

A Meditation on the Word *Ought*



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A first word

I WANT, first of all, to bid the reader welcome and hello. And I also want to extend my gratitude for the attention he or she is about to accord to these poor thoughts of mine.

Introduction

I want to talk a bit about our conception of morality. My purpose will be descriptive rather than evaluative. I will, in other words, be trying to uncover the sort of morality we actually do have rather than trying to argue about the sort of morality we should have. And my purpose will also be incomplete. I will not attempt to describe all the different conceptions we have of morality, but will, instead, just concentrate on one which seems to me to be especially curious.

The outline of this paper will be as follows: (i) a sketch of the basic idea; (ii) a clarification; (iii) some illustrations; (iv) some social consequences; and (v) some thoughts about foundations.

A sketch of the basic idea

The sketch of morality which I have in mind seems to me to have two layers: a first or basic layer and then a secondary layer which modifies this first one.

To get at the basic layer, I want to look at the effects of doing something immoral. What, in other words, are the consequences of violations of trust or breaches of duty? What are the results of sin and

immorality? And among all the effects which occur, there are two which I want to focus on here.

Now, assuming that I am the one who has violated a trust or breached a duty, one effect is a certain irreparability. I will have done something that I myself cannot repair or buy myself out of. In this sense a crime or immoral action is very different than a mistake or practical failing. If I lose a watch, I can buy a new one. If I break a chair, I can fix it again. But if I break a trust or violate a duty, there is a level of guilt or damage which I am powerless to fix or pay for.

But, someone might object here, is not restitution possible? And so is there not actually a way to repair the damage I have done?

And, in response to this, I would of course admit that restitution is possible. But I would also insist that restitution cannot function by itself. Rather, to be effective, I think that restitution must function with the other person's forgiveness. And so it is not really a method by which I myself can repair the damage I have done. To see this more clearly, we could imagine a case where I steal something and then later make restitution by putting this something back, but secretly and without telling anyone, and certainly without confessing my guilt and asking pardon for it. And the question, here, is whether this sort of restitution has managed to repair the breach of trust involved in the theft or has managed to remove my guilt from me. And if, as I think we should, we say that the answer to these questions is "no," then we will be admitting that there is a level of guilt or violation which restitution, by itself, cannot repair.

But, to move on to another example of this irreparability, imagine a king who wins his way to the throne through a series of murders. And imagine that, once king, he changes his attitude and becomes a model of justice and concern for his subjects. And he now asks whether these later good actions can wipe away his former crimes. And I think that, according to the conception of morality I am trying to put my finger on here, the answer is clearly "no." Those crimes are an unchangeable and an irreparable fact; the king is as guilty of them after his good actions as before.

This irreparability is the conception of morality which King David seems to have in mind in Psalm 51 where he says:

For I am well aware of my faults,
I have my sin constantly in mind

And it is also the conception of morality which Lady Macbeth finds as she cries out:

Here's the smell of blood still: all the perfumes
of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.

And I think that the greatness of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth—and of David too, of course—is that they are true to this conception of morality; their crimes are, for them, just this sort of unalterable fact.

Another example might be American guilt over slavery. We freed the slaves in 1865, but this freeing did not remove our guilt over what we had done. In fact, this guilt seems to linger down to the present day, as can be seen pretty clearly in various of our political postures. And I think that, even if we had done more than just freed them, even if we had actually given each of them the proverbial forty acres and a mule, we would still have remained guilty. And this sort of thing is what I want to call irreparability.

Besides this irreparability, though, I want also to talk about a second effect. And this second effect is that the person who has done the immoral act is now liable to vengeance. He puts himself at the mercy of the person whom he has offended. Before going into examples, I want to make a couple of clarifications. First of all, I mean something a bit different—and a bit more savage—than liability to legal punishment. For I think there is a sense in which the violator is morally subject to whatever the violated may decide to do to him, no matter how violent this retribution may be. Secondly, I want to say more than just that vengeance does occur. I want to say that there is a sense in which vengeance is morally authorized or justified.

I think that this effect is a little hard to see because, as I shall argue in a moment, we usually do cover it over with notions of legal punishment. But I think the more savage level of vengeance is, nonetheless, there. I have noticed this level come out most often when people talk about sexual crimes like rape or child abuse. People will often talk as if, in a case of rape, it would be morally just for the husband or brother or father of the woman raped to torture the rapist in ways as cruel or painful as he can imagine. This is talked about not just as being understandable on grounds of anger, but as actually being justifiable on moral grounds. I have also heard people say, with unconcealed delight, that child molesters are usually beaten to death in prison. And here again

what is interesting is that this is actually seen as correct and even good.

Another instance is the story of David. For after his crimes with Bethsheba and Uriah, God wrecks on David a most terrible vengeance. He raises his own son in rebellion against him, putting David into a position where he must war against his own child. Then, after the battle, He causes Absalom to be caught by his hair in a tree, slain while he dangles there, later to be discovered by David himself. And David's response to this? In Psalm 51 he says to his Lord:

You are just when You pass sentence on me,
Blameless when You give judgement.

