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“Guilt, Remorse and God: Response to Lynch and Dahanayake”

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Tony Lynch and Nishanathe Dahanayake have renewed an old debate about whether religion, or in their version God, is necessary to morality.¹ Lynch is himself an atheist. But he urges the view that morality, at least as we have long had it in the West, is indeed founded in the assumption of God. Lynch holds that guilt² is integral to the weave of that morality. Guilt “internally connects morality and motives.” (6). The capacity to feel guilt, Lynch argues, “involves the internalisation of a God figure: of a figure worthy of worship that is eternally – unavoidably, inescapably, necessarily – the source of morality and its ultimate guarantor.” (8) Our deep problem then is that, inhabiting a world in which religious convictions are dissolving, as we do, the framework holding guilt, and so morality, in place has largely collapsed.

Lynch allows that shame also can be the “psychological power” of a conception of morality. While guilt is intelligible only against the background of belief in “the City of God”³ shame-morality can thrive in “the City of Man”. But Lynch thinks it can do so only in societies that are “relatively small and ...value cohesive”. Modern mass societies are neither of those things, so in them shame cannot sustain morality. (14-17)

For different reasons, then, neither shame nor guilt has the power to animate and sustain moral thinking and practice in our contemporary cultural life. Lynch thinks the New Atheism is blind to the situation this puts us in:

The New Atheists,⁴ *contra* Nietzsche, agree that atheism poses no real problem for morality, even one historically derived from Christianity. They assume “that there is a universal objective secular moral standard”. And they pretty much take it that that standard is

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something they have a good handle on because it is, in fact, a matter of those moral views they have and share. (2)

Like Nietzsche before him, Lynch thinks such assumptions are complacent. One interest of his paper, then, lies in its attempt to update Nietzsche's take on the profound implications, for our moral self-understanding, of the death of God.

Lynch also has further criticisms of the New Atheism. He says that its "secularising" of guilt supplants God with the "benevolent security state" in whose "enfolding grip" the New Atheism is happy to lie, spending its "most fevered rhetoric contemplating and supporting 'aggressive war, state violence, the curtailing of civil liberties ...[and] torture...' ". (18) But whether this further diagnosis is right or not, his main argument does not depend on it; and it will not figure in my discussion.

I don't think guilt is dependent on God. But I do not therefore stand with those Lynch is criticising. I think Lynch is right to insist that the issues here have a depth they miss. So I resist Lynch's conception of the alternatives he thinks face us. Why so, and how else things might be expressed, I shall try to bring out.

I don't find it entirely clear from his essay why Lynch thinks guilt is dependent on God. But the line of thought seems to be roughly this: that the idea of morality is the idea of something with an absolute and unconditional character; that the only psychological power strong enough to bind us⁵ to requirements having such a character is guilt; and that, as already noted, "the capacity to feel guilt involves the internalisation of a God figure".⁶

Lynch then tells a quasi-Freudian story⁷ about this process of internalisation. People in "the City of Man" – most notably, the parents of infant children –

have that on which the internalisation is to build. In the first place they will be "law-giver[s] with the power and will to reward and punish"...And in the second place we will have – or, more accurately, will by the neophyte be seen to have – the right properties and to stand in the right relationship with that neophyte to turn what, from one point of view, might seem merely a power differential, into a matter of rightful authority. For the truth is that we seem as gods to our children, who want to please us in all our omnipotence, omniscience and wisdom.... (8)

As Lynch sees it, moral obedience understands itself as obedience to rightful authority, not merely to ungainsayable power. If God indeed has such power, His moral authority derives not from that

alone but is sourced in Him as (in John Locke's words) "A supreme being, infinite in power, goodness and wisdom, whose workmanship we are, and on whom we depend."⁸ The internalisation by the developing child of a God-figure along those lines, drawn from their parents whom they see as gods, is the psychological spring of guilt, binding human beings in obedience (which of course can fail) to moral requirements believed to be absolute and unconditional. The internalised figure gradually then comes to be represented more abstractly. As Lynch puts it: "Such a God Figure has the right properties and right relationship with us, to ground a universal duty of obedience to the moral law." (8)

The source of our problem lies in the alienation that then follows:

