

ARE WE PREDESTINED FOR PERDITION? WITTGENSTEIN ON DIVINE GRACE

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Wittgenstein on predestination

The Christian doctrine of predestination teaches that God has eternally chosen those whom he intends to save and that everyone else will face eternal torment. The individual does not have the power to influence her eternal destiny by her actions. Each one of us is utterly dependent on Divine Grace.

This doctrine originates in St Paul's epistle to the Romans:

And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what *is* the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to *the will of God*.

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to *his* purpose.

For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate *to be* conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.

Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and who he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified. (*Romans 8: 27-30*)

The doctrine of predestination came to hold a central position in Christian thought, for instance in the teachings of St Augustine, Calvin and Luther.

The doctrine is also a recurrent theme in Wittgenstein's notebooks during the last decades of his life. The problem seems to have engaged him, in particular, during two periods: in the autumn of 1937, and again between 1947 and 1950. In the selection of remarks in *Culture and Value*, there are five remarks from 1937 and eight remarks from the later period.¹

In this talk, I want to begin by trying to set out the themes in Wittgenstein's discussion. After that, I will propose a way of thinking about the doctrine of predestination which might help make it intelligible, one that is not explicitly expressed by Wittgenstein but might be thought to be suggested by his remarks.

¹ + *Denkbewegungen*.

Wittgenstein's discussion of predestination bears the mark of an inner struggle. He repeatedly expresses his misgivings or bewilderment about it:

Paul's doctrine of election by grace for instance is at my level irreligiousness, ugly non-sense. So it is not meant for me since I can only apply wrongly the picture offered me. If it is a holy & good picture, then it is so for a quite different level, where it must be applied in life quite differently than I could apply it. (P. 37e. MS 120 8: 20.11.1937.)

Could the concept of the punishments of hell be explained in some other way than by way of the concept of punishment? Or the concept of God's goodness in some other way than by way of the concept of goodness?

If you want to achieve the right *effect* with your words, doubtless not.

Suppose someone were taught: There is a being who, if you do this & that, live in such & such a way, will take you after your death to a place of eternal torment; most people end up there, a few get to a place of eternal joy. – This being has picked out in advance those who are to get to the good place; &, since only those who have lived a certain sort of life get to the place of torment, he has also picked out in advance those who are to lead that sort of life.

What might be the effect of such a doctrine?

Well, there is no mention of punishment here, but rather a kind of natural law. And anyone to whom it is represented in such a light, could derive only despair or incredulity from it. Teaching this could not be an ethical training. And if you wanted to train anyone ethically & yet teach him like this, you would have to teach the doctrine *after* the ethical training, and represent it as a sort of incomprehensible mystery. (Pp. 92e f. MS 138 13b: 2.2.1949.)

“He has chosen them, in his goodness, & you he will punish” really makes no sense. The two halves belong to different kinds of perspective. The second half is ethical & the first not. And taken together with the first the second is absurd. (Pp. 93e. MS 138 14a: 2.2.1949.)

Wittgenstein finds it difficult to see how the arbitrariness of preselection can be reconciled with the idea of God as a being whose essence is love, and thus, how Christianity could be an ethical force engaging our love rather than fear. If punishment is to constitute a moral response, the individual himself must be able to acknowledge its justice.

The prevalent note in these remarks is one of ambivalence. Although Wittgenstein finds the doctrine difficult to understand, the spirit of his remarks is very far from that of an atheist critic trying to prove the absurdity of the Christian faith by pointing out intellectual contradictions. He is not out to measure the tenability of the doctrine. But neither is Wittgenstein writing from a position like that of a theologian who takes the doctrine as a given and tries to spell it out. Rather, he is challenged by it, trying to find out what it could possibly have to tell him.

Is he taking a philosophical stance here or is he writing as an individual human being? My inclination is to emphasize the personal aspect. It is true that there is *some* affinity between this theme and the

discussions about the will in the *Notebooks 1914-16* (11.6.16-10.1.17) and the *Tractatus* (6.373-4; 6.422). But the doctrine of predestination is not mentioned in those texts. Nor did he include any of this material in the manuscript for the *Philosophical Investigations* which he intended for publication – nor, to my knowledge, did he ever lecture on this theme, all of which would seem to indicate that he himself regarded these thoughts as personal. Be that as it may, I still think his discussion holds philosophical interest.