I think, to underscore the obvious, that there really is a sense here in which David thinks that his sin morally authorizes God to unleash almost any sort of vengeance that He might like.

Finally, I think that there are various examples of this sort of thing in neurotic interpersonal relations. There are some people who, if you do something bad to them once, will ever after be bringing this thing back up to you to punish you with your guilt for it. And what is interesting about this is how hard it can be to defend yourself. The fact that you were guilty seems, on some level at least, and even to yourself, to authorize his endlessly punishing you.

And so the second effect of immoral actions is an almost endless subjugation to the vengeance of the offended party, a vengeance which is actually a morally authorized one. And this, along with the irreparability of the immoral act, forms what I have called the first layer.

Besides this first layer, though, there is also a second layer which modifies—which ameliorates—this first one. And there are, as far as I can see, two aspects of this layer. The first aspect—the first type of amelioration—is legal punishment. Here the rules and the penalties are specified, and here there are persons designated by the community to administer them. Hence, we now have not the vengeance of the aggrieved but the justice of the state.

I think that this aspect is pretty obvious, and so I will not take up the reader's time by deploying examples to prove that it does in fact exist. What I do want to say about this aspect of legal punishment, though, is that I suspect that it functions—or at least began its career by functioning—not as the creator or enforcer of morality, but as the alleviator of

it. I suspect that the morality of the first layer—of irreparable crimes and unlimited vengeance—was already in place, and that the function of legal punishments was to soften this morality. Legal punishments, in other words, provided a way to pay for—and so, in a sense, repair—one's offenses and also a substitute for a sort of personal vengeance that must have been spawning blood feuds.

Take as an example the famous law “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” Now, to our ears, this law sounds barbaric and harsh—as if our morality tells us to gouge out the eyes and break the teeth of those who offend us. And yet, I suspect that this law was, in its original setting, not harsh but merciful. The people who would need such a law were probably people who regularly took more than just an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. If properly read, this law would actually be saying to them “Only an eye for an eye, and only a tooth for a tooth.”¹

Now this ameliorative function of legal punishment may not be too obvious anymore. We no longer encounter too many cases of people taking both eyes or all the teeth. And since we don't see the extreme vengeance, we don't see the ameliorative role of punishment either. The system of legal punishment has, rather, become “just the way things are,” and its ameliorative rationale has become, for the most part, forgotten or obscured.

But in some instances, at least, I think that this ameliorative function of punishment does still show itself. One example would be the saying that a criminal, after his time in jail, has “paid his debt to society.” Now, in a certain strict sense at least, this is actually impossible. Imagine, for example, a man who has raped a woman. How could any amount of time in jail “pay back” the damage he has done to her? And yet this is exactly the genius of ameliorative punishment: although, according to all our first-layer conceptions of morality, the rapist is irreparably guilty and subject to vengeance, according to the second layer he is actually given a way to pay back his crime.

As a final example, I want to talk about something I heard an Islamic jurist say on television. He was asked about the extreme severity of the Islamic law, and, in particular, about the law which penalized theft by

1. I was told, after writing this, that this idea has appeared in the writings of others. Although neither I nor my informant knew who exactly these others were, I still want to acknowledge them here.

cutting off one hand. "Wasn't this barbaric?" he was asked. And what he said in reply was that the Islamic judge was never actually supposed to use this penalty but was always supposed to apply a lesser one. The penalty was still listed in the law to show just how seriously the law looked on theft, and what it was that thieves truly deserved. But the actual penalties imposed were always less than this to show that the law was also merciful. And I think this example shows pretty clearly how the law (or, in this case, how actual legal practice) functions as an ameliorative to a first-layer morality which is actually much more implacable.

Besides this method of legal punishment, though, I think we also use a second method of amelioration, and this is the method of forgiveness. Here I think it is pretty obvious that forgiveness does exist and that it is an ameliorative. And so I will confine my remarks to just a single point or reminder. And what I want to say is that forgiveness is based on what I have called the first layer.

There is, to begin with, a connection between forgiveness and irreparability. It is true, of course, that in order to be forgiven we must first of all be guilty of something. But I think it is also true that forgiveness points to a guilt that we cannot fix or somehow work off by ourselves. We ask forgiveness because only forgiveness can release us. If we could fix the problem on our own, after all, why would we put ourselves through the submission involved in asking pardon from another? Or, to put it a bit differently, forgiveness is so important because it is only the offended party who can release us from the offense we have done him.

This connection between forgiveness and irreparability can also be seen in another way, namely, through the acknowledgment of guilt. The first step in asking for forgiveness is to admit that you are guilty. At this point, there are no excuses and no talk about how you will be able to fix or undo the damage. Rather, you must begin by acknowledging your guilt as a fact, and as a fact which cannot be altered by yourself but only by the forgiveness of the person you have offended.

