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The Need for Atonement.

Ultimately, a full understanding of the need for atonement requires a fully developed theological understanding of the self in its relation to others. For the atonement is ultimately the story of the healing of those relations, beginning with the most fundamental relation to God and working out to others. However, I think that the moral experience of the non-religious person contains intimations of the need for something like an atonement. This is what we should expect if Christianity is true, for Christians believe that God is the creator of all persons, and that all persons therefore have intimations of God's reality and even dealings with God, though they may not recognize that it is God with whom they have dealings. Even apart from mature religious faith, ordinary moral experience contains elements that point beyond morality.

An understanding of the need for atonement must begin with an understanding of the role guilt plays in human life. We live of course in a society that tends to identify guilt with guilt feelings, and regards the latter as a bad thing that one should attempt to eliminate through therapy or other psychological techniques. (At least this is so for our *own* guilt; paradoxically, there is also a retributivist strand in contemporary culture that wants to come down hard on 'them', the guilty ones who are causing all the trouble.) To some degree this tendency to dismiss guilt is an understandable reaction in the case of those who have been socialized to have excessive and unreasonable feelings of guilt. However, morally sensitive people who have a realistic understanding of themselves and the world around them realize that there is such a thing as actually being guilty. Sometimes when I feel guilty, it is because I am guilty.

The phenomenon of guilt gets articulated in a host of images and metaphors. Some are drawn from civil society. When I have treated another badly, I feel as if I have incurred a debt to that person. Others are drawn from legal institutions. To be guilty is to have broken a law, to become the sort of person who deserves punishment. Alternatively, guilt is understood in terms of purity and defilement; when I am guilty I have become unclean and in some way in need of cleansing. I want to be whole and clean, but see myself as broken and dirty.

Though there are many who stand ready to help us overcome all such 'negative emotions', the morally mature and sensitive person understands that there are times when such emotions are appropriate, and that a human life that has no place for them is a life that is shallow and does not take seriously the moral task of becoming a whole and decent human being. There is in fact a paradox that lies at the heart of the moral life, a paradox difficult to understand and express clearly. The people who are morally most mature and advanced—those who are, we might say, closest to sainthood—are often the people who struggle the most with feelings of guilt and moral inadequacy. The Mother Teresas of this world, far from feeling morally superior, often have a strong sense of their solidarity with ordinary, morally fallible human beings. If anything, they feel less comfortable with their moral progress than the ordinary person who might be inclined to look at his neighbor and judge that he is 'as good as or better than most folks'.

We might of course just say that these morally heroic people are simply neurotic, and that the feelings of guilt they struggle with are unreasonable and false. After all, if we judge by comparative human standards, such people have little to feel guilty about. However, the kind of person I have in mind here is precisely the kind of person who seems healthiest and least neurotic, and appears to have a most realistic self-understanding.

It is apparent that such people do not judge themselves by comparative human standards. They don't pat themselves on the back and say 'I'm a pretty great person; look how much more I do than the average Joe.' Such moral smugness and superiority, far from being the conquering of a neurosis, would be proof that the individual is really not a deeply moral, sensitive person after all. No, the person is not content to compare himself or herself to 'most people', but judges life by a higher standard. It is this higher standard that makes

the person's moral achievements a reality, but paradoxically, also makes it necessary for the individual to struggle with guilt. Moral progress is accompanied, not by moral smugness and self-satisfaction, but by an increasing ability to live with a painful understanding that there is a gulf between what one has accomplished and the task, between what one has become and what one would like to be.

Kierkegaard speaks of this split between what one is and what one knows one should be as a wound, and says that is the mark of the truly moral or ethical person to 'keep the wound open', and not bandaged it with superficial palliatives.³ For it is living with that painful awareness that makes further moral growth possible.

A concrete example may help to illustrate the point. Compare two people living in North America with similar incomes and life situations. Let us call the first individual Kelly. Kelly lives to impress his colleagues by demonstrating his flair for fine clothes, his beautiful BMW, and his great popularity with the opposite sex. He knows that there are people in the world whose life situations are less fortunate—in other countries and even in his own. However, as much as possible he tries not to think about such people, though he would gladly perhaps attend a benefit concert to aid the starving, especially if the event promised to be a memorable evening and lots of famous and glamorous people would be there. Kelly does make a contribution to charity every now and then; in fact his accountant made him feel good the other day when he told him that his tax-deductible contributions last year were around 3 per cent—slightly above the average of the general population.

Kelly's co-worker Sara is much more affected by the poverty of those she knows about in her world. Like Kelly, she enjoys nice clothes, and she thinks it would doubtless be fun to own a BMW. However, she owns an old Toyota and she has for a number of years sent a substantial sum of money each month to a development agency that is working to end hunger in various regions of the world. She also volunteers one evening a week in a literacy programme, working with children from the centre of her city. Nevertheless, she is far from feeling morally complacent and self-satisfied. She decides to fast one day a month, and increase her contribution for world hunger. Even then, however, as she contemplates the enormity of the needs in the world full of starving people, she thinks that her level of sacrifice is hardly anything that she should feel is something special. After all, her life is a very comfortable one, when compared with the misery of those she is trying to help. When she thinks of what she is able to do, in fact, instead of feeling proud or superior, she sometimes feels discouraged and other times is tempted to smile or even laugh at her efforts. Nevertheless, despite her feelings of inadequacy she does not give up, and she feels it is good to do the little she does.

