MORAL HORROR AND THE SACRED

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ABSTRACT

The sense of moral horror at certain deeds and the related idea of the sacred have not been given as central a place in ethical theory, theological or secular, as they have in our moral consciousness. I place them in a broader theological metaethics, in a way that I hope avoids mere taboo and provides for a rational critique of our responses. Moral horror is understood here in terms of violation of the sacred, and the sacred is understood in terms of images of God. The focus on images of God is defended against a less ontological approach suggested by Ronald Dworkin's recent discussion of the sacred, and the choice of violation rather than defilement as a central concept is defended in dialogue with Jeffrey Stout's discussion of abominations.

1. Moral Horror

I WANT TO TRY TO DO JUSTICE HERE TO A DISTURBING and dangerous, but morally necessary idea, the idea of the morally horrible; and I want to sketch a place for it in a broader theological metaethics. The broader metaethics, which will appear at various points in the present essay, distinguishes the theological grounds of the right and of the good. It incorporates a divine command theory, which (in my opinion) plausibly grounds obligation and the theory of the right, but is not the right sort of theory to ground value or the theory of the good. For the latter, I turn to an Augustinian theistic Platonist theory according to which God is the supreme Good and created things are (intrinsically) good insofar as they faithfully image God. These ideas help to articulate

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the moral sentiments of requirement and of admiration and aspiration.

Over the years, however, I have come to feel that these views need some expansion or development, if not supplementation, to deal with another important source of our moral response to most of the actions that are most gravely wrong. This other source to which I refer is a sense of *horror* toward certain types of deeds. It is not a consciousness of a command or requirement laid on us by anyone, but a feeling about the actions themselves and their consequences. We feel there are certain things it would be *horrible* to do even if there were no authoritative rule or social pressure against them, and even if they were not forbidden by God. Among the actions that most obviously evoke such a horror are rape, murder, and maiming, torturing, or brainwashing a human being. Our primary feelings about such deeds are not about violation of a rule or requirement, but about what is done to the victims.

Feelings of moral horror have usually not been given as important a place in ethical theory, theological or secular, as they have in our moral life. There are reasons for this neglect. One is that moral horror is apparently unsystematic. It does not apply to every sort of moral wrongdoing. We do not find income tax evasion horrifying, for example, though we think it wrong. Violations of persons evoke horror in a way that violations of their rights commonly do not. Even gross injustices may seem more appropriate objects of outrage than of horror. The outrageous is not necessarily horrible, in the sense that concerns me. Outrage is akin to anger, or perhaps is even a species of it, in a way that horror is not; and horror has what I am tempted to call a metaphysical depth that outrage, as such, does not.

The wrong, therefore, can hardly be identified simply as the appropriate object of horror. Although moral horror is closely connected with our attitudes toward wrong action, it is properly directed to action, not as wrong, but as bad. Or rather, the morally horrible, as such, is a species of the bad rather than of the wrong.[1] As a divine command theorist, I would say that if God issued no commands, murder and torture would not have the property I think *is* wrongness, but these actions would still be (objectively) evil, and specifically horrible.

[1] The question may be raised whether a morally horrifying action is still bad even when it is right to do it, as I grant is sometimes the case, as in medically necessary amputations. I am inclined to think that such actions are in some respect bad, though they may be good and even praiseworthy on the whole. It is natural to speak of an amputation as "a bad thing to have to do." The impulse of moral purism, to eliminate ambivalent evaluations, is to be resisted.

At the same time I am not prepared simply to identify the morally horrible with the morally bad in actions. Actions can be bad, even very bad, without horrifying. Acts of great cowardice, for example, or gross intemperance in food and drink, as such, seem shameful, perhaps even disgusting, rather than horrible.

Another reason for the neglect of moral horror in ethical theory is that feelings of moral revulsion vary greatly from person to person and from culture to culture, and must often be considered to be quite subjective. Even in the case of incest, which is almost universally regarded with horror, we find that different societies have had quite different ideas of which relations, apart from the very closest, fall within the scope of the incest taboo. From the standpoint of modern societies, taboo generally seems an untrustworthy moral guide. It has led to grave injustices, such as the persecution of homosexuals. We are rightly reluctant to subject behavior to moral condemnation on the ground of personal feelings of abhorrence.

In view of all these considerations, we might doubt that the feeling of moral horror deserves any important place in our ethical thinking. But that would be going too far. The sense of moral horror is an essential ingredient of any humane response to some types of action, and it is important to the motivational power of moral concern. One of the most chilling features of the phenomenon of Nazism was the use of a facade or pretense of scientific rationality to suppress normal reactions of horror at what was being done. I shall argue, moreover, that if we do not respect such feelings, we will find it difficult to understand the gravity with which we rightly regard certain types of bad action. I wish, therefore, to offer an account of something true and important in ethics that we might be apprehending by way of an appropriate sense of moral horror.

I do not take the feeling of horror to constitute, in itself, the sort of moral fact I am seeking to understand. Rather, I take it to be a signpost to an objective fact that is independent of it. The feeling can be mistaken. We may hope that it will sometimes be reasonable to trust it, but the possibility of criticizing feelings of revulsion and setting them aside as subjective is important. I will try to develop a theory that provides some basis for such criticism.

It will be a theory about horrible deeds, about *doing* something horrible. People also have ideas about *being* something horrible; and the horror experienced by a victim often seems to be directed at least as much toward the agent as toward the action (Hallie 1969). But I will not try to determine here what it would be horrible to *be,* or even whether there is such a thing as a person being something horrible in

the relevant moral sense. The question of what it would be horrible to *do* will be enough to keep us busy.

Our initial hypothesis about the ethical significance of moral horror might be that it simply expresses our awareness of the great harm suffered by the victims, in the sense of a cost to their interests; and we may be tempted to subsume this under a general category of loss of "utility." There is reason to regard this interpretation as inadequate, however.

