

The Ethics of Honour and the Possibility of Promise

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1. Some *Aporias* of Promise and Forgiveness

In twentieth century writing on forgiveness one can note three emphases.¹ First, it is linked to time: forgiveness tries in some way to alter the past, to begin again in the present and to create a new future. Secondly it is linked to *promise*. Forgiveness itself promises – ‘I repent’, ‘I promise not to hold this against you from henceforth’ etc. But more precisely, it has been seen that promise is a symmetrical ethical action to that of forgiving. Whereas forgiveness amends the past, promise tries positively to foreclose the uncertain future.

But both acts seem at best precarious, at worst impossible. Can one in any sense at all alter the past? Can one in any way pre-emptively guarantee the future? And yet, every present moment evaporates on inspection into that which is already over and that which is yet to come. So *all* our ethical attitudes and responses seem to be about this precariousness and near-impossibility. We are always mourning or revising or commemorating the past. We are always fearing, planning and trying to secure the future. This problematic relationship to absent time makes up the very substance of our practical orientation in every present. Hence these difficult issues about promise and forgiveness concern the very possibility of ethical behaviour as such.

¹ I am thinking mainly of Jankélévitch, Derrida and Spaemann. For detailed references see below.

The third characteristic emphasis in modern writings on forgiveness has been on its aporetic character, aspects of which I have already alluded to.² But the *aporias* of forgiveness are multiple and these are just some of them which are most relevant to the argument about general argument about ethics which I wish to make in this paper.

1. We should offer unconditional forgiveness only to the repentant. But the latter has no right to absolve himself before he has been granted forgiveness by the one he has offended. Therefore both pardoner and pardonee must take the first initiative and we have reached an apparent deadlock. Mere *disposition* to forgive (given the repentance of the offender) on the part of the potential pardoner, and disposition to repent on the part of the potential pardonee (given the actual offer of forgiveness from the offended one) although they should both be present as necessary preconditions, cannot point a way through this *impasse* of the actual performance of forgiveness.³ Hence forgiveness that is unilaterally offered hovers in a limbo, as Shakespeare appears to grasp to *Cymbeline*, where Imogen says of her husband Posthumus, departed across the sea, ‘if he should write, and I not have it, ‘twere a paper lost, as offered mercy is’.

(*Cymbeline*, I.iv)

² The current paper can be read as a sequel to my two chapters on forgiveness in *Being Reconciled* (London: Routledge, 2003) 44-78. Some of the same ground is covered here but in a distinctly different way, because my ultimate focus is here upon the ethics of honour. The earlier writings dealt with forgiveness as either negative forgetting or positive remembering. This aspect is not dealt with here although it is obliquely alluded to.

³ Charles Williams, in his superb long essay ‘The Forgiveness of Sins’ rightly insists on the importance of preparatory independent dispositions to forgive and to repent but he does not claim that this changes the simultaneous mutuality of forgiveness itself upon which he strongly insists. See *He Came Down From Heaven* and *The Forgiveness of Sins* (Berkeley CA: the apocryphile press, 2005) 198. I am grateful to Sarah Coakley for reminding me of the existence of this text.

2. We *should* forgive; yet there is no right for the offender to be forgiven. It follows that forgiveness is a contradictory *elicited gift*, like Aquinas's natural desire for the supernatural.⁴

3. If forgiveness is a free act then it lies outside any economy of meritorious penitence. However, once offered it must be gratefully received in order for it to be operative (see 1) and this involves a certain measurable exchange, however minimal. Therefore forgiveness appears to be aneconomic but always lapses into an economy after all.

4. If a person repents of a bad act and offers restitution, then justice is satisfied. Reconciliation can occur. There is no need, it would seem, for forgiveness. This need only appears to arise when an act is so bad that it cannot be set right nor compensated for. Here the irreversibility of time asserts itself. Murder is such an act: the murderer cannot bring the murdered one back to life again. So he requires to receive a forgiveness in excess of justice. However, the crime that cannot be atoned because it cannot be pardoned by the victim (since he is dead) is thereby *unforgivable*. To have removed a person from the scene of life cannot be balanced-out. So it would seem, as Jacques Derrida contended, that only the unforgivable calls forth the need for forgiveness. The latter is then either impossible, or rather constitutes a regulative 'impossibility' orientating our compassion (Derrida) or a supra-ethical religious miracle of the grace of an instant above and outside time (Vladimir Jankélévitch).⁵

⁴ See John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids/London: Eerdmans/SCM, 2006)

⁵ Jacques Derrida, 'On Forgiveness' in *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London: Routledge, 2002), 27-60; Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness* trans. by Andrew Kelley (Chicago: Chicago UP 2005), 13-56, 106-155.

5. But if the act of forgiveness transcends time, then so does the act of murder. This bad act stands forever as irrevocable. It should not be forgiven else we forget its seriousness and encourage future murders. Yet revenge and resentfulness is also bad – as Robert Spaemann emphasises, we should recognise the murderer as a person whose personhood still transcends his murderousness.⁶ So we should and yet we should not forgive both the literal and the metaphorical murderer. These two contradictory imperatives seem to enjoy an equal atemporal ultimacy. Such an impossible equality is also echoed in terms of the impossibility of moral finality back within time. Here forgiveness *may* be the last word, but equally, as Jankélévitch declared, a revived lapse into wickedness may be the last word.⁷ Religion tries to give forgiveness an eschatological finality, yet it seems that even that may be unavailable, while within the secular horizon of time ethical interaction is alien to any notion of closure.

6. How can we prevent forgiveness from degenerating into cheap forgiveness, palliating wickedness? The habitual pardoner travels too lightly through life: not feeling injuries to the appropriate degree that would register their seriousness, he exonerates all too easily.⁸ The problem with such lightheartedly stoic indifference is the excuse it offers to the cruelty of others. Its attitude of removal from bodily pain also downgrades the role of the body as registry of injuries that are not simply physical. For in the heat of the moment of physical suffering it is virtually impossible to forgive, just because an extreme bodily pain is unendurable. And this renders also the deliberate perpetration of such pain unendurable for the authentic moment of its

⁶ Robert Spaemann, *Happiness and Benevolence* trans. Jeremiah Alberg S.J. (Notre Dame UP: Notre Dame Ind. 2000), 187-199; *Persons: the Difference Between 'Someone' and 'Something'* trans. Oliver O'Donovan (Oxford: OUP 2006).

⁷ Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, 13-56, 156-165.

⁸ See Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 44-60.

remaining. Inauthentic by comparison would seem to be the belated offering of pardon once the pain has died down.

7. Finally there is the issue of who should forgive? The victim, obviously. Yet the victims of any bad deed are virtually infinite, just as an offence is never isolated and the question of responsibility always murky.⁹ We cannot assemble the entire number of victims stretched through time and dispersed across space together in any one forum. So actually, forgiveness is political. We require a sovereign representative in order that an offender may be forgiven. But the sovereign power has not suffered, so does it not usurp the voice of the victim? How can one have representative forgiveness without sovereignty, without the dubiety of political power, asked Derrida? But that is 'impossible', he answered.¹⁰

These particular seven *aporias* of forgiveness are of especial relevance, as we shall see when it comes to considering the relation of forgiveness to perspectives of guilt and shame which, I shall presently argue, constitute rival ethical horizons. There are also *aporias* of promise, relevant to the same contrast in terms of its positive valency of conscience versus honour. These *aporias* again concern the disturbances introduced by time – at once the condition for the possibility of promise, as for that of forgiveness, and at the same time the cause of its apparent undoing. For present purposes we can name four of them:

1. In the future, you should do your duty and others should do their's. So what need is there of the making of promises? Like forgiveness, promise would be in excess of

⁹ Spaemann, *Happiness and Benevolence*, 187-199; *Persons*, 197-235.

¹⁰ Derrida, *loc. cit.* See also Milbank, *Being Reconciled* 44-78.

justice, in excess of the ethical, even though many, like Robert Spaemann, see it as being at the heart of the ethical.¹¹

2. If something is a good thing to do, then why not do it at once, immediately? Maybe circumstances will not allow that it be done quite yet. Maybe, for example, we cannot get married for a few months, until we've saved up enough money to do so. But then we will already get engaged, already engage in performative utterances which is tantamount to doing something already. This something is a bit more than a mere promise. Instead, it is the anticipation of a vow which has traditionally shadowed the breaking of an engagement with something of the disgraceful tint of divorce, and ensured that the male jilter be seen as probably a cad or the female jilter as probably a coquette.

3. This *aporia* is to do with consistency. It can rightly be said that an act is never entirely punctual. So it might seem that I need to promise that I will continue to act rightly in order to ensure the integrity of an always imperfectly present action. But on the other hand it can be said that either I have already proved to be consistently virtuous in the past and then remain so in the future – or not. For a promise cannot produce a good habit. Either habitual goodness is there or it is absent. So the possession of a good habit seems to render promising redundant. Whom does a woman trust – the man of consistent promises or the man who never needs to make them? Promise seems more requisite in the public realm where we need formal guarantees or contracts in order to ensure the smooth functioning of the normal operations of life between strangers. But alternatively, promise comes into play in

¹¹ Spaemann, *Persons*, 221-231.

private life when it is more a question of irregular surprise than of regular disposition: ‘I promise to treat you’; ‘I promise to show you something interesting, something unusual’. And after all it turns out that promise belongs more to the private than to the public sphere. For contract is precise: in ‘normal’ times, given no arrival of credit crunches etc, its terms can be met. Indeed contract is publicly binding *because* it is exact and because, in consequence, it is viably enforceable by coercively-backed positive law. For this double reason – precision and enforceability by a third party – contract is both more and less than a pure promise. Genuine promise is, by contrast, absolutely anarchic, since it is only guaranteed in the first person by the promiser himself, who thereby takes responsibility for his own freedom and even by aspiration for future circumstances: ‘come hell or high water I will exact this revenge’; ‘somehow I knew that you would contrive to be here’. Yet this assumption of total first-person responsibility is also enabled by the relative vagueness of promise as compared to contract – in which case the law can allow for circumstances of non-fulfillability in a way that the more exacting chivalry of personal relationships cannot. But the inexcusability of a broken promise is linked to the relative fluidity of what might constitute the keeping of a moral or a romantic tryst. A true promise is paradoxically vague: ‘somehow I will be with you’, somehow I will always be true to you’ is always the sub-text of ‘I will be with you’, ‘I will always be true to you’. So a promise is something that we *must* keep, even though we frequently do not know *how* we will be able to do so or even precisely what can be interpreted as the keeping of the promise. Especially in the case of promises met with children, adults can wait in fear of the hermeneutic verdict of the promisee. Thus on either side, that of the promiser and that of the promisee, the question of when and whether a promise has been kept remains in principle a matter of interpretation – as in the case of the course

of many marriages. At the extreme problematic limit one can say that one *must* keep one's promises *even though we can never know that we will be able to do so*.

Promise-keeping, therefore, appears to be a matter of categorical imperative rooted in our own self-possession of free autonomy, and yet it turns out to be the precise point where our very freedom – our 'ownmost' thing – is not fully within our guaranteed power to know just what we have willed and whether we can ever effectively will it after all.

4. Closely linked to this problematic is another point made by Derrida.¹² As with offering forgiveness, the very fact that we feel the need to promise at all, suggests ambivalence. I promise not merely because I hyperbolically will to do something, but also for the opposite reason: because I might *not* do it – just as I forgive precisely because I may well still be harbouring anger and resentment. So these gestures of reliability are paradoxically such because they are also intrinsically *unreliable*.

Thereby they reveal not just a moral but also an ontological frailty – present because of time, because of our spontaneous emotions. Spaemann rightly says that in part we have to apologise for our finitude, even though it is scarcely our fault!¹³ Thus though, in my usual absent-mindedness, I didn't mean to get in your way in the corridor, I should still say sorry. Likewise I ought to apologise although I was unavoidably detained and was unable to keep my word that I would turn up at a certain time. And in an equivalent fashion we should keep on promising despite the fact that we know that the limits of space and the uncertain horizons of time mean that we will be unable entirely to keep most of our promises. The recall by the other of our intent to do so, even though we didn't in the end, can be received as a kind of advance warrant of the

¹² Derrida, *loc.cit.*

¹³ Spaemann, *Happiness and Benevolence*, 187-199.

later confession of finitude. But all the same, why promise at all, apart from this mode of ontological apologetic and mannered assumption of our existential burden? Why not just stick with habit and forget the luxury of surprise which conjures up the field of promise as erotic anticipation, without which surprise would be mere shock? For promise is always the promising by myself as a morally unreliable promiser of I don't know what for I don't know when or even for whom.