Wittgenstein seems to approach the doctrine from two different angles: what we might call intellectual resistance and submission. The remarks from 1937, on the whole, tend to emphasize submission, while the intellectual resistance is more pronounced in the later remarks.

What I am calling the intellectual response has close analogies with responses to the ordinary philosophical problem of freedom of will². It has often been asked how human beings can be held accountable for their actions, since what distinguishes an evil-doer from a law-abiding citizen, for instance, is ultimately dependent on circumstances beyond the control of either of them: on their personality, the impact of the environment, the particular situations in which they find themselves.

To be able to hold someone accountable, we must be able to distinguish matters that are under the agent's control from those that are not. When we look at human conduct from a scientific point of view, on the other hand, it seems impossible to identify the kinds of condition that would prove an agent accountable. Now, what Wittgenstein is suggesting is that it is an error to look for factual circumstances that would decide this issue. It is ultimately a matter of our attitude. Sometimes it may be easy to find the agent not accountable, as in the case of irresistible duress or obvious insanity. In other cases, however, we may be torn in different directions and will have to make up our minds. Could the drug addict have resisted? Our response in these cases means taking a moral stance. The decision to hold the agent responsible may range from obviously justified over harsh to unjust to unintelligible.

Wittgenstein said, in a conversation recalled by O. K. Bouwsma:

We do not hold a drunk responsible. The alcohol makes a difference. We do hold the sober man who does what the drunk does, responsible. Who knows, however, that this is not also a matter of chemistry? There may be something in his body which makes the temptation irresistible. It is

² This, by the way, was a problem to which, in its conventional form, Wittgenstein hardly gave any attention in his philosophical work, with the sole exception, more or less, of two lectures he gave on the topic in 1939. Yorick Smythies' notes of these lectures were published in J. Klagge and A. Nordmann (eds.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993).

conceivable that you would not, following some such suggestion, hold any man responsible. ... In all these cases we take an attitude. Taking an attitude is blaming, praising, defending, etc. (O. K. Bouwsma, *Wittgenstein, Conversations 1949-1951*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986. P. 16.)

In the concept of divine punishment, however, these same problems come to a head. We can make ourselves *no* idea of the objective circumstances that an all-powerful, all-knowing being would take into consideration in passing judgment on human beings, since God's knowledge of the circumstances of each individual's life is *complete*, and furthermore, he himself is the *creator* of those circumstances. God comes across like an undercover police agent who coaxes school kids into taking drugs, then arrests those who succumb, the only difference being that he has already determined who is going to succumb. Speak of *a fortiori*!

Life is like a path along a mountain ridge; right & left smooth slopes down which you slide in this or that direction without being able to stop yourself. I keep seeing people slip like this & I say: "How could anyone help himself in that situation!" And *that is* what "denying free will" comes to. That is the attitude that expresses itself in this 'belief'. But it is not a *scientific* belief, has nothing to do with scientific convictions.

Denying responsibility means, not *holding* anyone responsible. (Pp. 72e f.)

If God really does *choose* those who are to be saved, there is no reason why he should not choose them according to their nationalities, races, or temperaments. Why the choice should not be expressed in the laws of nature. (He was of course also *able so* to choose, that the choice follows a law.)

I have been reading extracts from the writings of St. John of the Cross, in which it is written that people have gone to their ruin, because they did not have the good fortune to find a wise spiritual director at the right moment.

And how can you say then that God does not try people beyond their strengths? --- (P. 83e.)

Imagine someone watching a pendulum & thinking: God makes it move like that. Well, doesn't God have the right even to act in accordance with a calculation? (P. 86e.)

How God judges people is something we cannot imagine at all. If he really takes the strength of temptation & the frailty of nature into account, whom can he condemn? But if not, then these two forces simply yield as a result the end for which this person was predestined. In that case he was created so as either to conquer or succumb as a result of the interplay of forces. And that is not a religious idea at all, so much as a scientific hypothesis.

