NEWSLETTER ON INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

ANNOUNCEMENTS

ARTICLES

ASHRAF ADEEL
“Faith, Violence, and our Integral Humanity: An Ecological Perspective”

MASHUQ ALLY
“Collective Responsibility and Race Cognizance as Bases for Restorative (Re)conciliation: Karl Jaspers’s Contribution to Transformation in Post-Apartheid South Africa”

JACOB ELSTER
“Simone Weil on the Purificational Role of Atheism and Amoralism”

PAUL KURTZ
“Paranatural Claims of Qur’anic Revelation Examined Critically”
**ANNOUNCEMENTS**

**Searle’s Philosophy and Chinese Philosophy: Constructive Engagement, Hong Kong, China, June 2005**

Participants at this conference included: Robert Allinson (Chinese University of Hong Kong), Chung-ying Cheng (University of Hawaii), Kim-chong Chong (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology), Wan-chuan Fang (Academia Sinica, Taipei), Dingzhou Fei (Wuhan University), Christopher Fraser (Chinese University of Hong Kong), Yiu-ming Fung (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology), Gang He (University of Shanghai for Science and Technology), Soraj Hongladarom (Chulalongkorn University), Joel Krueger (Purdue University), Joseph Lee (Hong Kong), Jianyou Lu (China), Jeannie Lum (University of Hawaii), A. P. Martinich (University of Texas), Bo Mou (San Jose State University), Anh Tuan Nuyen (National University of Singapore), John Searle (University of California–Berkeley), Avrum Stroll (University of California–San Diego), Marshall Willman (University of Iowa), Kai-yee Wong (Chinese University of Hong Kong), Min Zhang (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology)

**Jaspers/Arendt, APA Eastern Division Meeting, New York, NY, December 2005**

Chair: Alan Olson (Boston University)
Michael Zank (Boston University), “The Theological-Political Conundrum and the Context of the Early Leo Strauss and Carl Schmitt”
Leonard Ehrlich (University of Massachusetts), “Arendt, Jaspers, and Kant on Evil, Radical and Banal: Part Two”
Commentator: Gregory Walters (Saint Paul’s University)

**Philosophical Studies in China in View of Constructive Engagement, APA Eastern Division Meeting, New York, NY, December 2005**

Chair: Bo Mou (San Jose State University)
Dikun Xie (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences), “A General Introduction to Philosophical Studies in China”
Jiadong Zheng (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences), “Studies of Traditional Chinese Philosophy in China”
Xianglong Zhang (Peking University), “Studies of Western Philosophy in China”
Discussant: Jinfen Yan (University of Toronto, Scarborough)

**Current Topics in Portuguese Philosophy, APA Eastern Division Meeting, New York, NY, December 2005**

Joao Branquinho (University of Lisbon), “On the Persistence of Indexical Belief”
Joao Saagua (New University of Lisbon), “Contextualism, Minimalism, and Communication”
Antonia Marques (New University of Lisbon), “An Expressivist Point of View on the Inner and Outer Relation”

**Arendt/Jaspers, APA Eastern Division Meeting, New York, NY, December 2005**

Chair: To be announced
Dianna Taylor (James Carroll University), “The Significance of Arendt’s Analysis of Terror for the Contemporary United States”
Emily Zakin (Miami University), title to be announced
Commentator: To be announced

**Jaspers, APA Pacific Division Meeting, Portland, OR, March 2006**

Chair: Helmut Wautischer
Presentations to be announced
300,000 died in water. First was a man-made disaster, chillingly the first case, 3,000 people died in fire; in the second, over

First there was 9/11 and then we had the Asian Tsunami. In

Introducing an Environmentalist View on 9/11 and Tsunami

University of Peshawar

An Ecological Perspective

Faith, Violence, and our Integral Humanity:

Participants to be announced

University, June 2006

Engagement of Distinct Perspectives, Peking

Philosophy of Language: Constructive

Chair: Alan Olson (Boston University)

Shadia Drury (University of Regina), title to be announced

Lee Cooper (Colorado State University), Hannah Arendt on the Anti-Political Paradigm of Fabrication in Plato’s Political Philosophy

Commentator: Thomas McCarthy (Northwestern University)

Jaspers/Arendt (session 1), APA Central Division Meeting, Chicago, IL, April 2006

Chair: Dianna Taylor (James Carroll University)

Craig M. Nichols (University of Rhode Island), “Beyond Liberal and Conservative: Freedom, Transcendence, and the Human Condition in Arendt, Jaspers, and Niebuhr”

Stephen Schulman (Ball State University), “Public Forgiveness and Friendship in the Work of Hannah Arendt”

Commentator: David Pellauer (DePaul University)

Jaspers/Arendt (session 2), APA Central Division Meeting, Chicago, IL, April 2006

Philosophy of Language in Latin America, APA Pacific Division Meeting, Portland, OR, March 2006

Chair: Rob Stainton

Oswaldo Chatteaubriand (Brazil), “Sense, Connotation, and Reference”

Maite Ezcurdia (Mexico), “Moderate Contextualism and What is Said”

Eleonora Orlandom (University of Buenos Aires), “Meaning and Attitude: Different Kinds of Contextual Dependence”

ARTICLES

Faith, Violence, and our Integral Humanity:

An Ecological Perspective

Ashraf Adeel

University of Peshawar

Introducing an Environmentalist View on 9/11 and Tsunami

First there was 9/11 and then we had the Asian Tsunami. In the first case, 3,000 people died in fire; in the second, over 300,000 died in water. First was a man-made disaster, chillingly destructive of intercultural understanding, and second was a natural one, generating immense crosscultural outpouring of sympathy and humanitarian help. In the two cases, death came upon thousands and hundreds of thousands as a shocking surprise. There was no time either for the victims to realize what was happening to them or for the rest of the world to grasp the full import of the events before or during their emergence. How do we react to such completely sudden and unforeseen man-made and/or natural disasters at the moral level? What is it that our ethical paradigms say about these kinds of sudden and shocking disasters? Apart from apportionment of blame and condemnation in cases of man-made disasters, we need to understand how such a disaster suddenly brings home the realization that we, as humans, are, after all, not in total control of all the factors operational in our lives at any given moment. This can be said for both our personal lives and collective existence of the groups of which we are members. As individuals and as groups, we can be struck by sudden man-made or natural disasters. Also, such disasters can strike us all as humanity; though, thankfully, that has not happened in recent history. Nature can kill on a mass scale, and so can a group of terrorists, or some other kind of group interested in wreaking havoc on our societies. The resulting pain and misery is immense and continues to haunt people for years to come. Life no longer remains the same for the suffering societies and relatives of the victims. Such great tragedies call for special ethical treatment because the ethical treatment of such disasters can shake up our established ways of looking at moral issues. In addition, when such tragedies strike, they can strike across cultural, religious, and national boundaries. Therefore, ethical, religious, and political responses to them also require nonconventional approaches.

But the issue is not just how to find general principles for moral, religious, and political responses to such disasters. These disasters unleash chains of events for individual and group lives that cannot be easily subsumed under a few general principles for analysis and response. The complexity of the resulting chains of events is awesome. Therefore, such tragedies call for global responses to them, responses that take into account our interdependence for survival on this planet. Otherwise, our responses will fail to rise to the level that the complexity of consequences emerging from such tragedies for our individual and collective lives requires. Purely local responses to intercultural or global tragedies can be, in fact, counterproductive in the long run.

Placed in this context, both the man-made disaster of 9/11 and the Tsunami disaster of 12/26 not only caused immense losses to individuals and communities but also were truly global disasters in terms of their implications for humanity. In the first case, the political implications are extremely complex and continue to unfold for almost the entire world. In the second case, the scale of the disaster was so huge that the humanitarian response could have been nothing less than global and must continue to involve humanity for many more years, perhaps decades, to come. Human pain and suffering, as well as sympathy and hatred, have been globalized through these disasters.

In the case of 9/11, we had human beings as the source of pain and suffering for fellow human beings. Evil was inflicted on man by man. In the case of 12/26, we had natural disasters as the source of pain and suffering for man. Evil was inflicted on man by forces of nature. For an environmentalist who views human life as an integral part of nature, the distinction between man-made evil and evil coming-out-of-nature may not be quite as sharp. If nature is taken as one huge living organism with man as an integral part, then the evil would seem to have resulted from within the same organism (cf. Rolston). Under such a view, the cause of disasters might be taken as some kind of an
imbalance in different parts of the same organism. In the case of 12/26, the disaster occurred due to an imbalance in nonhuman forces of nature. In the case of 9/11, it occurred due to an imbalance in human forces operative as part of nature.

Both these kinds of imbalances can be and have been traditionally interpreted in religious, as well as moral and political, terms. This has happened this time around as well. An imbalance of nonhuman forces causing destruction at the human level always has been viewed, by at least some sections of various societies, as a divine intervention into human affairs, or even as divine punishment for human failings and corruption. At the moral level, this same imbalance has been viewed as a grave challenge by philosophers to any religious interpretation of the universe. Even from an atheistic view, it has to be explained away somehow. Lastly, at the political level, such an imbalance has been viewed as a form of destruction of societies that do not show enough resilience or foresight in dealing with natural forces or human use of natural resources.

Similarly, an imbalance in human forces, operative in the context of nature and history, has received religious and moral, as well as political, interpretations. Such an imbalance has been interpreted either in terms of the moral and political parameter of “oppression,” or religious parameters of “divine trial or punishment.” It has also been interpreted in terms of “pursuit of power,” which is primarily a political parameter.

When it comes to 9/11 and 12/26, these disasters have received all these responses from different sections of various societies involved in the tragedies directly or indirectly. There are fundamentalist responses to 9/11 on both sides of the fence, which declare it to be divine punishment or revenge. Then there are political interpretations, which take 9/11 to be a result of an imbalance caused by oppressive policies of the United States in the Middle East. Related to this, still others have taken 9/11 as a by-product of the power politics pursued by the west in relation to the weaker nations of the world in the contemporary and colonial periods.

The Tsunami of 12/26 has also elicited fundamentalist interpretations, as it has elicited interpretations that view it as a failure of rational/scientific foresight on the part of Asian communities or our global community to handle the forces of nature.

Let me sum up these preliminaries. What I have suggested so far is that 9/11 and 12/26 are disasters that took us by shocking suddenness; that have complex and unforeseen implications for our global village; that exhibit imbalance in the organism that is nature, inclusive of history; that have elicited varying religious, moral, and political interpretations (in the case of 9/11, it has also been motivated by a fundamentalist outlook); and that have been viewed as the by-product of an oppressive pursuit of power by the west or failure of scientific foresight by the world. All these aspects of the disasters and responses to them are tremendously important when it comes to developing a credible understanding of these events through a multilayered analysis. In these remarks, I’ll focus on fundamentalism and 9/11 on the one hand, and its intercultural context, on the other. I have run 9/11 and the Tsunami together so far as a device for emphasizing the interconnectedness of human history and nature and the symbolism of the Tsunami for the possibility of a global ethics of sympathy and help.

**Fundamentalism and 9/11**

Despite the conspiracy theories, the overwhelming consensus is that Ben Laden’s fundamentalist group is responsible for the 9/11 tragedy. This terrorist act is perhaps the most visible, complexly planned, and shocking in recent history. Its psychological and political impact is similarly unparalleled by any other event in recent history. The pain and suffering caused to innocent citizens and their families, belonging to diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, is also beyond description. Yet, one must acknowledge that the Ben Laden fundamentalists seem to have planned it that way, that is, to produce the utmost shock globally. To our grave misfortune, they succeeded. This immediately thrust them into the position of global actors of great pre-eminence in the affairs of the world, without even being a state. As a result, they became the rallying point of resentful fundamentalists throughout the Muslim World. The religion of Islam became deeply entangled with the whole maddening situation. The official and nonofficial reaction in the United States and the west, both in the intensity of the shock and in subsequent months and years, also sometimes bordered on confusing Ben Laden fundamentalism with the religion of Islam.

There is no denying the fact that the Ben Laden fundamentalists are Muslims. Therefore, the question of their relationship with the religion of Islam is a very complicated one and requires much religious, political, and moral analysis before it can be settled. However, in this section, I want to argue that the religious faith at the heart of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam cannot be recruited in support of an ideology like fundamentalism. It is true that fundamentalism is primarily a religious phenomenon, but I want to argue on the basis of Kierkegaard’s conception of Abrahamic faith, that there is a genuine gulf between faith as a spiritual process and contemporary fundamentalist movements among followers of various religions, including Islam. Ben Laden fundamentalists do seem to have a religious ideology and seem to have political goals as well, but that is something not connected with religious faith in its spiritual sense. At least, that is my contention, based on Kierkegaard’s interpretation of the story of Abraham, the father of faith for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard has examined the story of Abraham in some detail. It is here that he appears to develop the basics of his outlook on religion. The relevant part of this work, for our purposes, is his conception of faith. Once we have this conception in view, we can cast a look at basic characteristics of fundamentalism and see how faith, in its spiritual sense, cannot be claimed to be a basis for fundamentalist programs.

Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes de Silentio, argues that Abraham’s life cannot be explained in terms of the ethical categories. He has been asked by God to sacrifice the son whom God himself had earlier promised to be a source of honor for Abraham. How can God take away someone whom He also wants to flourish in history? Silentio argues that the whole situation is paradoxical and cannot be understood in ethical terms at all. However, Abraham decides to act on God’s command. From the ethical point of view, Abraham is about to commit a murder. From a rational point of view, it makes no sense for God to ask Abraham to sacrifice a son whom God Himself has earlier promised to be a source of honor for Abraham. How can God take away someone whom He also wants to flourish in history? Silentio argues that the whole situation is paradoxical and cannot be understood in ethical terms at all. However, Abraham decides to act on God’s command, even when it is beyond rational comprehension, and even when it is in conflict with ethics. This is where the true glory of Abraham lies, and this is what makes him the father of faith.

Silentio insists that Abraham’s life cannot be explained rationally and ethically. In order to understand Abraham, we need to assume a religious level of existence, a category of faith higher than and autonomous from ethics. Otherwise, Abraham is reduced to a potential murderer, and his glory is
lost. He also notes that the ethical and the rational is available
to Greek paganism as well. Abraham definitely goes beyond that
and, hence, becomes the father of faith.

In trying to understand what Abraham undergoes, Silentio
identifies three moments in Abraham’s act of sacrifice. These
are: intense concentration, infinite resignation, and a leap to
faith on the basis of the absurd, involving the teleological
suspension of the ethical. In the first moment, the entire
content of Abraham’s life and significance of all reality for him
is concentrated into a single wish—that of doing the divine
will. Here, all operations of consciousness are focused into a
single thought. Without such a focus, one remains dispersed
and cannot make the leap to faith.