The fact and degree of harm, as expressed by any general measure of utility, is not all that concerns us in the case of rape, for example. Rape is virtually always harmful to the victim, of course, and typically very harmful. However, individual reactions can vary, and there might be a person who would suffer as much discernible harm, in her actual life-circumstances, from having her doctoral dissertation research destroyed by malicious sabotage of a university's computer (no trivial harm that!) as from being raped. Yet the computer crime, though undeniably reprehensible, is not horrifying in the same way that the sexual assault would be.

Something similar is true of killing. There is perhaps a sense in which killing a person is necessarily harming her, but there are cases in which it is very doubtful that being killed was on balance a misfortune for the victim (Henson 1971; Read 1988). Even in those cases the killing evokes horror. It seems natural in this connection to speak of the violation of something sacred and of "the sanctity of human life." Even those who believe, as most people do, that there are at least a few circumstances in which it is right to kill another human being are apt to feel a metaphysical shudder, so to speak, at any prospect of doing it.

2. Violation of the Image of God

The motif of moral horror has not usually been accorded any more fundamental a role in theological than in secular ethical theory, but I think it has a natural affinity with religious feelings. It is natural, as I have just remarked, to conceptualize it in terms of the violation of something sacred. In the Western religious tradition, the idea that human beings are "created in the image of God" (Genesis 1:26–27) provides an obvious basis for interpreting human life as containing something sacred whose violation could be the object of moral horror. This idea provides a suitable starting point for the interpretation of moral horror in a theistic ethical theory. It also has the advantage, in my eyes, of resonating with the view of theistic Platonism that created things are good insofar as they faithfully image God.

2.1 *Violation*

One of the issues to be resolved in developing this line of thought concerns the nature of "violation." What is it that it is horrible to do to an image of God? The most obvious part of an answer to this question is that destruction and lasting damage count as violation. Killing and maiming are horrors, as is the infliction of any injury, physical or psychological, that significantly diminishes the beauty, or impairs the normal functioning, of a person for a considerable period of time. The act is the more horrible inasmuch as the destruction or damage is intended. Some horrific actions may be justified, of course, and their horror mitigated, if not entirely removed, if they are seen as necessary for the good of the person to whom they are done, as in a surgical amputation.

Destruction and lasting damage are not the only forms of violation, however. Rape and torture often result in serious enduring damage to the victim, but they are prime objects of moral horror even when they do not. They are surely violations of a person. We need a more general account of what constitutes a violation.

I cannot offer as clear or neat a criterion of violation as I would like, but I think I can identify two necessary conditions; a violation must satisfy *both* of them. (1) An act that violates a person must *attack* the person. Its foreseeable effects must be so damaging to the person, or so contrary to her (actual or presumed) will, that fully intending them, in the absence of reason to believe them necessary for the prevention of greater harm to her, would constitute *hostility* toward the person. (2) A person is not violated by every act that harms her interests or crosses her will. A violation is an act that attacks the person *seriously* and *directly.* Most (but not all) violations of a person will assault her body. Acts that mainly damage a person's possessions, what she *has* as distinct from what she *is,* will typically not violate *her,* even if they are quite hostile to her interests. This second condition is the point on which I find it hardest to attain generality and precision at once. I think we must sometimes rely on our sense of moral horror to determine which acts attack a person seriously and directly enough to violate her.

The importance of these points may be illustrated in an attempt to understand the horror of rape and other unconsented incursions into a person's sexuality, a horror that is still powerful where there is no serious physical damage or impairment of the victim's faculties. On my view such sexual incursions are violations of a person, and hence of an image of God. Why are they violations? (1) Their opposition to the victim's will qualifies them as attacks, satisfying the hostility con-

dition. (2) The claim that the person is seriously and directly attacked receives some support from the involvement of the victim's body, but needs more support.

We may seek it in the thought that the meaning of selfhood, if not the substance of the person, is partly defined by social structures, and that certain boundaries between distinct selves are a crucial part of those structures. Prohibitions and permissions about touching and viewing other people's bodies play an important role in defining such boundaries, and sexual restrictions can contribute to this definition. By the same token, sexual touching or viewing without full adult consent can rightly be seen as attacking something central to selfhood, and thus as a serious and direct assault on the person, and a violation of an image of God.

The horror that many people feel about sexual violations is undoubtedly intensified when the boundary that is infringed, against or without the victim's will, is one that it would be thought *wrong* for the victim to cross voluntarily, in the same situation, with the person who is the aggressor. It is morally interesting, however, that in subcultures in which horror is rarely felt at fully voluntary crossing of sexual boundaries, crossing a person's sexual boundaries without his or her full, competent consent is still widely seen as morally horrible. This suggests that in these subcultures the sexual boundary is still seen as important to the meaning of selfhood, but (at least for adults) it is one's own control of one's boundary, rather than conformity to a general rule, that contributes most importantly here to the definition of selfhood.[2]

Reasons can be given for the importance assigned to consent in these matters. Sexual boundaries are often experienced as given; these are boundaries set by societies, and their socially conditioned character is evident from the diversity of their forms in different societies. They are important for the development of children's selfhood—so important that another agent's infringement of a child's socially determined sexual boundaries, with or without the child's (noncompetent) consent, and good or bad as the social arrangement may be, will commonly be damaging enough to be a violation of the child. Even for adults, the importance of such social boundaries is great enough to provide strong *prima facie* moral reasons for respecting

[2] That rape is seen as horrible even where consensual sex would be socially allowed is one of the points at which the ethics of moral horror resists analysis in terms of Mary Douglas's anthropological theory of purity and defilement, which is discussed in § 3 below.

them.[3] Some socially drawn sexual boundaries are manifestly unjust, however—such as those that prohibit interracial marriage or that treat women as belonging to men without treating men as belonging reciprocally to women. The consensual infringement of these boundaries by reflective adults surely is not, in general, morally horrible. But neither is the value of the boundaries generally decisive for the violative or nonviolative character of an infringement of them. An unconsented infringement of a boundary that an adult accepts although it is seriously unjust to her may still have all the horror of rape, whereas polygynous sexuality as such, in societies where it is not merely tolerated but preferred by women, has surely none of the horror of rape and is not plausibly regarded as violating their persons, though we may still think it unjust to them. These considerations support the conclusion that it is authentic consent that chiefly determines what would sexually violate a competent adult.

