicism, “contentment” ought to determine our attitude. Wall contrasts “contentment” with “envy”: contentment about one’s life allows one to be a friend with God whereas envy makes one into an enemy of God.

Virtue Theory

Our final category for understanding the various interpretations of James 4 entails the philosophical lens of virtue theory, and I consider these interpretations under the label of virtue theory because they utilize both the language and logic of Aristotelian virtue theory. In terms of the language: they identify specific virtues and vices that accompany certain behaviors. In terms of the logic of virtue theory: I usually mean by this that someone reasons with the logic of the golden mean,¹⁷ but in this case I mean that the interpreters think through the relationship between enmity, friendship, and virtue. I take a different approach than the one taken in the Platonist and Stoic interpretations: I group together four different commentaries based upon their various denominational commitments: Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Russian Orthodox, and Wesleyan. The Presbyterian interpretation emphasizes the vice of hatred; the Roman Catholic interpretation focuses on how the virtue of love works theologically; the Russian

¹⁷ See *Narrative Theology and the Hermeneutical Virtues*. See *Strength of Mind*. See *Introducing Prophetic Pragmatism*.

Orthodox interpretation turns toward the virtue of prudence; the Wesleyan interpretation, which I introduced at the end of the section of Stoic interpretations, understands the vices James worries about to be those related to envy, greed, and wealth. This grouping offers an examination of what Christian Textual Reasoning might look like in relation to James 4.

Presbyterian minister, James Adamson, directs his commentary to the vice of hatred. He argues, “He who ‘determines’ to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God, not because God hates him but because he hates God.”¹⁸ Adamson also claims that the love, which is attached to the word “friendship,” and the hate, which is attached to the word “enmity,” ought to be interpreted as “objective, conveying the strongest ethical contrast” possible. By which, he means, that the love and hate undergirding friendship and enmity respectively are not “feelings” but “states”: “choosing the world constitutes deliberate enmity toward God,” neither simply feeling “hatred of God nor being hated by God.” *Becoming* an enemy of God means “being on a footing of hostility.”¹⁹

Roman Catholic biblical scholar, Kelly Anderson, interprets James 4 along the lines of an Augustinian take on the virtue of love with an Aristotelian logic of the golden mean. She argues,

Loving things more than we love Christ harms our relationship with God.... Once again, [then], James takes aim at the center of the problem: the human heart. A person can love either God or the world but not both.... The Greek word rendered as to be a lover usually means ‘friendship’ or ‘affection’. The one who deserves our love and longing is God.... [W]hen Scripture speaks negatively of the world, it refers to human society insofar as it is opposed to God. To be a lover of the world, literally, ‘friend of the world’..., is to adopt

¹⁸ James Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmanns Publishing Company, 1976), 170.

¹⁹ Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, 170.

the values and ideas of society that run contrary to God's teaching. The consequence is that a person makes himself an enemy of God.²⁰

Augustine argues that love ought to be directed toward God, first, and then toward neighbors and enemies. Augustine, however, seems to enjoy breaking Aristotle's logic of the golden mean in his own virtue theory.²¹ Anderson uses an Aristotelian logic of the golden mean to defend and explain how the argument of James 4 represents an early version of the Augustinian insight that love ought to be directed toward first.²²

The Russian Orthodox Archbishop, Averky Taushev (1906 – 1976), demonstrates that James 4 gives us a biblical defense of the significance of the virtue of prudence. He writes that James "Chapter 4" can be summarized as "Accusatory speech against evil desires..., against friendship with the world..., against speaking evil of others..., and against arrogant self-assurance." He expands on the second one—"against friendship with the world"—on these terms:

Whoever has true Christian wisdom is pure in his intentions and dispositions. He is meek, humble in his desires, and obedient to his elders—that is, he subjects himself to authority. He is filled with mercy and good deeds. A contrast to this heavenly wisdom is the earthly, psychological, and demonic wisdom, the source of which is the father of lies, that is, the devil. The characteristic traits of this so-called wisdom are envy and irritability. This 'wisdom' leads only to disorder and evils. In chapter 4, the apostle demonstrates the results that...demonic wisdom has in social life. The preachers of this so-called wisdom pander to the lowest desires of people, urging love for earthly goods and inspiring the proud thought that man himself, by his own efforts, without the help of God, can achieve happiness and prosperity. Bitter reality mercilessly destroys any such self-satisfied and frivolous theory of human happiness. The pervasive spread of this earthly so-called wisdom gives rise only to enmity and dissension in human relations. Excessive

²⁰ Kelly Anderson, "James," in *James, First, Second, and Third John*, ed. Kelly Anderson & Daniel Keating, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 82.