In the second stage, Abraham enters the phase of infinite
resignation. He resigns himself to his situation and loses
interest or surrenders everything in the world. Nothing in the
world is of any value to him now that he is about to lose his
son, who is more precious to him than anything else. In this
process of surrendering the world infinitely, Abraham comes
to a kind of “painful reconciliation” with existence and
discovers that he doesn’t need anything worldly any longer.
He is sufficient unto himself in this regard. This Silentio calls
discovery of one’s “eternal validity.” One is still within reason
at the stage of infinite resignation.

The third moment is that of the leap to faith on the basis of
the absurd. Abraham knows that he is in a state of paradox
existentially. God wants him to sacrifice his son. Yet, God has
promised to honor him through this very son. It is a paradoxical
situation. Similarly, Abraham’s moral duty is to love his son
dearly. Yet, God wants him to kill this son as a sacrifice. There
is a clear clash between God’s command and Abraham’s duty
as a father. In this state of paradox, Abraham takes the leap of
faith. He believes that he is acting on God’s command in
sacrificing his son. Yet, he believes, over and above any rational
justification, that God will fulfill His promise and honor him
through the same son. Abraham believes in this on the basis of
the absurd. He suspends his ethical duty and acts on God’s
command on the basis of the absurd. His action is beyond
rational comprehension. Yet, he believes and acts. This is his
leap to faith through which he regains the finite, the worldly,
and his son. What he had surrendered at the level of infinite
resignation, he retrieves through his leap to faith. It is not
within reason. It is paradoxical. It is unthinkable in rational
terms. Yet, it is Abraham’s way and his glory. Without this leap
to faith, Abraham’s life and glory become inexplicable.

The three moments briefly described here are logically
simultaneous and are constitutive of true faith for Kierkegaard.
Kierkegaard argues that the apparent clash between the
religious and the ethical is what gives its true “dread” and glory
to Abraham’s story. Also in Kierkegaard’s view, it is the
contradiction between Abraham’s unparalleled love for his
son and his raising the knife to kill him under God’s command
that turns Abraham’s act into a sacrifice. Without Abraham’s
unparalleled love, his act would be nothing more than a
murder.

Kierkegaard also notes that Abraham is led to faith without
so much as a word about it to anyone. He is completely silent
and cannot tell even his wife Sarah what he is about to do.
There is no way he can make anybody understand what he is
about to do. It is beyond everybody’s comprehension,
including Abraham himself. Nobody can either understand
what he is about to do or help him in any way with his decision.
The leap to faith must be taken by him, all by himself. From
this, Kierkegaard draws two conclusions: that faith is
unteachable and that it is nonsectarian. If there is nothing to
be shared by Abraham in his journey of faith, how can he
Teach faith to anyone, or build a sect around his faith?

These, then, are the characteristic elements of Abrahamic
faith in Kierkegaard’s view. When we look at fundamentalism,
however, we come across a picture that does not measure up
to such a conception of faith. A number of studies have
focused on fundamentalism in recent years to understand this
worldwide phenomenon. All the major religions of the world
have seen the emergence and phenomenal growth of
fundamentalism among their followers in recent years.
Anthropologists have pointed out four basic characteristics of
these fundamentalist movements in different religions—i.e.,
orthodoxy, revivalism, evangelicism, and social action (cf.
Beeman). All fundamentalist groups believe that they are
the representative of the true religion and their (generally) literal
understanding of the sacred text and tradition is what
constitutes the true orthodox religion. The rest of the
interpretations of the same tradition are looked at as heresies
of varying degrees by them.

Secondly, all these groups are completely given to some
program of reviving a golden order from the past, an order that
represents, in history, the authentic and pristine practice of
their religion. In addition, all fundamentalist groups deeply
desire to spread their true religion throughout the world.
Evangelical efforts at spreading the word are basic to these
groups. Lastly, they are devoted to some kind of social and
political program of action to bring the world out of its current
corruption, rooted in modernity and liberalism or secularism.
The “misguided” world needs to be brought to the right course
of social and political life, and every group considers it a duty
to do so in accordance with its own ideology.

These four characteristics of fundamentalism seem to have
the combined effect of making it exclusivist. It appears,
therefore, that fundamentalist movements in various religions
are sharply exclusivist in the sense of rejecting all other
religions and points of views as misguided ignorance in
religious, moral, and social spheres. They look at world history
as a cosmic struggle between good and evil, with each group
firmly believing that its own position represents the good in
this struggle.

If this is what fundamentalism is, then it appears to be
more a religious ideology than a spiritual course toward a life
of faith. As a crosscultural religious ideology, it might have its
roots in shortfalls of modernity or perceived threats of
globalization. However, it does not seem to share the
characteristics of Abrahamic faith outlined by Kierkegaard.

Not that fundamentalists do not have faith. They claim
they do, and there is no reason to doubt their claims. The
point is different. Faith, as understood by at least one major
philosopher of religion, does not happen to provide justification
for the kind of religio-political programs or ideologies or
violence that fundamentalists advocate. Such programs,
ideologies, and violence are based in considerations other than,
and further from, faith itself. Let me elaborate.

Faith, as we have seen, involves a certain unthinkability,
unteachability, and nonsectarianism. In addition, in faith, one
deply loves the person who might be up for sacrifice. The
fundamentalists’ programs claim to have their own justificatory
ethical and political arguments. They are also claimed to be
teachable to “misguided” humanity, and they are deeply
sectarian as well. In fact, all fundamentalists engage in
evangelical instruction and also vehemently insist on the
religious rectitude of their particular sect. Under these
circumstances, there is hardly any possibility of claiming
fundamentalism as stemming from the kind of faith that
Kierkegaard thinks Abraham had.
At this juncture, a critic can point out that there is hardly any political program or ideology that can be based on the Abrahamic faith as understood by Kierkegaard. I think this is a fair assessment of the situation. Faith, in the Kierkegaardian sense, is something above the rational and the ethical. As such, it cannot be recruited in support of any political program. However, Kierkegaard also points out that the ethical/rational level of existence has to be attained by us before we can move beyond them to the level of faith. He takes the ethical as a general divine consciousness based on universal moral principles. Ethical and political programs would seem to fall at this level of existence for Kierkegaard. Here, of course, the decision on the part of a group or sect or political party to adhere to and advocate a certain ideology is a decision separate from the process of faith per se. This also means that all such political programs, including those of the fundamentalists or other religious and secular groups, will have to be judged on ethical and rational grounds. Fundamentalist or other religious-political programs do not possess any special access to a faith by which they could be judged on different or special standards. These are political programs like any others, except for the fact that these programs consciously link themselves with religious ideas and practices.

If we take this approach, we can see that 9/11 is not essentially linked with the religious faith of the Ben Laden fundamentalists, despite their claims to the contrary. It is primarily a politically motivated, murderous action against the United States, which is perceived by them as their great enemy in the power politics of the Middle East. The same would apply to Christian fundamentalists in the Bush Administration who support the power politics of the neoconservatives in relation to the Middle East. This support has nothing to do with their faith in its most primordial sense.

**Intercultural Context**

We cannot afford to overlook the intercultural context of 9/11 as a man-made disaster. The event was crosscultural in the worst sense possible, but, nonetheless, it was crosscultural. Cultures taken as extensions of nature cannot be anything but interdependent. It is simply an illusion to take one part of humanity as less dependent on other parts as long as all parts are integral to nature in its broadest sense. From this ecological perspective on culture, an event like 9/11 appears to be a self-inflicted wound and a suicidal act on the part of the Ben Laden fundamentalists, just as American or western policies in the Middle East leading up to the emergence of extremism or fundamentalism turned out to be suicidal in the end. The more one part of the global organism oppresses another, the greater the harm it can cause to itself in the end. My point is not to absolve the Ben Laden fundamentalists from their responsibility for 9/11. They do remain responsible for their acts as a group, like all other groups and/or states. The point is simply that all groups and states act in history, and their actions have a set of causal antecedents in immediately prior history. These causal antecedents provide the foundation for their actions. They are the root causes of their actions. One cannot, therefore, adopt an ostrich-like policy in the matter and shut one’s eyes to these causal antecedents of historical events or actions.

The basic idea that I am advocating here is a simple one. All oppression and unjust violence produce a reaction, even when these are perpetrated against parts of nature that do not possess consciousness. If the reaction receives further violent or oppressive response, then a vicious cycle is already in the making. Once such a vicious cycle of oppression and violence is generated in history, it can continue for a while and keeps providing justifications for self-righteous thinking to all sides involved in the cycle. Each side thinks that the past actions of the other side fully or partly justify its violent response to the acts of the other side. Societies or parts of societies entangled in such a vicious cycle of violence with each other are truly suicidal in the sense of perpetuating violence or oppression against themselves in the process.

All occupation or colonization or oppression generates such vicious cycles. In the extreme case where the victim of oppression is totally annihilated or completely paralyzed through control mechanisms of the oppressor, the psyche of the oppressors becomes primarily power-driven. This results in cultural modes and social behavior that are dehumanizing in character, and oppressors pay the price for their oppression in the form of the distortion of their own culture and behavior.

My primary argument for this idea is that actions have consequences, and these consequences can be, in many ways, qualitatively similar to the actions themselves. It is because of this reason that I tend to believe that oppression, colonization, occupation, and unjust violence all have distorting consequences for the victim as well as the perpetrator, particularly when we keep in mind the ecological connectedness of our global system. Viewed in this light, 9/11 appears to be a part of a vicious cycle of violence and counter-violence between sections of western and Islamic cultures. Its immediate antecedents are based on the role of the western powers, particularly that of the United States, in the contemporary situation of the Middle East. However, it does have roots in colonization of the Islamic countries by the west, as well as related cultural distortions and tyrannies within the Muslim World. The rise of fundamentalism in the Third World itself might be partly linked with the globalization of western political and economic power, arousing fears in the hearts and minds of the past victims of colonialism. One-sided support of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories by the United States and many other western countries, combined with the colonial interregnum of the recent past, has caused deep scars and grave suspicions in the average mind of the “Arab street” or Muslim World in general. No matter how misguided as a reaction, 9/11 cannot be delinked from these antecedents.

The concepts of “integral humanity” and our “interdependent freedom” in Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophy embody the idea that in choosing one’s own freedom, one must choose everyone else’s freedom as well. One ends up being in a state of bad faith, or a state of hiding from one’s own freedom, if one oppresses, colonizes, discriminates, or exploits others. Our freedom is integrally linked with the freedom of everyone else in humanity. We cannot hope to be free by subjugating or oppressing others. Our freedom as human beings is interdependent (cf. Santoni).

From an ecological perspective, the concept of integral nature, inclusive of humanity, is employed. Violence against any part of this huge organism harms the organism as a whole. However, Sartre also has a concept of humanizing violence. It is the violence carried out by the oppressed against the oppressor to rectify the anomalous situation of oppression, occupation, colonization, or exploitation. It requires violence to regain one’s freedom. This kind of corrective violence appears to be acceptable. Otherwise, we would have no check against crime or oppression of various forms. One may, therefore, ask whether or not the crosscultural violence of 9/11, or the subsequent violence by al-Qaeda, is corrective violence in this sense. Despite the historical antecedents/causes of 9/11 noted above, the answer seems to be in the negative. Corrective violence needs to be measured against the oppressing agencies. Violence against innocent citizens cannot be taken as “humanizing violence” in Sartre’s sense. Such violence, even when carried out by the
oppressed, is itself oppressive and dehumanizing. It dehumanizes its perpetrators equally.

This last thought applies to the post-9/11 war on terrorism as well. The war has wreaked havoc on innocent populations and the natural environment both in Afghanistan and Iraq. It fails to meet the standards for being corrective violence. In fact, the vicious cycle of violence between sections of Muslim and western societies has been fueled further by 9/11 and the so-called war on terrorism. Unless we fully absorb and act on the idea of the interdependence of freedom of all mankind, we stand little chance of coming out of this vicious cycle. What needs to be saved is our “integral humanity,” and, without saving it, we do not stand a chance of saving our individual societies that are constituents of the global organism we call nature.

References

Collective Responsibility and Race Cognizance as Bases for Restorative (Re)conciliation: Karl Jaspers’s Contribution to Transformation in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Mashuq Ally
University of South Africa

I. Introduction

Sixty years after the end of the Second World War, a central dilemma of that era continues to resonate in contemporary world politics: “To what extent should citizens be judged collectively responsible and to what extent should they feel responsible for state wrongs perpetrated on their behalf?” This issue is particularly acute in “divided societies,” polities undergoing a transition to democracy, and postcolonial states, in which the discourse of “reconciliation” is often employed.

The extent to which citizens should recognize collective responsibility for wrongs perpetrated in their name is a perplexing issue confronting many political communities in the contemporary world. In particular, the problem of collective responsibility arises where there has been a history of abuse of state power by members of one group at the expense of another. Thus, it often appears in countries undergoing a transition to democracy (such as Chile or South Africa), in divided societies (such as Northern Ireland or Yugoslavia), and in postcolonial states (such as Australia). Two related questions inevitably emerge in these contexts: (i) To what extent should ordinary citizens be judged accountable? and (ii) To what extent should they feel accountable for state wrongs perpetrated on behalf of their community?

The political controversies that arise when discussing guilt and responsibility in terms of a collective result from the fact that these concepts relate primarily to the actions, intentions, and moral character of individuals. Guilt and responsibility do not transfer easily from the moral sphere of individuals to the political sphere of the collective. There are principally two reasons for this. First, the judgment of collective responsibility appears contrary to respect for individual autonomy since it implies blame without regard to the intentions or actions of particular group members. Second, recognition of collective responsibility seems to suggest that group members should feel guilty for the perpetration of wrongs from which they, personally, were considerably removed.

Despite these difficulties, however, in societies seeking to reckon with past wrongs, we often hear the claim that some kind of recognition of collective responsibility is necessary in order for reconciliation to take place. Only to the extent that members of an offending group recognize their complicity in sustaining an unjust regime and/or benefiting from the mistreatment of another group is it possible for a new and more just society to be created. To compensate the victims is not enough. In order to underscore a break with the past, it is claimed, what is required is sincere public expression of remorse and widespread personal realization of collective responsibility for past wrongs.

In this paper, I consider what place collective guilt and collective responsibility should have in the politics of a society reckoning with past wrongs. In particular, I want to consider two issues: first, the extent to which it is just to judge members of a collective responsible for state wrongs perpetrated in their name; and, second, whether a politics of guilt and remorse lends itself to the ideal of reconciliation (i.e., the transformation of a divided society into a more inclusive political community). In examining this issue, I shall focus on the question of racial (re)conciliation in post-apartheid South Africa.