Among the questions that can be raised about the attempt to understand the significance of sexual violation in terms of the image of God is one that arises from the fact that traditional speculations have tended to locate the image of God in our rational faculties, including the will. If our reflection of the divine glory is founded in our rationality, we may wonder, why should we feel so violated by things that are done to our sexual organs? On this point, it seems to me, the tradition was trying to get a tighter intellectual grip on the divine image than we can reasonably hope to have. This is one of the places at which we may need to rely on the emotion of moral horror. Our sense of where we would be most deeply violated is probably a better clue than the traditional speculations are to the contours of the image of God in us.[4] And it clearly marks sexuality as an area intimately linked with our selfhood and its value. I doubt that we can expect a thoroughly satisfying rationale on this point. To an outside view, nutrition seems as closely connected as sex with our personal being. Yet the force-feeding of a conscious adult, while certainly offensive, and perhaps an outrage, does not seem to reach the same level of horror as rape.

[3] Assigning such moral weight to contingent social customs and expectations (a weight that I am about to limit) seems to me consonant with the traditional Christian view of marriage as a *natural* estate, once we recognize that what is natural in human behavior is determined and developed largely through social processes and is historically variable in its forms.

[4] This sense is culturally variable, no doubt, but I would resist the implication that it is merely subjective. The contours of the image of God (what it objectively is in us) may also vary somewhat across cultures. As historical creatures who image God imperfectly at best, humans may image God in different ways in different cultural settings.

Certainly I do not mean to exclude the will from the image of God. Attempts to interfere with, or impair, the normal functioning of a person's will, through such techniques as brainwashing or the surreptitious or coercive administration of mind-altering drugs, are horrifying and seem to violate the image of God if anything does. The involvement of the will as well as the body is essential to what horrifies us in sexual violation, which can be contrasted here both with killing or maiming and with "crimes against property."

People are not *violated* by sexual acts to which they give uncoerced and competent consent, even if those acts are in some way bad or demeaning; whereas such consent is by no means enough to remove the aspect of violation from killing and maiming. The nature of sexual violation cannot be understood apart from the role of the will because it is largely through the voluntary control that the morally competent person exercises over his or her own sexual boundaries that those boundaries serve in defining selfhood. Moreover, if what is done sexually to a morally competent adult is not opposed to his will, then (unless it is evidently damaging to him, which is not normally the case in fully consensual sex between adults) it is not an *attack* on him and hence does not violate him.

Where sexual violation does occur it is still relevant, however, that the person's body is involved. The sexual violation is not only an infringement of the victim's freedom and right to voluntary control over a certain sphere of influence, but something more and in some way worse. It attacks the person directly and violates her in a way that theft of her property does not. The theft is an infringement of her rightful sphere of voluntary control, but in most cases it does not infringe the interpersonal boundaries that are most important for defining selfhood. Those boundaries must therefore be seen as a tighter perimeter, defining more of an inner sanctum, than the privileged sphere of control which typically plays a part in contemporary theories of rights. Violation of a person is something that happens on a deeper and more primitive level than violation of a person's rights. This is not to say that *no* violation of my property rights could violate me personally; that might be done, for example, by a burglary that invades a sufficiently private space.

The infliction of physical pain is like sexual violation in these ways, if it lies within a certain range (decidedly less than torture, yet more than trivial). Consent, as in a contact sport, removes the aspect of violation, but in the absence of consent, such a physical attack is violative in a way that annoyance not involving physical coercion or contact is not, even if the latter is deliberate and causes states equally unpleasant to the victim. It is important to the violative character of the

act that both the will and the body of the victim are attacked.[5] If the intensity of pain is so great that we might speak of torture, I am inclined to say that the consent of the sufferer (if it were ever given) would not remove the moral horror. Torture may be like maiming in this respect, even if the effects of torture are temporary. Perhaps that is because the most intense pain, even if voluntarily accepted, dominates a person's life in a way that at least threatens, if it does not destroy, all the value of that life to the sufferer.[6] Indeed, the grip of intense pain on a person's life probably ensures that so much of the person will be unshakably opposed to the pain, no matter what consent may be given to it, that infliction of the pain is bound to have the aspect of a serious and direct attack on the person. In this way, the infliction of truly intense suffering may be violative in itself, independently of any other reason for its being so.[7]

The following views about violation of a person emerge from these reflections. Killing and maiming, or (to put it more broadly) destruction and lasting damage, are violative independently of questions of voluntary consent. Such acts directly and seriously attack the person whether or not they oppose her will. I think the same is true of torture. In these ways, presumably, one can do violence to oneself.

[5] Interestingly, the *threat* of a physical assault or sexual violation is also felt to be violative, if it is sufficiently serious and alarming. I think that imprisonment, as an invasion of a person's fundamental bodily freedom, is violative, and the more so, the more physically restrictive it is. Chains and straitjackets are most violative; small, locked cells quite clearly violative; minimum security prisons much less so. Most punishments that human beings have devised are violative. This is not to say that violative punishments are always indefensible, but there is always a weighty reason against them.

[6] This view, that the most intense suffering necessarily threatens the value of the sufferer's life, might seem difficult to reconcile with the view of some religious traditions that a person can come closer to the image of God, and thus to true value, in suffering. But that is really a problem for my whole account of good and evil. For the view about suffering is surely that one can come closer to the image of God in suffering *evils*. Perhaps we are concerned here with an imaging of God that takes place, paradoxically, precisely in the loss or degradation of an image of God. It will be important to avoid identifying the loss or degradation with the imaging. This problem is obviously related to the fundamental problem about the ascription of suffering to God, that of the relation of divine suffering to divine blessedness. The union, without confusion, of divine and human natures in Christ has been seen in some Christian thought as providing an alternative solution to the problem, enabling theologians to see the deity, not as suffering, but as most intimately united to something that suffers. On that view, suffering would not be a way of imaging God, but might be a way of coming into fellowship with God through Christ. I am indebted to Marilyn McCord Adams for help with this topic.