For while to the infant, the parental figure may be God-like it is precisely that God-like character that drops away as the infant comes into a developing understanding of itself as an individual in a world of individuals, none of whom are Gods at all, but limited, finite, fallible, with purposes and concerns of their own, often inimical to one's own. Yet for guilt to thrive, these things must be kept at bay. Real people, including those who once appeared as Gods and whose appearance has been internalised, might be limited, finite and fallible, but the internalised God-figure must remain unlimited, infinite and infallible. If it does not... if all there is are (now) limited, finite and fallible individuals in a world of conflicting interests, then that emotion from which remorse and the demands of repentance and reparation arise finds itself severed at the roots.... Only on the basis of a belief in God... can guilt give an honest and robust account of itself. (9)

In short: there is nothing to sustain the "unlimited, infinite and infallible" internalised God-figure needed to hold morality's authority in place, once we realise that the figure was illusorily generated out of (merely) limited, finite and fallible human materials. As this formulation suggests, Lynch thinks the problem lies not in the genesis of guilt, but in its sustenance and transmission in an atheist culture. In a religious culture, human beings can be seen as "children of God", and religious concepts and practices can be relied on to sustain and culturally transmit the God-figure internalised in the normal development of children. With "the death of God", the natural atrophy of the internalised god-figure that is kept in check within a religious culture will have free rein, so that people progressively come to see themselves and others – merely, but truly – as "limited, finite and fallible individuals in a world of conflicting interests". And parental commitment to inducting children into morality's absolute unconditionality then cannot "stand firm...in the face of a tendency to appear as a quixotic idealism on whose altar one's children might be sacrificed." (10)

Lynch says that guilt morality is “finished” unless “guilt can be refined psychologically so that its dependence on the infantile fantasy of an all-seeing, all powerful, all loving victim/enforcer drops away without guilt itself doing the same”. (11) Lynch considers two attempts at such refinement – by Kant and Adam Smith – and declares both of them failures. And he thinks there are no other plausible candidates.

I think at least two main themes of Lynch’s narrative are mistaken: his account of how guilt is sourced in God; and his picture of how else things must be seen once God is dispensed with. These two mistaken themes turn out, moreover, to be interdependent. So I shall try to show.

As noted, the internalising of a God-figure is at the heart of Lynch’s account of guilt as what “binds us into morality”. (6) But his account simply misses the way a person’s consciousness of the victims of his wrongdoing must inform his guilt if it is indeed to fill the role of genuinely binding him to morality. *Something* called “guilt” can indeed be engaged in the recognition that one has transgressed the demands of an authority figure – be it an external (e.g. parental) figure or an internalised one, and even when the internalised figure comes to be conceived abstractly as “the moral law”. In fact philosophy has often represented guilt expressly in connection with such recognition. Grant that there is such a phenomenon. There is also a further dimension or aspect of guilt, involving the wrongdoer’s pained consciousness of his victims, that cannot be made sense of in those terms. That is because a painful consciousness of one’s victim *as* one’s victim – as this-one-violated-by-you – need not be implicated at all in a wrongdoer’s awareness of having violated “the demands of morality”. I think this further dimension of guilt is well-described as remorse (though I do not hang too much on the word); and my suggestion is that any account of what “binds us into morality” that omits reference to remorse so understood is to that extent inadequate.

Let me spell out what is at issue here. Think of the remorse someone might experience for doing something terrible – for example, betraying to his death an innocent person. Imagine someone whose sense of what he had done in thus betraying another was (simply) that he had *contravened the moral law*. Well, people can and do feel guilty for breaking moral laws, but there would be something seriously limited, even infantile, in the response of a person whose guilty sense of his betrayal of another was adequately reflected in those terms. (And it doesn’t improve things in the least if we speak of breaking “the” moral law rather than “a” moral law.) Contravening “a universal duty of obedience to the moral law” simply is not the salient occasion or focus of genuine remorse. As far as the wrongdoer’s aliveness to the moral import of what he has done in (say) betraying or

humiliating someone is concerned, his pained awareness of the other as violated by him is the nub of the matter. Raimond Gaita's "parodies" are apt here.⁹ Gaita imagines someone awaking to the significance of what he has done in betraying another, and saying: "My God, what have I done! I've transgressed the universal duty of obedience to the moral law!" Gaita rightly calls this a parody of morally serious remorse, precisely because of the absence, in this person's response, of any pained awareness of the other as his victim. Lynch's account of things is blind to the parody.