2. Shame and Honour versus Guilt and Conscience

Seven seemingly intractable aporias of forgiveness; four of promise. Is this really how things are? Or is there something profoundly wrong here? I think the latter. The problem is that we are dominated by the perspectives of post-Kantian ethical thought in both its Protestant and liberal-secular Jewish versions (including those of Levinas and Jankélévitch). And by their pseudo-Catholic equivalents, although it must be added that the genealogy of Kantian ethics itself lies in the perverse trajectory that runs diversely from Bonaventure, Henry of Ghent and Duns Scotus through to Jansensism on the one hand and Suarez and Wolff on the other.

This tradition prioritises inner motivation over external action and intrinsic teleological outcome. It concomitantly sees ethical action as complete within immanence and therefore brackets questions of eschatological transformation, the beatific vision and bodily resurrection, which an integral Catholicism considers to be essential to the formation of a genuine ethical perspective. For interiority tends to

inscribe a closed circle which ensures that ethics concerns the securing of individual autonomous control in the finite present.

A deconstructed Kantianism, as rigorously achieved by Derrida, then reveals how finitude always destroys any possibility of a closed immanent presence, such that pure autonomous motivation now remains only as an 'impossible' regulatory horizon, which cannot, even in any degree, be mediated to the finite such as to modify its cruel exigencies. (Derrida's soft-minded followers imagine that it can; he himself was ambivalent about the rigour of his own position.) Openness to the exterior, by contrast, allows us to confess the problems of limitation for autonomy while pinning our ethical hopes rather upon relationality and faith in the future transformation of natural and human relations which reaches beyond the circumstances of our current finitude.

The interiorising approach to ethics, because it is focussed upon motivation, thinks within the horizon of *guilt and conscience*. The exteriorising approach, by contrast, because it is concerned with the right ordering of external relationships, thinks within the horizon of *shame and honour*. My case in this paper is that the *aporias* of forgiveness and promise arise within the first horizon but evaporate in the light of the second, more open horizon.

Such a suggestion will have to meet two immediate prejudices. The first is that codes of honour are sub-ethical, to do with aristocratic manners and not genuine good and evil. The second is that appeal to shame and honour is an appeal to the pagan, whereas Christianity is concerned with the interior conscience.

The first prejudice results from a failure to understand that pre-modern ‘courtesy’ (in which the ‘noble’ in every sense were expected to excel) was not modern ‘civility’¹⁴ which was inaugurated by stoic-influenced humanists from the 15thC onwards. Civility is indeed a sub-ethical code for making an essentially amoral public life between strangers (estrangement now being newly the public norm) safer and more convenient for the individual. By contrast, ‘courtesy’ embodied a more liturgical and sacramental understanding of public behaviour in continuity with our relationship to God and to angels (for example Gabriel was said to have greeted Mary ‘courteously’ at the Annunciation) whereby a normative continuity was assumed between external action and interior disposition. ‘Honour’ concerns how one stands in the regard of the other. In this respect it might seem to be either less than, or superficially more than, ‘virtue’. Yet if virtue anciently concerned the fulfilling of one’s role within a polity, then naturally judgement as to correct fulfilment lay as much with the other as with oneself. This was a matter of ‘courtesy’ and not simply of ‘good manners’ that oil the wheels of social intercourse.

As Charles Williams so well understood, ‘style’ in social life was taken in pre-modern times to the very heart of the exhibition of ethical substance.¹⁵ Later on, this came to be seen, in Stoic fashion, as rather to do with the interior control of passions – thereby adding self-discipline to the pragmatic social discipline of civility. This, in effect,

¹⁴ See Anna Bryson, *From Civility to Courtesy: Changing Modes of Conduct in Early Modern England* (Oxford: OUP 1998) and Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing; on the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 146-149. Bryson is developing the original insights of Norbert Elias here, to which Catherine Pickstock also refers. Pickstock cites in addition the crucial work of John Bossy and Talal Asad in elaborating this contrast.

¹⁵ Williams, ‘The Forgiveness of Sins’. Williams’ conclusions here are consonant with the later ones of Michel Foucault, Ivan Illich and Charles Taylor in this regard. See in particular Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 90-145.

‘immanentised’ the exercise of chastity (constraint of sensual passion) and dualistically divided chastity from ‘style’. By contrast, as Williams also pointed out, the Middle Ages saw chastity as mainly to do with our ordering towards God and the priority of the spiritual over the physical, not to do with our ordering towards the neighbour. Bodily-mediated ‘courtesy’ towards the neighbour was rather regarded as the social mode of participation in ‘chastity’. Both, therefore, were viewed in a more liturgical, festive and celebratory light, because outward expression participated in inner disposition and was essential to the latter. ‘Style’ was not a matter of pragmatic discipline because it revealed ethical substance, while the latter was not a matter of wilful control because it was achieved precisely through a courteous, measured external ordering.

Hence the ‘normal’ situation (which can still allow for the exceptions of false disguise, the unfairness of the other etc) was one in which the virtuous action is also an honourable action, since the well-performing of a role would be rendered nugatory if the other did not recognise this well-performance. One could say that, within the perspective of a virtue-ethic, virtue (unlike Kantian ‘good will’) must not only be done but must be seen to be done if public justice (the acme of virtue for Aristotle and Aquinas) is to be rendered possible.

This ‘seen to be done’ is precisely the sphere of honour in which all human beings and not just aristocrats were situated. If it applied in the Middle Ages more especially to knights with their code of chivalry, then this was because their dealings with the other were both more acute and more complex than the dealings of the clergy with each other and with the laity, which operated more under liturgical constraints and

removals from the fields of sexual relationship and resort to violent enforcement. In this way the ethical horizon of the clergy was, indeed, relatively ‘interiorised’, although a clerical theologian like Aquinas (in particular) fully took the lay perspective into account in an already ‘humanist’ fashion.

The second prejudice, which assumes (either positively or derogatively) that the horizon of shame and honour is only a pagan one, can be refuted by a reading of certain passages in Thomas Aquinas. Although Aquinas inherited through Roman thinkers like Cicero and Seneca the Stoic concept of *conscientia*, he in part interpreted this in Aristotelian terms of honour and shame – in this way not dividing the interior from the exterior court of ethical appeal.

Thus he says that a virtuous man can never be shamed, thereby making it clear that for him there is no ‘honour code’ that is either less or more than the code of virtue itself. (ST 2.2. Q. 144 a. 4) Indeed he explicitly argues that honour is identical to virtue on the basis that virtue is desired for its own sake and that this is the mark of ‘honesty’. (ST 2.2. Q. 145 a. 1) One might still assume that for Aquinas relatively ‘internal’ virtue has priority over relatively ‘external’ honour, but, in fact, he modifies even Aristotle by tilting the balance towards the latter. In this respect he follows Augustine, who, in the *City of God*, explicitly links human honour with divine glory: the reception of divine grace ‘glorifies’ us more than any merely ‘possessed’ virtue. (CD V) Thomas accordingly says that the scope of honour is greater than the scope of virtue because some things that are honoured are greater than virtue: explicitly God and beatitude, at which virtue aims. (ST 2.2. Q. 145 a.1 ad 2)

This suggests that for Aquinas the external ‘judgement of the other’ is more fundamental than the interior self-judgement of conscience. For finally the other who judges us is God himself and furthermore it is his very gracious judgement which renders us really virtuous (‘justification by faith’). Thus at the theological extreme ‘being honoured by the other’ is actually more fundamental than the self-possession of virtue and is indeed what renders the latter possible. One can even extend this insight to the intra-divine: God’s own goodness is a matter of the mutual glorification between the persons of the Trinity. A further legitimate gloss upon all this would to say, with Kierkegaard, that the ‘religious beyond the ethical’ mooted by Christianity involves a kind of higher chivalry or ‘knightly’ faithfulness, as the Danish philosopher himself put it.

If, for Aquinas, the virtuous person cannot be shamed (such that shamefacedness is not itself a virtue) then this is because he is innocent of any ‘disgraceful’ deeds, not simply because he exonerates himself within an inner tribunal. (ST 2.2. Q. 144 a.1) Nothing shines out from him other than a reflex of the divine glory. What shines out is precisely *honestum* that is worthy of honouring, and this *honestum* is defined by Aquinas as ‘spiritual beauty’: ‘a thing is said to be honest as having a certain excellence deserving of honour on account of its spiritual beauty while [by contrast] it is said to be pleasing, as bringing rest to desire, and useful, as referred to something else’ (ST 2.2. Q. 145 a.3 resp.) Honour is hence firmly associated with the final rather than the provisional by Aquinas. A state of *honestum* worthy of honour is indeed brought about by virtuous activity (divine, angelic or human) but insofar as it participates in the divine glory one can infer that it also exceeds virtue as tending

remotely to the end of virtue which is the complete spiritual beauty that is God and beatitude.

It is notable here that Aquinas associates finality still more with ‘honesty’ (and so honour) than with virtue, precisely because *honestum* is an aesthetic quality, and it is beauty that entirely exceeds the useful and even the merely desirable (whose end is merely ‘the pleasing’). For Aquinas it is beauty that it is most obviously self-justifying. Thus he defines *honestum* as the *acme* of beauty which is spiritual beauty but which ‘like all beauty or comeliness results from the concurrence of clarity and proportion’. (ST 2.2. Q. 145 a.2 resp) This rationally produced proportion and *claritas* – or ‘shining forth’ -- is clearly something which only exists insofar as it can be recognised. Hence ‘honesty’ is present insofar as it is honourable and can be honoured. Therefore ‘the clarity of glory [which attaches to *honestum*] consists in a person being honoured’. (ST 2.2. Q. 144 a.2 resp) ¹⁶

It is this tending which is a self-exceeding that also ‘goes out’ towards the human other and forms the bonds of sociality and political union: ‘honesty consists radically in the internal choice, but its expression lies in the external conduct’ and ‘the internal choice is not made known save by external actions’. (ST 2.2. Q. 145 a.1 ad 3)

Honestum, Aquinas further says, ‘has a certain beauty insofar as it is regulated by reason’, and the effect of this internally ordered ‘honesty’ is emanating glory, since ‘through being honoured or praised a person acquires clarity in the eyes of others’. (ST 2.2. Q. 145 a.2 ad 2)

¹⁶ Just why certain supposed Medieval experts, like John Marenbon, can contend that Aquinas is unconcerned with the aesthetic remains a total mystery to me.

There is therefore a strong implied link here between the ‘outgoing’ aesthetic dimension of ethics and the orientation of the ethical towards political harmony.

Relationality is primary and hence *recognition* of relationship is as fundamental as relationship itself, because relationship is not present without recognition: relationship is always reflexively doubled, just as virtue is both doubled and exceeded for Aquinas by honour.

The emanating *claritas rationis* that shapes the spiritual beauty of *honestum* is also ‘virtue which moderates according to reason all that is connected with man’. (ST 2.2. Q. 145 a.2 resp) It follows that ‘honesty’ which is alone worthy of honour is for Aquinas that power of judgment which passes over from concern with individual virtue to the architectonic business of political justice which is continuously concerned with the ‘economic’ distribution of roles and resources.¹⁷ Just to the measure that the ethical as a matter of honour transcends itself towards the theologically salvific, so also it transcends itself towards the political – a sphere in which Aquinas’s measured endorsement of the papal *plenitudo potestatis* makes it peculiarly clear that he endorses no purely ‘natural’ ethical order.¹⁸

It should not, however, be thought that Aquinas, under Aristotelian influence, had little concern with interiority. The point is rather that his perspective *does not separate* political exteriority from existential self-development (as the treatment of *honestum* shows). In this respect it should now be pointed out that the mark of the modern horizon of guilt and conscience is less a focus on internal motivation pure and

¹⁷ For Aquinas, as for Aristotle, monetary exchange acts as a mediating middle of ‘redistribution’ between politically architectonic ‘distributive’ justice on the one hand and civil and criminal ‘commutative’ justice on the other.