[7] Philip Hallie's treatment of the relation between cruelty and horror (1969, esp. 5) has helped me get clear about the intrinsically violative character of torture, though there is much in my theory of moral horror that is no part of Hallie's account.

Otherwise, however, one can be violated only against one's will, or without one's will, or at any rate without one's fully competent consent. Nonetheless, not everything that crosses a person's will violates the person, and our feeling of where we would be personally violated is an important clue here.

The conception of violation presented here provides a basis for critical assessment of moral claims based on feelings of revulsion. It does not resolve all ethical issues about sexual relations between consenting adults, for example, but it does imply that because of the consent, such relations do not attack, and therefore do not violate, the persons involved. Questions can be raised about the genuineness of the consent, of course, as in many cases of prostitution. Nevertheless, there are surely cases in which we can hardly doubt the authenticity of consent to sexual behavior that some people do regard with horror. In such cases, I think we should *not* accept this sense of horror as establishing that a person has been violated, or that something morally horrifying has been done.

This argument is the more compelling to the extent that feelings of revulsion toward voluntary sexual practices are principally a reaction of outsiders, not generally shared by the participants. It is reasonable to suppose that it is the person to whom something happens whose sense of violation is most authoritative (though not, to be sure, infallible). When participants find something delightful, meaningful, and expressive of loving, loyal, and respectful relationships, the negative emotional reaction of others is not to be trusted as a ground for thinking that a participant was violated, or a person attacked.

On the other hand, the sense of moral horror does on my view provide some basis for discriminating among the claims of the human will on our respect. Mere preference is not sacred. It would be neurotic in the extreme to feel that we have violated a person or done something truly horrible whenever we are responsible for someone else not getting what he wants. One of the implausibilities of the best-known forms of utilitarianism is the moral importance they attach to aggregates of satisfactions and dissatisfactions that seem individually to be quite trivial. Disregard for a person's preference constitutes a violation of something sacred only where the preference is so important and so connected with selfhood that disregarding it constitutes a serious and direct attack on the person. It is not always up to us to choose what has this significance; intense pain, for example, has it whether we want it to or not. I have suggested that our moral feelings provide an important clue for judging where something that is against our will impinges on us in such a way as to violate us as persons.

2.2 *Images of God*

Thus far the only images of God that I have discussed are human persons. I would not, however, say that we are the only images of God, for I believe that everything good is good by virtue of faithfully imaging God—though perhaps not in exactly the same sense of 'image' intended in Genesis 1:26–27. Should I therefore hold that violations of persons are not the only actions that ought to be regarded with moral horror as violations of something sacred?

I will pursue this issue in two different directions, beginning with offenses against goods that are not alive—for instance, against art. The trumpeter who blows a very noticeable sour note in the middle of an otherwise wonderful performance of a great symphony will doubtless feel awful about it; but this is not an occasion of even a lower degree of the same sort of horror as arises from causing, even accidentally, serious injury to a person. Why not?

It is not that no such horror arises from any offense against art. The wanton destruction of a great painting or of the only recording of Caruso's voice, if there were only one in existence, might well seem horrible in the relevant way. In these cases it matters, I think, that what is destroyed is an enduring object, already in existence. It is primarily such things that can be violated. A musical performance, on the other hand, is typically regarded, while it is going on, as essentially repeatable, so that no enduring focus of value is damaged if the performance is spoiled in the process of production. Neither the composer's work nor the musicians' capacities are damaged by anything that happens during the performance. Likewise a painting, I suspect, is apt to be regarded as relatively repeatable or repairable so long as it is in production, so that it will be less susceptible of *violation* then than after it has been finished (or left definitively incomplete) for some time.

Even the destruction of a great work of art, moreover, is not horrifying in exactly the same way as the killing or maiming of a person. It matters that the person is a *subject* of knowledge, feeling, desire, and choice, which no work of art can be. Our evaluation on this point would support the view that an image of God is present in us in a way that it cannot be in anything that altogether lacks subjectivity.

We speak of "violations" of the moral law, but it cannot be violated in the same sense that a person can. The moral law is not destroyed or damaged, nor its "selfhood" threatened by immoral actions. Like aesthetically bad performances, morally bad performances, as such, are not violations of an image of God, but failures to image God as one should. This applies, for instance, to an immoral act of tax evasion,

and the fact that it is a failure to image God should not lead us to retract our initial judgment that such an act is not horrible in the way that murder and rape are. It would be a mistake to blot out the intuitively valid and important distinction between actions that are truly horrible and other sorts of wrongdoing.

This is not to deny that there is a kinship (both as to the nature of the fact and as to our sense of it) between moral wrongdoing in general and the morally horrible. I believe that the significance of wrongdoing arises largely from seeing it as an offense against valued interpersonal relationships, including relationship with God. I think personal relationships are sufficiently real and enduring things that we can indeed speak of violating them in the relevant sense. A personal relationship with God can indeed be something sacred, and other personal relationships, when they are truly good, can image God. In this way violation of good personal relationships can be viewed with horror as violation of something sacred. It is only loosely, however, that we could speak of every offense against a good relationship as a "violation." In general a relationship in which every possible offense must be viewed with a shudder of horror is not a good relationship.[8] It is perhaps only in the case of gross betrayals of deeply significant relationships that what is done to a relationship warrants real moral horror and serious talk of violation.