Besides this connection to irreparability, I think there is also a connection between forgiveness and vengeance. Part of asking for forgiveness is acknowledging the other person's right to avenge the wrong if he should want to. David, to go back to the example used earlier, begins his plea for forgiveness by acknowledging God's right to punish him even to the horrifying extent which God chose. Also, the traditional

position for asking forgiveness is on one's knees—a position of submission and defenselessness, a position which seems, in effect, to offer one's head to the blows or sword of the offended party. It seems, in fact, that one is not really serious in one's plea for forgiveness unless one is willing to offer himself up in this way to vengeance. And I think this fact is an important clue as to how morality works. But, with the reader's permission, I would like to postpone further discussion of this clue until the last section of this paper.

A clarification

After I wrote this first section, I remembered a passage from *The Genealogy of Morals* which contains ideas that are similar to it.² And so the first thing I want to do is to acknowledge Nietzsche's originality in this.

Secondly, though, I want to say that this passage in *The Genealogy* looks a bit ambiguous to me. Sometimes it seems to be saying, like I am saying here, that justice ameliorates an original retribution. However, at other times—most of the time, actually—it seems to be saying that a sense of justice actually generates or produces retributive violence. And I think that one way to clarify what I am arguing for here is to talk a bit about these two possibilities, about how they are different, and about why the first possibility is better than the second.

According to the second possibility, the possibility which Nietzsche seems to stress, punishment actually originated as a form of barter or exchange. If we injure someone or damage his property—if we have, in one way or another, taken something from him—then we must, in the interests of fair exchange, give him back something of equivalent worth. We must, so to speak, make good his loss. Now this can be done by giving him whatever amount of money or goods will be a rough equivalent of the damage done. But what if we are poor and so do not have enough money or goods to pay back this debt? Well, this is where punishment comes in. There is no greater pleasure, Nietzsche says, than to have another person completely in our power and to give him pain with impunity. We—if we would only admit it—would like nothing more than to make another person writhe in agony. And so, even if we are too

2. Essay 2, sections 4–6.

poor to pay back our debt in other ways, we could always pay it back by giving the offended party the chance to torture us for a while. This would, after all, be to give him the greatest of human pleasures. And it is in this way that Nietzsche says that punishment first came about: the debtor allows himself to be tortured for a while as a way of repaying his debts.

To take a particular example, imagine that I rape another man's daughter and that he comes angrily to me and demands reparations of five million pesos and three hectares of land. I bargain with him, but can't get the price to come down to anything I can afford to pay. And so it begins to seem like there just isn't going to be any way that he and I will be able to balance our accounts. But then, suddenly, he hits on a great new idea. "Look," he says to me, "Why don't you just let me rip out your fingernails with a pair of pliers, and we'll call it even." Being human also, I immediately see just how attractive this must be in his eyes, and just how valuable a commodity I have to offer him here. Perhaps I even begin to haggle and argue, pointing out that the equitable price for a rape without attendant murder is probably the fingernails of the left hand only. He will no doubt reply that she was his only daughter, and that this fact is probably worth a fingernail or two. And so we haggle on until we settle on a price, and he pulls out his pliers and then pulls out my fingernails—or at least the agreed-on number of them—and, in this way, makes everything even between us.

Now the theory I am proposing here, and what I just a moment ago listed as the first possibility, is a bit different from this. On the theory we just talked about, the notion of justice as equivalence or fairness actually incites us to sanguinary punishments. It tells us to take an equivalent to our loss—and if there's nothing else to take, it tells us to just take the equivalent in the other person's pain.

On the theory I am suggesting, though, the notion of justice as equivalence or fairness would moderate rather than incite such violence. It would be addressed to a vengeance which was originally unrestrained, and it would tell that vengeance that it must stop at so much pain only.

Also, there is the issue of when morality arises or on what level it first appears. On the possibility discussed above, it would seem that morality first appears with the notion of equivalence or fairness. Anything that happens before this level is not moral yet. Actions of vengeance may occur, but they will not be moral actions; they only become moral when they are authorized by the notion of justice as fairness.

On the theory I am proposing, however, this first-layer vengeance is already moral. The avenging party is already acting in a morally authorized way. He is, so to speak, just exercising his moral right to retribution. Or, to put this all another way, there seems to me to be a moral authorization of vengeance which antedates the notions of justice or exchange. And it is this authorization which I am calling a first-layer morality.

To return to the previous example, the theory I am proposing would say that the story probably begins like this: I have raped another man's daughter and so he comes, and without any talk of barter or equivalence or payment, begins tearing my fingernails out with a pair of pliers, fully intending to pull my toenails out after that, and to eventually kill me in some horrible and painful manner. He might also decide to burn my lands, shoot my family, enslave my servants, make war on my tribe, and so on. And in all this he is perfectly justified: I have raped his daughter and so he is morally justified (if not morally required) to wreck his vengeance on me—a vengeance to which, it seems, this first-layer morality sets almost no limits at all.