In order to address these issues, I look to Karl Jaspers’s reflections on the paradigmatic case of collective guilt in the twentieth century, postwar Germany. Our contemporary understanding of the normative issues surrounding the problem of collective guilt is fundamentally informed by the postwar German experience (Olick 1997: 567). The “coming to terms with the past” by the German people for their complicity in the Nazi death camps remains a significant issue in German political culture. Moreover, the German experience provides a common reference point for other societies seeking to reckon with past wrongs. Thus, the central postwar German question continues to resonate in contemporary world politics—i.e., “To what extent should citizens be judged responsible and to what extent should they feel responsible for state wrongs perpetrated on their behalf?”

In addressing this issue, Jaspers distinshes political responsibility from personal guilt. While the members of a political community can, indeed, be held collectively liable for the actions of their state, political liability (unlike personal guilt) in no way implies blame. All that political liability entails is a duty to make reparations to the victims of state crimes. In considering why citizens should accept this vicarious responsibility, Jaspers explains his own sense of corresponsibility for the crimes of the Nazi regime by describing a kind of “sympathetic identification” with his conationals. He envisions a “purification” of the German polity through a spreading consciousness of moral and metaphysical guilt among like-minded individuals. This position may be described as the restorative conception of reconciliation (which is predicated on a logic of guilt). I want to argue that this kind of “sympathetic identification” with one’s conationals is required if a true purification of the South African polity is to be
achieved. I maintain that through a spreading consciousness of moral and metaphysical guilt among citizens in that country a restorative conception of reconciliation will prove more supportive of the cohesiveness and stability, which seems to be a sine qua non for countries in transition, such as South Africa. This is in contrast to the current symbolic (re)conciliation, which characterizes a polity, which enjoys peaceful coexistence but little meaningful socioeconomic change or normalization of social relations among the historically divided sectors of the population. In other words, I want to examine the relevance of Jaspers’s ideas on reconstruction of a postwar German identity in respect of the development of racial (re)conciliation in South Africa.

II. Karl Jaspers’s Notions of Collective Guilt and Responsibility

In considering the extent to which ordinary Germans should be held collectively responsible for the crimes of the Nazi state (particularly the extermination camps), Jaspers maintains that all citizens may justly be held liable for wrongs perpetrated by their state. Civic responsibility entails a collective liability for making reparation to those wronged. However, this liability in no way implies moral blame since such responsibility is based on association rather than individual action. Thus, Jaspers articulates a distinction between collective guilt and collective responsibility, which is now commonplace. Whereas the idea of collective guilt is unjust because it attributes blame without regard to individual intentions and actions, the idea of collective responsibility is just since it refers only to the liability or duty of citizens, without attributing blame. Political liability is an unavoidable condition of membership in a political community.

In The Question of German Guilt, Jaspers differentiates this political liability from criminal, moral, and metaphysical guilt. Whereas political “guilt” is collectively incurred by all citizens as a consequence of a state’s action, these other forms of guilt are strictly personal, relating to the intentions and actions of the individual. To attribute criminal, moral, or metaphysical guilt to a “people,” Jaspers (2001: 40-41) points out, is unjust since this ignores the heterogeneity of the collective and denies the status of its members as autonomous agents. However, according to Jaspers, everyone is coresponsible for the way they are governed: a people must “answer for its polity” (2001: 55). Jaspers thus suggests that members of a modern state are not only liable for the actions of their state but for the type of state by which they are governed (2001: 25).

Jaspers principally offers two justifications for why citizens should be held collectively liable for the actions of their state. First, there is an element of political realism in his thought: it is simply a fact that all citizens will be held accountable for the actions of their state in the case of military defeat. Just as all members of a polity accrue common benefits by virtue of their association, they are similarly liable for common costs (2001: 33-34). Second, he suggests that where states institutionalize common decision-making structures, citizens can be collectively held to account for the outcomes of these, for “everyone acts in a modern state by voting or failing to vote, in elections” (2001: 56). Moreover, even the absence of collective decision-making structures implicates the citizens of such a state: the failure to participate entails political liability, too, for the “atmosphere of submission is [also] a kind of collective guilt” (2001: 72). Implicit in these justifications is a positive valuation of political liability. Political liability is more than a necessary evil of life in a modern state. It is also a public good, since in recognizing its political liability a people realizes political freedom (i.e., democratic self-government).

In differentiating between four kinds of guilt, Jaspers’s fundamental concern is to facilitate the “moral and political self-clarification” of his conationals (Rabinbach 1996: 20). Specifically, he wants to question the view that the prosecution of state criminals exonerates the rest of the population. This leads Jaspers to a fairly cursory treatment of political and criminal guilt. His purpose in discussing these is essentially to affirm the right of the victors to prosecute war criminals and to demand reparation from the German people for the victims of the regime. What criminal and political guilt have in common is that they are subject to public judgment. By contrast, moral and metaphysical guilt may only be judged from within. However, it is the realization of moral and metaphysical guilt by ordinary Germans, which, in Jaspers’s (2001: 55) view, is fundamental for political renewal: “We are collectively liable. The question is in what sense each of us must feel coresponsible.”

Publicly, the way to purification of the German polity depends on state reparations and punishment of war criminals. But the deeper process of purification that Jaspers advocates depends on the “spreading consciousness” of individuals of their own moral and metaphysical guilt—i.e., the extent to which each individual is personally complicit in state wrongs (2001: 96).

Moral guilt might be incurred through conforming with an immoral system out of self interest, showing indifference to the suffering of others, failing to resist a criminal regime, genuflecting to its values while knowing them to be immoral, giving tacit support to the regime, trying to see something “good” in it, or deceiving oneself that one could change the system from within (2001: 57-64).

Metaphysical guilt is incurred toward those who suffered and died. It is the lot of an otherwise innocent person in whose presence, or with whose knowledge, crimes were committed. A sense of human solidarity will bring the sensitive person to feel a kind of coresponsibility for having done nothing to prevent the deed at those decisive moments when choosing to act might well have involved risking one’s life (Jaspers 2001: 26). This solidarity, Jaspers argues, is the final connecting bond between people, even where all other modes of common order have been eliminated. For Jaspers, the metaphysical guilt of Germans arises primarily because the transcendentally human possibilities of the German tradition catastrophically have been ignored by the German people. Metaphysical guilt is, therefore, guilt that is caused by the most profound and universal resources of humanity itself. Humanity (here, the humanity of the Germans) becomes metaphysically guilty, therefore, wherever it willfully refuses to recognize and to be guided by the transcendential ideals to which it has access in its (German) traditions and cultural forms.

Just as the realization of moral guilt brings insight, which involves “penance and renewal” and leads to “inner development,” so recognition of metaphysical guilt leads to “transformation of human self-consciousness before God” (2001: 30). Thus, through a spreading consciousness by individuals of their moral and metaphysical guilt, Jaspers envisions a process of purification, a transformation of the “collective morality contained in the ways of life and feeling” of the German polity (2001: 73).

III. Guilt and the acceptance of civic responsibility

Clearly, the distinction between personal guilt and political liability raises a difficulty for the restorative conception of reconciliation. As I noted at the beginning of this paper, this notion of reconciliation is underpinned by the logic of guilt since it is the moral sentiment of guilt that orients the individual to the restoration of a relationship. When emptied of the notion
of blameworthiness, it seems that collective responsibility cannot do the work of orienting citizens toward reconciliation with previously wronged others. Moreover, given that political liability is undifferentiated among members of a polity, this suggests that both those complicit in wrong doing and those who are the target of such wrongs share a common liability for state wrongs within a newly constituted political community. I will return to both of these issues in the final section of this paper. I raise them here in order to point out a difficulty, namely, how individual citizens are to come to a personal realization of their collective liability for state wrongs.

In order to address this difficulty, Jaspers traces a connection between the moral self and the collective life of a political community. Just as the political culture of a society shapes the morality of individuals, so the morality of individuals constitutes the basis of the political culture. Thus, in order for the German polity to be purified, individuals must come to an awareness of their moral guilt. It is through the spreading awareness by individuals of the ways in which they are morally implicated in the crimes of the state that the political community will be transformed.

Clearly, with the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949 as the self-proclaimed successor state of the Third Reich, West Germans did accept political liability for the crimes of the Hitler regime. This was reflected in an unprecedented program of reparations and institutional realignment. It is sometimes claimed, however, that in pursuing this policy, the Adenauer government “instrumentalized” the issue of collective responsibility (Rabinbach 1996: 24). The government determined to close off the issue of German guilt once and for all, to settle the account through reparations to Israel, forget the past, and move on. According to Olick and Daniel (1997: 928), the recalcitrance of the Adenauer administration, in its refusal to acknowledge collective guilt for the Nazi crimes, reflected a general inability of most Germans, in the immediate postwar years, to “understand their own implication in what had happened.” Similarly, Reuter argues that while political liability was generally accepted, there was a failure to accept moral guilt by the broad majority of Germans (1990: 174-175).

Anson Rabinbach (1996: 23-24) suggests that Jaspers’s influential book contributed to this cultural milieu in that it “encouraged the view that politics and morality were distinct and separate spheres.” In his view, this separation of morality from politics permitted the political culture of the early Federal Republic to substitute financial reparations and public declarations of responsibility for what might have been more effective and less ritualised attempts to reveal the truth of the Nazi past (1996: 24).

In fact, Jaspers’s distinction between moral guilt and political liability is far from overly clear. On the contrary, he insists, “there can be no radical separation of moral and political guilt” (2001: 71).

Jaspers’s distinction between political liability and moral guilt implicitly relies on the liberal distinction between public and private. This functions to set the limits of public judgement, thus protecting a private sphere that is subject only to the judgment of the individual’s own conscience. At the same time, however, Jaspers does not view morality and politics as requiring distinct (and potentially contradictory) norms of human interaction. Rather, he points to the dialogic relation of the moral self and the political community to which it belongs (2001: 25-26). The ethos of a political community arises from the “moral everyday life of individuals” and the morality of individuals is, in turn, formed by the ethos of a political community. In this sense, Jaspers seems to presuppose a Rousseauan notion of political community as the basis of moral self-realization. He points out:

Although [moral guilt] always burden[s] an individual who must get along with himself, there still is a sort of collective morality contained in the ways of life and feeling, from which no individual can altogether escape and which have political significance as well (2001: 78-79).

The extent to which individuals feel subjective guilt for state crimes may, therefore, be an impetus to the realization of political liability and, hence, the transformation of the political/moral community. Similarly, awareness of metaphysical guilt, of one’s failure to show absolute solidarity with all other human beings, leads to the renewal of a polity (Jaspers 2001: 26-27). Larry May (1991: 241) distinguishes the concept of metaphysical guilt from moral guilt on the basis that where the latter refers to “what one does,” the former refers to “who one chooses to be.” May relates Jaspers’s category of metaphysical guilt to Sartre’s concept of “authenticity.” To be authentic is to be conscious of who one is and to assume responsibility for one’s situation in the world. Authenticity entails a responsibility not simply for one’s behavior but for the attitudes, dispositions, and character one chooses:

The discussion of authenticity for Sartre, and metaphysical guilt for Jaspers, reveals that people should strive to understand who they are, and to approach the self with a strong enough attitude of accountability that whenever it is possible to change for the better who one is, a person will strive to take necessary steps for change (May 1991: 243).

One becomes morally tainted by wrongs perpetrated by one’s fellow group members because one recognizes that one shares dispositions, attitudes, and character traits, which gave rise to wrongdoing. In recognizing this aspect of oneself, a responsibility arises to change those aspects and to distance oneself from others who possess these group traits. Jaspers, then, views the sentiment of guilt as a potentially productive force in the process of reckoning with past wrongs. This moral feeling functions to personalize a sense of collective liability and, as such, can be the beginning of “an inner upheaval which seeks to realise political liberty” (2001: 71). It is on the basis of identification with the collective that we come to feel coresponsible for the actions of our state and our fellow nationals. For Jaspers (2001: 74),

the fact of my being German—that is, essentially, of life in the mother tongue—is so emphatic that in a way which is rationally not conceivable, which is even rationally refutable, I feel co-responsible for what Germans do and have done.

Jaspers likens this feeling of coresponsibility to that which we feel for the deeds and misdeeds of family members. Through sympathetic identification (based on a shared way of life), individuals may come to feel a personal sense of political liability.

While Jaspers distinguishes between political liability and moral guilt in order to define the limits of public judgment, he does not consider politics and morality as radically separate, as Rabinbach and other commentators suggest. Rather, Jaspers emphasizes the dialogic relation of the self to the political community and, thus, relates individual morality to civic
responsibility. Through a process of sympathetic identification with one’s conational, one comes to internalize a sense of political liability. This leads him to a somewhat contradictory position: on the one hand, he rejects the notion that some flaw in the “national character” predisposed Germans to Nazism, while, on the other, he insists that the way in which every German confronts his or her own moral and metaphysical guilt will “create the essential basis of what will in future be the German soul” (2001: 34).

In Jaspers’s reflections on guilt, then, we have the basis for formulating a conception of reconciliation based on a politics of authenticity. For Jaspers, the purification of a polity tainted by state wrongs depends upon a transformation of the moral selves of its citizens. This suggests that the political project of reconciliation should be oriented toward encouraging citizens to internalize the proper sense of contrition toward those historically wronged.

Clearly, Jaspers’s concept of purification, based on a politics of authenticity, closely resembles the restorative conception of reconciliation. Jaspers (2001: 97-98) points out:

Our use of the word purification in the guilt question has a good sense. We have to purge ourselves of whatever guilt each one finds in himself, as far as this is possible by restitution, atonement, by inner renewal and metamorphosis.

The metaphors of purification and healing of a polluted/wounded polity similarly resonate in the discourse of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.

IV. (Re)conciliation in South Africa—A Continuing and Differentiated Process

Understanding the process of (re)conciliation in South Africa is often a significant obstacle to the very sense of agreement, unity, and stability that proponents of the idea would like to see achieved in the social and political life of that country. This ought not to occasion surprise. After all, (re)conciliation has been urged upon sectors of the population whose very self-conceptions have been structured in terms of historical-and state-sanctioned relations of dominance and submission. It is to be expected that insincere “reconciliations of convenience” would tend to frustrate recovery efforts across the globe. When “perpetrators” and “beneficiaries” invoke reconciliation in a self-serving and unengaged way as a means of effacing past abuses, such destructive roles and mentalities sow the seeds for future confrontations. If, to a very large extent, (re)conciliation in South Africa may be described in these terms, a different approach to the situation there may be called for.

Reconciliation is often conceived of as a process involving two types of actors: “victims” and “perpetrators,” with little attention being paid to more complicated degrees of complicity such as that found among “bystanders” or “beneficiaries.” The standard binary does not take into account the many shades of coercion, force, desperation, and miscommunication that defined many peoples’ experiences during the apartheid era. The complex, contradictory, and dynamic nature of these identity categories raises serious questions about the accessibility, relevance, and capability of formal mechanisms such as truth commissions for people who have been affected by institutional oppression. In the contemporary South African context, discussion of a “shame tax” on the beneficiaries of apartheid seems to have reached an impasse, but other alternatives exist.