Another direction in which we may look for the possibility of violations of something sacred is toward living things that are not persons; the possible violations in this direction will all be pretty straightforward cases of destruction, damage, or infliction of serious suffering. We may regard all living things as having intrinsic value and as being distant imitations of the divine life. The way in which the killing of animals is surrounded with ritual in many religious traditions also suggests an apprehension of the possibility of trespassing on something sacred that is at least reminiscent of the horror of killing a human being. Some religions have thought it a violation of something sacred to kill animals for food at all.

This must be distinguished from the claim being made by some philosophers, that such killing is a violation of "animal rights." What I

[8] This is obviously true of interhuman relationships. Its application to relationship with God is notoriously more difficult and controversial. It has commonly been felt that sin as such, in its relation to God, should be regarded with a certain horror. On the other hand, theologians have been impelled to devise theories—of venial sin, for instance, or of justification by faith—in which that general horror is limited or overcome; believers' relation with God is, thus, enabled to withstand some offenses, so that the faithful can be encouraged to live boldly and without excessive scrupulosity. This is not the place to discuss this much-debated theological topic.

am discussing here is not a matter of rights, but of something more primitive (though possibly less stringent morally): a "reverence for life," in Albert Schweitzer's famous phrase. Clearly there are limits to its demands. While deliberate and totally purposeless destruction of insects, for example, is offensive, it does not seem natural to humans to feel horror over the death of an insect. Our life in this world (a good life, on my view) depends on our consuming other living things of some sort, and even in plants there is beauty and some likeness to the divine life. Indeed it seems as natural to recoil from the killing of a great tree as of a chicken. The image of God is no more to be identified with sentience than with rationality.

Another issue to which the consideration of reverence for life may be relevant is that of abortion. It is debated whether a human fetus is a person, but incontestably it is a living thing, with some of the characteristics of a human being—more and more of them, the more developed it is. On my view, there must surely be some sort of image of God in it. By virtue of these characteristics, it is natural to see the destruction of the fetus as a violation of something sacred.[9] Here again it is not a question of a "right to life," or of rights at all, or of anything that should affect the criminal law, but of something that should weigh (not always decisively, I would think) in individual decision-making.

Reverence for life may also be engaged in respect for the continuity and survival of *species* of animals and plants. The diversity and independence of species are part of the beauty of the world, and this variety manifests the glory of God. There is something appalling about causing the extinction of a species, though there is certainly a subjective aspect to our sense of this; we are apt to feel more keenly about the disappearance of a very visible and showy species, such as the peregrine falcon, than about a spider or even a species of sparrow.

The most important single case for us is that of the human species. Quite apart from harms to individual humans, it is intuitively plausible for us to suppose that there would be something appalling, an offense against something sacred, in intentionally allowing the human race to die out; and such a view is naturally interpreted theologically in terms of our species being an eminent bearer of the image of God.

For most of us, at any rate, there is no point at which an offense against non-human life evokes a horror of the same order as that with which we regard the violation of a human person. There is more than one way in which this difference in our reactions could be valid. Western thought has traditionally supported it by claiming that human

[9] As suggested, without theological presuppositions, in Feinberg 1985, 56f.

beings are unique among living things in the degree of their value and in their possession of the image of God. Alternatively one might argue that the fact that we are human, and related in a special way to other humans, appropriately affects the horror we feel about one human violating another. We write ethics for humans, after all, not for angels or tigers, and we have not the possibility of writing it from a point of view as comprehensive as God's.

2.3 *Ontology*

To explicate our sense of the sanctity of certain objects, and particularly of human life, in terms of images of God is to explicate it in terms of what the objects *are*. This sort of explication has competitors that are much less ontological. A particularly notable competitor is the account of the sacred that forms a centerpiece of Ronald Dworkin's recent book *Life's Dominion* (1993). *Life's Dominion* consists of six chapters focused on the moral and political issues of abortion, followed by two chapters on euthanasia. Dworkin's interest in the sacred is connected with an idea that I share with him: that the evil, if any, in abortion may be viewed as a violation of something sacred rather than an infringement of rights of the fetus.

Dworkin's conception of the sacred is not essentially theological. It allows theists to give theological explanations of sacredness, but also allows nontheists to regard human life, and various other objects, as sacred. Although he sometimes uses the term 'religious' in a more conventional way, Dworkin argues in the end that the belief that human life is sacred is religious, in a broad sense, "even when it is held by people who do not believe in God" and who do not adhere to a "traditional religion" (Dworkin 1993, 155f.). With these views, thus generally stated, I have no quarrel. It is a large part of my project here to offer a theological interpretation of our sense of the sacred; but I regard the sense of the sacred as a datum for theological interpretation, not as a result of the interpretation. It is a datum of moral experience which nontheists also have reason to embrace and for which they have reason to seek a nontheological interpretation.

In speaking of the sense of the sacred as a datum for interpretation, I do not mean to identify the sacred with the sense of it, or to imply that the sacred is constituted by interpretation. On the contrary, I believe that the most satisfying interpretations will present the sense of the sacred as an apprehension of a kind of objective moral fact. This being so, I may think that the prospects are brighter for theological than for nontheological interpretation of the sacred, but the sense of

the sacred has a grip on us that is largely independent of the adequacy of our theoretical interpretation of it.

Dworkin's examples of the sacred as a morally important sort of value are largely the same as mine;[10] they include great paintings, animal species, especially our own species, and, of course, individual human lives (Dworkin 1993, 72–84). They also include human fetuses; Dworkin's main purpose in introducing the idea of the sacred is to argue that it is as a destruction or dishonoring of something sacred that abortion seems at least *prima facie* objectionable to most people, rather than as a violation of a personal right to life, which he believes that fetuses are not in general sufficiently developed to possess. Dworkin is certainly not the first to see a broadly religious dimension in such public issues as these,[11] but his powerfully argued book makes a persuasive case for a sense of the sacred as a living and influential part of our moral consciousness.