His view fares no better if we consider guilt for transgressing the dictates of a divine authority figure rather than of "the moral law". So far as that really is *the* source of guilt, then the only motivation guilt generates is to rectify things with the authority figure – perhaps by accepting punishment, or by seeking forgiveness, from him. The correct model for overcoming one's guilt would then be reflected by one who says: "I've cheated, humiliated and betrayed people, and been weighed down by guilt because these things are forbidden by God. But I am wholly cleansed because I sought and was granted forgiveness by God." I say: "What about the people you cheated, betrayed and humiliated, who are still near by? Have you apologised to them, sought their forgiveness, done anything to make reparation to them?" He says: "No, what are you talking about? What has *that* got to do with it? My guilt is at having disobeyed this authority figure (God), so what I needed, and the only thing I needed, to dissolve my guilt was His forgiveness." This would surely betray a weird and shallow moral sensibility. Imagine that *you* had been betrayed by this person. Then in front of you, fully aware that you were the one he had betrayed, he blithely ignores you while telling the person beside you that he felt so guilty for having betrayed "someone", because doing so involved disobeying God; but that he was in the process of seeking God's forgiveness and if that was forthcoming his guilt would be resolved. What a parody of moral seriousness (again)! If his guilt was thus informed by no painful consciousness at all of you-as-violated-by-him, you would rightly reckon him to have no genuine appreciation of his wronging you, and so at best a trivial and distorted moral appreciation of what he had done. But on Lynch's account of things this man would seem to have it right!

Lynch may seem to have an immediate reply to this blunt criticism. For he does himself refer to remorse – as flowing from guilt, and as doing so in a way that seems to build in a direct concern with the victims of one's wrongdoing: "from [guilt]", writes Lynch, "arise the demands of repentance and obligations of reparation we call remorse". (7) Guilt on Lynch's account thus apparently directly implies attention to victims in the form of "reparation"; and so it seems my criticism in the previous paragraph must be misplaced. But this is not so. For neither repentance nor

reparation in themselves necessarily involve any genuine care or concern for one's victims. They *may* involve and express such care, but they also may not. Whether they do is matter of the motivation to them and also of the spirit in which they are done. I might apologise because it will look bad if I don't; and I might make reparation for that same reason, and/or perhaps because I know that doing so will make people stop being angry with me. In all these cases, remorse as a form of painful attention to my victim *expressive of genuine care for her* is no part of my response. To put this point slightly differently: Lynch is simply mistaken to suppose that "the demands of repentance and obligations of reparation" are in themselves already and automatically reflective of remorse. They are so only when they express the kind of pained care-ful attention to one's victims that I have described. And the key point is that and so far as they issue from or express *only* a guilt originating as Lynch says guilt originates, they involve *no* such care-ful attention to one's victims. (Conversely, so far as we do assume them to involve such attention, we are implicitly supposing them to reflect a guilt that is not intelligible as originating only in the way Lynch describes.)

As noted, of course people can and do apologise, repent and make reparation in ways that *do* painfully express such care-ful attention, and these possibilities are important elements of remorse. It is worth noting, even so, that the painful consciousness of one's victim that I spoke of is not exhausted by answering to the demands of repentance and reparation in that spirit of remorse. Raimond Gaita captures this when he speaks of how someone in his remorse can be "haunted by" his victim.¹⁰ That immediate painful consciousness of this other as wronged-by-one is the centre of gravity of remorse. Lynch's own passing reference to remorse wholly misses this.¹¹

I suspect Lynch is simply *assuming* that 'normally' through the business of moral education by parents (and others), the child's attention to other people will be enlivened in such a way that she *does* come thus to experience what I am calling remorse for her wronging of them. Fine. But then the point is that she is enlivened to an experience of guilt/remorse that escapes being characterised in terms of the child's relation to an authority-figure, either an external one or one internalised in the way Lynch describes.

So, Lynch's account of how guilt binds us to morality is inadequate because it misses the central importance of remorse as I have sketched it. It is worth recapitulating why this is so. Remorse as a mode of attention to one's victim carries the wrongdoer's pained sense of his victim as harmed or violated by him. But Lynch's account of the source/origin of guilt carries within it no resources for explaining how one's remorse can embody such care for one's victim.¹² All it explains is the

internalising of a deep motivation to avoid offending a (God-like) figure of absolute “power, goodness and wisdom, whose workmanship we are, and on whom we depend”. I can be absolutely and unconditionally committed to obeying such a figure, and disposed to guilt for failing to do so, without having even the slightest care or concern for the victims of my moral wrongdoing. The point remains the same when Lynch’s view is put – as I noted above he himself sometimes puts it – in terms of a deeply internalised motivation to obey “the moral law”. For this motivation too has no necessary link to the phenomenon of remorse as I have described it. Framed in these terms, Lynch’s account explains only a deep-seated motivation not to transgress a law. As already noted, a response reaching no further than this shows a seriously humanly truncated, perhaps even infantile, moral sensibility.¹³