Looking to the United States, there have been several examples of businesses being pressured into acknowledging and addressing their roles in past violence, exploitation, and oppression. Exxon launched a public environmental awareness campaign after the Valdez oil spill and funded a large-scale environmental clean-up campaign. Other companies have been forced to make reparations after being publicly exposed and pressured for everything from supporting or benefiting from the Holocaust to discriminating against their employees, exploiting their workers, and marketing destructive goods, such as tobacco products, unethically. This would seem to suggest that the expression and provocation of emotions such as anger, guilt, and shame may create spaces for productive action.

For some people, (re)conciliation simply means peaceful coexistence and an end to violence. Others insist that there must be a change in how formerly opposed groups and individuals regard their former enemies. For them, (re)conciliation is signalled by a shift in attitude and the absence or lessening of feelings of hostility. There are still others who demand socioeconomic change through redistribution of resources as part of the (re)conciliation process. Focusing on symbolic and emotional relations among people, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission addressed only issues of gross human rights abuse and offered amnesty based on full disclosure by the perpetrators of such abuse.

In a pluralistic society, attitudes toward the past and opinions about contemporary political problems can be expected to differ. Nevertheless, a certain common understanding of the apartheid past and its human rights violations is very significant for the interaction of people from different cultural groups in everyday life. How can interpersonal trust increase across former conflict lines if one side ignores the fate of the other? And how can (re)conciliation take place if past discrimination is not accepted as principally wrong and evil? One of the aspects of South African present-day life that continues to serve as an obstacle for (re)conciliation is the denial by white South Africans of any responsibility for apartheid. This denial parallels the denial on the part of postwar Germans for their complicity in the Holocaust.

Here, I need to refer to my earlier description of Jaspers’s account of moral and metaphysical guilt. As stated, moral guilt might be incurred through conforming with an immoral system out of self interest, showing indifference to the suffering of others, failing to resist a criminal regime, genuflecting to its values while knowing them to be immoral, giving tacit support to the regime, trying to see something “good” in it, or deceiving oneself that one could change the system from within.

These are precisely the questions that many white South Africans might put to themselves, for did not many individuals (and not only “big” business) conform with an immoral system out of self-interest? The shows of indifference to the suffering of others were not confined to the bureaucrats who dealt first-hand with the suffering of large numbers of black people. Nor could it be seriously maintained that it was only those in various positions of authority who failed to resist a criminal regime. How many churchgoers in an avowedly “Christian” country were guilty of genuflecting to racist values while knowing them to be immoral? How many (and not only those) sitting on Government and Opposition benches deceived themselves that they could change the system from within?

Likewise, given that at least some white South Africans brought with them and/or developed Enlightenment cultural values that recognized the common humanity of all people, if Jaspers is correct, they ought to experience intimations of metaphysical guilt toward those who suffered and died as a direct result of apartheid policies. Should they interrogate their appropriation of their cultural heritage in the light of their
African historical experience and current predicament, it might be possible for them to determine the extent to which they incurred metaphysical guilt as white settlers imbued with various European traditions and cultural forms, which, as Jaspers would have it, they catastrophically chose to ignore.

V. Reconstituting White Identities After Apartheid

For whites in South Africa, (re)conciliation could never be an easy matter. Given that racial segregation made anything but pro forma interracial contact relatively rare, the contact that did take place was inevitably grounded in inequality and colored by large misconceptions about “the other.” As South Africa emerged from apartheid, white attitudes to the past and to the new democracy have undergone certain changes. Apartheid was not only a product of some “mindless” politicians, it is deeply entrenched in the mind of many ordinary whites as well. The political responsibility for the apartheid past is broader than most whites believe today. Gunnar Theissen (1999) has labelled this symptom post-apartheid syndrome, implying, thereby, that the sentiments of these whites reflect a self-serving system of attitudes.

For many whites, one way of avoiding being seriously morally challenged about their role in the past is to deny it. Many, especially the older ones, remember the apartheid years as an ordered and prosperous time. Not many of them had been directly exposed to the repressive acts of the apartheid regime.9 Here, one needs to recall such things as the heavy censorship of the press and the absence of television. Emergent feelings of guilt can always be masked through selective comparison of aspects of present-day life with an idealized past. Agreeing that they were wrong would imply that something was amiss in their self-defining value system, which implies that they are not as worthy as they thought.10

In order to describe the second form that white racial awareness has taken in present-day South Africa, I employ the social theorist Ruth Frankenberg’s term race evasion/evasiveness. In this way of relating to race—which is often reflected in liberal discourse—racism is regarded as an “irrational prejudice” based on some misguided belief in social groupings that do not exist. According to Frankenberg (1993: 145), many of these liberals assume that “being caught in the act of seeing racial difference is to be caught being ‘prejudiced’.” A feature of race evasiveness resides in its denial or selective engagement with the difference race makes in people’s lives. Instead of recognizing the effects of an event or situation on the victim(s), a typical race-evasive person places the burden of proof on the intent of the perpetrator. Race evasion, therefore, also involves the evasion of power relations and social inequalities. The denial of the importance of race “appears to embrace cultural and other parameters of diversity” but does so “in ways that leave hierarchies intact” (Frankenberg 1993: 143). I want to argue that as a result of the antiracist atmosphere of the 1990s, race evasion is now the dominant and normative approach to race among whites in South Africa. But that does not mean that an authentic acknowledgement of race realities is not possible. This leads to a third category: race cognizance.

According to Frankenberg, this category of thinking about race holds the greatest potential for a progressive reconstruction of whiteness (1993: 158). In race cognizance, people acknowledge that although race is not a biologically or culturally determined attribute of people, it makes a real difference to people’s lives and to society as a whole (1993: 157). A race-cognizant person recognizes that race structures the way she thinks because it is a product of oppressive historical structures. Any race-cognizant person has to have stepped outside the mainstream in conscious, even if accidental, ways in order to have developed a critical perspective on the discursive status quo. Although she does not employ the term “race cognizance,” Melissa Steyn provides several instances of such individuals, especially in the penultimate chapter of her book Whiteness Just Isn’t What It Used to Be.

Race cognizance articulates explicitly the contradiction that racism represents: on the one hand, it acknowledges the existence of racial inequality and white privilege, and, on the other, it does not lean on ontological difference in order to justify inequality or explain it away. In this way, it generates a range of political and existential questions about white complicity with racism. Whereas many whites appear to experience their racial identity and privilege as normalized to the point of invisibility, a minority of race-cognizant individuals are able to identify at least some of the ways in which they are shaped by a unequal power relational social structure. The challenge for them is how to change society and white people, given that both have been distorted by racism. As pointed out earlier, even when racism has been constitutionally outlawed, its effects remain to cripple the possibilities of meaningful human interaction in South Africa. For this reason, if for no other, whites need to become race cognizant. Especially white Afrikaans-speakers—the group who previously were most privileged—need to realize that it is equally false to think in terms of binaries such as, “I am entirely responsible for apartheid,” or “I am not at all responsible for apartheid.” Instead of considering the question of white complicity with racism as a structurally determined one in which racial domination has forever established all-encompassing fault lines that are definitive of white selves, it might be more fruitful for them to grasp the existential moment and “contribute to the cancellation of injustice and the restitution for damage and suffering” (Lotter 2000: 149).

VI. Guilt and Authenticity in the Politics of (Re)conciliation

Referring to a white South African respondent whom she identifies by the pseudonym “Jeanine Cohen” and to whom she attributes race cognizance, Frankenberg (1993: 180) shows (by means of structured interviewing) how guilt emerged as an obvious, quite reasonable, reaction to awareness of the contradiction that privileges represented in her life. One should contrast this guilt response with that of those suffering from post-apartheid syndrome. Whereas the latter resort to various strategies to mask their guilt, race-cognizant individuals experience it as inevitable and unavoidable. This acceptance of guilt resonates with the account given by Jaspers, which was presented earlier.

If race cognizance is to grow among white South Africans, they need to recognize and acknowledge their complicity in the legacy of apartheid—the poverty and erosion of cultural values among all sectors of the population in the wake of centuries of virtual enslavement and systematic dehumanization of the indigenous population. Despite ten years of democracy, the youth of the country are unable to identify with one another’s history or concerns (Gouws 2003). While many black students feel the hurts of the legacy of apartheid, most white students do not wish to engage with apartheid history or with the process of transformation. It is as if they are unwilling to recognize that the character and passage of their lives has been profoundly influenced by apartheid, which entrenched their privilege while, at the same time, entrenching the humiliation and exploitation of black people.

Equally significantly, many white South Africans remain unaware of the extent to which they were dehumanized by apartheid and how they continue to live out racist attitudes, which have become entrenched in their psyches and about which they appear to have little insight or concern. While
they enjoyed vast physical and material privilege, the laws of the land also ensured that they failed to develop as robust, whole, and well-integrated people. They appear unable to deal with adversity and frustration in constructive and creative ways. Because of this defensiveness, they are unwilling and unprepared to face up to the challenge of constructive engagement with the legacy of apartheid. A suggestion for meeting this challenge might involve adopting a perspective which differentiates what we can be responsible for, that is, our day-to-day attitude and actions towards the people we meet—on the job, at traffic lights and in our country at large—from the grand plan that was apartheid (Clark 2003).

Clark (2003) argues that when guilt and shame begin to replace defensiveness, we can start to become human again, not because we are taking responsibility for apartheid, but because we are aware of and sensitive to the very different realities of all the people of the country.

This suggestion is valuable in so far as it shows whites that the ideology which they adopted and from which they benefited—the world-wide prejudice that assigns power to white, westernized people—and its apotheosis, apartheid, is the real enemy that needs to be recognized and combated.

A reconstructed whiteness will have to abandon the idea of progress as a march toward some notion of civilization and modernity and will have to adopt a notion of progress as the reduction of social inequality, the alleviation of suffering, and the ability to engage with others. For authentic (re)conciliation to be possible, minds have to be desegregated, which means that South Africans will need to recognize the internal structures that underpinned segregation and seek out ways of learning to communicate with segments of their repressed consciousness. Only then may it be possible overcome the legacy of apartheid—a system that prevented generations of people from getting to know not only one another as fellow South Africans but also their own repressed selves.

Here, too, what Jaspers has to say is salutary. He saw the deeper process of purification in postwar Germany as never-ending, as a lifelong process of becoming, of moral self-realization (i.e., of “not being German as we happen to be, but becoming German as we are not yet but ought to be” [2001: 75]). Whereas the history of white settlement and immigration in South Africa was one in which the identity of the settler and immigrant differed totally from that of indigenous and enslaved population, one might suggest that the new ideal of nation-building through racial (re)conciliation is posited on “not being South African as we happen to be, but becoming South African as we are not yet but ought to be.” Just as the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission brought only a certain measure of closure to the South African trauma, the public process of purification (reparations and punishment of state criminals) brought only some closure to past wrongdoing in Nazi Germany. Indeed, Jaspers (2001: 111) goes so far as to argue that the widespread personal acceptance of moral and metaphysical guilt should become a “fundamental trait of German self-consciousness.” This raises the question of what merit there might be in such widespread personal acceptance of moral and metaphysical guilt as a future “fundamental trait of white South African self-consciousness.”

VII. Some Problems with the Application of the Role of Guilt in the Restorative Model of Reconciliation

The restorative conception of reconciliation presupposes a “we,” which contains both those implicated in wrongdoing and those wrongs. Hence, it presupposes that the political conflict underlying the need for reconciliation is a communal one, which will lead to the reconstitution of a collective identity. But that identity is surely the one that South Africans seek to bring into existence through racial (re)conciliation. In an all-encompassing oppressive regime like apartheid, the very identities of individuals are often constructed in terms of whether they are members of the perpetrating or the victim class. (Re)conciliation between blacks and whites would appear to involve the construction of a coherent narrative that encompasses both the atrocities of apartheid and the hope for a peaceful, respectful coexistence of political equals. Any identity developed in the wake of such a narrative will require that people give up fundamental self-conceptions or face some very unwelcome truths about themselves.

The personalizing of politics, which the restorative concept of reconciliation demands, also threatens to close down the open-ended nature, the contingency, of political action. The sense that people will be judged less by what they say or do than how they say or do it (or worse) by who they are in saying or doing, may close down the possibilities of political action. This is particularly the case where one’s identification as a member of a perpetrating class or a victim class is understood to lend less or more authority to one’s opinion, or to limit the scope of opinions that may be acceptable. In such a climate, instead of being judged by the extent to which their words or deeds contribute to a shared understanding of a common reality, people are judged for “their tactlessness, for picking the wrong time, for being poor judges of ceremony” (Buruma 1995: 251). Likewise, Buruma argues that the motivation of action by guilt is likely to constitute a withdrawal from political engagement, a retreat into the self. Faced with the perplexity of having to deal with the current political reality, the legacy of a past wrong, the sentiment of guilt personalizes the political in a way that allows no way forward, in a way, which, in fact, encourages nonparticipation. Such nonparticipation, in turn, makes the forging of new encompassing identities less, rather than more, probable.

Clearly, the epistemic privilege frequently claimed in the voice of the victim and the truth demanded by the discourse of reconciliation set limits on the potential of politics to reveal this “sameness in utter diversity” (Christodoulidis 2000: 183). The danger of Jaspers’s concept of purification and of the restorative conception of reconciliation is this: instead of leading citizens to enter into an open-ended political dialogue through which shared meanings may be created, the politics of authenticity threatens to reify identities based on guilt or innocence and, hence, encourage a retreat into the self, rather than political engagement with others. The particularism that guilt introduces to the public sphere may hinder the creation of shared meanings among diverse equals.

In outlining these various problems for the position I have been defending, it will be evident that the problems of newly constituted political communities require sensitive management. This does not imply that acknowledgement of guilt and awareness of race is not central to reconciliation in South Africa any more than they show that the restorative model of reconciliation is inappropriate there. Certainly, the German experience indicates that even years of pacifism may be replaced by meaningful, even if coercive, intervention, as indicated in its contribution to NATO during the war in Kosovo:

[While for decades Auschwitz was a reminder for the necessity of a special German peacefulness, it now became the reminder of a moral obligation to participate in war (Schiller 1999: 12).]
Likewise, South Africans, too, have long been engaged in peacekeeping duties in various parts of Africa. Living and working side-by-side can only facilitate the forging of a common identity as diverse equals. There is no reason to believe that restorative reconciliation requires the elimination of the tension that triggers it. Black South Africans may come to see whites as, in the past, having been oppressors and now being fellow citizens. Those who focus on just one or the other of the apparently exclusive description fail to grasp the whole truth of a dynamically evolving reality. But reconciliation is never a solipsistic task. One is constantly engaged and challenged by others in one’s daily life. As a result, opportunities for publicly debating the issues of the problem at hand, the complexity of the situation, the need to act, how South Africans should act, a legacy of collective guilt, and burgeoning race cognizance need not imply any nonparticipation or foreclosure from the public sphere.