Dworkin's substantive conception of the sacred, however, is quite different from that which I have offered. He assigns a dominant role to considerations of *process* in determining what is sacred.[12] He distinguishes "two processes through which something becomes sacred for a given culture or person. The first is by association or designation" (74). An example of that is viewing a flag as "sacred because of its conventional association with the life of the nation." This ground of sacredness plays no important part in his reasoning. "The second way something may become sacred is through its history, how it came to be" (74), and this way provides the machinery of Dworkin's argument. He thinks we view great art as sacred out of respect for the process of artistic creation, and animal species as sacred out of respect for the natural process of evolution, or for God's creative activity lying behind it, depending on our religious beliefs (74–76, 79). Individual human lives, and human fetuses, he regards as sacred because of the "investment" of both divine or natural and human creativity involved in their origination and development (82–84).

Dworkin develops the idea of investment into an organizing metaphor. He speaks of offenses against the sacred in terms of a "waste" of

[10] This is a convergence of independent reflections. My examples were chosen in 1989 for the first version of the present essay.

[11] See Greenawalt 1988, chaps. 6–8, for a discussion of issues of "borderlines of status" (including, especially, environmental ethics and abortion) as a particularly obvious field for reliance on religious ethical considerations. The idea of the sacred is present (101), but less prominent than in Dworkin's argument.

[12] I also have a partial disagreement with the way in which Dworkin relates his argument about the sacred to the religion clauses of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, but that is something I hope to take up elsewhere.

the investment of divine or natural or human creativity—or often in terms of a "waste of human life," but clearly understood in terms of wasted investment (94, 84). More precise, he thinks, is a terminology of "frustration" of investment, which focuses attention on the investment that comes to nought, rather than on mere possibilities of life foreclosed (86–88). In these terms he formulates a "metric of disrespect" by which we may weigh the gravity of the alternative insults to the sacred that may be involved (as I agree) in *all* our available courses of action, possibly concluding in some cases that a greater frustration of invested creativity would be involved in carrying a fetus to term than in aborting it (84, 89–101). Likewise, he argues that the widespread view that abortion becomes more objectionable or more morally questionable as pregnancy advances and the fetus develops is best explained as a recognition of the increasing investment of creative process in the fetus (88f.).

The usefulness of a "metric" for resolving inescapable moral issues (if it can be made to work) is obvious, but it gives much of Dworkin's reasoning a quantitative aspect that is also disturbing. One of the attractive features of his conception of the sacred, as he introduces it, is his insistence that the value of the sacred is not "incremental" or aggregative: valuing things of a certain type as sacred does not commit you to think that "the more of them we have the better" (70). In one way, he holds consistently to this view: the sacred, as such, is for him always something whose given actuality we are to respect, rather than something we are to try to produce. In another way, however, the quantitative aspect of much of his reasoning threatens to overwhelm the special character of the sacred. When we get down to brass tacks, what we are offered as a practical guide to respecting the sacred in personal decision-making can easily be read as a restricted consequentialist calculus of a fairly familiar pattern, in which avoiding frustration of investments of creative process is a privileged type of consequence.

My most fundamental objection to Dworkin is that I believe the sense of the sacred has a "strongly object-directed character," as I will call it, that is not adequately accounted for in terms of respect for creative processes. The metaphysical shudder that abortion evokes in many people (indeed, in most, on Dworkin's view) is surely not a response to the length or complexity of the human gestation process, but to what the fetus is like. Abortion seems worse in later stages of pregnancy because the fetus then has more of the characteristics of a developed human being, and specifically of a human infant. Dworkin denies this, claiming that "increasing resemblance [to human infants] alone has no moral significance" (89), but the denial is implausible. If

the resemblance were superficial, merely a matter of appearances, it might have no moral significance; but the resemblance here is grounded in what the fetus really *is* in late pregnancy: not quite a person (I agree with Dworkin about that), but profoundly rather than superficially like a human infant.

Dworkin's own account of our differential evaluation here is also implausible. The duration of gestation, as such, is intuitively irrelevant to our moral response, and few of us have any clear notion of the complexity of the process. If human fetuses were as developed in the fourth month as they in fact are in the seventh, an abortion in the fourth month would seem about as bad to us as a seventh-month abortion does now. The converse case is more complex. If the human gestation period were eighteen months, with the fetus after nine incredibly complex months of development no more advanced than a second-month fetus is in fact, an abortion in the ninth month would surely not seem nearly as bad to most of us as a ninth-month abortion does now. Would it seem worse than a second-month abortion does now? Certainly it might be more of a human tragedy,[13] but whether it would have more of an aspect of horror would depend mainly, I think, on how strong a bond pregnant women would feel to the fetus in those circumstances—that is, on the degree to which a present reality (in this case relational) that might seem sacred would be violated, rather than on the history invested in the case.

Dworkin's denial that resemblance has moral relevance also seems to be in conflict with the long theological tradition that sees the value of creatures most fundamentally in their (admittedly very imperfect) likeness to God, a likeness that has historically been seen as constituting the very nature of the creatures. Dworkin does mention the traditional idea of humankind being made in the image of God (82), but this idea plays no important role in his account of theological grounds for beliefs about the sacred, an account that focuses instead on the idea of God's investment of divine creativity. The neglect of the former in favor of the latter seems to me a mistake. Respect for God's creativity, and especially for God's creative *purposes,* doubtless does and should play a part in theistic views of the sacredness of human life, but I think it should not be dominant here. The consideration of God's creative purposes yields a *voluntaristic* ground, which seems appropriate where moral *requirement* is concerned. But the sense of the sacred, and the correlated sense of moral horror, seem to me to respond primarily to *ontological* rather than voluntaristic grounds.

[13] Reliance on the concepts of waste and frustration leads Dworkin to conflate how tragic something is and how much it infringes on the sacred (1993, 87).

The idea of images of God gives theological form to ontological grounds.