The stories of revenge—in both Greek and Hebrew literature—at test to this authorization of practically unlimited violence. Take, as but one example, the story of the rape of Tamar. After her rape, her brothers contrive to kill every male of the tribe from which her rapists came. They first persuade this other tribe to undergo circumcision as a sign of friendship. And then, while this other tribe is laid up and recovering from their surgeries, the brothers walk into their camp and cut down every male—men and boys both. And when their father, Jacob, complains to his boys that they might have been a bit extreme and impolitic, they silence the old man with the unanswerable argument “But she is our sister.”

But to come back to our imaginary example and to go on to the next stage of the story, this vengeance is, I think, stopped (rather than as in the previous possibility, started) by a notion of fair exchange. The headman or chieftain comes along and sees the outraged father starting on my toenails, and says to him, “Look, I know that it's within your rights to take as many body parts out of that criminal as you would like, but don't you think that the fingernails are already enough? You know that I am starting a program of limited vengeance; these unlimited vengeance—right as they are, of course—are just causing too many

endless feuds. Why don't you turn that wretch over to my bodyguards here, and they will take care of him. If you like, they will pull out his toenails too; that should really make him remember your rage and respect your vengeance. But maybe then they will let him go, figuring that we will have hurt him enough. It is a new concept; I call it 'justice.'"

And it is this role of moderator which Jacob tries to play—although ineffectually—in the other story I have mentioned. When this role of moderation is effectual, though, then I think we have the system of morality in its complete form: both an unlimited authorization of vengeance and a moderation of the same.

Some illustrations

What I would like to do next is to add a couple more examples which will, I hope, illustrate this two-layer system. I am sorry to be arguing so much in this style, but it is actually the strongest sort of argument I can think of. To prove that something exists, it seems, we must just keep pointing to it until it becomes really obvious.

In any case, the first illustration is a custom, called *houle*, which is practiced on a small pacific island. I have probably misspelled the word *houle*, but its meaning in English is total destruction. And this custom was related to me, one evening in New York, by a friend of mine who had grown up on this little island.

According to my friend, his island does not permit direct divorces. And so, if a man is unhappy with his marriage and wants to change it, he must allow himself to be caught in the act of adultery. He must do the adultery too early in the evening, in a place too easy to detect, and so on. And once he has been discovered in adultery, his wife's family will have no choice but to angrily take her back.

But, my friend said, it is also important for the man to tell his family what he is planning to do, and to notify them as soon as he has been caught. That way they can, early the next morning, go to the family of the wife with huge and lavish gifts of reparation for the damage he has done them—gifts which, assuming that they really are lavish, custom enjoins her family to accept. And it is when this notification and this bringing of gifts is not accomplished, that the custom of *houle*, or total destruction, takes place.

What happens in *houle* is that the wife's family comes to the build-

ings of the man's family and begins putting leaves on different objects there—canoes, perhaps, or other valuable items. And whatever they put their leaves on becomes theirs, while the man's family must just sit back and watch as their possessions become, in this way, decimated. Houle is allowed to continue for the whole of an afternoon.

And I think this example shows, pretty clearly, the two layers I have been talking about. At the bottom of this custom we can see the idea that the aggrieved family of the wife is morally entitled to wreck, on the family of the faithless husband, a total destruction. But we can also see how this basic idea has been ameliorated, and ameliorated twice, actually: first, by the custom which permits reparations if they be both speedy and lavish; and, secondly, by the ritualization of the process of houle itself, a ritualization which prevents it from becoming bloody, from extending to the burning of houses, or the raping of women, or the destruction of crops. Morality, to put the point as sharply as I can, both authorizes total vengeance and dilutes it.

The second illustration I want to talk about is the Christian story of man's fall and redemption. The story begins with Adam and Eve eating of the forbidden fruit. As a punishment for this, God ejects them from the garden and makes them subject to labor, to the travails of childbirth, to sickness and to death. And not only does this doom fall upon them, but it also falls on all of their posterity through every succeeding generation. In the Christianity I grew up with, this was further interpreted by a doctrine of original sin. According to this doctrine, each one of us is, as a result of Adam's sin, born guilty before God and so already subject—and rightly subject—to eternal damnation. And I think this is all a pretty clear example of a first-layer morality authorizing an almost unlimited vengeance. The justice of God means that, thousands of years after Adam's sin, his descendants are still liable to pain and death in this life, and then to the torments of everlasting fire in the next.

Besides this, the Protestant attack on "works righteousness" is a good example of what I have called irreparability. According to Protestant doctrine, we are unable to overcome this original sin—this guilt and this damnation—through any works of our own. No good action, however meritorious it might seem, is really able to move us even the smallest step closer to justification before God. Unless we are raised up by God's free mercy and forgiveness and grace, we are irremediably reprobate—irremediably damned. And there is, quite literally, nothing we can do to change this.