¹⁸ It is incredible that this point is so frequently overlooked by neoscholastic supporters of the *natura pura*.

simple, as rather a *dualistic divide* between the interior and the exterior. Indeed this dualism generates the paradox that the modern ethics of interior conscience is also an explicitly ‘other-regarding’ ethics, as explored by Robert Spaemann.¹⁹

This paradox was also well pointed-up by Bernard Williams in his book *Shame and Necessity*. The voices of guilt and conscience are internal. Yet they concern entirely *not* ‘how I am,’ my very being, my character, but something punctually isolated which I am deemed to have done to the other such that I should feel guilty: impaired his freedom, inhibited his happiness.²⁰ Or else, to the contrary, something which should enable me to enjoy a good conscience: promoted his freedom, made him happier. Hence the concern with internal conscience is also a mark of continuous *ecstasis* towards other people. This paradox holds of *both* deontology and consequentialism.

What is the significance of this paradox? It means that the other-regarding is curiously impersonal, curiously non-self-involving. One’s own happiness and self-development is not at stake here. A disinterested self-sacrifice or even self-obliteration is always latently at work within this non-eudaemonism. For its sense of *ecstasis*, as for the entire proto-Kantian medieval Franciscan tradition from Bonaventure onwards, is the very reverse of *relational*.²¹ Just as my existential identity is not here in play, so also

¹⁹ Spaemann, *Happiness and Benevolence*.

²⁰ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (California UP: Berkeley Cal, 1993), 1-49.

²¹ See Pierre Rousselot, *The Problem of Love in the Middle Ages: a Historical Contribution* trans. Alan Vincelette (Marquette UP Milwaukee, 2002), 155-196.

my *interaction* with the other is not here attended to, is even bracketed. This is *not* an ethics of the *metaxu*, of the ‘between’.²²

Nor is the ethics of guilt and conscience a narrative ethics, as Alasdair Macintyre has famously pointed out.²³ For the inward voice of conscience supposedly strikes out of nowhere, more impossibly outside any plot than a *Deus ex Machina*. It concerns an isolated, atomic action towards the other, also not situated within a story, but transcendently located within a formal field of eternal synchronicity. So the model involved is spatial and atemporal.

And this engenders a further remarkable paradox. Such an ethical approach inevitably tends to appropriate for immanence ethics-transcending atemporal religious acts like sacrifice, forgiveness, renunciation and promising. Thus, for example, Kantian ethics, like the Cartesian theory of knowledge, is a sort of dubious angelism. Here the duty to help the other, to assist and promote her freedom, takes no account of before and after. But even the utilitarian command to make as many as possible happier in the future is quasi-religious, because it implies an infinite horizon of self-renunciation. Hence the utilitarian imperative, like unrealisable capital, can never after all be cashed-out in the assets of measurable happiness. For whose happiness is meant and when? The quasi-religious character of this imperative logically demands that happiness be always deferred and displaced and that no-one is entitled to enjoy happiness rather than to make others happy. In deconstructive consequence, no-one is entitled to occupy the position of beneficiary despite the fact that the conferring of

²² See William Desmond, *Ethics and the Between* (New York SUNY 2001). The crucial philosophical and ethical importance of the *metaxu* was first pointed out in modern times by Eric Voegelin. I am grateful to Nick Rengger of St Andrews’ University for reminding me of this.

²³ Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981)

benefit alone drives the whole system. So in its angelic capitalisation of all future time, utilitarianism obliterates real, lived, narrative time.²⁴

But if both narrative time and the between are discounted, then so is the development of a good *habitus* and so likewise is real *ethos* which is a being with the other. Or at the very least these things become secondary. What is substituted for habit and *ethos* is the atemporal affirmation of my own freedom and the equally atemporal commitment to sustaining the freedom and/or the happiness of the other (according to deontological or consequentialist variants). But this assumed perspective of an eternal transcendental spatiality is inherently absurd: we exist only within time; we suffer and hope within time and only cross the temporal border when we die. Yet this suffering and this hoping are handled by other-regarding ethics as if they were not time-bound events and emotions. It is for this reason that it considers that suffering must be blotted-out rather than lived-through and the causer of suffering negatively and unilaterally forgiven. Equally hope must be palliated through absolute contractual promise legally enforceable either by the sovereign State or by the sovereign conscience.²⁵

What is subordinated here, by contrast, is any notion of reconciliation and intimate bonding. In this paper I am calling this notion metaphorically ‘betrothal’. In the case of reconciliation one has to do penance, and make symbolic acknowledgement of both one’s own repentance and the offer of forgiveness by the injured party or its sovereign representative. This alone permits charity to flow again. One has to recall the past;

²⁴ These problems of consequentialism are very well explored, though not, as he supposes, even partially resolved, by Derek Parfit in *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: OUP 1984).

²⁵ The genealogical link between these two is finely elaborated by Jean Bethke Elshtain in her book *Sovereignty: God, State and Self* (New York: Basic Books, 2008)

allow with Augustine that as the past is abidingly real as a trace, the past is still *really there* insofar as it is there in my memory.²⁶ So it is possible to revise what has already occurred even with respect to its occurrence.

Jankélévitch was wrong in supposing that the past is entirely unalterable and that past suffering must in justice be left unatoned for.²⁷ Following St Paul and Irenaeus, one can rather see that ‘recapitulation’ (*anakaphtaiosis*) is indeed possible. In a certain way we can go back in time and redo the things that still darkly echo in the present. Just because there is no purely present action, but every action commences as already-over and only occurs as not yet having fully happened, the memory and continued effect of a past action is more precisely the ‘archaeological remains’ of that action, a self-recording which alone constituted it as an event in the first place. There is no history without historiography even at the level of natural history (fossilisation etc) and just for this reason a charitable historiography really does alter past history which is ‘no longer there’ only because it is ‘still here’ in altered form – it being the case that no event has any being other than continuous alteration. Recapitulation as salvific is the key to the ethical, not the eternalisation of law-codes which will be bound to ignore their temporal contingency.

It follows that forgiveness does not lie beyond justice which distributes, nor beyond economy which continuously tries to re-distribute in accordance with justice.²⁸ Instead, it operates a kind of hyperbolic economy – an imperfect and open-ended participation of infinite exchange by finite processes of reciprocity.

²⁶ See Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 44-60.

²⁷ *Forgiveness*, 13-56.

²⁸ See note 17 above.

Likewise with bonding or ‘betrothal’. People are either joined together in marriage or they are not, said Jesus. In which case man cannot set them asunder. To be married is to be in a settled habit of togetherness which binds together two distinct genders.²⁹ Marriage is, for Christianity, as the Middle Ages upheld, a *de facto* matter, not *de jure*. So it is not that habit confirms promise, but that only good habit can deliver genuinely secure promise. Regular fidelity can indeed, or rather must, cultivate surprises, but a regular fidelity is not a kind of loyalty to a law of commitment to surprise.

It is here that Spaemann, to my mind, gets rather confused. He tries to show, quite rightly, following Leibniz (for whom love was *delectatio in felicitate alterius* --delight in the happiness of the other) that in a certain sense Christianity tries to synthesise eudaemonism with other-regarding ethics – or rather, that the latter is a post-Christian distortion of a certain ‘ecstasisation’ of the eudaemonistic.³⁰ This is not the unilateral, disinterested ecstasy of the Franciscan to Kantian tradition, but rather a mutual *ecstasis* of the between, as found in Aquinas. For if the architectonic theological virtue for Christianity is charity which (for both Augustine and Aquinas) is friendship with God and the neighbour, then virtue is, beyond the Aristotelian praise of magnanimity, most primarily gift-exchange, and happiness is also a rejoicing in the happiness of the other, as Leibniz so acutely saw. It is no longer aristocratic political tranquillity, but rather, with a certain measured recovery of the Dionysiac, conviviality, celebration and festivity both solemn and jovial.

²⁹ ‘Homosexual marriage’ is of course ontologically impossible.

³⁰ Spaemann, *Happiness and Benevolence*.

So far, with Spaemann, so good. But his more Thomistic aspect is betrayed by a residual Kantianism which makes promise prior to habit. Trusting a good habit, he says, is just natural, a reliance on other people's emotions. By contrast, the moral absolute lies with the emotion and life-transcending commitment of promise.³¹ But if promise is not rooted in habitual virtue, then it is no longer properly vague or open-ended. Instead, it is reduced to contract – to moral contract as a simulacrum of capitalist contract. Hence one contracts non-relationally with the other in his freedom in order to guarantee both his freedom and one's own. For Spaemann, one should *subsequently* adjust one's habits in accordance with the standards of absolute promising. But this Kantian subordination of virtue to duty suggests too great a gloom about our specifically human animality. And let us remember that Kant, with more rigour, thought that we could never *attain* to the purity of rational disinterest. We could only reach a sublime affective simulacrum of such a stance. And this means that we can never really be sure that we have not been motivationally contaminated by the radical evil of our sensory interestedness. The motivation of the promise would then become problematically undecidable.³² Jankélévitch's eschatological equipose of wickedness with goodness is the logical consequence of this Kantianism – as Spaemann fails to acknowledge.

Likewise with forgiveness. For both Spaemann and Jankélévitch (equally Kantian in this respect), forgiveness is not first and foremost a charitable habit of mutual reconciliation. Instead, as for Kierkegaard (who is disappointing on this topic) it is a punctiliar, as it were miraculous, negative cancelling. In the case of both promise and forgiveness, within the perspective of 'conscience', internal guilt tells us that we have

³¹ Spaemann, *Persons*, 221-225.

³² See Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 1-25.

defaulted concerning the external other. But we are not seen as involved in a shared plot or constitutively relational entanglement with the other. Therefore we are not here directly ashamed by her suffering or accusing face as something particular – and I do not here mean the Levinasian ‘face’ which never actually appears, since it is the general concept of something *so* particular that it can enter into no shared space and therefore, paradoxically, remains both abstract and generalised.

Instead we are guilty because we are held to have internalised a sovereign lawbook. We have violated certain categories which underwrite promise as contract and so must acknowledge and repent the violation. Meanwhile, the pardoner agrees to behave as if the contract had not been violated and carries on regardless.

Thus for other-regarding ethics, pivoted paradoxically around the internality of guilt and conscience, promise and forgiveness miraculously interrupt time.

And yet there exists in time no such pure moment of presence, only the flux of duration. Hence promise and forgiveness must after all be incarnated within temporal narrative if they are to achieve any real possibility. But we have already seen how, if that incarnating is posited within the horizon of guilt and conscience, then eleven crucial *aporias* arise to frustrate this supposition.

However, what can now be suggested is that this multiple *impasse* of frustration only arises because one tries to temporalise the atemporal. Let us suppose, instead, that forgiveness and promise are not ‘angelic’ interventions after all. It can then be suggested that interpersonal and emplotted reconciliation is more primary than

forgiveness, whose declared specificity is only sometimes exigent – although we must allow that a miraculous ‘speed’ of conversion can constitute in itself a decisive narrative turn on occasion, as in the case of the operation of pardon in Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*, as Charles Williams pointed out. Pardon here is so swift that, as Williams put it, ‘it seems almost to create the love to which it responds’.³³

Similarly, it can be suggested that tacit habits of bonding or ontological ‘betrothal’ are more fundamental than promises. Again, their declared specificity is only sometimes exigent, according to narrative circumstance. Yes indeed, as Jankélévitch suggested, ‘heavenly interruptions’ are sometimes attested. Miracles of pardon and avowal do indeed occur, but moral, like physical miracles, are only recognisably miracles insofar as they revise the meanings of normal temporal sequences by being reintegrated back into the flow of recordable time.

The argument is that, if we switch to a perspective at once narratological and metaxological, then we can dispense – at least in part – with the paradoxically ecstatic and ontologically dualistic horizon of conscience and guilt. It is this perspective alone which engenders seemingly irresolvable *aporias*. The other horizon, as already claimed, is that of shame and honour. Within this horizon everything appears differently and more lucidly.