So if you want to stay within the religious sphere, you must *struggle*. (P. 98e. MS 174 7v: 1950.)

To approach the problem of predestination from this angle, however, is to assume the position of God, trying to decide under what circumstances he would be justified in sentencing some among us to eternal perdition. We are asking, as it were, "What would I have done if I were God?" Of course, that question is blasphemous.³

³ We should note that one may be misled by words like "*predestination*" or "*preselection*" into thinking that the temporal dimension matters, as if the real injustice consisted in the fact that God had rigged the game to start with, not giving the

Wittgenstein warns against too facile readings of religious similes:

--- Religion says: Do *this!* - "*Think like that!*" but it cannot justify this and it only need try to do so to become repugnant; since for every reason it gives, there is a cogent counter-reason. It is more convincing to say: "Think like this! - however strange it may seem. -" Or: "Won't you do this? - repugnant as it is. -" (P. 34e.)

In religion it must be the case that corresponding to every level of devoutness there is a form of expression that has no sense at a lower level. For those still at the lower level this doctrine, which means something at the higher level, is null & void; it *can* only be understood *wrongly*, & so these words are *not* valid for such a person. (P. 37e.)

--- I am inclined to say here, it is true, that crooked concepts have done a lot of mischief, but the truth is, that *I do not know* at all, what does good & what does mischief. (P. 83e. MS 137 57a: 26.6.1948.)

"God has commanded it, therefore we must be able to do it." That means nothing. There is no "*therefore*" about it. The two expressions might at most mean the *same*.

"He has commanded it" means here roughly: He will punish anyone who does not do it. And nothing follows from that about being able. And *that* is the sense of 'election by grace'.

But that does not mean that it is right to say: "He punishes, although we *cannot* act otherwise." - Perhaps, though, one might say: here there is punishment, where punishment by human beings would be impermissible. And the whole concept of 'punishment' changes here. For the old illustrations can no longer be applied, or now have to be applied quite differently. Just look at an allegory like "The Pilgrim's Progress" & see how nothing - in human terms - is right. - But isn't it right all the same? i.e. can it not be applied? Indeed, it has been applied. (P. 87e f.)

From the third person point of view, the idea of divine punishment becomes an unfathomable mystery. This shows that wishing to assess God's actions in terms of justice or injustice is an absurdity. God is not to be understood as a kind of supernatural one-man Ethics Committee. What is being measured is not *God's* love; it is always only our own love that is measured.

In wondering how the relation between God and His creations can be a moral one, we are as it were looking through the wrong end of the telescope. The morality of the relation is for us to worry about, not for Him. The doctrine will only open itself to us if we submit to God's judgment. In this spirit, Wittgenstein suggests that the difficulties he has in coming to terms with the doctrine of predestination may be due to a religious shortcoming on his part: to his own lack of humility and devotion.

The spring that flows quietly & clearly in the Gospels seems to foam in Paul's Epistles. Or that is how it seems to me. Perhaps it is just my own impurity that reads muddiness into it; for why

individual a sporting chance, whereas it would be all right if he could only wait and see how she manages. From a divine point of view, of course, the distinction between before and after has no significance.

shouldn't this impurity be able to pollute what is clear? But for me it's as though I saw human passion, something like pride or anger, which does not square with the humility of the Gospels. It is as though he really is insisting here on his own person, & doing so moreover as a religious act, something which is foreign to the Gospel. I want to ask - & may this be no blasphemy-: "What would Christ perhaps have said to Paul?"

But a fair rejoinder to that would be: What business is that of yours? Look after making yourself more decent! In your present state, you are quite incapable of understanding what may be the truth here. (P. 35e. MS 119 71: 4.10.1937.)

I am reading: "& no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost." And it is true: I cannot call him *Lord*; because that says absolutely nothing to me. I could call him "the paragon", "God" even or rather: I can understand it when he is so called; but I cannot utter the word "Lord" meaningfully. *Because I do not believe* that he will come to judge me; because *that* says nothing to me. And it could only say something to me if I were to live *quite* differently.