Now I am not going into all this because I want to dispute the truth or falsity of these ideas. As to this, I express no opinion here. What interests me, rather, is that so many good and religious people have believed in these ideas. The striking fact is that so many moral people have been able not only to accept this God and his terrible punishments, but also to earnestly believe that he is good.

And the question to ask, I think, is how they were able to believe this. And the explanation I want to suggest is that they were able to believe it because the vengeance which this God exacts is actually authorized according to what I have called a first-layer morality. They can believe, in other words, because this God is only doing what is, according to their own ideas of morality, right.

I know that this explanation might sound a bit odd, but I think that it is actually the most logical one. The simplest explanation of our allegiance to this God is that we actually do find his actions—his condemnations and punishments—to be right and justified. Any other explanation, after all, would mean that we were believing in a God whose actions we found to be morally unjustified. And it is hard to see how such a belief and allegiance could be sustained.

But this is, so far, only half the story. For this God has also deigned to save us from this damnation. And the mechanisms he employs to do this exhibit, I think, what I have been calling a second layer of morality.

On the one hand, this mechanism is forgiveness. God offers us pardon for our sins. And he forgives us out of his free grace and mercy.

On the other hand, though, there is also the mechanism of reparations and limited punishment. God accepts the passion and death of one man—Christ—as a substitute or payment for the endless punishment of all men which it is really within His rights to exact. We have here, in other words, an example of legal punishment as an ameliorative. The sacrifice of this one is sufficient to appease a wrath which should, by rights, extend to all.

And yet, within this ameliorative punishment itself, we still see traces of the original and unlimited vengeance. For Christ does not just die and is not just executed, but he is scourged, beaten by soldiers, mocked, spat upon, crowned with thorns, and then crucified to die in a horrible and lingering manner. Just as we saw in the example of *houle*, there remains here too the image of that total destruction—that endless and brutal torment of hell—which was the original right of the aggrieved.

And I think that one interesting question to ask, here, is whether Christ's sacrifice could have been so effective had it occurred in a swifter and less painful manner. Would it have been sufficient, for example, if he had been merely beheaded? And if the reader's immediate response to this is, as mine is, that the brutality of Christ's death seems somehow necessary, then the interesting question is, why? And the explanation I am suggesting is that this brutality seems necessary because it is the image or vestige of that first layer which the second layer is ameliorating. There cannot be an ameliorative, after all, without an original severity to be ameliorated. Even under the ameliorative, then, the first layer is bound to retain some vestige of its original rights, and so Christ must be scourged, beaten, mocked, spat upon, crowned with thorns, and crucified.

But, before I end this section, I want to add a qualification. I do not want to say that this mechanism of total condemnation and violent expiation accurately represents God's mind and God's morality. For I think it is possible to hold that God chose these mechanisms not because they were conformable to his mind and morality, but because they were conformable to ours. Perhaps, in other words, we would not have been able to understand what God was doing unless he first condemned us so totally and then saved us by such a bloody expiation. It might have been, then, our moral understanding—and not God's—which required both the damnation of all humanity and a salvation wrought by crucifixion.

Some social consequences

What I would like to do next is to make a few comments about how I think this system of moral ideas is actually functioning in our society today. Now I must confess that I am not a sociologist, and so my comments here will really just be speculations. But I have decided to just go ahead and speculate anyway; armchair sociology, after all, is one of philosophy's traditional prerogatives.

And so, to begin with, I think that this system of moral ideas is weakening, and weakening from its base or first layer. We no longer seem to have so much taste for unlimited vengeance or irreparable guilts. To choose just an example or two: we no longer break criminals on the wheel, or hang them in public, or burn them, flog them, draw them, quarter them, rack them, duck them, press them, pillory them, or crop

their ears. On a more inward note, our counselors are no longer telling us about the irreparability of wrongs, but are now telling us to work things out and to avoid long-term guilt. In a variety of ways, then, we are losing the fierceness of morality's first layer. And the effect of this, I think, is to actually weaken morality itself. It seems to me, in other words, that one of the causes behind our present crisis of morals may be that, by making morality less cruel, we have also deprived it of its traditional basis.

There seems to be a sort of paradox in this. By giving up this irreparability and vengeance we would seem to be making our morality more humane and therefore stronger: easier to believe in and more worthy of allegiance. And yet the opposite seems to be the case: our morality these days seems to be getting both better and weaker at the same time.

And yet I think this paradox is easily explained by the principles laid down here. For, if I am right, our moral conceptions are actually based, deep down, on notions of irreparability and vengeance. And so if we try to become more humanely moral we actually end up draining the strength out of our moral concepts. To try to become humanely moral—or at least too humanely moral—is, for us, to become not moral at all.

There is a lot that would need to be done in order to turn this suggestion into anything like a serious theory: we would need a detailed analysis of causes, empirical evidence, an examination of alternate explanations, and more. But, due to personal ignorance and lack of space, I will not be able to do any of these things. I do at least, however, want to provide a more specific example of these ideas. And the example I have in mind is our belief in God. For I think that our belief in God shows exactly this paradoxical pattern of improving and weakening at the same time.