³³ Williams, ‘The Forgiveness of Sins’, 114.

3. Honour: Pagan, Christian and Modern

But even if this is so, at what price? Surely shame and honour, despite Aquinas, are pre or extra-moral or worse, residually pagan?³⁴ Is not Christianity, properly understood, an internalising trajectory?

As to the first charge, I agree with some of Bernard Williams's conclusions. Far from being sub-moral, the perspective of shame which concerns, above all, how we appear before the other, properly allows that all morality is about interpersonal recognition and co-belonging.³⁵ It reveals that it is not a matter of keeping a fixed law or of breaking it, but of *seeing* in the other's reaction whether I am in the right or not. One problem with the modern, self-enclosed 'buffered self' is that it thereby renders itself immune to this crucial resource for ethical self-recognition.³⁶

Literature often reflects upon this phenomenon and its modern suppression, in terms of a preternatural 'return of the repressed'. Sometimes, when a fictional perpetrator has committed an entirely secret sin, he only recognises this through a preternatural simulacrum of the other which *doubles* him. Think of the picture of Dorian Grey or the ass's skin in Balzac's *Le Peau de Chagrin*. Inversely, Dr Jekyll can only arrive at the extreme of evil by externalising the shameful part of himself who is for that reason totally without shame – thus when he knocks over a small girl in the night-smog of a London street he just continues on his way. In this way Literature reveals to

³⁴ One could possibly argue that Aquinas was over-influenced here by Aristotle. Yet as I indicated above, Augustine also stressed how Christianity newly validated, while transvaluating, notions of moral glory.

³⁵ Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 75-102.

³⁶ The 'buffered self' is Charles Taylor's term of art. See *A Secular Age*, *passim*.

us that the moral drama is never really internal – but only apparently and then diabolically so.

Yet supposing the reaction of the other is an unfair one? The danger of Williams' position is that it could be reducible to a pragmatist contractualism, all too modern after all, which implicitly discounts the problem of false denunciation -- of a culpable shaming and dishonouring at which good conscience must rightly revolt.³⁷ In fact, any secular version of an honour ethic must be so reducible.

By contrast, a true honour ethic has to be theological. As we saw in the case of Aquinas, external honour is an index of internal virtue, even though virtue only exists at all through its glorious self-emanation and self-donation as *honestum*. It is therefore not really a matter of opposing shame to guilt or honour to conscience as rather of refusing an internal/external duality which would divide the one pair from the other. The human good is a state of right relationship and if relation is ontologically constitutive then it is neither 'external' nor entirely 'internal' (to allude to an old British philosophical debate) but rather as once both contingent and yet essential, such that to be in a relation is a matter of narrative occurrence and yet something that reaches into the very heart of the individual.

In keeping with this curious poise of the constitutive relation, one would have to conclude that the rightness of a relationship cannot be exclusively judged *either* from the unilateral pole of internality, *or* from the perspective of the other alone, which would after all only represent the alternatively unilateral pole. Instead, because it is

³⁷ This point was made by Nick Rengger when I gave a version of this paper at St Andrew's University. The next two paragraphs have been added since in clarification of my own position.

precisely the 'between' that is subject to judgement, the only true judge is a third party and the only absolutely valid third-party perspective is that of God. This is all the more true insofar as any human third party perspective constitutes another relationship to the first relation, such that the strictures against the adequacy of merely unilateral points of view must apply once again, and so on *ad infinitum*.

Human judgement of the relationship, which is the site of the ethical, is therefore only valid to the degree that it participates in the divine judgement. This means that neither self nor other can act as a univocal immanent surrogate for God. So when I see in the other's reaction whether I am in the right or the wrong, this is not to accord to any such reaction an automatic validity and equally not to accord necessary validity to a democratically consensual collective response. Rather, this moment is one of a crossing of gazes in which I apprehend in the other's reaction the state of our mutual relationship. This involves a judgement on either side, but a judgement that only emerges through the mingling of perspectives. Of course *both* parties can be deluded and await further correction by further others. Here *again* delusion is possible, and therefore moral perception always waits upon the arrival of *the right other*, just as with the case of romantic love. Equally, it waits upon the arrival of my right relationship with the right other. Conscience indeed must judge when this state of affairs is in play, but equally conscience can only judge rightly when it receives a truly honourable response, just as true guilt and true shaming are really simultaneous.

But it is also the case, as Williams says, that an inclusion of the shame-perspective allows one to integrate act, character, motivation and consequence with the hinterland of non-moral (pre or post moral) shame regarding bad manners, clumsiness and

ineptitude which are often, after all, a signifier of disturbed moral character. As he puts it: ‘shame continues to work for us, as it worked for the Greeks, in essential ways. By giving through the emotions a sense of who one is and who one hopes to be, it mediates between act, character and consequence, and also between ethical demands and the rest of life’.³⁸

It is in the context of this *continuum* that one can see how the amorally noble man, perfectly poised and without fear, is potentially capable of extraordinary sanctity. Thus in the *City of God* Augustine said that the Roman exercise of coercive *dominium* was worse than their love of glory. (CD V) But *dominium* included, for pagan ethics, as Augustine insists, the self-control of passion. (CD XIX) Surprisingly, perhaps, Augustine is therefore saying that love of good appearances before others (love of honour) is more of a harbinger of grace than is pagan virtue. For it is a matter of glory, of the radiance which one receives from a gaze beyond oneself.³⁹

Here we have a symmetrical paradox to that which characterises the guilt-conscience matrix. In the latter case purely internal guilt is intentionally ecstatic. But within the shame-honour matrix my worry about ‘how I look’ in public, about my standing ‘in the between’, is also a concern with the development of my entire character that is *absent* from conscience-centred ethics. This, however, is only fully true for a theological honour ethic that alone is also a virtue ethic, since, as I have already claimed, a secular honour ethic (as advocated by Bernard Williams) is reducible to a pragmatic adaptation to varying evolutionary and cultural norms. He espoused an

³⁸ *Shame and Necessity*, 102.

³⁹ Gregory of Nyssa explored the same thematic concerning the ethical as well as theological aspect of glory in his *Life of Moses*. See John Milbank, ‘The Force of Identity’ in *The Word Made Strange* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 194-216.

incoherent mode of liberalism in which ‘thickness’ of character is simply reducible to the sway of cultural fashion and influence. If this sway is ‘paganly’ in excess of the formal control of absolute negative freedom (which assumes a fundamentally contentless self that Williams claims to reject) then in reality it must exceed the norms of liberal politics in the direction of a fascistic politics of pure power.⁴⁰

Augustine’s perspective on honour is later echoed by the great 19th Century North Italian Catholic writer Alessandro Manzoni in his one novel, *I Promessi Sposi*.⁴¹ The notorious outlaw in this romance, the so-called *Il Innominato*, who may figuratively be Satan, is all the more capable of virtue after he repents because of his great previous bravery and independence. The Cardinal of Milan, Federico Borromeo, tells him that his virtuous condemners do *little* honour to God because they are basically fearful, resentful and weak. But a converted ‘Unnamed’ will bravely display heroic virtue and erstwhile admirers of his *panache* will now follow him as kind of hero-saint.

By contrast, other-regarding ethics has little to say about fear. If, in despite of a supposedly incurable weakness of natural motivation, the keeping of the law is what matters, then fearful motivation can be discounted or even encouraged. As long as you entirely obey it does not really matter in what emotional idiom you obey. For Kant proper obedience should be emotionless, but in reality this ideal is never attained and fearful shudder before the sublime is exactly what tames emotions in the direction of moral response.⁴²

⁴⁰ *Shame and Necessity*, 130-167.

⁴¹ This was originally written in Milanese dialect, though later re-written in the more literary-standard Tuscan. For the English translation see Alessandro Manzoni, *The Betrothed* trans. Bruce Penman (London: Penguin, 1972).

⁴² See Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 1-25.

But there looks to be something very wrong here from a Christian viewpoint. Does not perfect love in the New Testament cast out precisely fear? Is not the only true test of charity our willingness to die for it? In the case of the martyr, contract and formal gesture count for nothing. The practical issue is, rather, does he have the habit of charity or can he miraculously acquire it to such a degree as to surmount his fear?

But is the idea of a Christian honour-ethic genuinely plausible? Bernard Williams thought, in a Nietzschean fashion, that pre-Socratic pagans alone (in the West) ascribed to the true ethical horizon of shame and honour. Plato and then Christianity contaminated this horizon with notions of guilt. But one can argue against this view in the following fashion.

Ancient, pre-chivalric honour was mostly heroic; to do with strength, self-conquest and the generous display of wealth. And here comes the really strange twist, crucial for my case. If honour consists in the demonstration of strength and riches before others, then it is actually *not glory enough*. For it is not simply concerned with the *beauty* of my appearing before and with others and the social music which I co-compose with them (Aquinas's *honestum*). In this way pagan honour paradoxically has the seed of a virtue that is reduced to a matter of guilt and conscience (as with one aspect of Stoic ethics) lying within it, once one allows – as with Aristotle – that the philosopher and the politician, not the warrior, are the paradigm of honour as magnanimity. The continuity between warrior and philosopher/politician here is the *strength* shown in the exercise of self-control – once in battle, now over one's own passions also in peacetime.

Historians of thought have often recognised certain continuities between pre-Socratic and Stoic philosophy. In the present case one can see how the Stoic insistence upon passionless inviolability as the key to the highest form of the ethical (as opposed to political convenience), which is the grandparent of the Kantian ethics of autonomy, is in a greater continuity with pre-Socratic heroic ethics than the outlook of Plato in particular, and of Aristotle to some degree. Hence Williams overlooks the secret link between a *pagan* honour ethic and the modern, post-Christian *anti*-honour ethics of conscience.

Then one can symmetrically argue that classic Christian eudaemonism, which I am contending is an ethics of honour as well as of virtue, actually *does not* derive from a gradual process of ‘internalisation’, but rather from a *radicalisation* of the ethics of shame and glory, the ethics of the *metaxu* and of emplotment.

Here one should say, first of all, that aspects of Williams’ historiography are debatable. He evades the evidence which shows that the Greeks did indeed gradually ascribe more to personal responsibility in ethical matters, because he wishes to suggest that this is simply a post-Socratic, and then Christian and post-Christian concern. But archaically the Greeks put on trial in court pillars that fell upon people; later they desisted, and saw only subjects as capable of the ascription of guilt. French structuralist scholarship has emphasised such developments and one cannot argue them away, as Williams tried to do, as merely the projection of a Cartesian progressivist bias.⁴³

⁴³ See Louis Gernet, *Anthropology of Ancient Greece* trans. John D.B. Hamilton SJ and Blise Nagy (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP 1981) and Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, ‘Intimations of the Will in Greek Tragedy’ in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone, 49-84.

At times, if inconsistently, this same scholarship has suggested that the development of notions of personal responsibility in ancient Greece was *not* to do with a ‘Cartesian’ inward turn, but rather with the growth of a sense of the *invasion* of the self by the *daimonic* other who belonged to the realm of the *metaxu*, erotically mediating between gods and humans.⁴⁴ This growing sense is exemplified amongst the Pythagoreans and then, supremely, with Socrates. A similar sense, in negative gothic guise, survives in the ass’s skin and the picture of Dorian Grey in the mode of an absolute shaming by an uncanny double who is at once utterly other and yet invasive of selfhood. Daimonic notions continue to be present in Plato though they are more-or-less suppressed in Aristotle, whose more immanentist notion of virtue begins somewhat the slide back towards heroically ‘male’ notions of virtue as control that is consummated by the Stoics.⁴⁵

It follows from this once again, against Williams, that internally-reflected shame recognised initially in the reaction of the other is not able to do without the divine in the end. For if shaming is simply a human affair then it is indeed just a matter of social convenience and carries no ethical freight. It can only do so if the voice of the human other is also the voice of a divine other. If it is not, then *either* one will substitute one’s own autonomy as moral arbiter (modern ethics whether deontological

⁴⁴ See Marcel Detienne, *Daimon: de la Pensée religieuse à la pensée philosophique: la notion de daimon dans le Pythagorisme ancien* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1963).