**VIII. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have explored Jaspers’s concept of collective guilt and sought to apply Frankenberg’s concept of race cognizance to the question of racial reconciliation in South Africa. Although there are clear idealistic and even contradictory strains in Jaspers’s concept of collective guilt, I have tried to suggest that it has real application to countries that, historically, have been torn apart by deep divisions. When combined with Frankenberg’s notion of race cognizance, it may serve as a basis for continued pursuit of racial (re)conciliation through transformation of both individual and of society within the present South African context.

In considering the racial dynamic there, I have argued that only to the extent that whites recognize their complicity in sustaining the apartheid regime and benefiting from the mistreatment of other groups is it possible for an inclusive and more just society to be created. Compensation for the underprivileged is only a beginning, albeit an important one. But attempts to implement restitution continue to founder on the part of whites to acknowledge the plight of their fellow countrymen and women, which is a legacy of policies designed to privilege themselves and suppress the rest. In order to underscore a break with the past, what is required is recognition of the ways in which this systematic oppression damaged not only their countrymen and women but continues to limit their own capacities for leading psychologically empowered and spiritually enriched lives. But this ideal appears to require widespread personal realization of collective responsibility for past wrongs. A logic of guilt underpins the political discourse of reconciliation. This is particularly evident where the desired outcome of (re)conciliation is social healing or restoration of community.

**Endnotes**

1. For recent work on reconciliation, see several essays in the special issue of *Ethics and International Affairs*, 13 (1999).
2. I employ parentheses in order to problematize the term within the South African context. Since there never was a time of relatively peaceful racial harmony in the almost four centuries of white settlement in that country, it might seem odd to speak of “reconciliation.”
5. Jaspers (2001: 33) writes, “The accused either hears himself charged from without, by the world, or from within, by his own soul.”
6. Herbert Morris (1976: 134) thinks “this phenomenon may also be described as ‘self-guilt’ or ‘guilt before oneself’ or perhaps best ‘shame’.”
7. Participants from a dozen countries and a variety of fields and professions met in Manila as part of the “Interrogating Reconciliation” conference to address this issue (see Porter 2003).
8. Given the political inequalities of the old South Africa, it is hardly surprising that blacks and whites felt highly threatened by each other.
9. According to a recently published work by James L. Gibson (2003), “Though some whites may have been unaware of the atrocities committed by their state against the liberation forces, no whites could claim to be unaware of the enormous subsidy apartheid provided for their standard of living.”
10. Here, one may again compare the German experience. Referring to the denial of complicity for the Holocaust among Germans, Theissen (1999: 18) points out “in order to protect the self from feelings of guilt the past is whitewashed, political responsibility is denied, and new forms of racial prejudice...emerge.”
11. As evidence for this, one can cite facts such as that white South Africans experience the third highest divorce rate and the highest rate of family murders in the world (Demographic Yearbook, 2002, United Nations Publication, 2004).
12. According to Lotter (2000: 149), depending how the present generation of Afrikaners live, others might “remember apartheid for all the bad things associated with it, and respect white Afrikaans-speaking South Africans for their contribution to the cancellation of injustice and the restitution for damage and suffering.”

**Bibliography**

Simone Weil on the Purificational Role of Atheism and Amoralism

Jacob Elster
University of Oslo

1. Introduction

Although Simone Weil is perhaps most known for her religious, often mystical, writings, she was just as much a political philosopher. In particular, she discussed the necessary role of moral motivation in establishing a just society and the interplay between religion and moral motivation. In this paper, I propose to do the following things.

1. Give a description of the role of moral motivation in Simone Weil’s political philosophy, especially as developed in The Need for Roots.
2. Examine one theme, in particular, from Weil’s theory of moral motivation. The idea which I will examine is that there is a possible parallel between, on the one hand, the relationship between true religious beliefs and atheism, and, on the other hand, the relationship between moral motivation and amoralism. The hypothesis to which I will devote the main part of my paper is that, according to Weil, moral behavior can best be achieved by refraining from grounding actions in moral motives and justifications. This view I call “purificational amoralism.” I will ask if it is plausible to think that Weil held this view, and to what degree it is compatible with her other views on morality.

2. The Political Importance of Moral Motivation

Weil stressed the necessity of moral motivation for the performance of moral actions in general: knowing what actions morality requires is not enough; one must also be motivated to act accordingly. She writes in The Need for Roots:

No action has ever been performed if motives capable of furnishing the amount of energy which is indispensable for this action were not present. Wanting to lead human beings—one self or others—towards the good by only showing the direction, without having taken care to guarantee the presence of corresponding motives, is as if one wanted to make a car with no fuel go forward by pressing the accelerator. Or it is as if one wanted to burn an oil lamp without having put oil in it. This error has been denounced in a rather famous text, which has been sufficiently read, read again and quoted the last twenty centuries. Yet the error is still made.¹

Simone Weil distinguishes between two parts of moral education—what she calls “enseignement,” which tells us which actions are good or obligatory, and “l’education,” which seeks to furnish motivation for the performance of these actions.² (She thus seems to think it possible to have moral beliefs and not be motivated by them.) I will call this latter part of moral education, where one seeks to create moral motivation, “motivational transformation.”

2.1. Types of Motivational Transformation

In the text quoted above, Weil mentions that one might want to lead both other human beings and oneself toward good action. Taking our cue from this, we can distinguish two types of motivational transformation, one type in which one seeks to transform one’s own motivation, and another type in which one seeks to transform the motivation of other people: I will call these self-transformation and other-transformation, respectively. (This rather trivial distinction will matter later on, when I examine the hypothesis of purificational amoralism. In some texts, Weil’s main focus is on self-transformation, in other texts on other-transformation.)

2.2. Motivating Political Morality

One of the main concerns of Weil’s political philosophy is how political action can make individual moral action possible. In this perspective, the creation of moral motivation becomes a central question for her political philosophy. (Though it is not the only relevant question—another question is how political action can create the conditions necessary for moral perception, i.e. for noticing that fellow human beings are in need.) This is the problem that Robert Goodin calls “motivating political morality” (in his book with that name, which I will...
mention later on). This question is most explicitly treated in the third part of The Need for Roots.

2.2.1 The Context

We should note the context of The Need for Roots: it was written in 1943 while Simone Weil was in exile in London. The immediate goal of the third part of the book is to propose a method of motivational transformation, which the French resistance movement, in France and in London, can use to motivate French acts of resistance. At times, the text is even more specifically oriented toward the content of the radio transmissions sent from London to France and how these can be used for purposes of motivational transformation. However, beyond this immediate goal, the practical purpose of Weil’s theory of motivation is also to create in the French people the motivation necessary for creating a new kind of civilization once the war is over. It is important for Weil that the motivation used to inspire a war-time effort is of such a form that it can also play a role in the creation of a new French society after the war. Her analysis of motivation is largely oriented toward this double goal: What motives can not only create the desired action but also have further positive psychological effects on the agent? With this purpose in mind, Weil provides insightful comments on the interplay between actions and motives.

Weil’s basic assumption is that, on certain conditions, a person seeking to motivate an agent—in this case, for example, those speaking on the radio from London—can provide, through communication, a) an action to be performed and b) a motive for the action (i.e., a reason for performing the action). If the right conditions are in place, the agent will be motivated, by the reason given to him, to perform the action in question. Weil further supposed that different motives can be provided for a given action. (So if the action in question is sabotaging a German train, the motives appealed to could be patriotism, hatred for the German occupiers, a taste for adventure, a sense of moral duty, etc.) Given this basic assumption, the question Weil seeks to answer in The Need for Roots is this: For the greatest (long-term and short-term) efficacy, what motives (and actions) should the motivator seek to provide the agents with? Should one appeal to an agent’s self-interest or to morally laden motives? And if the latter is the case, to which morally laden motives?

Although the wartime context makes the problem of motivational transformation urgent, for Weil, the war also renders this problem more tractable. It is instructive to compare Weil’s approach in The Need for Roots to her pessimism in her earlier work, Reflections on the Causes of Liberty and of Social Oppression, from 1934. In this book, Weil doubted the possibility that society might change, in part because people were so immersed in oppressive social structures that they were incapable of being motivated by anything other than self-interest. Change would be possible only if, for some reason, society collapses. “When,” asks Weil, “will the rupture take place after which it might be possible to try to construct something new?”

Two things happened between this work and The Need for Roots. First, the rupture did take place, in the form of the Second World War. Weil was acutely aware that this was an exceptional occasion for changing the motivational structure of the French people. “After the war, this possibility will be gone, and peacetime will not provide us with a similar possibility.”

2.2.2 God and Moral Motivation

The second change is Simone Weil’s new religious beliefs, which allowed her to believe in the possibility of moral motivation, even in unfavorable circumstances. I do not have time to discuss in any detail Weil’s metaphysical views and their importance for her theory of motivation, but, in short, Weil believed that the worldview of modern science, which saw the world as exclusively ruled by deterministic natural laws, was incapable of explaining morality. In such a world, only self-interested motives can exist, so all moral actions must be the result of God’s grace. However, grace works through systematic laws that make a scientific theory of moral motivation possible, as long as science takes what Weil calls “the supernatural” into account.

But, though God is necessary for moral motivation, an agent need not have religious beliefs in order to be motivated. Weil notes that people can be directly motivated by God’s command without even knowing about this themselves and without believing in God. This view—that for moral motivation, God is necessary but belief in God is not—is the inverse of a view that was popular at the end of the eighteenth century (and later), that although God might not exist, belief in him is nevertheless necessary in order to guarantee moral motivation.

2.2.3 Systematic Theory or Practical Guidelines?

To what degree does Simone Weil propose a systematic theory of moral motivation? Weil writes: “The problem of finding a method for inspiring a people is completely new.” She notes that solutions to this problem may have existed in pre-Roman antiquity and in the Middle Ages, but that they are lost today. Nevertheless, we should not think that there does not exist a systematic method for solving this problem—in theory, such a method can certainly be found, since everything—even psychological phenomena—operates according to strict laws.

Even though such a method can be found, Simone Weil does not set forth, in The Need for Roots, to propose a general theory of motivational transformation. She gives two reasons for this. 1) Even a general theory would need to be adapted to particular circumstances. What worked for ancient Greece need not work for occupied France. 2) As the problem of motivational transformation is a practical problem, it can be given a practical solution, even if one does not know the general solution. So, what Weil proposes in The Need for Roots is more a collection of psychological mechanisms underlying moral motivation than a general theory of moral motivation. Nevertheless, these mechanisms can be taken as indications of what a general theory of motivation must look like.

In other works, which might not have been directly intended for publication (such as her notebooks), and which were not meant to serve this urgent wartime goal, Weil might have attempted to establish a more general theory of motivation. What might seem like discrepancies between her works might be due to this difference in approach—seeking practical methods for immediate use versus seeking a general theory of motivational transformation. We should add that finding a practical solution was an urgent matter for Weil when writing The Need for Roots. This can explain both that she did not there attempt to develop a general theory of motivation, which might be time consuming, and that she is more pragmatic there than in other texts (I will return to this point).

3. The Abuse of Moral Motivation and Purificational Amoralism

3.1. Purificational Amoralism

Against this general background, I wish to examine one method of motivational transformation and its underlying psychological mechanisms, which can be found in Weil’s writings, but which does not play a role in The Need for Roots. Indeed, it could seem to contradict her approach in this book. This is not a method that Weil develops systematically and in great detail. What I propose is a reading that seeks to make sense of some
interesting passages in her writings; I will then ask if this is a plausible interpretation.

I call the method that I will examine “purificational amoralism.” Purificational amoralism consists in deciding not to perform actions for moral motives, or not to encourage people to perform them out of moral motives but only out of self-interest. The hypothesis behind adopting this strategy is that it will actually be more efficient in creating moral behavior than an appeal to moral motives will be. My point of departure is a passage in the essay “Forms of Indirect Love of God,” where Weil discusses the famous Melian dialogue from Thucydides. I will give a long quote from Weil, where she describes the context of the dialogue and then comments on it:

The Athenians were at war against Sparta and wanted to force the inhabitants of the small island of Melos, who were ancient allies of Sparta and had so far remained neutral in the war, to join them. In vain the Melians, faced with the Athenian ultimatum, appealed to justice and asked for pity for their old city. As the Melians would not give in, the Athenians sacked the town, killed all the men and sold all the women and children as slaves.

Thucydides has the Athenians pronounce the following lines. They first stated that they would not try to prove that their ultimatum was just:

Let us rather discuss what is possible...you know as well as we do that, given how the human spirit works, what is just is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.

The Melians answered that if they should come to a fight, they would have the Gods on their side, because of their just cause. The Athenians replied that they saw no reason to suppose this.

Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can. And it is not as if we were the first to make this law, or to act upon it when made: we found it existing before us, and shall leave it to exist for ever after us; all we do is to make use of it, knowing that you and everybody else, having the same power as we have, would do the same as we do.

[Weil comments:] This lucid intelligence in conceiving injustice is the level of enlightenment immediately below that of charity. It is the clarity which subsists for some time where charity has existed, but is extinguished. Beneath it are the shadows where the strong sincerely believes his cause to be more just than that of the weak.

On the face of it, this admiration of the Athenians’ speech might seem astonishing. Weil herself recognizes this in another text, where, after giving the same quote from Thucydides, she writes: “These sentences are of the kind that shocks decent people.” The cause of Weil’s admiration is that the Athenians are not seeking a false justification for their immoral actions—they are admitting their immorality. Almost all people, on the other hand, are incapable of this, according to Weil. They always seek to justify their immoral actions. So Weil writes in The Need for Roots: “It is in no man’s power to exclude completely all forms of justice from the ends he gives to his actions. Even the Nazis couldn’t do it; if any man could do so, it would surely have been them.” So the idea Weil seems to get at is that no moral motivation at all is better than a misguided moral motivation. This is the basic idea behind what I call “purificational amoralism.”