When we were small, my generation still knew the old-fashioned fire-and-brimstone God—the God before whom all trembled and all were guilty, the God who was more than willing to toss small boys and girls into everlasting fires if they missed mass on Sunday or entertained an impure thought. When we were older, though, our Church changed and began to teach us a more humane belief—a God who was merciful and loving, who might actually save everyone, and who certainly did not condemn eternally for just one Sunday missed.

A similar change can be seen in attitudes toward the crucifixion.

When I was a child, this was accepted without embarrassment. God, we were told, was very angry and so he required a most bloody and painful sacrifice to appease his wrath. But this is not a theory that I hear anymore. We now think of God as a nicer fellow than that and so try not to think of him as demanding such cruel expiations. Whatever explanation we might now give for the crucifixion, it is unlikely to be God's blood vengeance.

Now one would think that the effect of such a change would be a strengthening of belief. We are, after all, being offered a much better—a much less cruel—God to believe in. And yet the actual effect is just the opposite: as God became better, belief in him weakened dramatically. It is actually during the reign of the new and nicer God—the kinder and gentler God—that people decided to stop going to Church.

I realize, of course, the dangers of arguing post hoc. Just because the betterment of God was followed by a weakening of belief doesn't mean that the betterment caused the weakening. Belief could have weakened for a whole variety of reasons which have nothing to do with the sort of God believed in. And I lack the sociological or historical background to sort through and evaluate all the alternative possibilities here.

All I can say is this: it does seem logical to me that our picture of what God is like will have a real effect on how we believe in Him. And in these terms I want—post hoc or not—to suggest that what may be happening is this: by making God more humane and less vindictive, we have also made God less morally serious. He no longer exercises the unlimited vengeance of morality's first layer. And he cannot, therefore, extend the forgiveness of morality's second layer. The old God of condemnation and mercy fit nicely into our moral beliefs and so was most believable. The new "nice fellow" God of assistance and aid, on the other hand, does not fit into these moral beliefs and so is not believable. He is, in a way, too nice to be God—too nice to even, from a moral point of view, be taken seriously.

But, I could imagine someone objecting, are not assistance and aid actually good things? And so is not the God of assistance and aid a moral God too?

And, in response to such an objection, I would, of course, agree that assistance and aid are good things. But, and I will argue a similar point in just a moment, I do not think that assistance and aid have yet become implanted as the basis of a new morality. They may be moral, but

they have not yet become a new moral center. And so, correspondingly, the God of assistance and aid has not yet managed to become implanted in our beliefs in the same solid and central way that the old God did.

But this brings me to the second point I want to talk about. I think that this system of morality, although it is weakening, still has a pretty strong hold on our way of thinking. And I think that this two-sided situation—the situation of an aging lion, as it were—appears in the way that alternate moral systems are treated. On the one hand, as is natural given the weakness of this first system, other, alternate moral systems are now being developed. On the other hand, though, because of the remaining strength of this first system, the alternate systems are being displaced and pushed away into the realm of the nonmoral.

The example which first comes to mind is the recent proliferation of psychology. People are consuming self-help books at an amazing rate. They are thinking about their lives, analytically and reflectively, in psychological terms. And they are making serious efforts to change their lives for the better.

And I think that this psychology is actually a sort of ethics. It is certainly playing the role of an ethics in people's lives. It is supplying a scientific knowledge which is designed to help us make ourselves into better people. And this, I think, is the goal which ethics has traditionally aimed at.

In fact, this psychology actually seems to me to be a modern version of Aristotle's ethics. We see the same emphasis on happiness and self-development. We see the same method employed, that is, the method of making our passions or feelings behave in more reasonable ways. We see the same goal of an increase in personal stature. We see the same focus on the individual and his virtues or vices.

And yet what is surprising is that this tremendous flowering of Aristotelian ethics is not looked on as an ethics at all. It is looked on as just psychology or just self-help. People complain that we do not care about ethics anymore. And yet, all the while, in this Aristotelian sense at least, we are talking about ethics almost constantly. An odd fact: to develop such an advanced ethical technology and to fill a country with this ethical discourse, and yet not to know it as an ethics.

And what I think is behind this strange oversight is the system of morality I have been describing here. From the perspective of a morality that is based on irreparable wrongs and unlimited vengeance,

all this psychological and Aristotelian talk about adjustment and self-development just will not look serious. "Yes, but where is the real moral obligation in such a system?" I once heard someone ask an Aristotelian who was giving a public lecture in our department. From an old-fashioned point of view, the new psychological ethics—or the old ethics of Aristotle, for that matter—will simply not be harsh or severe enough to really count as an ethics. And so it gets mislabeled as mere psychology or just self help.

And this, I think, defines our present moral situation: an old ethics we can no longer believe in because it is too cruel, and a new ethics we cannot believe in yet because it is not cruel enough.