Here is a slightly different way of coming at the present issue. Lynch says that seeing one’s parents as gods is a condition of guilt, which in turn binds us to morality. There is a serious difficulty in making sense of how seeing one’s parents *as gods* – and so as infinite, perfectly powerful and invulnerable – holds in place one’s guilt/remorse for violating finite, vulnerable, imperfect, very limitedly powerful, other human beings. Lynch obscures this difficulty by his practice, echoing Bernard Williams, of describing the (internalised) God-figure as a “victim/enforcer”. It is unclear (as it also is in Williams’ text)¹⁴ how the one figure can fill both of these roles. In email correspondence, Lynch has suggested to me that the parents’ God-like status is generalised by the child to other people (who will then include the victims of his wrongdoing) because the parents make sure that the attention *they* receive is seen as essential to the right moral viewing of other people too – the parents’ “god-like” status is so to speak transferred across to (potentially all) others. Thus the attention directed to one’s parents is moralised into remorse felt in relation to those one wrongs.

But this cannot be right. A person’s remorse for having (say) publicly humiliated another depends on a sense of his victim’s human vulnerability to humiliation – depends, that is to say, on a sense of the other as, precisely, *not* “god-like”. How then can the possibility of remorse in relation to others depend on our having so-to-speak transferred a God-like status across to them from our parents? On the other hand, if the (supposed) God-parent is already understood by the child as a potential victim of his wrongdoing, then the parent is already being regarded as vulnerable and fallible – and so as not (an unlimited, all-perfect) God. Put simply: even when loved as well as feared, a God-figure understood as *absolutely* powerful does not have the *vulnerability* required to make sense of the

orientation of remorse towards another as one's victim. And any account of our "commitment to morality" that fails to make sense of that orientation is radically wanting.

Something else Lynch says in a passage I quoted earlier is relevant here too. He gives us an either/or: *either* we (as children) see parents as Godlike, and we come to relate to other human beings through the prism of that construction, *or* we (come to) see ourselves "as an individual in a world of individuals, none of whom are Gods at all, but limited, finite, fallible, with purposes and concerns of their own, often inimical to one's own." In the latter case (which Lynch says is our situation now), morality will be important only "for reasons of social co-ordination [of conflicting interests] and enlightened self-interest." (9) Lynch seems to treat these two perspectives as exhaustive, as the only options for us. But this is surely not so.

Remorse as I have described it certainly does not fit this either/or. If Lynch's story about the divine origins of guilt does not engage with remorse, neither can remorse can be derived from, constructed from the materials of, what Lynch says is the only alternative we are left with in a de-divinised world. The point can helpfully be put this way. The work of remorse reveals the one who suffers it as *colonised* by the human reality of another – his victim; and he is then moved in response in ways that resist explanation in terms of the requirements of "social co-ordination and enlightened self-interest". But I have already said that we cannot explain such remorse in the religious terms Lynch proposes either. If that is right, then Lynch cannot resist my argument so far by saying: "Well, yes, remorse as you describe it has indeed been a seminal feature of a widely shared moral understanding. But it too can be expected to dissipate with the death of God." This reply will just be misguided if, as I have argued, remorse resists explanation *via* Lynch's internalised God-figure.

I don't deny (in fact I should insist) that there is something remarkable in the phenomenon of remorse as I have spoken of it – that, as I put it, we can find our deepest being so colonised by the reality of another that we can be wracked by remorse for violating him. In this connection, something else remarkable that moral philosophers seem to have shown little interest in is worth mentioning: that our lives can be made empty – that we can be devastated, paralysed, psychically dismantled – by the loss of those we love. Such grief, too, shows us as colonised by those others – shows our sense of *who we are* as partially constituted through our relation to them. (Of course this shows not only in grief – love of others manifested in the shock of losing them. It shows also in the daily weave of our loving relations with others. But it is suddenly and shockingly brought home to us in grief at their loss.) Those we love, and their claims upon us, are in this way already lodged

deeply in our own being. That is why Lynch's flat assertion that "all there is are (now) limited, finite and fallible individuals in a world of conflicting interests", far from being an obvious unvarnished truth about how things must be in a God-stripped world – although Lynch's assumption that it is such a truth is widely shared – is in fact a description true only of those who never really love or grieve or undergo remorse.¹⁵