What inclines even me to believe in Christ's resurrection? I play as it were with the thought. - If he did not rise from the dead, then he decomposed in the grave like every human being. *He is dead & decomposed*. In that case he is a teacher, like any other & can no longer *help*; & we are once more orphaned & alone. And have to make do with wisdom & speculation. It is as though we are in a hell, where we can only dream & are shut out from heaven, roofed in as it were. But if I am to be REALLY redeemed, - I need *certainty* - not wisdom, dreams, speculation - and this certainty is faith. And faith is faith in what my *heart*, my soul, needs, not my speculative intellect. For my soul, with its passions, as it were with its flesh & blood, must be redeemed, not my abstract mind. Perhaps one may say: Only *love* can believe the Resurrection. Or: it is *love* that believes the Resurrection. --- (Pp. 38e f. MS 120 108 c: 12.12.1937.)

Christianity is not based on a historical truth, but presents us with a (historical) narrative & says: now believe! But not believe this report with the belief that is appropriate to a historical report, - but rather: believe, through thick & thin & you can do this only as the outcome of a life. *Here you have a message!* - *don't treat it as you would another historical message!* Make a *quite different* place for it in your life. - There is no *paradox* about that! (P. 37e. MS 120 83 c: 8-9.12.1937.)

Go on, believe! It does no harm.

"Believing" means, submitting to an authority. ---

A cry of distress cannot be greater than that of *one* human being.

Or again *no* distress can be greater than what a single person can suffer.

Hence one human being can be in infinite distress & so need infinite help.

The Christian religion is only for the one who needs infinite help, that is only for the one who suffers infinite distress.

The whole earth cannot be in greater distress than *one* osul.

Christian faith - so I believe - is refuge in this *ultimate* distress.

Someone to whom it is given in such distress to open his heart instead of contracting it, absorbs the remedy into his heart.

Someone who in this way opens his heart to God in remorseful confession opens it for others too. He thereby loses his dignity as someone special & so becomes like a child. That means without office, dignity & aloofness from others. You can open yourself to others only out of a particular kind of love. Which acknowledges as it were that we are all wicked children. (P. 52e. MS 128 49: ca. 1944.)

At this point, it is important to realize that submitting to God does not mean that we stop thinking. The submission in question is not intellectual. On the contrary, submission is a precondition for thinking, i.e. for seeing what the issues are. As long as we are getting ourselves mixed up with God, we are not in a position to think clearly. But now we are clear about the division of roles.

This entails switching the third person perspective on responsibility to a first person perspective. Judging *another* person's accountability requires taking a moral stance. But where my own responsibility is concerned, the case is different. I do not have the choice of lifting all responsibility from myself, not because it would be wrong, but because it would be unintelligible what that means. In the bit of conversation noted by Bouwsma, Wittgenstein said, after noting that "It is conceivable that you would not ... hold any man responsible": "But each man would now hold himself responsible – not to do this would mean that one would cease to be human."

If I were not to hold myself to any demands, I would no longer be an agent. This is not the same as acting irresponsibly, making light of one's obligations, shrugging off all criticism. It is easy enough to imagine someone who does that. But it does not seem possible to imagine someone who really does not consider himself as in any sense responsible for what he says and does. This may have been what Wittgenstein had in mind in suggesting that such an individual would no longer be human.⁴

For me to be an agent means that I, as it were, *interject myself* between the objective circumstances conditioning my life and my own action. That is how I constitute my actions as mine.

Assuming a first person perspective on responsibility has consequences for the way one thinks about punishment. From this perspective, something will *be* a punishment for me only if I think I deserve it. This is different from an appraisal of the procedure through which some agency has arrived at its decision to punish me. Suppose I consider myself innocent of the crime I am charged with, either because I simply did not do it, or because I consider myself justified in having done what I did. In that case, even if I am found guilty, and even if I can find no fault with the judicial procedure, there is nothing, in so far, for which I see myself as being punished, hence the consequences will not constitute a punishment for that crime for me. And contrariwise, I may regard some misfortune that befalls me –

⁴ Wittgenstein is apparently saying that holding oneself responsible is also a matter of "attitude", suggesting that it too is something one may do or not do. I would contend that this idea is problematic. On the other hand, strictly speaking, so is the idea that we might hold no one responsible. In any case, we should be aware that these were conversation notes written down later the same day and not a meticulous recording of Wittgenstein's own words.

say, an illness or an accident – as just punishment for some wrong I have done, even if I do not imagine that there is any causal connection between my actions and the event.⁵ By combining these two we get the possibility that, even if I am punished for a crime I did not commit, I may still think I deserve the punishment – though *for different reasons*.