This expression is meant to mirror the expression “purificational atheism,” which has been used to describe an idea that Weil develops in her notebooks. (I do not think that Weil herself has used this expression.) I want to suggest that there is a parallel between “purificational atheism” and the view expressed in the comments on the Melian dialogue. Weil’s starting point was the observation that many people are religious for entirely wrong reasons, basically because they have an erroneous and idolatrous conception of God as someone who would help and console them; their way of being religious is very far from the self-abnegating mystic reunion with God that Simone Weil considered to be the essence of religion. An atheist, according to Simone Weil, is closer to a true understanding of God than the standard Christian because although he has no true religious beliefs, at least he is not encumbered with all the false religious beliefs that hinder many people from having a true relationship to God. Weil, therefore, recommends what she calls a “purificational atheism” as a first step away from false religious beliefs and toward a true understanding of God. Some quotes on this point:

Of two men who have not experienced God, the one who denies God’s existence might be closer to him. The false God who resembles the true God in every respect, except that one cannot touch him, always hinders one from reaching the true God.

When religion is a source of consolation, it is an obstacle to the true faith, and in this sense atheism is a purification. [...] Among the men whose supernatural part is not yet awake, the atheists are right and the believers are wrong.

Analogous to atheism being closer to true religion than an idolatrous religion is, one can consider that someone who acts only out of selfish motives will be closer to true morality than someone who acts out of moral motivation but whose moral beliefs are false. Note that although Simone Weil does not explicitly draw the parallel between atheism and amoralism, she does indicate that the structure she sees in purificational atheism is a general structure that holds for other phenomena as well: “It is possible that every form of evil has another aspect, as a purification in the course of progress towards the good…”

3.1.1. Does Weil Endorse Purificational Amoralism as Practical Advice?

The quote from Thucydides plays an important role in the development of Weil’s philosophy. Its main role is theoretical—it allows Weil to define true justice by contrast with the view expressed by the Athenians. This is what she goes on to do in the essay, “Forms of Indirect Love of God.” I want to suggest that the discussion of Thucydides might also play a more practical role—it indicates a method of motivational transformation. The insight of the Athenians is a necessary condition for actual moral motivation.

However, there is one problem in reading this passage as practical advice concerning the best strategy of motivational transformation. This is that when, in the practical perspective of the wartime effort, Weil proposes methods of motivational transformation in The Need for Roots, purificational amoralism seems to play no role. On the contrary, she explicitly recommends cultivating moral motives for action, even motives that she herself recognizes are not “pure moral
motives" (i.e., they are motives of the kind which can be abused for nonmoral purposes, and therefore precisely the kind of motives which a strategy of purificational amoralism would seek to exclude).

I will return to this problem after having discussed the possible reasons one can have for adopting purificational amoralism.

3.2. How Can One Justify Purificational Amoralism?

I will here examine what reasons one can have for believing that purificational amoralism is the best strategy for producing moral behavior. I will examine three different justifications. The three justifications have in common the idea that purificational amoralism can be justified because moral motivation can sometimes be skewed, abused for immoral purposes.

Such abuse of moral motivation is possible only if the motivation to be moral can be separated from specific moral beliefs. For example, people's motives must be of a relatively general form that can be applied to a variety of specific actions—e.g., "to act morally," where the content of "morally" can be specified in many ways. (The motivation must be de dicto, not de re.) If people's motivation to act morally stemmed from a motive that was more intimately related to each individual moral action—e.g., a motivation "not to kill this man"—such abuse would be more difficult to explain. (It might be possible, but it would certainly not be as easy as Simone Weil makes it out to be.)

The reasons for adopting purificational amoralism that I will propose are related to the two forms moral motivation takes in Weil's theory—that of a "mental energy," or "drive," making an agent perform a given action, and that of a "filter," hindering an agent from performing a given action. I will first discuss purificational amoralism as a strategy for avoiding the abuse of positive motivational energy, next as a strategy for avoiding the abuse of motivation as a filter.

3.2.1. The Abuse of Positive Moral Motivation

The first justification that I want to propose is the one which it is least probable that Simone Weil herself would count as important. Nevertheless, it is interesting in itself, and parts of Weil's analysis seem to go along these lines. My analysis here is inspired by Robert Goodin, who devotes a chapter of his book Motivating Political Morality to the question of the abuse of moral motivation. The starting point is that moral motivation can motivate many different kinds of actions, even immoral actions, if the moral beliefs are misguided. Goodin writes: "moral motives are no guarantee of morally desirable outcomes." The main evidence of this is all the historical examples of atrocities being committed under the cover of morality. I quote Goodin again: "Hitler and Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot all appealed, disingenuously or otherwise, to a moral vision in mounting what would otherwise have been regarded as a straightforwardly political sort of witchhunt." Taking our cue from the word "witchhunt," we can easily find examples from further back in history—the inquisition, the wars of religion—where immoral actions have been undertaken from seemingly moral, and sometimes religious, motives.

The hypothesis is that moral motives more easily give rise to fanaticism, with the strong motivational force this requires, than selfish motives do. When the moral motives are skewed, giving rise to immoral behavior, we can get the phenomenon that Stephen Holmes calls "selfless cruelty":

It is easier to be cruel, on a large scale, when you act in the name of others, or in the name of an ideal, or even for the benefit of your victim, than when you act for your own sake. Blood revenge for a humiliation suffered by one's ascriptive group, even at the risk of one's own life, is a glaring example. Think also, of those Catholic zealots in medieval France, described by Montesquieu, who rushed onto the scaffold where a Jew was about to be executed for having blasphemed the Virgin Mary: they subdued the public executioner and used their own knives to peel away slowly the sinner's skin. They were not acting from egoistic or mercenary motives, but for the common good—as they saw it.

What is striking about the kind of behavior Holmes is referring to is not only the immorality of the acts but the self-abnegation involved in them: people commit immoral acts "even at the risk of one's own life." This kind of self-abnegation can most of the time only be the result of nonselfish motives. Indeed, the "fanatic egoist" seems to be a contradiction in terms, since fanaticism can be understood as the sacrifice of all other interests, even basic self-interests, for a given cause. The purely selfish person may surely be capable of immoral acts, notably of acts of negligence, but he is less likely to commit acts of great cruelty when these acts require a sacrifice of self-interest. The morally motivated person, on the other hand, can find the motivation for performing these acts.

In this perspective, the reason for adopting the strategy of purificational amoralism is that by excluding appeals to moral motivation, we will exclude these extremely immoral actions. There are certain truly moral acts that the amoralist will not perform because self-interest-based motivation is insufficient for motivating them, but, at the same time, there are also strongly immoral acts that he will not perform, also because self-interest-based motivation is insufficient for motivating them. As noted above, self-interest is a guarantee against fanatic immorality since many strongly immoral acts will require a sacrifice of self-interest, and, therefore, a moral motivation, however misguided. The pure egoist, for example, will never be a suicide bomber, although the morally motivated person might be.

But is it plausible that purificational amoralism will actually increase the chances of people performing moral actions, overall? The success of purificational amoralism as a method depends on several factors. To a large degree, it depends on the degree to which selfish actions and moral actions coincide. The exact degree to which these coincide will depend both on how demanding one's conception of morality is and on the partly empirical question of what kind of actions can be explained by self-interest. The success will also depend on the extent to which moral motivation is actually misdirected toward immoral goals, and the extent to which moral motivation leads to truly moral actions; purificational amoralism is only necessary if one believes that moral motivation actually leads to fewer moral actions than immoral ones, or to moral actions that are less important in consequence than the immoral actions it leads to.

However, the scope of what actions self-interest can motivate is not a completely fixed constraint but depends on social structure. If one actively decides on a social system where one wants to minimize the role of moral motivation, one can at the same time organize society in such a way that there are self-interest-based incentives for performing moral acts (e.g., payment for blood donation).

3.2.1.2. What Would Weil Think about This Argument?

Simone Weil does not, as far as I am aware, discuss this argument explicitly, although some of her comments are applicable, in particular her discussion of Hitler as motivated by a misguided conception of greatness. However, I believe that the argument is not open to her. This is because she
refuses the possibility that a society ruled by self-interest alone can be of much value. She thus denigrates the idea—which
she finds both in utilitarianism and in “the liberal economics of
the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie”—that, through some
mechanism, self-interest can be guaranteed to produce
justice.\footnote{28} On the contrary, Weil sees the oppression and
suffering in the world as largely a result of the interplay of
people’s self-interest. The result of pure self-interest will,
therefore, not be worse than the result of willful amorality or
cruelty.

One might be astonished at Weil’s refusal to accept that
morally desirable results can come out of the organized
interplay of self-interested motives; this goes against several
centuries of analysis in the vein of Hobbes and Adam Smith.
In part, Weil is committed to this view by her metaphysical
views, which I will not discuss here. But, also, her view might
result not so much from a disagreement about the analysis of
how self-interest operates, but from a disagreement
concerning the normative evaluation of the results of self-
interest. Where a Hobbesian might see modern society as
good, because it is infinitely better than life in the state of
nature, Weil sees oppression and suffering, especially among
the working class.

\subsection{3.2.2. The Abuse of the Motivational Filter}

A different argument for purificational amorality concerns
the possibility that our “motivational filter” might be skewed.
Morality does not only create the drive for action, it also
influences our actions by creating a sort of filter, which will
only let actions through if we can justify them morally. So
not only can morality have a positive effect on motivation, it can
also have a demotivating effect if our actions do not appear
morally justified to ourselves. Indeed, Simone Weil claims
that people cannot perform blatantly immoral actions without
in some way justifying these to themselves morally: “It is in no
man’s power to exclude completely all forms of justice from
the ends he gives to his actions. Even the Nazis couldn’t do it;
if any man could do so, it would surely have been them.”\footnote{29}

In a way, this is a positive lesson, since it points to the
presence in all men of a minimal moral motivation; however,
also shows how easily moral motivation can be abused:

Even justifications which are full of contradictions and
lies are sufficiently plausible when they are used on
behalf of the strongest party. […] They suffice for
providing an excuse for the adulation of the weak,
the silence and the submission of the suffering,
the non-interference of spectators, and they let the
victorious forget that he is committing crimes; but
none of this would happen if there were no
justification available, and the victorious would then
be doomed.\footnote{30}

It is precisely in this context—giving excuses for wrong
actions—that Weil introduced the idea that I call purificational
amorality: the Athenians were able to refrain from such
excuses and to do wrong unabashedly. But precisely this
example shows that adopting purificational amorality will not
lead to more moral actions: it does not matter much, in terms
of the resulting actions, whether the moral filter is skewed or
whether it disappears as the effect of purificational amorality.
The Athenians may be more lucid than other men, but they
do not behave any better. So, at least in the practical
perspective of \textit{The Need for Roots}, this method seems of little
use.

\subsection{3.2.3. A Step Toward True Morality}

These two justifications concerned the immediate effects on
behavior of adopting purificational amorality. We concluded
that they did not lead to more moral behavior. However, the
justification might rather lie in the long-term effects of
purificational amorality on our moral motives. We need to
take more seriously the comparison with purificational
atheism. Purificational atheism is only good because it is a
necessary step toward true religious beliefs. In a similar way,
purificational amorality is good only because it is a necessary
step toward true morality. The lucidity of the Athenians,
Simone Weil said, is “the level of enlightenment immediately
below that of charity.” As mentioned, our need of justifying
our actions is a sign of a minimal moral motivation, but as long
as we allow ourselves false justifications, this need can never
translate into true moral actions.\footnote{31}

So the practical justification for purificational amorality is
not that someone who does not act out of moral motives will
behave more morally than someone who acts out of misguided
moral motives. It is that only the person who acts out of true
moral motives will behave well at all, and purificational
amorality is a necessary condition for at one point starting to
act from moral motives. Weil writes: “As long as someone has
not felt the truth of [the lesson from Thucydides] in all of his
flesh, blood and soul, he can not yet attain true love of justice.”\footnote{32}

\subsection{3.4. Who Should Adopt Purificational Amorality?}

Now that we have seen the justification for purificational
amorality, we can ask why Weil did not adopt this strategy in
\textit{The Need for Roots}. Although Weil did not propose
purificational amorality as a form of other-transformation—
that is, as a method for making other people perform good
actions—we can ask if it does not follow from her view that
she should propose this. If each person cannot reach true
morality unless he denies himself any moral justification, should
not the person influencing people’s motives refrain from
appealing to moral motives? This seems especially to be the
case since, as we have seen, what is important for Weil in
\textit{The Need for Roots} is not only the short-term goal of winning
the war but the long-term goal of creating a new motivational
structure in the French people. Should those responsible for
influencing the French people refrain from appealing to moral
motives?

I will now argue that she need not, and does not, accept
purificational amorality as a method of other-transformation.
This is more a sketch of an argument than a complete analysis,
however, and certainly needs to be fleshed out.

\subsubsection{3.4.1. The Lesson Weil Draws}

First, let me note that Weil does draw a lesson from the
possibility of abuse of moral motivation, in particular the
possibility of the abuse of positive motivational energy (as
opposed to the negative motivational filter).

Weil distinguishes, in \textit{The Need for Roots}, three kinds of
motives: self-interest, purely good motives, and motives in
the “middle range” of values, motives that, although they can
produce good actions, can also produce bad actions. (She
gives the example of French pacifists who, in 1918, appealed
to the French people’s desire for comfort and security in order
to support pacifism, without realizing that, in different
circumstances, these motives would have disastrous effects
on the French war effort.) Middle-range motives are precisely
those that can be misguided for nonmoral purposes. Weil notes
that, in the case of “middle-range” motives, we must examine
completely all the different effects they might produce in
different circumstances.\footnote{33} Weil does not exclude the use
of motives that might be abused, as purificational amorality
would require, but she does counsel great care in inculcating
these motives in people. This is indicative of the more
pragmatic approach she takes in \textit{The Need for Roots}, with its
immediate practical purpose.
3.4.2. Why Weil Need Not Propose the Strategy of Purificational Amoralism

The other reason why Weil does not, in The Need for Roots, adopt the strategy of purificational amoralism is that she also recommends the use of “pure” motives, that is, motives that are such that they cannot be abused. Compassion might be a good example. (Goodin, who proposes a similar solution, proposes the use of motives tied to the Golden Rule—he suggests that such motives can hardly motivate immoral actions.) The main task of those motivating the French people is to identify these motives and inculcate them in the French.31

The question of how we identify the “nonabusable” motives requires further examination, but what seems clear is that identifying these motives requires lucid moral analysis. This lets us answer one objection, which is why this solution is not open in cases of self-transformation: If I want to make myself morally better, instead of adopting purificational amoralism and refusing all forms of moral justification, why not just appeal to the true moral motives? The reply is that one must already have attained a grasp of true morality in order to identify these motives. So, for self-transformation, these motives are not available. They are available for other-transformation, but only if the motivators have already reached a true understanding of morality—they must already have undergone the process of purificational amoralism and the further moral evolution for which this is just a precondition.

4. Conclusion: The Role of Religion in Motivating Political Morality

I have not said much directly about the role of religion, in the sense of “religious beliefs,” in motivating political morality. Let me conclude by making two points related to my discussion.