²¹ See Augustine, "The Catholic Way of Life and the Manichean Way of Life."

²² Luke Timothy Johnson...

attachment to earthly goods and prideful self-confidence is unfaithfulness to God and service to the devil.²³

For Archbishop Taushev, James 4 gives a contrast between two different types of prudential wisdom: demonic wisdom and divine wisdom. Being a vicious person means that one lives according to and by “demonic wisdom,” but being a virtuous person means that one lives according to and by “divine wisdom.” Traits of “demonic wisdom” include deception, envy, and irritability whereas traits of “divine wisdom” involve humility, meekness, and mercy. Ultimately, the difference between these two versions of prudential wisdom entails that one either lives with “[e]xcessive attachment to earthly goods and prideful self-confidence” (demonic wisdom) or with purity in their dispositions and intentions concerning “good deeds,” material possessions, and truth-telling.

Conclusion

I conclude by re-visiting Robert Wall’s interpretation of James 4 because it represents the interpretation that I find most convincing and helpful.

Friendship with the world, according to Wall, “functions as a catchphrase for those beliefs and values that oppose a believer’s friendship with God.”²⁴ The “world” is where

the needs of the community’s most vulnerable members are neglected.... [O]ut of this profane ‘world’... God calls the poor and powerless into the covenant community as heirs of the coming kingdom. Rendered by these...uses, the ‘world’s friend’ denies both the values and ultimate triumph of God’s reign. In this sense, he is an enemy of God, lives at enmity with God, and forfeits the prospect of life over death.²⁵

²³ Archbishop Averky Taushev, *The Epistles and the Apocalypse: Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the New Testament, Volume III*, trans. Nicholas Kotar, ed. Vitaly Permiakov, (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Seminary Press, 2018), 184 & 187.

²⁴ Wall, *Community of the Wise*, 201.

²⁵ Wall, *Community of the Wise*, 201-202.

Wall further articulates the results of becoming an enemy of God: “[A]n enemy of God lives a life in opposition to God’s will; indeed, God’s enemy fails the test of wisdom, and his foolishness forfeits the prospect of divine blessing in the age to come.”²⁶

According to Wall, a believer chooses to become an enemy of God. He writes,

[O]ne’s status as God’s ‘enemy’ is self-determined. Yes, this spiritual failure is problematic for James because it addresses the poor, who are otherwise God’s elect...and objects of the concern and compassion of God’s friends. Nevertheless, James recognizes that the envy of wealth is a trial of the poor as well as the rich. In fact, the envy of the poor constitutes a tacit denial of divine mercy, which has specifically called them out of the world in order to be rich in faith and heirs of God’s kingdom. It seems ironic, then, that the ‘enemy of God’ in this case is the poor believer, who desires the passing niceties of middle-class life over the eternal blessings of God’s kingdom. In this context, then, the anger of the poor believer expresses a rejection of divine election and so of Israel’s most sacred and critical identification.²⁷

The logic of virtue is at play here in the sense that vice and volition are the reasons that one becomes an enemy of God. The vices include failing to become wise, having envy toward the wealthy, neglecting the poor, and on overall intemperance in relation to one’s material needs. For some interpreters of James 4, being poor makes one a friend of God. For Wall, however, the poor suffer an especially strong temptation toward envying the wealthy. This makes Wall’s interpretation very much in line with Aristotelian virtue theory because the virtues are not guaranteed simply by one’s class status, but *everyone* must strive toward virtue and avoid vice.²⁸

²⁶ Wall, *Community of the Wise*, 201.

²⁷ Wall, *Community of the Wise*, 202.

²⁸ I am grateful for comments, questions, and suggestions from David Ford, Stanley Hauerwas, and D. Stephen Long.