From my own point of view, then, whether I deserve what I get does not depend on a factual relation between what I have done and what confronts me: rather, it is a *perspective* under which I regard what befalls me.⁶

This suggests a way in which the doctrine of predestination may be thought about. The doctrine, we might say, constitutes a way of seeing the sense of one's life:

Christianity is not a doctrine, not, I mean, a theory about what has happened & will happen to the human soul, but a description of something that actually takes place in human life. For 'recognition of sin' is an actual occurrence & so is despair & so is redemption through faith. Those who speak of it (like Bunyan), are simply describing what has happened to them; whatever gloss someone may want to put on it! (P. 32e.) MS 118 S6r c: 4.9.1937

Election by grace: It is only permissible to write like this out of the most frightful suffering – & then it means something quite different. But for this reason it is not permissible for anyone to cite it as truth, unless he himself says it in torment. - It simply isn't a theory. - Or as one might also say: if this is truth, it is not the truth it appears at first glance to express. It's less a theory than a sigh, or a cry. (P. 34e f.) MS 118 117v: 24.9.1937

A paraphrase: on being in need of forgiveness

To embrace the doctrine of predestination is to acknowledge one's dependence on grace. It is to recognize that one is in need of forgiveness. This goes with the Christian teaching that we are all sinners.

For a believer to *reject* the doctrine, on the other hand, would be to declare himself master of his moral fate, thus making himself independent of the need for forgiveness. That is, he would be

⁵ Analogously, if I encounter happiness after a betrayal, say, after having irresponsibly deserted my family, I may feel that my happiness is undeserved.

⁶ For a penetrating discussion of these issues, see Peter Winch, "Ethical Reward and Punishment" in his *Ethics and Understanding* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972). See also "Trying" in the same volume. (**3rd person perspective not a moral perspective?**)

expressing the conviction that, if he just tries hard enough, he will never have to feel guilty. (This, I believe, would put him in the position of Kierkegaard's ethical individual.)⁷

What would such a conviction amount to? Let us consider some aspects of what might be termed the phenomenology of guilt. We commonly think that the paradigm of guilt and forgiveness is a case in which one person, *A*, whether through malice, selfishness or neglect, offends another person, *B*, at time *t*, whereupon *B* forgives *A* at *t'*. In such a case, from *t* to *t'*, *A* is in need of *B*'s forgiveness.

What characterizes a case like this, for one thing, is that what we might call the inside and the outside of the offence – the agent's involvement and the outcome – are roughly proportionate. What I feel guilty about and what others may accuse me of are roughly equivalent. Another characteristic of this case is that it is clear when the need for forgiveness arose, who has the need, who the offended party is, and, thus, who is in a position to bestow forgiveness or withhold it.

If we think of guilt and forgiveness in relation to cases like these, the idea that one could stay free of guilt by keeping one's nose clean at all times is perhaps intelligible. At least, this is what every mother hopes her son will do when she sends him off to school with the words: "Remember to behave yourself!"

Now, there is a narrow conception of guilt according to which all cases, or at least all genuine, "rational" cases of guilt, are like this. People who hold this conception may acknowledge that sometimes people will also feel guilty in cases that do not fulfil this condition, but they consider those cases to be marginal and not to be taken seriously.