Some thoughts about foundations

I want, finally, to ask about the foundations of this system. What is the reason behind it? Why would it make sense to set up morality in this way? Why, more particularly, should morality be based on irreparability and vengeance?

And one answer that pops to mind is that people need to be kept in line. Good intentions are fine, but what really guarantees compliance is the threat of punishment. And so, according to this answer, the harshness of the first layer should come as no surprise and should need no special explanation. For morality to function at all, it will, of course, need to be severe.

And I want to say that this answer is probably true but probably does not go far enough. The answer says, basically, that the harshness of morality is a deterrent. And who could disagree with this? And yet, if we look a little more closely, I think we will find that there has to be more than just deterrence which is going on here.

To begin with, the amount of harshness can go way beyond what deterrence would require. The example of David would be a case in point. Was it really necessary, in order to deter future adulterers, that it be David himself who found the body swinging, by its hair, from the tree? Wasn't the insurrection of Absalom and then his death already deterrence enough? Or, to take a more recent example, in the 1800s Bentham and company pointed out that punishments often went well beyond the amount which a rational deterrence would require.

Secondly, the impulse to harshness lasts even when the function of

deterrence is not being served. The proponents of capital punishment, for example, seem unfazed by statistics which show that executions do not deter crimes. Or we can ask about an imaginary case where the punishment of some violent criminal will remain unknown to the society at large. And I think that, in such a case, almost everyone would say that we should still punish. And what this shows is that something more than deterrence is involved here.

Thirdly, the impulse which wants to see a criminal beaten or tortured seems to be an impulse of vengeance directed at that particular criminal and not an impulse of deterrence directed at other men who might be contemplating crime. This, it seems to me, is just how the impulse appears. What we directly want is to hurt this one person. And the deterrence seems to be a sort of secondary effect which attaches to this primary impulse toward retribution.

I think, therefore, that deterrence is probably not a complete explanation for the harshness of our morality. Something else is, it seems, in operation here. Now I think that this something else is actually similar to deterrence, though it is also a bit more complicated. To explain this, though, I will have to begin by talking a bit about human relations.

And what I want to say is that human relations run, to an enormous extent, on trust. I trust that the drivers on the road will not try to run me down as I cross the street. I trust the ladies in the cafeteria not to poison my food and then take my money. I trust that the person I ask for the time will not lie to me. And so on. This quality of trust, in fact, is so pervasive and usually so automatic that we most often don't even think about it. And yet just a little reflection will show how vast a phenomenon this trust actually is.

Not only do we trust others, but we also expect them to trust us. If I served someone a sandwich, I would be quite insulted if he checked it for poison before he ate it. I would be furious if someone asked me to take a polygraph whenever I told him the time. In fact, I think that we would feel, in such situations, that we had a right to be trusted. And we would demand an explanation from the other person as to why he wasn't trusting us. And so I think that this feeling that we have a right to the trust of others is a second pervasive fact of our relations with each other.

One actual situation in which this surfaces, at least for me, is when a shop girl checks the bill I have given her to make sure it is not counterfeit. This always makes me feel a bit angry, as if I am not being ac-

corded the trust I deserve. Of course, though, I understand the reason for this practice, and I understand that it is not directed at me personally, and so I do not go around the shopping malls demanding explanations. But imagine the feeling if one were the only customer whose bill was checked. In such a situation, I think the feeling that one had a right to be trusted would probably make itself clear.

And I think that this is something which is a bit puzzling or intriguing. For this right to be trusted looks to be a most peculiar right. Where does this right come from? And how can I be so sure it is a right I actually have?

And it is at this point that I want to begin suggesting an answer of my own to the question about morality's harshness. For I think that this right to the trust of others is secured by offering them, implicitly of course, a pledge or a surety. And the surety which I think I am offering is a right to an unlimited vengeance if I fail or betray this trust. To put it metaphorically, I am not only saying, all the time, to those around me, "Trust me," but I am also saying "And if I fail on this trust, you can beat or kill me if you like."

And this, too, is an idea which Nietzsche mentions, though, once again, an idea that he does not develop in quite the direction that I think correct.³ But I hope the reader will allow me to just skip over the exegesis of Nietzsche and get right to the issues at hand.

Now I suspect that this idea of a surety might sound a bit strange, and so the next thing I want to do is to say a few things to make it seem a bit more believable. And the first thing I want to say is that it will explain the feeling which seemed puzzling just a moment ago, namely, the feeling that I actually have a right to be trusted. Since this trust is something which I have already, so to speak, posted the collateral for, it will also be a trust which I will think I am entitled to. The offer of myself to the vengeance of the other will have, in other words, already purchased the right to his trust.