First, as already mentioned, Simone Weil would certainly refuse the idea that people must have some religious belief in order to be morally motivated, but that it matters little what that belief is. On the contrary, I imagine that purificational atheism would often be a precondition, or at least an auxiliary condition, for purificational amoralism. Among the false justifications that one can use to justify immoral conduct, many can be provided by religious beliefs. Furthermore, as we have seen, one can be morally motivated without specific religious beliefs.

Next, the persons responsible for motivating the people would do well in taking into account certain religious beliefs, not for the effect of these beliefs on their own motivation, but for the effect of these beliefs on their theory of motivation. As already noted, Simone Weil believed that a scientific method of motivational transformation was possible. And, even though knowledge of specific mechanisms suffices, it is plausible that this knowledge, too, must imply a certain grasp of the general truths underlying moral motivation. The principal of these truths is, for Weil, that all true moral motivation happens through God’s supernatural grace, and that grace follows scientific laws. A science of moral motivation, then, needs to take certain supernatural facts into account:

A science of the soul and a social science are both completely impossible unless the notion of the supernatural is rigorously defined and introduced into the science, as a scientific notion, to be treated with extreme precision. (OC, 1213)

So, an atheist might perform moral actions, but he would not be very adept at making other people perform moral actions.

Endnotes

2. Œuvres, 1145. Weil profits from the fact that the French language has two words for “education”—equivalent perhaps to “teaching” and “education.” I do not think her exact choice of vocabulary matters much, however.
3. Œuvres, 1161.
4. In the cases Weil discusses, the main conditions are a) that the person suggesting the action and motive has the right kind of authority and b) that the motive suggested is already to some degree present in the agent’s motivational set.
5. Œuvres, 345.
6. Œuvres, 1161.
7. The effect of deterministic natural laws on the human psyche is often described by Weil through the term “force.” The interpretation that I propose here is that “force” will always result in self-interest. One might also consider that “force” can result in other nonmoral motives, which are not based on self-interest either.
8. Œuvres, 1154.
9. The second part of this claim is expressed, among other places, in George Washington’s farewell address to Congress: “And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.”
10. Œuvres, 1143. Strictly speaking, what Weil calls “inspiring a people” is not equivalent to the problem of motivating political morality—it is a class of the solutions to that problem, precisely that class of solutions that Weil finds interesting. Propaganda and appeals to self-interest are also solutions to the problem (Œuvres, 1145), but these are rejected by Weil.
11. Œuvres, 1143-44.
12. Œuvres, 1144.
16. PG p. 132.
17. Œuvres Completes, VI,2, Cahiers, 337; my translation.
18. PG, p. 131.
20. The view that moral motivation has these two forms is not unique to Weil, and she is probably inspired by Kant in this respect.
22. p. 162.
24. The exceptions are cases when a person’s self-interest might include such things as honor after
Paranatural Claims of Qur’anic Revelation Examined Critically

Paul Kurtz
State University of New York–Buffalo

I.
The dialogue between Islam and the West is at a critical juncture. There is a great opportunity today to achieve a significant breakthrough, though there are strong forces opposing progress. I wish, in this paper, to deal with the basic claim that is foundational to Islam, yet is very rarely discussed—namely, the claim that Islamic culture needs a Reformation if it is to profitably engage in an exchange of ideas with people in other parts of the globe, but only if it allows open and forthright inquiry to proceed.

Permit me to come directly to my key point: the Qur’an is rooted in revelations allegedly received by the prophet Muhammed from Allah. This claim, I submit, is highly questionable. These revelations present the basic structure and framework of Islamic religion, culture, and law, and they have been used as a guide for moral and social behavior down through the ages. Islamic culture has deep historic roots—in its social institutions, laws, the arts, science, philosophy, and as a way of life. But I doubt that they are veridical or have epistemic justification. I wish to focus on this basic premise of Islam: that Muhammed transmitted a creed and code derived from Allah and that it is a duty of every Muslim everywhere in every age to submit to this, and also to use the power of the state to enforce it.

The relationship between theology, on the one hand, and philosophy and science, on the other, is a controversial issue, historically. The writings of Aristotle were used by Ibn Rushd (Averroes) in the twelfth century in Cordoba and translated into Latin and Hebrew. Ibn Rushd argued for a kind of autonomy of philosophical truth. Aquinas received Aristotle from Averroes. He distinguished natural from revealed theology. According to this distinction, although it was possible to prove the existence of God by rational means, revealed theology (as read in the Bible) is a matter of faith. A similar approach was adopted by Muslim scholars. Islam was based on the revelations of Muhammed, received directly from God (read in the Qur’an), and described by his companions in detailed actions (in the Hadith).

Revelation refers to the act of communicating divine truths from God to man. To reveal something is to make known that which is hidden or secret; many or most of these revelations assume propositional form, for these are explicit commandments of what we should or should not believe in or do. Some defenders of revelations interpret them mystically, but the content of Muhammed’s communication, in many or most cases, can be in the form of declarative statements or imperative commandments. Presumably, it is the divine source of his experiences that sanctifies the truth of his statements or commandments.

In the decades following the death of Muhammed, a kind of official narrative was woven about him and his revelations. According to tradition, Muhammed was born in Mecca, a city in Arabia, about the year 570. At age six, after the death of his mother, he was brought up by his uncle Abu Talib. Muhammed began his adult career as a camel driver. At age twenty-five, he married Khadijah, a wealthy older woman who plied the camel trade. He sired several children with her.

The most significant religious event in his life was being called by Allah to serve him. This, according to legend, began in his fortieth year, when he encountered the archangel Gabriel, who transmitted messages to him. This occurred after wandering among the peaks of Hira, mountains outside of Mecca. He would spend several days and nights in seclusion in a cave. He began hearing voices. The key Surah 96th: 1-5 repeats a command from Gabriel to “read” or “recite.” “I cannot read,” he responds. He is fearful of the voices and apparitions and thinks that he is going mad or is possessed. Fearfully, he rushes to tell his wife about his terrifying experiences. According to the Hadith, Khadijah comforts him, assuring him that this was the voice of God. On occasion, he slept with his family in a cave. No one heard the voices but him. Still concerned about the voices, he is assured by his wife and family that he is a prophet, and his uncle Waraka Ibn Naufal (Khadija’s Christian cousin) says that this is similar to the revelations of the prophets in the Old and New Testament, and thus the mantle of prophethood is bestowed on him.

Muhammed, in time, began to believe that the voices he was hearing were real, and he was persuaded that they came from outside of him. Eventually, he began to preach openly his convictions that he believed that he alone had a divine
commission to spread the messages from God and summon the people to faith in Allah—which contradicted the popular polytheistic religions of the day. The revelations of Muhammed, according to Islam, are to be accepted as the bedrock of the Islamic faith. Believers were required to submit to them without question. To deny these revelations was apostasy or blasphemy, and this was the worst sin, punishable by death.

As Muhammed began to proclaim his faith in public, he was taunted by those who heard him. They said he was insane, possessed of evil demons, and practiced magic and sorcery. He moved to Medina, raised an army, and eventually came back and conquered Mecca. In subsequent years, he conquered the entire peninsula of Arabia. He took unto himself several wives and concubines. His reputation as a prophet began to spread. The history of what followed is surprising, for Islam grew by leaps and bounds over the next centuries, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. In subsequent centuries, new Muslim Empires were able to spread Islam by conquests, all in the name of Muhammed. The most recent great Islamic empire was the Ottoman-Turkish Empire. Today, in the postcolonial world, Islam is again on the move. Not only does it exist in fifty-four countries of the world, but growing Muslim minorities appear in Western Europe, the United States, and other countries. Many people today are attracted to or perplexed by this new, revitalized faith as proclaimed by Muhammed.

**II.**

Today, the revelations of Muhammed present an enormous challenge. No doubt much of Islam’s populations are peaceful folk. Yet there is a radical version of Islam that still seeks to spread Islam by conquest and Jihad, and revelation is the cornerstone of this faith.

In recent decades, an influential Muslim philosopher emerged to vindicate the Qur’an as expressing the one true faith applicable everywhere. He is Sayyid Qutb, who authored the thirty-volume work, *In the Shade of the Qur’an*, written while he was in prison. Its appearance has been favorably received by large sectors of the Arab World as a major contribution to our understanding of the Qur’an.

The life of Qutb vividly demonstrates the dynamic character of militant radical Islam today. The key point of Qutb’s system apparently is that philosophy must be subservient to theology as revealed in the Qur’an. Qutb was born in Egypt in 1906. As a young student, he memorized the Qur’an in its entirety. He studied at the university system in Cairo and was employed by the Egyptian Ministry of Education. He visited the United States for a brief period of time and received an MA in education. He was turned off by the liberal lifestyle of Americans. In 1951, he returned to Egypt and devoted himself to the Islamist movement. A member of the Muslim Brotherhood, he was regarded as its leading theoretician and thinker. A year after his return, Gamal Abdel Nasser and other military officers overthrew the Egyptian monarchy and proclaimed a nationalist pan-Arabist ideology. Nasser sought the support of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood wished to see alcohol forbidden in Egypt, and they wished to establish Sharia as the law of the land. Nasser’s revolutionary council and the Brotherhood split. An attempt was made on Nasser’s life. Qutb was jailed in 1954 and, except for a brief period, spent the rest of his life in prison, where he was tortured. In 1966, he was finally hanged. Nonetheless, while in prison, he wrote a massive amount. *In the Shade of the Qur’an* is a detailed elaboration and commentary of the various Surahs of the Qur’an.

According to Qutb, Islam may be distinguished from all other worldviews because it provides a total cosmic outlook. There is one basic principle: “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammed is his prophet.” Qutb believed that Muslims today should practice Islam as it was practiced in the early Islamic generations, spawned by a nomadic agricultural civilization of the seventh century. He declared that this was the only road to eternal salvation. He wished to resurrect the pure Islamic society. To achieve spiritual and moral rectitude, faith is essential, and it is the central point of Islamist education and the Islamic legal code. Achieving this faith means submission to the divine law and the rejection of all other secular laws. There are, he admonishes, “divine revelation” and “divine instruction” to serve as our guide.

“Men must base their values and standards on divine consideration,” he declares, as they are “laid down by Allah.”

The basic standard Allah has given us, through his prophet, is that “the noblest of you in Allah’s sight is he who fears Him the most.”

The Qur’an thus lays down “fundamental and permanent principles.” Hence, “all human values, standards, tradition, and concepts must be abandoned by the Islamic nation.” Qutb takes the authority of the revelations of Muhammed as absolutely pivotal to our understanding of the Qur’an. He states, “The truth is one and the faith is one. This results from the fact that their origin is one, Allah, whose will it was to send messengers to mankind. The messenger delivers basically the same message, the same simple truth.” “Those who disbelieve among the people of the earlier revelations and the polytheists shall burn forever in the fire of Hell.”

Qutb is antisecularist, antirationalist, antihumanist, and antidemocratic. He rejects Western civilization because of what he considers its debauchery and corruption. He recommends us to return to the earlier moral creed as established by Muhammed in his lifetime. He rejects the separation of mosque and state, the sacred and the secular, insisting that the city of God must dominate the city of man.

He said (quoting Surah 5), “The Qur’an was bestowed from on high to Muhammed, God’s Messenger, so that he might, by means of it, establish a state...and set moral values.” This meant that the Muslim legal code, Sharia, would be reinstated. In the section on martyrdom and Jihad (Surah 2), Qutb declared that “The Surah tells the Muslim that, in the fight to uphold God’s universal truth, lives will have to be sacrificed. Those who risk their lives and go out to fight, and who are prepared to lay down their lives for the cause of God, are honorable.”

Qutb thus believes that Quranic truth requires revolutionary action on Islam’s behalf, and this included martyrdom in the cause of the holy Jihad, as well as personal sacrifice.

**III.**

What are we to make of the pivotal claim that Muhammed received revelations from Allah? I have introduced the concept of the paranatural to deal with such revelatory claims. By this, I mean the effort to explain alleged supernatural events in naturalistic terms, using the best scientific and scholarly methods at our disposal. Revelation is considered by believers to be a supernatural event; nevertheless, it appears in the world and is represented by human beings who utter sounds and sentences and who can be heard and seen. Thus, it is open, in some sense, to empirical investigation. This term, paranatural, is analogous to the term paranormal—abnormal phenomena, existing beside, alongside of, or beyond normal phenomena. Paranormal investigations deal with psychical and extrasensory perception (ESP), telepathy, psychokinesis,
communicating with the dead, faith-healing, and similar phenomena. Although allegedly para phenomena, we can interpret them experimentally and seek causal explanations. I should say that my own experience is based on thirty years of investigations of paranormal claims by the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CISCOP), for we consider many or most of these claims to be amenable to careful scientific description and explanation, even though many are quasi-religious in form.

Religious believers have insisted that these revelations must be accepted as veridical without question, as does Qutb apparently—and to be taken as the word of God. But they are natural at least in the above sense that they have a special historical spatial-temporal location and they refer to persons and situations, which can, at least in principle, be examined empirically. Philosophers generally have frowned on arguments such as the ontological, cosmological, teleological, and recently fine tuning and intelligent design, but they have given insufficient attention to the argument from revelation. We now have the tools of science and historiography to explain the alleged events of earlier generations.

Let us try a hypothetical experiment. What would be our response if someone would come forth today and claim that he was a prophet and that he has a new revelation, which he received from On High?

First, we may ask epistemological questions: Can anyone corroborate these revelations? Were there any eyewitnesses present? And, if so, did they likewise hear voices or see visions? Do these eyewitness accounts stand up under scrutiny? Clearly, these were private reports, privileged experiences, introspective subjective accounts of personal soliloquies in alleged encounters with the divine. We would no doubt be reluctant to accept them today, unless we could corroborate them; and, if so, the same line of questioning should apply to Muhammed's revelatory claims. A believer may object that we are applying standards of knowledge that he does not accept, to which I reply, they reflect the methods of practical reasoning used by both common sense and scientific inquiry, which have been vindicated by their effectiveness in inquiry and conduct.

Second, we must ask of all such events: (a) Did the event happen as reported? Is the revelation an accurate description of what the messenger claims? We may ask an even more fundamental question, (b) Are there causal explanations for them? The hearing of voices and the seeing of visions is not an uncommon phenomenon in human experience, and many may be attributed to hallucinations or delusions. If these are excessive and persistent, we often claim that they are symptoms of a psychiatric condition; a person may be suffering from a bipolar disorder, depression, or even paranoia. According to legend, Muhammed did flirt with suicide and perhaps suffered from depression. There are several biographical accounts of his experiences that suggest this.

He may also have been manic (part of a bipolar mood syndrome), which may explain his delusions of grandeur and account for his inflated ego or his belief that he was forging a new religion certified by Allah. It was surely presumptuous of him to claim that he was the only prophet of God and that all others were to be rejected as spurious.