However, if we consider the ways in which guilt enters our lives, it is not hard to see that there is a huge number of cases which are not at all like the paradigm case. Let me describe some cases: A child may feel guilty for having been conceived accidentally, which led to her parents being forced into a loveless union. Many Germans born after the second world war felt guilty about the deeds of the Nazis. In a television programme about Ansperger's disease, a man was racked with guilt for having unwittingly passed on the gene to his grandchildren. In *The Book of Illusions* by Paul Auster, a man is tormented by guilt for having hurried his wife and children to catch a flight which

⁷ Cp. Winch, "Can a Good Man be Harmed?", Simone Weil.

then crashed. Oidipus blinded himself when he discovered that the man he had killed was his father and the woman he had married was his mother. One of the teachers at the school in Beslan felt guilty after the massacre for not having prepared her pupils for a terrorist attack. The father of a 19-year-old man who set off a bomb in a shopping mall near Helsinki, killing himself and six others, was devastated with guilt for not having seen it coming.⁸

While these cases differ from one another in a variety of ways, they have one thing in common: none of them fits the guilt and forgiveness paradigm described above.⁹ In some cases, as in feeling guilty for having been conceived, there is no agent involvement at all: there was nothing the girl could have done differently, since that would have required her to exist before her own conception. In the case of the family killed in the air crash, there is agent involvement but it is totally innocent. In other cases, there is *no proportion* between the agent's involvement and the outcome. Maybe the teacher in Beslan could or should have organized drills to prepare for a terrorist attack. (I do not know whether she was supposed to have done so.) But even so, if there had been no attack, she would probably have considered her failure a minor oversight. The father of the bomber might conceivably have noticed that his son was becoming reclusive and showing signs of depression. Even so, it would be unjust to say that he was showing reckless disregard of the possibility that his son might be planning a horrendous act. The teacher and the father, we may imagine, were guilty only of the shortcomings of everyday, sins of omission of the kind which is inevitable if life is to be possible at all. Because of what happened to happen, however, things that would in themselves have been insignificant took on a huge importance.

In other cases, the lack of proportion is in the opposite direction. I may feel guilty for my thoughts or feelings, even if I do not act on them, and even if nothing untoward happens. Thus, if I hope that my rival should fail miserably at some task, I may feel guilty about my feelings even if he is successful.

⁸ The term "survivors' guilt" is used in several of these cases.

⁹ This is also true if guilt is considered from a third person perspective. For instance, avenging oneself on the innocent is a common motive in human conflicts. The history of mankind would look radically different from what it does if the idea were not so prevalent that *A*'s wrongdoing gives me the right to inflict harm on *B* simply because *B* stands in some specific relation to *A* (say, that of belonging to the same family, religion, profession, or sex). Consider for instance the Christian excuses for anti-semitism, the practice of scapegoating, vendettas, or the spiral of revenge in the Middle East. Of course, we could say that this form of thought is always corrupt, since it violates the individual's claim to be encountered as the individual she is. This, unfortunately, does not change the facts. And it may be important to keep this in mind since in discussions about revenge it is often taken for granted that revenge is typically aimed at those believed to be guilty of an offence. **French. other form: anger at mate or parent for dying too young.**

The cases also do not fit the paradigm in the sense that it is not clear who might forgive the agent or what she is to be forgiven for. In many cases, there would be no question of others blaming the agent, and hence, from their point of view, there is nothing *to* forgive.¹⁰

Whether or not there is somebody whose forgiveness I may seek, I may have a need to forgive *myself*.¹¹ The notion of forgiving oneself seems paradoxical, however. Forgiving another is internally connected with remorse. I think one might say that in as far as I acknowledge the genuineness of the other's remorse I have *already* forgiven her. (I do not wish to imply, on the other hand, that I cannot forgive someone *unless* she feels genuine remorse.) Now, to feel genuine remorse is to see what one did as unforgivable. The paradox of self-forgiveness, then, is this: it seems to require that I forgive myself *by* recognizing that what I did was unforgivable.