I do not mean that historical considerations are completely irrelevant to the sacredness of an object. Human persons are sacred, not as static objects, but as having lives that are dynamic processes. Dworkin's process-centered view of the sacredness of the fetus connects easily with his appropriate responsiveness to feminist protests against viewing the fetus in isolation from its mother. He quotes an apt statement about the fetus by Catharine MacKinnon: "More than a body part but less than a person, where it is, is largely what it is. From the standpoint of the pregnant woman, it is both me and not me" (quoted in Dworkin 1993, 54–55). The being of the fetus, we are reminded, is not separate from that of the pregnancy as part of a woman's life. How the sacred is engaged in the fate of the fetus may therefore depend in part on how it is engaged in the human significance of the pregnancy. As Dworkin recognizes, this helps to explain why abortion seems less objectionable to most people when it ends a pregnancy that began in rape or incest (95–97). The pregnancy that is terminated by abortion in those circumstances may be seen as possessing only a compromised sacredness, and that is certainly due to its history. Like Dworkin, I am willing to think about this in terms of the human "meaning" of the pregnancy. What I want to resist is reducing the issue of the sacred here to one of investment of valued processes. What matters most is what the fetus, and the pregnancy of which it is an inseparable constituent, *are* in the light of their history.

3. Defilement and Symbolic Violation

An approach, quite different from mine, to something like an idea of moral horror is proposed by Jeffrey Stout in his recent book *Ethics after Babel.* Stout shares with me two aims: he wants to make a sense of moral revulsion accessible as a resource for ethics, and he wants to do this in a way that permits ethical criticism of any such sense (Stout 1988, 156). He differs from me in that he wants to do this in a way that builds on Mary Douglas's anthropological account of purity and defilement. Her work dominates recent discussion of uncleanness, pollution, and defilement in the study of religion. Accepting Lord Chesterfield's definition of *dirt* as "matter out of place" (Douglas 1975, 50) and drawing on a wealth of anthropological evidence, Douglas argues that it is objects and actions that straddle boundaries, or otherwise resist placement in a society's customary scheme of things, that are evaluated as unclean and that are, therefore, apt to be the subject of taboos. The boundaries in question here are not those between indi-

vidual persons, which I have argued are protected by an appropriate sexual morality, but boundaries between culturally important categories of things.

The unclean, we should note, is not necessarily an object of moral horror at all. Though "pollution beliefs are often discussed in terms of the emotions which they are thought to express" and though revulsion is sometimes felt toward what is viewed as unclean, Douglas points out that the attitudes actually observed to be connected with "primitive" religious ideas of pollution are often as matter-of-fact as those connected with our ideas of sanitation. "[T]here is no justification," she writes, "for assuming that terror, or even mild anxiety, inspires [pollution beliefs] any more than it inspires the housewife's daily tidying up" (Douglas 1975, 59; cf. Douglas 1969, 1f.).

Douglas's account doubtless taps into deep concerns about our place in the world, and I grant its plausibility as an anthropological explanation of much uncleanness talk. In contrast to Stout, however, I have not made it the basis of my reflections here. I have consciously chosen to work with the concept of violation and *not* that of pollution or defilement. One reason for this is that some of the moral horrors that most concern me, such as homicide and torture, cannot be plausibly understood in terms of Douglas's theory because they do not seem to involve the straddling or blurring of socially recognized boundaries—except the boundary between right and wrong, which is not to be presupposed for our present purpose. The killing of humans by humans is culturally glorified in some contexts and is only too common, much commoner than the killing of humans by other (nonmicroscopic) animals.

Some moral horrors do involve the breach of the sort of socially sanctioned boundaries to which Douglas calls attention, but even in those cases I doubt that her theory provides a basis for rationally defensible *ethical* judgments, as distinct from anthropological explanations. Social structures and conceptual schemes vary from culture to culture, so that an obvious relativity affects the question of what things straddle their boundaries. There is no reason to suppose that objects and actions that fail to fit in socially established categories are inherently bad, much less objectively horrible. Moreover, the moral stigmatization of boundary-straddlers seems dangerously likely to lead to some of the worst effects that one fears from moralities of taboo, such as the persecution of homosexuals or lepers or others who may be marginal in some society's scheme of classification.

Stout thinks, nonetheless, that an ethically interesting conception of "abomination" can be understood in terms of the blurring of socially

or culturally significant boundaries.[14] On his view the explanatory aspects of Douglas's anthropological theory are helpful in dealing with such problems as I raised in the last paragraph. He acknowledges that there are cases "where the moral data against which one group tests its theories are not even recognized by another. What we need in such instances," he claims, "is the critical leverage an explanatory theory can provide" (158). His reason, apparently, for thinking that anthropological explanation can provide ethical leverage is that he thinks the appropriate object of ethical criticism here is the social construction of the world that sets and values the boundaries. In his opinion,

> What requires defense . . . is the battery of categories that gives rise to an intuition in the first place. . . . The question is not whether homosexuality is intrinsically abominable [for example] but rather what, all things considered, we should do with the relevant categories of our cosmology and social structure [158].

The criticism made possible in this way is not to be understood in a purely relativistic sense. Stout says, "At least some of the judgments of abomination we make seem to fall roughly where judgments about evil do on the spectrum of relativity" (160). He has identified that as the most objective end of the spectrum (87). He goes on to say, by way of illustration, "When the Nazis made lampshades out of the skins of their human victims, that was truly abominable" (160). Since Stout would "say the same thing about members of some more distant culture if they engaged in similar practices," his judgment of abomination in this case is not relative to social arrangements. In his view, however, it does have to do with social acceptance of "categories," inasmuch as its absoluteness must rest on an objective judgment about what categories people *ought* to have and what differentiations they ought to invest with moral significance, whether they do or not. In his judgment about the Nazis, he says, he "would of course be presupposing that the line between human and nonhuman ought to have moral

[14] Stout's choice of the term 'abomination' may be related to his use of Douglas's theory of pollution. The concept of the abominable seems broader in some ways than that of the horrible. It may express horror, but may equally well express an intensity of disgust, or perhaps simply of disapproval. The concept of the abominable may be narrower in another way, carrying something closer to an explicitly religious connotation than that of the horrible; but that does not affect the present discussion, since I am giving an explicitly theological account of moral horror. A dialogue is invited, nonetheless, by the number of Stout's cases of abomination that are in my opinion objects of moral horror.

significance and that there are certain ways in which human beings (and their remains) shouldn't be treated" (160).