I would argue that Sara is morally superior to Kelly, and that one measure of her moral superiority is her keener sense of guilt. In other words, Sara is morally superior to Kelly, not just because she gives more money and time to others, but because she does not view what she does as completely adequate. She struggles with the question as to what she really owes her fellow human beings, and does not attempt to answer the question simply by comparing herself with the moral standards of contemporary society. At times she feels guilty. Though her guilt does not paralyse her, it does cause her seriously to examine her lifestyle at certain moments.

I would argue that guilt is therefore a real feature of the moral life. If we make our picture of Sara a little more complete, this will be even more evident. Sara is no plaster saint; she gets grouchy and impatient at times, especially with some of her relatives. She has said things to her mother that have hurt her mother deeply, and that she later regretted very much. It isn't as if her mother didn't provoke her! Even so, Sara feels there have been times that she should have been more understanding of her mother. Relations with other people involve this kind of regret, for even the best of us at times hurt others, even, and perhaps especially, those we love. The person who feels she is always right, and that it is always the fault of the other person, is once more the person who is morally immature.

I conclude that guilt is a problem in the moral life, and that paradoxically, it is a greater problem, at least in terms of awareness, for the person who is morally sensitive and mature. How do we deal with the problem? I have already mentioned the superficial answer of the morally shallow individual: Just forget about it. Go to a therapist who will assure you that you are okay and that you are normal. Immerse yourself in the

pursuit of trivial pleasures and you will soon cease to worry about the moral integrity of your life. Comfort yourself by making invidious comparisons with others. Justify your broken relationships by blaming it all on others. Surely none of these techniques is worthy of serious consideration.

More serious answers involve the notions of asking forgiveness, making up for the past by what one does in the future, and redoubling one's efforts to become the person one should be. A case can be made that the solution to the problem of guilt lies in these kinds of moral efforts. I shall not here try to prove that humans cannot themselves 'atone' for their pasts. However, there is evidence that even the best human beings worry about the adequacy of this kind of solution.

First of all, we naturally worry about whether the future can really make up for the past. My guilt is a consequence of what I have done, and what has been done cannot be undone. Even if my future conduct is exemplary, am I not simply doing what I should be doing? Can I really create some kind of 'surplus' of good that somehow makes up for the past?

Secondly, we worry about whether such a moralistic solution is not merely a recipe for disastrously compounding our guilt. Perhaps by living exemplary lives in the future, we can make up for the past and heal our broken relationships, restore our sense of personal integrity and purity. But suppose we continue to fail? Suppose that our future efforts are pretty similar to our past ones, or only marginally better? In that case, we have redoubled our guilt. We feel guilty for the former past, the more recent past, and guilty because of our failure to undo our past. The task we have taken on seems fraught with possibilities for disaster.

The problem of guilt is so great, and our worries about such solutions so serious, that some simply find the burden of the moral life intolerable. The great philosopher and psychologist William James saw this burden as the source of appeal of Absolute Idealism. The Idealist believes that whatever happens is somehow necessary to the Absolute and that all suffering and tragedy contributes to the good of the whole. This allows the believer to take what James called a 'moral holiday'.⁴ James himself could not accept this vision of reality and held firmly to the importance of the moral life and its struggles. Nevertheless, James himself saw the burdensome character of this moral life, and urged the moral agent to simply 'take' a moral holiday from time to time, and quit worrying about such moral concerns, even without the theoretical justification offered by the Idealist.

Our need for 'moral holidays' illustrates the tension of the moral life, a tension we are tempted to overcome by either relaxing the strenuousness of the moral ideal, or self-deceptively convincing ourselves that we have realized that ideal. And it is precisely this tension that the Christian story of the atonement addresses: the claim of the Church is that in the story of Jesus we see how our failures can be overcome without undermining the seriousness of the ideal.

An awareness of the problem of guilt is far from a demonstration of the need for atonement in its theological sense. Much more needs to be said about the nature of the problem and the difficulties of alternative, humanistic solutions. However, I think one can at least say that what Christians claim the incarnational narrative offers is not remote from human experience. For what they claim is that the story of Jesus is the story of how God has acted to deal with the problem of guilt. It is the story of how broken relationships can be healed, how our sense of being debtors can be overcome, how we can understand ourselves as clean and whole again. Those are qualities that we humans need and that we want. Whether the story of Jesus in fact offers us these qualities is another issue, but if it does, one cannot claim that the story lacks relevance to our lives today.

When we move from the viewpoint of general moral experience to the viewpoint of the person who sees his or her life as lived before God, both the need for atonement and its possibility stand out yet more clearly. If God has created us to live in fellowship with him and with each other, then it makes sense to see the moral life as the calling he offers and demands each one of us. In this context, the moral life takes on a new earnestness and intensity.⁵ Our moral failings are not merely damaging mistakes; they are failures to realize our eternal destiny. They do not merely disrupt our relations with other human beings, but shatter our relationship with the eternal loving person who called us into being. We are guilty not merely of violating

our own standards and of hurting our fellow humans; we have broken God's law and wounded the one who has given us our very lives. From such a perspective the need for atonement is much greater, but there is also a greater possibility of help. We cannot easily believe that a God who created us and loves us will simply abandon us to our self-willed destruction. Rather, it is plausible to believe, or at least to hope, that God would do something to heal our relations to himself and each other. God would somehow work for at-one-men. Christians believe that the incarnational narrative is in part the story of how God has done this.

3. See his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Hoard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 85.

4. See William James, *Pragmatism* (published with *The Meaning of Truth*) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 41, 43, 56.

5. See my former colleague Charles Taliaferro's essay, "The Intensity of Theism", *Sophia* 31/3 (1992) 61-73.