Did Muhammed also suffer schizophrenia? Apparently, his hallucinations and visions appeared often enough so that they troubled him. Was he in touch with the supernatural realm? Or was he out of cognitive touch with reality? Did he suffer a brain disorder, perhaps in the frontal lobe? The Flemish psychologist Herman Somers recently diagnosed some form of psychopathology.

Another interesting question, which we can only speculate about retrospectively, is whether Muhammed also suffered a condition similar to epilepsy, some kind of ecstatic seizure, or “brainstorm.” Many in ancient civilizations considered epilepsy to be a form of “divine madness.” However, it usually manifests itself early in life. He may have, indeed, suffered from an epileptic attack while very young, being “visited by angels.” His uncle, Abu Talib, is reported to have said shortly after adopting Muhammed, “I fear the boy may have an attack. Take him back to his family before his disease declares itself.”

According to tradition, Muhammed kept having these strange experiences later in life. Here are some quotations taken from early sources, which may or may not be entirely accurate, but they surely are suggestive of some kind of disorder. The first account of Muhammed's religious soliloquy is from Al-Wakidi:

The first beginnings of Muhammed's inspiration were real visions. Every vision that he saw was clear as the morning dawn. These again provoked the love of solitude. He would repair to a cave on Mount Hira, and there pass whole days and nights. Then, drawn by the affection of Khadija, he would turn to his home. This went on till the truth burst upon him in the cave. It happened on the wise. Wandering in the hills around, an angel from the sky cried to him, 'O Muhammed, I am Gabriel!’ He was terrified, for as often as he raised his head, there was the apparition of the angel.

Now the first Surah revealed to Muhammed was the 96th, verses 1-5, Recite in the name of the Lord, etc.; and that descended on him in the cave of Hira. After this he waited some time without seeing Gabriel. And he became greatly downcast, so that he went out now to one mountain, and then to another, seeking to cast himself headlong thence. While thus intent on self-destruction, he was suddenly arrested by a voice from heaven. He looked up, and behold it was Gabriel upon a throne between the heavens and the earth, who said: "O Muhammed! thou art the Prophet of the Lord, in truth, and I am Gabriel." Then Muhammed turned to go to his own house; and the Lord comforted him, and strengthened his heart. And thereafter revelations began to follow one another with frequency.

Another outline of Muhammed's first inspiration is from Ibn Hisham and At-Tabari and is at some variance from Al-Wakidi's, for Muhammed is not alone in the cave:

On the night whereon the Lord was minded to deal graciously with him, Gabriel came to Muhammed as he slept with his family in the cave of Hira. He held in his hand a piece of silk with writing thereon, and he said Ar! Muhammed replied, I cannot read. Whereupon the angel did so tightly grip him that he thought death had come upon him. Then said Gabriel a second time Read! And Muhammed, but only to escape the agony, replied, What shall I read? Gabriel proceeded: —Read [recite in the name of thy Lord, etc.,] repeating the 96th Sura to the end of v. 5. When he had ended the angel departed; and "the words," said Muhammed, "were as though they have been graven on my heart." Suddenly the thought occurred to him that he was possessed of evil spirits, and he meditated suicide; but as he rushed forth with the intention of casting himself down a precipice, he was arrested by the appearance again of Gabriel, and stood
for a long time transfixed by the sight. At last, the vision disappearing, he returned to Khadija who, alarmed at his absence, had sent messengers to Mecca in quest of him. In consternation he threw himself into her lap, and told her what had occurred. She reassured him, saying that he would surely be a prophet, and Waraka confirmed her in the belief.”

Here is a description of revelations that he had in later life, according to the testimony of his defenders:

At the moment of inspiration, anxiety pressed upon the Prophet, and his countenance was troubled. He fell to the ground like an inebriate, or one overcome by sleep; and in the coldest day his forehead would be bedewed with large drops of perspiration. ... To outward appearance inspiration descended unexpectedly, and without any previous warning to the Prophet. When questioned on the subject he replied: “Inspiration cometh in one of two ways; sometimes Gabriel communicateth the Revelation to me, as one man to another, and that is easy; at other times, it is like the ringing of a bell, penetrating my very heart, and rending me; and this it is which afflicteth me the most.”

A further description of the character of a seizure and what followed:

Abd ar-Rahman relates that many years later in returning from Al-Hodeibiya, when Muhammed was fifty-eight, suddenly people began to urge their camels on. What was the reason for the rush? “Inspiration has descended on the prophet,” was the reply. Al-Rahman also hurried on his camel and reached Muhammed. When Muhammed noted that a sufficient number of people had gathered around him, he began to recite Surah 40. According to the Hadith, Muhammed was generally unaware beforehand that inspiration was about to overcome him. After the seizure, Muhammed was apparently able to compose himself sufficiently to recite a surah. Later in life, Muhammed is reported to have remarked that the white hairs that began to appear in his beard were hastened by these experiences. He is alleged to have replied to his devoted friend Abu Bekr that the “terrific” surahs were responsible for his gray hairs.

Tradition has preserved various stories about the fact that he continued to experience revelations. One is that, on one occasion, fearful of his sanity, Khadijah tested the character of a spirit confronting Muhammed, by making him sit first on her right knee, then on her left. Muhammed kept experiencing the apparition, no matter what his position. She then took Muhammed in her lap, removing her veil or uncovering her body, at which point the spirit disappeared—which seemed to demonstrate that the being was virtuous or modest. Khadijah said: “Rejoice, my cousin, for by the Lord! it is an angel and no devil.”

On another occasion, terrified by such an experience, Muhammed asked Khadijah to cover him, which she did, constantly administering to his fright.

Are the above biographical accounts accurate? Perhaps not entirely, yet if we take them at face value, they provide enough negative data so that a psychiatric diagnosis is plausible. In reading the histories of Muhammed, one cannot help but also feel that, at times, Muhammed would make up revelations to fit the political or social circumstances of the day, or that they were self-serving, such as when he declared that he had received permission from Allah to marry Zaynab, the wife of his adopted son, Zayd!

Third, there is still another series of psychosociological dynamics that may help to explain the influence of Muhammed on others. There is a good deal of evidence that certain powerful personalities are able to persuade people to believe what they claim. Here, the key ingredient is suggestibility. Certain charismatic individuals who speak with authority are able to convince others to accept what they say. There is a two-way transaction. (a) The promoter of an idea, ideal, or proposition, the promise of salvation, or the fear of Hell can have a dramatic effect on other persons. There are political-ideological leaders who demonstrate this magnetism—Alexander the Great, Napoleon, and Hitler were spellbinders—able to rouse passionate devotion and dedication. This also includes religious prophets such as Joan of Arc, Joseph Smith, and Mary Baker Eddy, who were able to persuade others that they possess a higher truth, and were the way and the light. (b) Equally important is the receptiveness within the public, first among an inner circle of disciples who must be aroused, cajoled, captivated, and awed by his powers. Here, there is a form of gullibility at work, the willingness to swallow the faith hook, line, and sinker. There are psychological causes that play a role: the need of many individuals for a beloved cause, a prophet or leader with whom they can identify, and, having found such a person, for whom they are willing to sacrifice, or even die. Of course, the fact that Muhammed raised an army, plundered the defeated, and distributed the spoils of war to his key disciples is another factor. In any case, the sudden rise of a messianic, powerful, and ideological religious movement is common in human history. Charles Mackay, in his classic nineteenth-century book Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds, dramatized how people can be seized by new ideas or products and how they are overwhelmed to accept it. Perhaps a good illustration of frenzy that overtakes crowds is Tulipmania, which swept Holland in the seventeenth century. The price of tulip bulbs kept rising as new colors were introduced, and this was all out of proportion to their real value. The same thing is true of stock market bubbles that eventually burst. Similarly, for the excitement that swept Europe when Napoleon first appeared with his conquering armies as a liberator, or the reaction to Hitler in Germany in the 1930s, or even the UFO phenomenon in the U.S. after World War II, in which large numbers of people claim to have seen UFOs, or even to have been abducted aboard them. Others are fanatical religious hysteria, such as the Salem witch trials in New England.

In summary, the argument from revelation postulates the following: (1) some divine being—Allah, Jehovah, God, the Father, an Angel—manifests himself to a specially appointed individual(s)—a prophet, saint, disciple, or martyr; (2) the message conveyed is in the form of commandments, sayings, or parables; (3) the reality of God’s revelation is based upon human testimony, which is entranced by hearing or seeing it. The revelation of the classical religions contradict other revelations by other traditions. Many of these revelations advocate a specific individual or religious institution, which is at variance with other revelations by other individuals or institutions. I am here referring to the revelations of Moses (Judaism), of Jesus (Christianity), of Muhammad (Islam), and Joseph Smith (Mormonism). True believers will battle “in the name of God” for the superiority of their own revelatory creed, held without question. That is an additional reason why I am skeptical of all claims to revelation unless they can be definitely corroborated by independent observers.
IV.

An important source of skepticism is the critical investigation of the historical record that is being uncovered in our time. We have introduced the term **Qur’anic criticism**, analogous to the term **Biblical criticism**, to describe this literature. I should add that biblical scholars have likewise been skeptical about the traditional accounts of the origins of Judaism and Christianity.

Questions concerning the truth of all such historical claims are at issue, especially when they contradict our normal expectations based upon experience. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence or, at the very least, sufficient confirmatory evidence. In my view, historic religious claims often rest on fragmentary evidence hidden by the sands of time. They persist because they’ve not been challenged or criticized effectively, and this is very difficult in the modern scientific and educated world. I attribute this to what I have called “the transcendental temptation” or “willful belief,” which impel people to accept the incredible without evidence, or even with evidence to the contrary.

The problem with the Qur’an and Hadith is the uncertain historical accuracy of the record, which is filled with gaps. There had been a great deal of scholarly and scientific research, particularly in the last century and a half, and especially, but not exclusively, by Western scholars. These scholarly works have shown that the traditional Muslim accounts of the origins of Islam are unreliable.

Many research scholars have cast doubt on these traditional sources: the Qur’an, the Hadith, and Sira (biographies of Muhammed). For example, Ignaz Goldziher and Joseph Schacht showed that most of the Hadith did not date from the early seventh century, as commonly believed, but much later in the eighth and ninth centuries, two hundred or more years after the death of Muhammed. They said much of the Hadith involved mythological narratives, detailed sayings, and commandments introduced by propagandists for a new faith. The officially sanctioned accounts of Islam became entrenched only after the ninth century, but their historical accuracy still is doubtful.

There has been a strong revival of Qur’anic criticism in the twentieth century, particularly since World War II, again generating considerable skepticism about the traditional versions. Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, in their book *Hagarism: The Making of the Muslim World*, took new directions by drawing from non-Muslim sources. This casts doubts that Mecca was actually the place where Islam began. Similarly, there is considerable skepticism about the life of Muhammed drawn from the Sira. The official rendition is based on interpolation and exaggeration. The first biographies of Muhammed were apparently written 100 to 200 years after his death. Much of this was a product of the vivid imagination of Arab storytellers. We have only the fragments of a biography by Ibn Ishaq, who died in 767, one hundred and thirty years after Muhammed, and Ibn Hisham, who died in 834, two hundred years after Muhammed. You can imagine a biographer writing the life of Patrick Henry or Ethan Allen, one hundred and fifty years after their deaths. The point is, there is no corroborative independent evidence, no manuscripts or inscriptions, no archeological confirmation or carbon-14 dating, and very little, if any, non-Muslim sources to confirm the story of his life.

Equally serious is the received Muslim account of the Surahs collected in the Qur’an. Muhammed never wrote anything himself but would state out loud the content of his revelations. And these sayings were recited, memorized, and transmitted by an oral tradition of illiterate folk, and written down eventually on palm leaves or inscribed on wood or stone. In any case, Muslims believed that within twenty years of the death of Muhammed (632), the content of the Qur’an was fixed. The traditional story says that the Qur’an was completed about 650, under the direction of Uthman. Many scholars, using textual and linguistic analyses, date it instead to the end of the seventh century, and some have suggested that there were many versions of the Qur’an, and that the one we possess was not in its final form until the early ninth century; but, in any case, there’s no firmly dated complete Qur’an that scholars can agree upon, which raises the question, what is the true Qur’an?

In recent years, Ibn Warraq has attempted to bring together many of the writings of Qur’anic scholars, who have used the best available scientific and scholarly research. Two recent works are especially revolutionary. John Wansbrough of the University of London demonstrated that the Qur’an and Hadith grew out of sectarian controversies over an extended period of time. In two books, *Qur’anic Studies*, and *The Sectarian Millieu*, both issued by Oxford University Press and since republished by Prometheus Books, Wansbrough argued that Islam emerged only when it came into contact with rabbinical Judaism and apparently borrowed from that tradition.

Christoph Luxenberg, in a book just published in Germany, shows that many of the obscurities of the Qur’an disappear if we read many words in Syriac, not Arabic. For example, according to Luxenberg, the so-called “seventy-two virgins” promised to martyrs in heaven who die for the cause of the Jihad should be reinterpreted as “white raisins/grapes” of “crystal clarity” rather than doe-eyed receptive virgins.

The conclusion of these inquiries demonstrates that the Qur’an and Hadith need to be deconstructed as much as any other text. When we do so, considerable doubt is raised about the authenticity of the Surahs that are contained in the Qur’an and the personal accounts of Muhammed’s life and sayings in the Hadith.

All of this is in sharp contrast to traditional interpretations of the Qur’an, where two arguments have been used: *ad baculum* (the appeal to force) and *ad vericundium* (the appeal to tradition) to dictate assent and suppress freedom of research; and, indeed, *fatwas* have been issued for those who reject Islam. An essential condition of any meaningful dialogue with those representing Islamic culture is that there be free inquiry.

This has special relevance to the current debate about whether Islamic countries can develop secular democracies in which a free exchange of ideas is permitted. If Islam is truly the word of God revealed by Allah, then there is no room for dissent. If, on the other hand, there are skeptical doubts about its inerrancy, then metaphorical or pluralistic interpretations are possible, similar to those that have been developed in Christianity and Judaism by open-minded scholars who are not committed to absolute fundamentalism. Islamic culture needs to be appreciated for its great contributions to human civilization in the arts, sciences, law, philosophy, and culture, but it needs to learn to be open to critical inquiry. That Islam should be taken as the absolute word of Allah, as revealed by his messenger, Muhammed, in my view, is highly questionable, to say the least. For people in the Islamic World to recognize this does not necessarily mean the end of Islam, and that it does leave room for reinterpretations in terms of modern science, scholarship, and philosophy, would be an important step forward.
Endnotes
2. Ibid., 42.
3. Ibid., Surah 87, 147.
4. Ibid., Surah 98, 241.
9. Ibid., 50.
10. Ibid., 52
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 51.