⁴⁵ It is significant that Plato and not Aristotle speaks of the female philosopher Diotima. The Stoic case is complex. For one must also recognise, in Stoic public ethics, as echoed in Cicero, in certain ways a *greater* anticipation of a proto-Christian external relational ethics than with Aristotle, that is reflected in the shift towards ‘office’ rather than ‘character’. It is clear that St Paul was influenced by this aspect of Stoic ethics in his account of the harmony of ecclesial roles and also that Aquinas integrates Ciceronian perspectives with Aristotelian ones. (This remains perhaps under-researched.) But the bifurcation in Stoic ethics between the higher internal ethics and the lower public ethics means that the latter also exhibits features which will mutate into the moral-sense ethics of benevolence and its accompanying consequentialism. The incredible thing about Cicero’s *De Officiis* is that one can read it as an amazing *mélange* of ancient echo and modern anticipation. Its great appeal to the 18th C is a sign of that century’s ambivalence.

or consequentialist) *or else* the collective creativity of ‘all the others’ which is the self-assertion of a specific historical culture (the Nietzschean alternative adopted by Williams in a somewhat civilly disguised high-table manner – which is therefore, according to Rousseau’s diagnosis of modern civility, all the more virulent.)⁴⁶

These two alternatives equally derive in the long-term from a pagan ethics of honour which, as I have shown, oddly reduces to an ethics of virtue in the sense of an ethics of strength, of virility. The real contrast lies between *both* modern post-Christian ethics (pivoted on conscience and other-regarding) *and* postmodern neopagan ethics (Nietzsche, Lyotard, Williams etc) on the one hand, and a Christian honour ethics on the other.

I have already given my reasons for thinking (against nearly all existing interpretations) that Christianity actually exalts honour *more than* paganism did. For as with Aquinas, a Christian honour-code is *not* reducible to virtue. Instead, Christianity holds virtue and honour, character and relation, inside and outside, in perfect equipoise, since the judgemental verdict lies neither with the pole of self nor the pole of the other but rather with the daimonic third – ultimately God in which the human *metaxu* remotely participates. ‘In the economic middle’ both myself and the other receive the contrapassive judgements that are the reflex of our own shared activities.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ‘Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts’ in *The First and Second Discourses* trans. R.D. and J.R. Masters (Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1964), 30-74.

⁴⁷ Although monetary exchange lies for Aristotle and Aquinas half-way between distributive and commutative justice (see note 17 above) it leans more towards the former in its distributive function and so exhibits the *contrapassum* of geometric proportion which gives unlike for like (yet with analogical likeness) rather than arithmetic proportion which gives like for like.

The most decisive historical and conceptual contrast in the ethical field lies therefore between the (pagan) heroic and the (Christian) chivalric.

Socrates and Plato both anticipated and helped to shape the latter. Their stress upon the daimonic other is not simply a metaphor for interiority, as modernity might suppose. First, it is seen as a genuine ‘invasion’, not the mere invocation of an inner voice. Secondly, the divine-daimonic confirmation or shaming is also mediated by human others. Here again, exterior shame and glory is not downplayed by Plato as compared with the heroic outlook. Homer’s Achilles can skulk in his tent, hide disgracefully amongst the women, but the Guardians in the *Republic* stand forever in each other’s sight and indeed appear nakedly before each other in a mutual exposure so glorious as to banish shame altogether. (*Republic*, 415-427, 449-471)

Here it is appropriate to recall that shame is paradigmatically sexual. The Bible itself construes the first awakening of sin as a matter of shame and mutual gazing, and moreover sees this as sexual shame.⁴⁸ It appears to believe that the ‘primary’ trouble within humanity and between humanity and nature is the trouble between man and woman and the accompanying troubled relationship of mind to body.

One can think also of Hector’s potential shame at the prospect of a bad surviving memory amongst the ‘Trojan women with their trailing robes’; men’s fear of bad performance in every sense; women’s modest shame at appearing naked in public and of exposure, vulnerability and, at the extreme, rape.

⁴⁸ On the ethical import of shame see Vladimir Soloviev, *The Justification of the Good: An Essay on Moral Philosophy* trans. Nathalie A. Duddington (Grand Rapids Mich: Eermans, 2005).

Yet in Plato's *Republic* this legacy of shame is experimentally put to rout by the hyperbolic glory of appearing naked before each other all the time, which includes a sexual mingling. One should not take this as a utopian programme for all. The point is rather that the perfect instantiation of good would lie beyond any need for modesty at the point where mutual appearing is totally shameless. For as long as 'covering' denotes concealment of the shameful rather than beautiful adornment and manifestation, virtue must remain mere 'inhibition' of the inherently distorted and dangerous. But it is just this conception of virtue as containment of inherently deranged passion which Augustine diagnosed as pagan and adamantly rejected. (CD XIX) Plato in the *Republic* therefore anticipates this refusal, and in some ways in a yet more radical guise that also prefigures notions of the resurrection of the body – and in a way that would allow (as with Islam and occasionally within Christianity) the sexuality of this body.

In the case of Christianity, the voice of the divine other is likewise mediated by the voice of the human other. Hegel was here nearer the truth than Kant: Christianity does not internalise the political law. Instead it displaces law with equity, such that moral response more flows with the *continuum* of life itself. So it is not the case for this tradition, as for its modern perversion, that internality faces the other across an unbridgable chasm. Instead, the heart is entirely and intimately pierced by the other. This means that one's internal responses of conscience should ideally not be different from one's external responses of honour.

For example, what is the meaning of Christ's *dictum* that to look at a woman lustfully is equivalent to adultery? Surely it is that being faithful in marriage should entirely

obliterate all thoughts of infidelity, such that the inside should conform to the reality of the outside? This is the reading that is more in keeping with Christ's generally anti-legal and vitalist perspective which enjoins us to live like the lilies of the field (yet according to the *telos* of specifically human life). By contrast, an 'internalist' reading would be hyper-legalistic – the prohibition of adultery springs not from the lived reality of fidelity but rather from an extrinsic command which guards against the committing of the external deed by banning even any dangerous external gazing undergone with the wrong internal intent.

Here the anti-legalist bias towards life nevertheless shows an important continuity with the Old Testament. For with the Hebrews the shame associated with flesh and blood was not internally retreated-from as in the case of Eastern religion and to some degree with Plato. Rather, an attempt was made in the Hebrew law-codes to purify the shedding of blood and the blood-line which is human generation, including human sexual congress. An attempt to render all this a glorious appearance, free from shame. All this is consummated by the Pauline notion that in Christ the one human blood-line from Adam has now been purified in Christ. In this way the interior hidden spring and yet equally exterior manifestness which is life as symbolised by blood (which is supremely both hidden and shown) finally triumphs over the extrinsic character of law.⁴⁹ Law remains extrinsic because it inherently tends to divide into either internal self-command or else the alien command of the political other. But where there is relational bonding, the law as here fully realised also becomes superfluous.

⁴⁹ Michel Henry's insistence upon the interiority of life was distortingly one-sided.

St Paul therefore offered us not bloodless legal contract nor bloodless internal conscience but rather the ethical normativity of the collective Body of Christ. Its members are exhorted precisely to honour and glorify each other in ceaseless reciprocity. And the remedy for failures of this process is public *shaming* before the community and a mutual upbuilding which includes a proleptic glorification in which what one might term ‘undeserved praise’ seeks to incite the genuinely praiseworthy.⁵⁰ As the *Epistle to the Ephesians* puts it: ‘let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.....be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you’. (*Ephesians* 4: 29,32)

This body is therefore held together by mutual love and not by commandment. If love is nonetheless commanded to it, then this is somewhat paradoxical – since real affective love, like habitual constancy, cannot be simply willed in response to an external order. Because love cannot really be commanded, Christianity holds that it arrives by grace. This is precisely why, within Christian theology, *caritas* is deemed to be a *theological* virtue and not a natural one – ‘natural’ love being seen as purely animal affection. Love within a theological perspective must therefore arrive for us, must happen to us, must occur to us.

For this reason it is wrong to say, with Bernard Williams, that Christianity removes pagan perspectives of moral luck, anymore than it removes pagan perspectives of shame and honour.⁵¹ To the contrary, it is more the case that it *democratizes* moral luck. *All* indeed can love, whereas few can be magnanimous in Aristotle’s sense. Yet

⁵⁰ See John Milbank, ‘The Force of Identity’.

⁵¹ Bernard Williams, ‘Moral Luck’ in *Philosophical Papers 1973-80* (Cambridge: CUP 1981) 20-39. See also Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 138-161.

finding that we are in states of love is still a matter of good fortune, under the governance of providence. As Jankélévitch declared, any virtuous act is an unknown quality, quite singular, which embodies an unknown risk.⁵² Because a virtuous act can only be virtuous if it is right in and for the circumstances beyond any regular guidance, and because an act can only be virtuous in outcome if it re-establishes good relational bondings, we can never be fully sure, precisely in the case of the *most* virtuous act, that it *really is* a virtuous act. Conscience alone is not at all an infallible guide.

This is another reason why heroic villains are far nearer to virtue than bourgeois conformers. As Rousseau realised, in pre-modern times of rough-and-ready martial behaviour, symbolic courtesy revealed at once the inward man. But today, under conditions of politically economic civility, a universal *politesse* ensures that real character can only be revealed in an emergency when people appear in their true colours.⁵³

But here, as Rousseau declared, a crucial problematic is revealed: for the revelation that comes with an emergency arrives *too late*. We need to know what people are like precisely so that we can know whom to trust in a crisis: ‘for to know one’s friend thoroughly, it would be necessary to wait – for emergencies – that is, to wait until it is too late, as it is for these very emergencies that it would have been necessary to know him’⁵⁴ But modernity ensures – outside the contest of long-term and totally mobilised warfare, which it almost seem to require and call forth as its antidote – that we can never know whom we can trust and be friends with. Hence Rousseau diagnosed (in

⁵² Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, 106-165.

⁵³ Rousseau, ‘Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts’, 38.

⁵⁴ ‘Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts’, 38.

excess of his influence upon Kant and the French Revolution) that there can be no morality within the non-honouring moral code of modernity, which is rather a game of mimetic maskings that enables more subtle and vicious antagonisms to command all of public behaviour. (Girard is Rousseau's implicit disciple in this respect.)⁵⁵

However, Rousseau's remedy for this state of affairs remained all too much within the very enlightened horizon which he denounced. Instead of demanding the reinstatement of the heroic risk of charity, he sought an absolute security against the aggressively masked individualism of *amour propre* in the mode of a natural individual or else artificial collective ('republican') isolation which would allow an innocent *amour de soi-même* to flourish in an unsullied manner. Yet this was entirely to misconstrue his own insight and to abort his own emergent neo-gothic romanticism which finally emerges with Chateaubriand. For his diagnosis runs in favour of symbolic *courtoisie* and the view that the exterior should be the index of the interior. It is the *hidden and secretive* which is dangerous and violent, as Jane Austen also taught throughout her fictional *oeuvre* which Macintyre after C.S.Lewis rightly reads as a Christian critique of modernity.⁵⁶ Yet Rousseau tries to evade the dangers of concealment by appealing first of all to the innocence of the isolated will free of the envious contagion of *mimesis* and the artificial needs created by a mercantile civilisation. Nevertheless, in the second place, when it came to politics, he demanded a totally transparent manifestness, a new modern Republican honour and glory, such that the general will as opposed to the individual will must be exhaustively *shown*. Political life for this reason must avoid the ambiguities of representation; rather the

⁵⁵ See Jeremiah Alberg, *A Reinterpretation of Rousseau: a Religious System* (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2007).