The paradox shows that the notion of self-forgiveness cannot be understood by analogy with the notion of forgiving another. Forgiving oneself is not an event in time the way forgiving another often is. It involves forming a relation to my guilt in which I can recognize it without being paralyzed or torn to pieces by it. It is not an achievement, rather a matter of grace. Even *trying* to achieve self-forgiveness would imply that I had already conquered my guilt, that I had come to regard it from outside, as a psychological phenomenon that needed to be overcome. For until I am able to forgive myself, I must welcome my pangs of conscience as a punishment I have deserved. For the believer, I should like to suggest, being able to forgive yourself, and the conviction that God has forgiven you, are one and the same.¹² This may be what Wittgenstein had in mind when he wrote, in a remark already quoted:

Christianity is not a doctrine, not, I mean, a theory about what has happened & will happen to the human soul, but a description of something that actually takes place in human life. For 'recognition of sin' is an actual occurrence & so is despair & so is redemption through faith.

¹⁰ Third person cases and first person cases of what we might call innocent guilt do not necessarily coincide, though they sometimes do - e.g. cases of collective guilt. --- There are of course also cases of vicariously asking forgiveness - say, by a government for the crimes committed by its predecessors.

¹¹ It should be clear that the need for self-forgiveness will not automatically be forestalled by one's being forgiven by the other. We should note too that in some of the cases described above, to speak of forgiving oneself seems out of place. It seems at least to require some degree of agent involvement.

¹² Let me insert an aside here concerning self-forgiveness. Though I am not a great fan of Lars von Trier's films, I find it interesting to note that a common theme that seems to unite some of them is the portrayal of a form of kindness which becomes destructive because it rushes to forgive others without giving them space to forgive themselves, thus egging them on to ever more ruthless forms of evil. (In Swedish there is a word for this kind of attitude: "snällhet".) The error, it seems, is that of not taking the other seriously as a moral agent, which may come to be understood as a contemptuous attitude. (Contrast here the notion of "tough love" which is the attitude recommended for family members of people with addiction problems, problem teenagers, etc.)

There is a strong inclination to disregard phenomena like innocent guilt and self-forgiveness or to relegate them to the margins. However, these experiences are an important part of human life. Calling them marginal seems to express a preconceived idea of the sort of thing feelings of guilt ought to be.¹³ Thomas Nagel, for instance, in “Moral Luck” seems to suggest that the fact that our moral reactions may be directed at things that are not under our control shows that morality is partly irrational.¹⁴ However, it is not self-evident how the rational – irrational distinction applies in this connection. On the one hand, even if what torments me is something I could have avoided, that does not necessarily mean that I can undo it now, so in that sense guilt is not *productive* even in a case like this.¹⁵ On the other hand, we would not necessarily consider a person who is racked by innocent guilt pathological. On the contrary, someone who was totally free of such reactions might seem to us somehow deficient, almost inhuman.¹⁶

Feeling guilt is internally connected with the sense of meaning. The recognition that I have wronged someone may threaten my ability to see meaning in my life. But so may the recognition that I have unknowingly injured someone, or even the fact that my mere existence has brought misery into another’s life. To realize this is to recognize that life may throw me into situations in which I may be dependent on grace if my life is not to lose its meaning. Someone who is struck by this may feel the truth of the Christian doctrine that we are all sinners before God.

“Loving enough”

Now someone might go along with what has been said so far, and conclude that it is all a matter of luck. Life may put me in a position in which guilt may threaten my sense of meaning, but it is a matter of probability whether it will do so or not. Rather than saying that we are all sinners before

¹³ It is important to distinguish non-paradigm emotions from unintelligible attributions. Suppose someone survives an accident but is racked by guilt from the belief that she could have saved the others. She may then discover that there was nothing she could have done. It would be irrational for her to go on feeling guilty for not having done what she could not do; nevertheless, she may still intelligibly feel guilty about having survived when others perished. *We* might think she had nothing to feel guilty about and could try to console her by telling her that, but we would not be at a loss how to describe her response. On the other hand, if someone castigates herself, say, for a purely imaginary accident, it is not clear how her feelings are to be described; neither, it seems, could we in any straightforward sense try to console her.

¹⁴ Thomas Nagel, “Moral Luck”, in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Suppl. Vol. 50 (1976), pp. 137-151. See esp. p. 146.

¹⁵ Maybe it will be suggested that rational guilt is always a forward-looking emotion: the sense of guilt is that it should be a lesson for the future. But this is obviously a reductive view of guilt.