I agree with Stout's judgment that making lampshades of human skin is an objectively appropriate object of moral revulsion, but I disagree with his explanation. I think the moral horror or abomination there is not to be found in the blurring of a socially recognized boundary (between the human and nonhuman), but in what is done to images of God. Consider a society that made *all* lampshades from human skin, refusing to use anything else in place of that material. This would be a sort of observance of a boundary between the human and the nonhuman, but I think it would be no less horrible than making only a few lampshades of human skin—unless lampshades were treated in that culture as having something more than the utilitarian and aesthetic significance that they have in ours. Of course a distinction between the human and the nonhuman is involved in our reaction here, but that follows trivially from the fact that we think it horrible to make lampshades from human remains, but quite appropriate to make them from other materials.

A similar horror, discussed at some length by Stout, is that of *cannibalism,* which I shall understand narrowly as the action of one human being in eating the flesh of another human being—abstracting here from questions about the cause of the latter's death. In keeping with his theory, Stout explains the horror of cannibalism as grounded in a confusion of categories. He argues "that the social identity of the cannibal is the basic issue at stake when a social group abominates cannibalism." The cannibal offends by adopting a role that belongs naturally not to human beings but to wolves and leopards. "Nonhuman carnivores make no bones about eating human flesh. To eat human flesh is to become like them, to straddle the line between us and them, to become anomalous" (151). This is not an adequate explanation of the horror of cannibalism. Cannibalism would be no less horrifying if humans were the only creatures that ever ate humans.

Intuitively, making the condemnation of the horrible or abominable action secondary to a judgment of the value of social patterning seems ill suited to the strongly object-directed character of moral horror or abomination.[15] To the extent that Stout validates judgments of abomination, he fits them into something like a motive-utilitarian framework. It would be a good thing to maintain social commitment to certain boundaries. For this reason it would be worth discouraging, and hence stigmatizing, certain types of action that threaten these

[15] Houston Smit helped me see this point.

boundaries. Or perhaps, alternatively, our abominating certain things can be judged correct on the grounds that it springs from commitment to the desirable boundaries. However, this does not seem, even to Stout, a reason to believe that the actions in question are abominable in themselves. Without such a reason, it seems to me unjust to stigmatize them as abominable.

This can be seen as a misgiving about political implications of Stout's approach. He suggests that moral revulsion toward homosexual behavior arises from certain ways of defining and valuing masculine and feminine roles (154). Suppose we believed (as Stout and I do not) that those social arrangements for gender roles are good and ought to be maintained. Should we then infer that homosexuality is objectively abominable since it blurs an objectively valuable social distinction? I think that would be unjust. If, as I believe, homosexual practice is not essentially violative of persons, then it would be unjust to stigmatize it as a moral horror even if (as I see no adequate reason to believe) the ideal society would object to the practice for other reasons. Talk of abomination is too powerful to be applied to something just because it breaches an importantly valuable social distinction—though it may be that it commonly has been so applied.

The horror of cannibalism, or of making lampshades of human skin, in my view, lies not in a straddling of social boundaries as such, but in what is done to the deceased person. We cannot understand this horror without understanding that we think of what is done to our dead bodies as in some way done to *us*. The horrible thing about cannibalism, and about the Nazi lampshades, is that what was the physical basis of a person's life is treated as something much more ordinary. This is not just classifying something in the wrong category; it is profoundly insulting to the deceased person. For that reason, and for at least one other reason, it is a symbolic violation of the deceased person. The additional reason is that acting in a way that expresses a view of the body of a living person as (potential) meat or lampshade material is apt to be in some degree violative of the person (the degree depending in part on the seriousness of the threat that the behavior might reasonably be felt to pose). To treat the body of a dead person as meat or as lampshade material is therefore an expression of a violative attitude, or an attitude inevitably associated with violation, and is thus a symbolic violation.

If I am right in this account of the matter, the objective moral horror in cannibalism has little to do with defilement, much more to do with violation. No doubt we would feel defiled by cannibalism. But a conception of symbolic violation is more important than ideas of uncleanness for giving objective moral validity to the horror we feel here.

My account cannot escape a certain cultural relativity, particularly as it concerns cannibalism. For symbolism, including symbolic violation, is culturally conditioned. As symbolism goes, the objectivity of symbolic violation in cannibalism seems very high. For a human corpse is a "natural symbol" of the person whose body it was.[16] Eating it seems inescapably to be treating it as meat. It is inescapable for us, at any rate. That is not a meaning we could change by convention. Perhaps that meaning is not inescapable, however, for cultures in which eating a human body is really felt to be a way of gaining possession of some of the "power" of the deceased. It may be that the human body has not normally been eaten as merely "meat" in those societies in which cannibalism has been a practice and not just a questionable last resort in crises of starvation.

I have not enough inner understanding of such a culture to offer a confident opinion as to whether the cannibalistic eating in itself is a symbolic violation and morally horrible. Normally, of course, the eating was preceded by a killing which was more than symbolically violative, and horrible enough. Instead, I will speak about something with which I am familiar, the Christian sacrament of Communion in the body and blood of Christ. Here is a sacred rite that is regarded, at least symbolically, as something that in other contexts would amount to cannibalism—a symbolic violation. This thought raises more questions than I can try to answer here. I will only observe that the drive to communion with another being inherently involves a temptation to violation, because it involves a desire to penetrate boundaries that define the selfhood of the other. Can we see such rites as the Christian "communion" (and many sacrificial rituals) as attempts to work through this tension? This may serve as a reminder that the relation between moral horror and the sacred is not a simple one.

[16] I take this way of putting it from Feinberg 1985, 55–57; Feinberg also applies it to cannibalism (70f.).

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