⁵⁶ Macintyre, *After Virtue*, 222-226. At the same time, as Macintyre stresses, Jane Austen opposed the 'false glory' of superficial charm which is but dissemblance

general will must directly declare itself in a constantly innocent and glorious festivity that celebrates nothing except itself and nature.⁵⁷

But isolated interiority for Rousseau, as Kant realised, really retained priority. Instead of calling for a return to liturgical courtesy, Rousseau with perverse brilliance tried to occupy the two modern alternatives both at once – both modern sheer interiority and already postmodern sheer surface exteriority which is a pseudo-liturgy. To a staggering degree French and especially Parisian life still conforms to this secular Genevan model: essentially isolated egos perform a public parade of rivalry in highly conformist polite and fashionable behaviour. But this reworked proto-romantic stoicism does not genuinely return to a participatory symbolic order in which the exterior surface can normally be trusted, yet remains something of an enigma which must be decoded. For this reason it allows no absolute sinless security either of the isolated individual nor of the republican political theatre of non-ambiguity –which turned out to be the theatre of explicit and unmasked cruelty. During the French terror supposed absolute manifestness (*le jour de gloire est arrivé!*) turned out to be the most hideous mask of all and to tune to a hysterical pitch the modern crisis of trust: a state of affairs that has then been repeated all the way through Hitler, Stalin and Mao to Pol-Pot, North Korea and several contemporary Islamic states. The mask of civility indeed precludes trust; yet trust is only reachable through the road of risk in the reading of participatory signs.

In refusing *mediation*, and yet trying to embrace both the absolutely interior and the absolutely exterior, Rousseau was essentially refusing the *Church* as the primary and

⁵⁷ Charles Taylor is very good on this. See *A Secular Age*, 205.

ultimate community of human association. For the Church being the sphere of the sacramental is precisely the arena where internal and external are enigmatically and yet (for faith) reliably connected, and thus there is no need to fantasise either an innocent individual in isolation (whereas for Christianity such isolation precisely *is* sin, is fallenness) nor a totally explicit governing spectacle (also the fallenness of sovereign *dominium* in its collective variant) which is the State as pseudo-sacramental authority.

All the same, Rousseau correctly saw that an entirely unexceptionable and apparently moral act, under the norms of contractual civility (including both ethical and merely polite gestures), can never be an unambiguously moral act, but can always be a disguise for subtle evil. The self-guaranteeing, apparently well-motivated act may be a false and wicked action after all – as Kant also had the profundity to realise. However, the salve against this cannot be the avoidance of moral risk in terms of either a pure inner citadel or a pure spontaneous expression of collective assent – as Rousseau ingeniously and yet disappointingly supposed.

By contrast Jankélévitch (here leaning to the more virtue-ethic aspect of his thought) was right: the only possibly virtuous action has to be an affair of heroic risk – the wager that one operates under grace, that one can achieve the miracle of reformed relationship, of ‘betrothal’. If to be ethical is to love, then this has to be the case. To love is to happen, through chance and response to ‘find oneself in love’. For the fact that the cult of romantic love was invented within a Christian *ambience* is far from accidental and not trivial but archetypal. Only ‘being in love’ in an extended sense amounts to exercising love at all. Charity in the High-to-Middle Middle Ages was a

state not an effort – it was ontological and relational, as John Bossy in our times has re-discovered.⁵⁸ Charity lay in the between.

Thus by a miracle of grace we find ourselves within a network of loving relationships. This miracle is the Church whose bounds we do not know, except that they are eschatologically coterminous with the cosmos. As Charles Williams declared, ‘where there is love, there is Christ. Where there is human reconciliation, there is the Church’.⁵⁹ It is the Church in this true sense which hold ‘the keys’ – the power and the tradition of how to make love happen. To be a member of the Body of Christ (and in the end all human beings are such members) is therefore to have the moral luck of belonging to the community which minimises the vagaries of moral luck itself. For love is truly the chance of all and that which the chance of life most continuously enacts.

It can therefore be concluded that the ethical horizon of Catholic Christianity is as much that of shame and honour as it is that of guilt and conscience. This is why it nurtured the emergence of a code of chivalry, which was not compromise or debasement, but rather a thinking through of a possible spiritual path for the lay Christian life which necessarily includes both physical conflict and erotic encounter.⁶⁰

It is relevant here that even ancient codes of revenge, as anthropologists emphasise, were systems of self-administered restitution and reconciliation.⁶¹ They constituted

⁵⁸ John Bossy, *Christianity in the West*, (Oxford: OUP, 1985).

⁵⁹ ‘The Forgiveness of Sins’, 164.

⁶⁰ Recent scholarship has shown that the cult of romantic love was originally, as in Chrétien de Troyes, as much to do with married as with adulterous relationships.

⁶¹ See Marcel Hénaff, *Le Prix de la Vérité: le don, l’argent, la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 2002) 283-298.

genuine modes of justice, and so revenge was not primitively an unending chain. It only became such in its decadent post-legal modern form as exemplified by many contemporary *mafias*, and as described in the case of 17th C northern Italy by Manzoni in *I Promessi Sposi*.

Of course Christianity renounces revenge even in the more benign ancient mode. However, this renunciation does not mean that it sees the existence of the law as an alibi for excusing ourselves from enacting judgement (like virtuous outlaws) in the face of the inevitable lapses and *lacunae* of legality. This is part of the whole point of chivalry. And it goes along with the older European view that where people have submitted to ecclesial processes of reconciliation then they should sometimes be immune from secular prosecution.

Within the added perspectives of shame and honour the supposed *aporias* of forgiveness and promise melt away. In consequence we can see how a theological ethics of honour alone permits us to see how an ethical life within time is possible – since this life must always involve both binding future commitments and the re-securing of bonds broken in the past.

4. The Glory of Jerusalem

It is crucial for dissipating all of the *aporias* that the past can be revised after all (as has already been argued) and the future prophetically anticipated, because good habit

will pre-shape it and be able to retain itself through non-identical repetition in the face of future contingencies.

In relation to the first *aporia* of mutually-stalled priority between pardoner and pardonee, one needs to understand how the arrival of reconciliation *between* these parties is prior to their isolated initiatives. This is possible where both ascribe to the mediation of a sacramental *symbolon* which in a general mode already exists through social institution. Where a bond is symbolically restored, then repentance and the offer of forgiveness can arise simultaneously. Hence Shakespeare, who as we have seen, seems to have been aware of this *aporia*, frequently makes the concluding reconciliation scenes of his late plays turn upon acts of symbolic exchange, going as far as a *substitutionary* exchange between the estranged parties: ‘the counterchange is severally in all’, as Imogen says towards the end of *Cymbeline*. (V.v) Sometimes, as in *Pericles* and *The Winter’s Tale*, this ‘counterchange’ is the extreme of resurrection from death – for only the sense that one has killed the other that one is estranged from brings home the truth that thereby one has damaged oneself and put oneself negatively in the place of the other.

This sacramental excess of reconciliation as the reflowing exchange of charity, over forgiveness as formal ordinance, is also insisted upon by Manzoni in *I Promessi Sposi*. For his anti-Protestant perspective in his romantic anti-novel (if one takes the novel as opposed to the romance to be a Protestant genre, apart from its commencement with the Catholic anti-romantic romance which is *Don Quixote*) forgiveness definitely involves an economy. It requires the offering of sign and

counter-sign in order to operate. This dissolves the third *aporia* which wrongly assumes that forgiveness must be aneconomic.

Thus the murdering bravo in Manzoni's novel, Ludovico, repents only by becoming a monk and taking the name of his victim which is Cristoforo. To the victim's father he declares that he cannot retribute the dead. Yet he does not then simply repent or ask from the father merely a negative gesture in a 'Protestant' fashion. No, he says that will only accept this in the concrete from of a gift of bread: the bread of forgiveness.

Hence Manzoni is saying here that all forgiveness is eucharistic and belongs like charity in the realm of supernatural virtue. Initially, as pardoners, we *offer* what we do not really own – the elements. Then we receive these back from the pardoned one as the body and blood of Christ. Forgiveness is always mutual substitution, as Charles Williams taught. Because the murderer cannot restore the broken bond, it is the relatives of the victim who strangely need to restore it through an atoning action. It is therefore the father of the victim who needs to proffer a gift to the repentant murderer and Manzoni makes him say that he felt as if it was absurdly he who needed to ask for an apology from Ludovico now become Cristoforo, the Christ-bearer. This absurdity well exemplifies Charles Williams's radical interpretation of the Lord's Prayer's request to 'forgive us our sins as we forgive them that trespass against us' to mean that for Christ 'to forgive and to be forgiven were one thing'.⁶²

Such radicalism resolves the second *aporia* concerning the apparent asymmetry of presence of duty to pardon and absence of right to be pardoned: the duty to forgive is

⁶² 'The Forgiveness of Sins', 157.

not an imperative to meet a right, but rather to restore the flux of gift-exchange which composes the social bond as such and this duty applies as much to the offender as to the victim.

One can only fully grasp this radicalism if one follows Williams' example by attending to William Blake's apocalyptic interpretation of forgiveness as reconciliation and promise as prophecy in his long poem *Jerusalem, Emanation of Giant Albion*.⁶³

Even though Blake insists on the negatively unconditional character of forgiveness, just like Dante he insists also on the importance of positive mutual reconciliation, and in fact gives the latter priority. This is because he vehemently denies that an innocent party is left morally unimpaired by an offence against himself: this is precisely why 'experience' assumes for Blake a tragic priority over a merely 'moral' approach to good and evil. Because we are radically related to each other and drastically responsible for each other, any betrayal by the other leads also to a self-loss. This applies even to God, whose absolute aseity (which Blake never denies)⁶⁴ is only upheld because he is drawn into an absolute identity with suffering humanity which redeems this humanity from its estrangements. Hence the eternal God simply is, for what Williams tentatively saw as Blake's unusual orthodoxy rather than heterodoxy,⁶⁵ the 'divine humanity'.

⁶³ 'Jerusalem, Emanation of Giant Albion, in *Blake: the Complete Poems*, ed W.H. Stevenson (London: Longman, 2007) 648-890. The excellent notes in this edition make it the best one to use.

⁶⁴ Blake's labyrinthine mythopoetics endlessly qualifies apparently heretical tropes which he lays with in a literary fashion in order to shock a complacent 'orthodoxy' and bring out the real radical heart of credal Christianity rather than ever outrightly endorsing.

⁶⁵ Williams, 'The Forgiveness of Sins' 177. It remains as true as when Williams made this comment, that few *theologians* have thoroughly examined Blake's writings and the ones who have done so have tended to be looking for a heterodoxy that they themselves endorse.

This constitutive relatedness Blake understands in terms of an honour-ethic in a modern, radicalised republican fashion which nevertheless assaults enlightened republicanism on Christian grounds. Hence he interprets human relationships in terms of ‘emanations’ that go out from one person to another, and paradigmatically from men to women.⁶⁶ Our creativity is a gift to another and in receiving the products of our ‘genius’ (our unique spirit) the other holds our selfhood in trust. This qualifies Blake’s admitted sexual hierarchy: man the imaginative artist may be properly in charge of woman the ‘weaving’ craftsperson, but the product of our art in a sense exceeds us, just as woman, as being (metaphysically) the emanation of man, in a sense exceeds man. Thus at the lower levels Blake speaks, like the Bible, of emanating female figures who have disobeyed and betrayed male spiritual authority, but at the very highest level of the entire poem it is the giant Albion (a kind of Adam-Kadmon figure) who has deserted the spiritual truth of his own emanation Jerusalem, just as Britain, for whom he stands, has betrayed her Christian legacy.

In this way Blake gives a radical priority to the place of ‘glory’ in ethics, in a fashion which, as I have been arguing, is actually in keeping with Christian tradition. The offended one may be innocent according to conscience, but it is far more important to Blake that he is injured according to honour. Failure to realise this means that people and cultures will erect a defensive wall around supposed innocence, and place isolated individual moral and ‘religious’ probity before the *political* good of harmonious peaceful relationships. (Again, Blake is perfectly Augustinian here.)

⁶⁶ Of course he is being strictly Biblical here: Eve was created from Adam’s side.