¹⁶ On this, see D. Z. Phillips, “How Lucky Can You Get?”, in his *Interventions in Ethics* (Basingstoke:Macmillan, 1992).

God, what we ought to say is that *most* of us are. You may if you like take a devil of a chance and turn your back on grace – and may still turn up a winner.

This idea is problematic, however. The central core of the Christian faith is love. However love is not (at least not in any straightforward sense) under our control. Wittgenstein writes:

The greatest happiness for a human being is love. Suppose you say of the schizophrenic: he does not love, he cannot love, he refuses to love – where is the difference?

“He refuses to . . .” means: it is in his power. And *who* wants to say that?!

Well, of what do we say “it is in his power”? - We say it in cases where we want to draw a distinction. I can lift *this* weight, but I will not lift it; *that* weight I cannot lift.

“God has commanded it, therefore we must be able to do it.” That means nothing. There is no “*therefore*” about it. The two expressions might at most mean the *same*.

“He has commanded it” means here roughly: He will punish anyone who does not do it. And nothing follows from that about being able. And *that* is the sense of ‘election by grace’. (P. 87e.)

Suppose I do not find myself able to love my fellow human beings the way I should. How am I to overcome this limitation? Of course I may try to work on my attitude. I may, for instance, practice being more attentive to others, or I may throw myself into the task of helping others, etc, and hope that my feelings will grow. It could be said that my desire to make the effort is itself an expression of love. At least in recognizing this lack I am further along than someone who does not even see a lack in herself, or who does not acknowledge that there can be such a thing as a failure to love. But at the same time, the fact that I must make the effort is a limitation of my love.

I may feel guilty about my lack of love. Perhaps I will compare myself to others, and wish that I had the kind of love they had. Suppose we turn this around, however, and imagine that one day I discover that my wish has been fulfilled, and that my love was, in fact, sufficient: I love my fellow beings just as much as they deserve. As far as love is concerned I have nothing to blame myself for. No more effort is needed.

However, there seems to be something problematic about this possibility. We are supposed to judge how much love another deserves. But from what perspective is that judgment to be made? From the perspective of love? Certainly not: it cannot be part of love to try to determine how much each one of us is entitled to. The judgment can only be made from some other perspective: I may decide that it is just not rational for me to spend any more time and effort on this particular individual who is pretty hopeless anyway. Or I may fear making a fool of myself if I love the other more than she loves me.¹⁷ Or I may become convinced that my love is at least as great as that of everybody I

¹⁷ Kierkegaard has a remark on this in *The Works of Love*:

know, or that it is as great as can be expected from a person in my station in life. Etc. These are not considerations of love. Evidently the idea of measuring how much someone deserves to be loved makes sense only from some perspective external to love itself; it presupposes that something else is given precedence before love.

Love, then, does not measure desert. The idea of “loving enough” is itself an expression of lovelessness. To recognize this is to recognize that I am *always* in need of grace.

Den Kjerlighed derimod, der undergik Evighedens Forandring ved at blive Pligt, den kjender ikke Iversyge; den elsker ikke blot, som den bliver elsket, men den elsker. Iversygen elsker som den blir elsket; ængsteligt piint ved Forestillingen, om den bliver elsket, er den lige saa iversyg paa den egne Kjerlighed, om den dog ikke er uforholdsmæssig i Forhold til den Andens Ligegyldighed, som den er iversyg paa Yttringen af den Andens Kjerlighed; ængsteligt piint ved Selvbeskæftigelsen tør den hverken ganske troe den Elskede, ei heller ganske give sig hen, for ikke at give for meget...

Og hvorledes er nu hiin eenfoldige Kjerlighed sikkret mod Iversygen? Mon ikke derved, at den ikke elsker sammenlignelsesvis? Den begynder ikke med umiddelbart at elske fortrinsviis, den elsker; derfor kan den heller aldrig komme til sygeligt at elske sammenlignelsesvis, den elsker.

Søren Kierkegaard: *Kjerlighedens gjerninger (Samlede verker. Gyldendal, 1963. Bind 12 , pp. 40 f..*