Remorse and love (and love's sibling grief) thus afford related though distinguishable demonstrations of the falsity of Lynch's either/or. We can recognise ourselves and others as not Gods but rather as finite and fallible and vulnerable, as we do in love and remorse, and thereby find ourselves so deeply colonised by others as to be claimed in absolute and unconditional response to them: "absolute and unconditional" response because our own deepest being can be at stake in that response.¹⁶ This fallibility and vulnerability are elements of that porosity of our being to the being of others that is a condition of our finding ourselves seriously answerable to morality's claims at all. (A main interest of Lynch's undertaking, in my view, is that the infant/parent relationship, on which Lynch focuses, is in fact one key site of our coming to be creatures thus colonised.)

I hope what I've said helps make clear why I think Lynch is right to find something shallow in the New Atheism's understanding of morality. I add two comments. The first is that much other contemporary moral philosophy also fails, in a similar way, to appreciate the depth of its subject matter; and the second (recapitulating my argument) is that Lynch himself is mistaken to think this depth locatable only in religion. In the last part of my discussion I have briefly indicated one way of engaging with a key aspect of that depth without invoking a specifically religious background.

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¹ Tony Lynch and Nishanathe Dahanayake, "Atheism and Morality, Guilt and Shame: Why the Moral Complacency of the New Atheists is a Mistake", *Early View*, this journal. Henceforth I shall refer to the authors as "Lynch"

² Guilt as something felt, rather than guilt as the abstract condition of "being guilty of".

³ This is not quite accurate. Lynch thinks guilt is strictly intelligible without such a culture, but that it can be culturally transmitted only in a God-oriented culture. Back to this below.

⁴ Lynch cites the following as the "canonical" New Atheist texts: Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006). Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, (New York: Penguin, 2006). Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, (New York: Norton, 2004), and his *Letter to a Christian Nation*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2008). Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, (New York: Twelve, 2007). Lynch thinks the evident differences between them leave intact his general characterization in the passage just quoted.

⁵ “us” being those who don’t inhabit communities small and value-cohesive enough for shame to be able thus to bind its members.

⁶ A comparison with John Mackie (*Ethics*, Penguin 1976) is instructive here. Like Mackie, Lynch thinks that “our” (roughly: western) moral ideas are ideas of absolute and unconditional requirements. Unlike Mackie, he thinks the path to our having of such ideas must go through our internalisation of a god-figure. Mackie sees no difficulty in whole-hearted answerability to moral requirements surviving rejection of their absolute and unconditional moral character as a complete illusion. Lynch would presumably think that on this point Mackie is as complacent as the New Atheists.

⁷ With a Winnicottian inflection. See Lynch, note 21.

⁸ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 4.3.18, cited by Lynch, 4.

⁹ See Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An absolute conception*, 2nd Edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) pp. 33-34.

¹⁰ Op. Cit., p. 52.

¹¹ Bernard Williams, whom Lynch follows quite closely, also speaks of guilt in a way that might seem to recognise the importance of what I am calling remorse, when he writes: “it is an inherent virtue of guilt that it turns our attention to the victims of what we have wrongly done...[so that] the victims and their feelings should remain figured in the construction of guilt”. (*Shame and Necessity*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 222) See my “Shame, Guilt and Remorse”, *Philosophical Investigations* 30 (4) 2007, pp. 337-362, for why what Williams says in fact misses remorse as I characterise it here.

¹² It is worth noting that Nietzsche’s account, of the genesis of what he calls “bad conscience”, in Essay 2 of the *Genealogy*, is vulnerable to essentially the same critique as mine of Lynch.

¹³ Kant’s account of moral sensibility arguably comes very close to a similarly desiccated law-fetish. If he avoids this outcome it is perhaps only by asserting, with notorious obscurity, that the “formula of humanity” of the categorical imperative is essentially identical to the formula of universal law.

¹⁴ See note 11 above.

¹⁵ It is, to be sure, also an ideological self-representation that we can – and surely have – increasingly come to resemble under the relentless pressures of capitalistic individualism.

¹⁶ Of course I am not saying that those who love and are subject to remorse will therefore always respond morally well. For perfectly familiar all-too-human reasons that is not so. (I note, also, that there is a good deal more to say about the dissemination of ethical response, understood as rooted in us in the way I have described here, into more general and abstract contexts of response and action.)

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