This attitude, according to Blake, engenders the entire normative cultural apparatus which is 'paganism'. Instead of thinking in terms of betrayed and damaged relationship, one thinks in terms of 'individual sin' and so of the idea that the erring person has disobeyed a law of internal command of reason over the passions. The offender must then punish herself internally with guilt, while she must be externally disciplined by political laws and physical punishments. Because the offence is not seen as a breaking of bonds, it cannot be amended by an atoning process, but can only be compensated for by an endless process of 'monetary' restitution. This, for Blake, gives rise to the entire conjoined system of bloody sacrifices to idols, deference to sovereign powers and subordination of indebted paupers, which he thinks was prefigured in ancient Britain by the religion of the 'druidic temples' (prehistoric stone circles, of which the most famous are Stonehenge and Avebury in Wiltshire) which perverted the primordial trace of antediluvian monotheism which Blake really and truly seems to have believed existed there, as the more well known short poem 'Jerusalem' ('And did those feet in ancient times/walk upon England's mountains green?') as well as the longer one, attests. (Of course the powerful poetic effect of this belief in rendering the exotic and spiritual local and relevant is what really matters.)

It is here that Blake espouses a Pauline antinomianism (probably close to the 17th C 'Muggletonian' tradition lingering-on within London radicalism)⁶⁷ that is nevertheless perfectly orthodox and in no way refuses our duty to observe the ethical good. For what he is saying is that the normal 'druidic' system, by rendering the legal and punitive limitation of evil the last word, is complicit with resignation to the

⁶⁷ See E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: Williams Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge: CUP 1993).

ontological reality of such evil. And like Paul, he is even prepared to reverse the priorities here: the legal attempt to define a positive area of life as ‘wrong’ – and supremely, the area of sexuality – can be itself the ‘original’ occasion of sin. It is logical therefore to see evil and the ‘the moral law’ (as merely reactive to an assumed positive reality of evil) as springing up together.

In this perspective, ‘original sin’ is not so much sensual selfishness as rather an egoistic failure to be selfless, a failure to realise that the good is a positive, joyful creative outgoing of the imagination, which is how Blake newly and yet validly understands the giving of gifts by the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. (*Jerusalem*, 77:8-44)

Interpreted this way however, it becomes all the clearer that original sin cannot be simply willed away by good behaviour. This is another aspect of Blake’s reworked orthodoxy rather than heterodoxy. For if evil is just a matter of uncontrolled passion then it might be reversed in a Pelagian fashion. Instead, habitual egoism and the inherited damage of human relationships is so endemic that it is impossible to trace its real cause: and this is one reason for the tortuousness of Blake’s mythopoeic arguments: there *are* for him no simply ‘bad’ material or spiritual states – only more or less good or bad, since all states are ambivalent and record both our fallenness and the divine economy of redemption: this is true, for example of the entire bodily, including the sexual, order.

This is one of the reasons why Blake opposed Christianity to Enlightenment. If honour as emanation is what ethically matters, then we cannot cure the ills of a

‘broken society’ by retreating to individual purity, as Rousseau suggested. As Blake acutely puts it, referring to Rousseau’s diagnosis of the impossibility of friendship in modernity already discussed: ‘Rousseau thought men good by Nature; he found them evil and found no friend’. He goes on to say that ‘Friendship cannot exist without Forgiveness of sins continually’, for what the enlightenment has failed to see is that the healing of human wickedness does not have to wait upon the return to, or the construction of, an impossible (and actually inauthentic) innocence. So whereas Rousseau, as we saw, erected a duality between interior conscience and a totally exterior collective and unambiguous *gloire*, Blake celebrated the *metaxu* of an imaginative glory, which as emanative is at once internal and external, just as it is at once spiritual and material. As such it is of course no transparent modern French stree parade, but rather an enigma that must be interpreted, like Blake’s writings themselves.

Blake’s ethic is an ethic of honour also in the most radical sense of all: namely that it ‘chivalrically’ pivots upon the male/female relationship as the key to everything. Here, again, he is simply being Biblical: shame begins, as in *Genesis*, as sexual shame, with the complicit rupture between man and woman. For that which initially grants us the sense that ‘others’ complete us and that our natural or cultural creative acts of generation are ‘gifts for others’ is most certainly sexual difference. So if *honestum* has been radically corrupted, then the heart of this corruption lies with gender. Again Blake is drastically innovative at this point and yet a case can be made that he is authentically developing mainline Christian tradition.

For the casual reader of *Jerusalem* (if such be imaginable!), it can seem as if Blake is a pathological, supposedly hen-pecked misogynist. And no doubt he was: yet he deploys his pathology to reach crucial insights and to cure himself of this very sickness, which in a way he is confessing --- confession being something that he requires from all as the precondition for forgiveness. Thus women are apparently seen as sunk in the 'vegetative', as tied to the mere 'loom' of craft and not the 'forge' of creative fire. They are also apparently seen as constantly trying to tie down and thwart male genius, and as overly sexual in a double sense: over-concerned with sensual seduction and yet also inconsistently committed to the laws of chastity and bourgeois hypocrisy. Because is it over-tied to the material realm, the 'female' spirit encourages, in modern times, the dominance of materialist philosophies and is the enemy of the gospel.

Blake, like D.H. Lawrence later, shows a real prophetic insight here: the age of the rise of the feminine is also (for good or ill) the age of increasing immanentist materialism. But he argues in addition, and far more shockingly, that both sides of a female hysterical oscillation with respect to sex – both prudery and an obsessive, cruel flirtatiousness – tend to encourage male aggression and warfare out of both frustration and rivalry. One of his most constant laments is that women chastely rebuff the advances of peaceful charitable geniuses (like himself!) while offering themselves to soldiering men of blood. Like the Danish novelist Karen Blixen, he notes in *Jerusalem*, in Homeric as well as Rousseauian fashion, just how much male adventuring, economic advancement and warfaring is to do with the quest ever further to adorn women and offer them domestic comforts.

However, these insights (which clearly require much qualification) can be taken as a denial of female innocence rather than as claims for a primary female culpability. For as already indicated, while, at a more finite level Enitharmon, the emanation of the creative spirit Los, may be seen as his betrayer, at the very highest metaphysical level it is rather Albion that betrays Jerusalem. This corresponds precisely to the way in which law is not merely complicit with sin, but is perhaps most of all responsible for it. (At the very least there is a co-responsibility). Hence while the ‘vegetating’ of the female spirit can be seen as inciting rationalism and political and military domination, it is only at the lower metaphysical levels that ‘materialism’ and ‘the passions’ receive the primary blame.

Rather, the esoteric secret behind all this, which Blake seeks ‘apocalyptically’ to unconceal, is that materialistic ‘vegetating’ is the outcome of a more primary *refusal of emanation which is the refusal at once of art, of the female, of the body and of the whole material and passionate domain*. Were ‘the female’ fundamentally to blame, then the sensual revolt against law would also be fundamentally to blame, instead of law itself being originally co-culpable. But, to the contrary, the real heart of the ethical is the emanating gift, and hence the key to the repair of evil is the re-emanation of gift as forgiveness which requires a mutual exchange between emanating source and emanating receptacle. And refusal of emanation is the pursuit of legal autonomy whereby an inward conscience is matched (as we have repeatedly seen) by a non-relational extrinsicist policing of the other. Therefore if ‘the ‘vegetating’ female will encourages her master in domination, then ‘vegetating’ is in the first place instigated by the male spirit of domination which seeks to live without

art and without woman.. (This also implies, as Blake's practice shows, that true art remains close to craft.)

The refused 'external' sphere becomes in consequence merely external to spirit. But eventually this initial 'male swallowing of the female', leads to a later 'female swallowing of the male' as scepticism about the very existence of the spiritual realm starts to emerge: one could argue that this is just what is occurring in our own time. For Blake the female 'woven' world is increasingly broken up by 'the hard rocks' of facts which begin to displace the equally false misty sublimity of the non-emanating male spirit. Both the overly vague and the overly concrete which is identically repeatable (the 'mills' of science and technology) are false substitutes for the 'minute particulars' of emanating art, which produces a non-repeatable and so *scientifically more precise* sort of exactitude which takes 'masculine' account of time as well as 'feminine' account of space. Once all things and people have been reduced to hard material nuggets, denying the human-shaped spirits which Blake thought lay within and behind everything ('the fairies' of British-Irish tradition which he fully believed in) then ironically they are doubled as 'spectres' because, as supposedly self-supporting, they lack any ground in reality. When you stop believing in fairies you land up haunted by ghosts.⁶⁸

Finally, it is very unclear just how Blake regarded the ultimate ontological status of sexual difference or the ultimate place of sexuality. And most readings of his work at this point are far too simple. Clearly he worried that conventional Christian sexual ethics did not address the problem of hypocrisy – namely that people often conform to

⁶⁸ In several respects – rejection of the Miltonic sublime, interest in hauntings, redeeming a corrupted habitation – Britain -- Blake seems more 'gothic' than 'romantic'. Several of Blake's longer poems had 'fairy' prefaces.

them because they are controlling or suppressing their desires rather than transforming and re-directing them in the way that Christian perfectionism demands. (Blake was *far closer* to Methodism than he was to any gnosticism, on his own testimony admiring just the French quietist authors whom Wesley also admired.) Yet it is just in the sexual field that this transformation seems to reach its temporal limit and we are bound to see something radically ‘fallen’ in the entire current spiritual/physical economy which cannot be very far set right until the resurrection of the dead.

It is for this reason that Blake clearly flirted with what he called the realm of Beulah – the realm of romantic free love and easygoing communities transcending the conventional family. Yet in the end Blake sees this realm as but usefully corrective or transitional. ‘Hippydom’ will not ultimately do, because it is a kind of ‘vegetating’ materialist simulacrum of genuinely Christian imaginative exchange which involves the reality of the spirit – since Blake believed, in neoplatonic, Augustinian and Thomist fashion, that what we see in our imaginations belongs to a *real* sphere, a *mundus imaginalis* between the realm of reason and pure spirits on the one hand and the realm of pure physical bodies on the other. Like Augustine in *De Genesi ad Litteram*, he interpreted St Paul as meaning by the resurrected ‘spiritual body’ a ‘body of the imagination’ – not a fantasised body, but a body *really* existing as those images which we now dimly glimpse when we imagine things. But if one fails to believe in the imagination in this realist sense, then one will pursue merely fantastic variations on the sensual and be led towards polymorphous perversity. So Beulah was for Blake but the scene of increased bourgeois jealousies and therefore the seed-bed of further egoistic wars and economic conflicts. Far from being a ‘libertarian’ (any

more than was D.H Lawrence) he thought that either one moved on from ‘Hippydom’ towards a more nakedly egotistic social order, or one must move on from it towards a more enduring and faithful mode of reconciliation between the sexes.

It is difficult to understand what for Blake this entailed. Nevertheless there are significant clues.

Often he suggests that the ‘primordial man’ – as for some of the Greek Fathers – transcended gender. Yet by this he seems to have meant, not a sexual hybrid, but some sense that psychically we transcend bodily sexuality.⁶⁹ Never, though, does he really suggest that this is a Jungian combination of both male and female elements in suppression of gendered embodiment. Indeed, in *Jerusalem* the creation of a ‘hermaphroditic’ pre-temporal *aeon* is the work of Satan – who in this poem is usually the evil Satan of tradition. The bad sexual duality of the fallen world is actually *identified* with this hermaphroditism, precisely because rationalism and vegetating are really two halves of the same picture. So on the one hand Blake through the voice of Los speaks of an *eschaton* beyond sexuality; on the other hand he clearly implies that the denial of emanation – of chivalrous honour, of ethical glory -- really produces a mode of hierarchical sexual difference that is at bottom *monistic*.