Besides this, the idea of a surety will also explain why we think that vengeance is morally justified. The odd fact here is not that vengeance does occur, but that it seems to be morally authorized. Even the person being struck down in retribution acknowledges that this vengeance is just. We saw this in the example of David and Psalm 52. And yet these

3. *The Genealogy of Morals*, essay 2, section 5.

curious facts are simply explained by the suggestion I am making here. The vengeance is just because it is not an aggression but merely the collection of a surety. And the person being struck down will acknowledge this because it is a surety which he, himself, gave.

In addition to this sort of argument, though, I also want to give a couple of more concrete examples which I think support these ideas. And the first example is swearing or the taking of oaths. When we were children, we used to say, "Cross my heart and hope to die." When adults swear, they are, if I understand it right, formally asking God to damn them eternally if they do not tell the truth or perform the action promised. And to swear on your mother's eyes or your father's grave is to formally offer these dear objects up to desecration if one fails on the oath. And what I think we have in all these cases is a making explicit of that surety of vengeance which is actually operating implicitly all the time.

The second example is the postures of forgiveness. As I mentioned earlier, we ask for forgiveness on our knees, in a position of defenselessness. In fact, the suppliant is even supposed to bend his head, exposing the vital area of the neck to the violence of the party he has offended. And what is behind these postures, I think, is an offer on the part of the suppliant to repay the surety. As promised, he pays the price of his betrayal by offering himself to the vengeance of the one betrayed.

And though this point about the surety is the main point I want to make here, I also want, before I close, to branch out into a couple of related points. And the first of these has to do with the issue of irreparability.

I argued in the first section that we conceive moral wrongs as irreparable. There is, in other words, nothing that we ourselves can do to set things right again. And I think we can now see a possible explanation for this, namely, the explanation that, with the crime or betrayal, we have forfeited the surety, and that a surety, once forfeited, is forfeited quite out of our own control. To look at it the other way around, to think that moral wrongs could be repaired would be, in a way, to renege on the surety offered. It would be as if we wanted to take back that right to vengeance which we had offered and to substitute a bit of repair work in its place. This is why I think other people would react angrily and say, "But you are guilty and must own up to that. You can't try to just smooth things over." And I think we can hear in this statement a demand that

the guilty party do what he has in fact implicitly agreed to do, that is, recognize the aggrieved party's right to retribution. This, the aggrieved party is saying, must come first before any sort of amelioratives—any sort of repayments—can even be talked about.

The second issue I want to talk about is the harshness or severity—the violence even—of our moral ideas. I read something once which seemed to throw an interesting light on this. And so I want to talk about it a bit before I close.

The something I have in mind comes from *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Adorno and Horkheimer argue there that paranoia is a fundamental—and a quietly constant—frame of mind. We are, they say, actually in a very uncertain contact with reality. We get only a few bits of data from our senses, and yet we must, on this slim basis, construct our whole picture of the world. The tenuousness of this procedure has been amply demonstrated by the arguments of modern philosophy. But it is also a tenuousness, Adorno and Horkheimer suggest, which we all, on some level, actually feel. And this feeling is a feeling of paranoia—a secret fear that we might be, almost constantly, deceived in fundamental ways. And this quiet but pervasive paranoia, Adorno and Horkheimer argue, is a secret source of our violence.

And I want to suggest something similar here. For if our knowledge of the world has been traditionally thought to be uncertain, then our knowledge of the minds and intentions of others has been thought to be doubly uncertain. We simply cannot see into other people's minds. And so we cannot verify—or at least verify directly—that they are worthy of our trust. And so it seems to me that, here too, there are grounds for a certain fear of deception and for a certain paranoia.

And I think that this paranoia can also break out into a certain violence—the violence of moral retribution. What I want to suggest is that our morality might be so harsh because, behind it, there is this fear of being deceived. There seems to be a connection between fear and reactions that are too harsh or extreme. It is as if the fear propels the reaction beyond what would actually be needed. To mention just one last example before I close: if my memory serves me right, the grade school teachers who were most harsh were those who, at bottom, were most fearful of being disobeyed. And I think that a similar connection between harshness and paranoia might be true of our morality as well.

Conclusion

I would like to end on a somewhat more personal note. I actually began this essay as an attempt to discover the meaning of the word *ought*. For some time now I have been puzzled by this word. What, besides such obvious tautologies as “must” or “have to” does it mean to say that we ought to do something?

To look at it in a slightly different way, the word *ought* seems to exert a real compulsion, a real binding force on us. And this began to seem more and more amazing and perplexing to me. How does the word *ought* get such binding power? In what, exactly, does this compulsion consist?

And this essay contains what I fancy are some first—and very partial, very incomplete—answers to these questions. I think that every time we use the word *ought* one layer of what we mean—one layer of the forces we access—are the various mechanisms outlined here: irreparability, right to vengeance, punishment, forgiveness perhaps, surety, paranoia, and excess of violence. It is all these things, in other words, which we hear echoing in the words “You ought to . . .,” and which give these words their peculiar force and power.

A final word

I would like to thank the reader for his or her kind attention to these thoughts. And I would also like to bid him or her, after this so brief association, adieu. ∞