What is decisive is that right at the end of the poem Blake suddenly starts to speak of an eschatological remaining of sexual difference and of the human family after all. The hypostasised four points of the British compass (which stand for the four corners

⁶⁹ I am dimly aware that there is some kind of weird American PC distinction between the usage of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ but I’ve never really understood it.

of the world spiritually renewed by a Britain become Jerusalem in atonement for her economic imperialist domination) take up their bows of spiritual struggle and declare: ‘the bow is Male and Female & the quiver of the arrows of love/are the children of this bow – a bow of Mercy and Lovingkindness, laying/ Open the hidden heart in wars of Mutual Benevolence, wars of Love;/And the hand of Man grasps firm between the Male and Female loves.’ (97: 11-15) Likewise the chariots which are vehicles of spiritual struggle are ‘sexual threefold’, meaning the sexes in harmonious unity with each other, whereas ‘every man stood fourfold’, meaning a certain integral image of the whole as a complete person, even though persons only exist in relationship and especially sexual relationship. Hence in our finitude the unrounded interruption of ‘three’ always qualifies for Blake the completeness of ‘four’.⁷⁰

However, the eschatologically returning sexes no longer seem to be so clearly characterised or hierarchised. No doubt Jerusalem never questioned Albion’s proper rule over her; it was rather Albion who perversely saw this rule as domination. Yet since Albion rules as an imaginative artist, there is something about his emanating other which exceeds him and inversely instructs him. In the end Jerusalem is more than he is, just as Israel/Church is more than Britain. She is the divine wisdom in heaven; she is Mary the mother of the divine humanity and she is also divine wisdom hitherto wandering forlornly through the byways of a Britain and the world that have rejected her. She is ‘glory’, the very substance of ethical relations as the ‘between’.

⁷⁰ Blake sees the union of the sexes as an example of a coincidence of opposites. This is no Hegelian synthesis, because nothing works through dialectical negation in Blake and there is no final negation of the negation in these sense of either a final monistic union or a continued extruded remainder. His perspective is in continuity with that of Eckhart and Cusanus and has almost nothing in common with the German idealism of his own day – indeed his concern with ‘the minute particulars’ reveals a specifically British ‘radical empiricism’. He explicitly rejects the reality of negation as a way of reconciling opposites: ‘Negations are not Contraries; Contraries mutually exist;/ But negations exist not. Exceptions and objections and unbeliefs/Exist not; nor shall they be organised forever & ever’. (*Jersuaalem*, 17:33-35.) The diverse Hegelian readings of Blake by Thomas Altizer and Andrew Shanks are therefore misconceived.

Since Blake saw the good in this way as an ontological state rather than as a mere private intention or empirically calculable outcome, he necessarily regarded it as a cosmic as well as a human reality. So of all existing things he can say in the last line of the poem: ‘And I heard the name of their Emanations: they are named JERUSALEM.’ (98:5)

5. The Bread of Forgiveness

William Blake’s radical Protestantism in many ways comes full circle towards Catholicism. In his later years he praised monks equally with Methodists, in *Jerusalem* saw Catholic Erin as less fallen than Protestant Albion and as protecting him, and openly suspected that the Roman Catholic Church was the only one which practised that forgiveness of sins which he held to be the heart of Christianity.

His stress on practices of mutual reconciliation rather than unilateral gestures can indeed be seen as belonging both to the Radical Reformation and to Catholic tradition rather than to the Magisterial Reformation. Nevertheless, as Charles Williams declared, it is not fully clear in Blake that forgiveness remains *justice* rather than its overriding, and this directly links with a utopianism of redemption too little concerned with the incarnation of reconciliation in specific socio-political practices and too despairing of the possibility of qualifying the coercive and military aspects of the political which Blake himself saw as consequent upon the spiritual/material economy of our fallen cosmos.

For this reason, utopianism is overtaken in the more pessimistic final poem *Jerusalem* by a sheerly eschatological hope that leaves current politics too sectarian and *refusenik* in its disposition.

Here one qualify Blake with the equally post-revolutionary but more conservative, if also radically humanist perspectives of Alessandro Manzoni. Manzoni's Catholicism far more directly sees forgiveness as an external symbolic practice which involves paradoxical restitutions of justice.

Manzoni presents us in *I Promessi Sposi* with an historical world dominated by distorted honour after the decay in Italy of civic republican democracy, feudal overlordship, the Dantean hope for empire, the collapse of the city communes, the intrusion of foreign nations and the rise of robber barons. It is a world of fragmented sovereignty and complex space gone wrong. A world riddled with criminal enclaves like the pockets of Dante's infernal eighth circle which Manzoni invokes.⁷¹

Yet what Manzoni attacks, like another Catholic novelist in the next century, Graham Greene, is less corrupt honour than bourgeois caution and fear. Somehow this extreme 17th C world of decadent shame and glory is, like Vico's recycled barbarism, more hospitable to Christian charity and forgiveness than the world created by the liberal sovereign state and liberal political economy.

⁷¹ Manzoni, *The Betrothed*, 430.

This is because, for Manzoni, charity involves grand public gestures, and forgiveness spectacular processes of penance – as supremely in the case of the perpetrator renamed as victim. We should recall here that forgiveness invokes finality – this is one of Jankélévitch’s key problematics. It suggests the interpersonal fusion of dance where each partner anticipates the improvised movements of the other, and each dancer of all the others, with perfect synchronicity, beyond even the sequence of surprise in gift and counter-gift. In this way forgiveness as perfect reconciliation anticipates the *eschaton*: as William Blake put it in *Jerusalem*, ‘Mutual forgiveness’ is ‘the minute particulars’ or the perfect shared style of courtesy, which, as we have seen, he opposed both to vague general reasoning and to repeatable ‘hard facts’,⁷² (*Jerusalem*, 38:61, also 38:32-33, 55:60, 69:42, 91:26-30) Ludovico performs this anticipation of perfect specificity through a specific gesture of final renunciation -- by giving up the claims of secular life in terms of wealth, marriage and family. Thereby he escapes the clutches and penalties of the law. This resolves the fifth *aporia* whereby forgiveness should and yet should not be the last word. Ludovico offers a provisional last word through absolute renunciation, and his reception of forgiveness does not obliterate the memory of an irreversible act of violence because he has entirely *become* his own victim through vicarious substitution.

In this way Manzoni shows that forgiveness is ecclesio-political. It mimics finality in advance because here one enters the sanctuary of the Church beyond the law. And the repentant person metaphorically assumes the name of his victim, substitutes for him, entirely identifies with him, just as the reverse applies also: the victim or his

⁷² This identification is cited by Williams, ‘The Forgiveness of Sins’, 181.

representatives must identify with the evil-doer in order that he may provide him with a gift as though the criminal were the innocent party.

Manzoni also suggests, in narrative terms, how the presence of an ecclesiastical hierarchy is necessary in order to overcome both fear and dilemma. The novel's events are set in train by a fearful priest, Don Abbondio, who refuses to marry Lucia and Renzo, the eponymous 'betrothed', because he is being threatened by the local baron Don Ronaldo, who wants Lucia for himself. But how do you overcome natural fear? Don Abbondio asks the cardinal. And how do you, the Cardinal, know that you wouldn't yourself have been just as afraid in my shoes? 'I don't' answers the Cardinal, and have the horrifically burdensome duty to reprove you when I am not sure how I myself would have behaved. But what justifies my rebuke is that you forgot that you had a bishop who might have protected you.....

Of course, as Manzoni himself recognises elsewhere in the book, the Church is often corrupt and backsliding. Yet in principle, because of our finitude and fallen weakness, we need the help of a sacral community, of a solidarity in weaponless charity as a counter-power to power.

Another illustration of this point in *I Promessi Sposi* is the way in which the new Cristoforo, on behalf of the Church, releases Lucia from the vow she had made to remain a virgin if she escaped the clutches of the *Innominato* prior to his repentance. This repentance finally arises, significantly enough, from his *shame* upon a single glance at Lucia's innocent and yet unvengeful misery. One is reminded here of another novel, Rebecca West's curious but compellingly brilliant fusion of Kipling,

Conrad, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, *The Birds Fall Down*, when a Russian early 20th C terrorist declares later that upon first seeing his innocent intended victim ‘he became fixed in contemplation of him, like a compass pointing to the North. It was as if what he was, the pure substance of him, wiped out my offence against him. I understood for the first time what is meant by the forgiveness of sins’.⁷³

Yet for all her single innocence, Lucia has not escaped social confusion. Cristoforo reminds her that when she made her vow she was guilty of an excessive piety which forgot the prior claim of betrothal – this narrative touch is one example of the very humanist Catholicism of the novel. Nevertheless, the vow had been made by a virgin to the Virgin herself, and Lucia now finds herself in an aporetic bind. Only the Church’s collectively judged sense of priorities within the *ordo amoris* is able to release her from this dilemma.

Manzoni therefore locates forgiveness and promise within both narrative time and structured community. Forgiveness for him conjoins supernatural gift with natural need, through the operation of social sacramental processes. Such a mode of reconciliation does not forget or go beyond justice, but rather realises justice where it is seemingly impossible of realisation, as in the story of Ludovico become Cristoforo -- this dissolves the fourth *aporia*, which falsely assumes that forgiveness lies in excess of justice. For him forgiveness was no light burden, as for Chaucer’s pardoner, but was going to take a lifetime of penance and charitable performance, carrying the bread of forgiveness always with him, until he finally hands it over to the married lovers towards the end of the book. This dissolves the sixth *aporia* of cheap pardon,

⁷³ Rebecca West, *The Birds Fall Down*, (London: Virago, 1989) 156.

whereby one can forgive only when the injury has eased, since, by taking over the injury perpetually and entirely, the perpetrator now himself becomes the object of compassion from the representatives of the victim.

As to the seventh *aporia* of the victim and the sovereign, since forgiveness is eucharistic, only the sovereign of all reality, who has suffered all there is to be suffered on the cross, can forgive, and we can forgive and be forgiven only by participating in this divine-human action. Without the Christian doctrine of atonement forgiveness would indeed fall prey to this *aporia*, as I have argued elsewhere.⁷⁴

6. The Triumph of Betrothal

Under the *aegis* of shame and honour, the seven *aporias* of forgiveness have now therefore evaporated. But what of the *aporias* of promise? They too evaporate, if under the same *aegis* we see promise as archetypically betrothal. ‘Betrothal’ exceeds the ethical as law because charity is always specific, always the instance of being in the between, of finding oneself ‘in love’. If the habit of erotic as well as agapeic fidelity naturally issues in wild promises of future excessive surprise, then that is because the ethical is itself only ethical as passing beyond the ethical into the religious which is to do with pre-ethical gratuity and ‘absurd’ sacrifice, as Kierkegaard realised.

In the case of the question of why we should not instantly perform that which we promise for the future, or at least pre-empt promise by an advance guarantee of future

⁷⁴ For the full statement of this argument, see *Being Reconciled*, 44-78.

performance, if promise is rather the rendering explicit of habit, then promise is itself a genuine anticipation (like betrothal), even though it is not a contractual warrant and remains open-ended as to what is really being avowed.

It might still seem that promise is redundant, given a good habit of fidelity, but this is but partially true – an underlying constancy must constantly renew itself in explicit words and deeds endlessly varied. Herein lies the importance of repeated avowals of love, remembered birthdays, carefully chosen presents, reassurances as to personal charm and beauty and so forth.

As to the vagueness of promise, which seems to render its keeping non-verifiable, this confirms again the supernatural, grace-given character of all adequate ethics – for no self-contained order of immanent nature can possibly disclose to us any normative ideals emergent merely from its own totality. (These will only be to do with the self-preservation of the whole which does not necessarily line up with the self-interested preservation of the individual parts of nature: hence power-driven nihilisms of the collective will endless compete in modernity with equally power-driven nihilisms of individual freedom and luxury.) To promise is always to promise to remain open to receiving a new inspiration as to how one might non-identically repeat fidelity in totally altered circumstances. Just as to forgive is first of all to receive Christ's forgiveness and to participate in this, so likewise to promise is to receive again God's covenantal promise to Israel and the Church, as well as to share in the Church's return promise as Bride to remain faithful to the Bridegroom.

It is to promise to receive again, in newly strange form, the divine promise in the future. Thus under the cloud of glory and fleeing the shadow of shame, being already in part reconciled, we the betrothed, anticipate the final coming of Christ the Bridegroom.

Let me conclude with a quotation from Alessandro Manzoni's narrative theological treatise on promise and forgiveness, *I Promessi Sposi*:

'Midnight is near; the Bridegroom will not now be long; let us keep our lamps lit! Let us offer our poor hearts to God, empty, so that he may fill them with that charity which rectifies the past and which assures the future; which fears and trusts and weeps and rejoices, all in due season; which converts itself in every case into the virtue that we most need'.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ *The Betrothed*, 482.

