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Morality: Why Augustine did, and Milbank didn't quite, get it right

Brian T. Trainor

Augustine's glorious City of God, the new Jerusalem as a living reality that seduces us, is the principle and origin (as 'memory') and the fulfilment and end (as our true destination) of the 'ethical', but we are fitted as pilgrim selves (in a sense, 'constituted' as integral selves fit to be pilgrims) for the homeward journey and 'held in being' as pilgrim souls by means of the imperatives of the 'moral'. This is my main argument and it is also, I submit, the key contention of Augustine's *The City of God*. The first and main part of my argument (Augustine's glorious City of God as origin and end of the ethical) is, I think, at least consistent with the St. Augustine of the Radical Orthodoxy school but the second, subsidiary but important, part (concerning our being held in being as pilgrim souls by 'descending' morality) puts me (and I believe Augustine) at odds with this school, which envisages no such benign or constructive role for morality. My main disagreement here with John Milbank, the leading advocate of Radical Orthodoxy, is not with his project of characterising 'the ethical as gift-exchange, feast, marriage, and resurrection' in opposition to 'a recent discussion that would try to understand the ethical as *primarily* self-sacrifice for the other, without any necessary "return" issuing from the other back to oneself'.[1] This project profoundly reveals the real meaning of the 'ethical' and is brilliantly executed. Rather, my concern is that, as he pursues his project of interpreting Christian ethics as retaining 'the goal of happiness or beatitude through a novel *abandonment* of the goal of self-possession' and also of 'the cognate themes of self-achievement, self-control and above all self-government which rule nearly all our inherited ideas of what is ethical',[2] the vital role played by the law (and by morality, Christian or otherwise) in spiritual self constitution, in holding the self in being and in *requiring* self-control and self-government on our part to prevent the self's descent into death (the destruction, chaos and insanity of unrestrained impulse and 'low immediacy') is dispensed

[1] John Milbank, 'The Midwinter Sacrifice; A sequel to "Can morality be Christian?"', *Angelaki,* Vol 6, No. 3, (2001) August, 59.

[2] Milbank, 'The Midwinter Sacrifice', 51.

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with, overlooked or simply lost along the way. There is certainly an important truth in Milbank's charge that 'modern ethics, just because it enthrones altruism, is pathological in its degree of obliteration of the possibility of *consummation*, or of the beginning of beatitude in a time simply to be enjoyed, and a conviviality to be celebrated by the living self'[3] but it is also true that his own account, especially his celebration of divine plenitude overflowing in and through us (a condition of freely given beatitude) is deficient to the degree that it elides the role of law and morality (and also of self-control and self-government, of which he takes a dim view) in the constitution of the spiritual self.

In this article, I will firstly show (section one) that, for Augustine, the glorious City of God ever intends to draw the whole of creation, especially created humanity and most especially sinful, rebellious fallen humanity, towards itself, and to entice it to gaze upon the holy City and to be transformed and re-directed by so doing; the importance of this profound connection, I suggest, seems to be missed by John Milbank, Oliver O'Donovan and William Cavanaugh. I then show that law/morality is deprived of its benign, constructive and prohibitive role or its important 'negative' function (i) by Milbank's rejection of Augustine's bi-focal understanding or 'double prism-ed' conception of the law (section two), (ii) by the 'either-or' choice he (Milbank) presents us with between law and morality (a) understood 'falsely' as human-centered, 'reactive' and concerned with self-containment in one form or another (of the soul or of the city but always in a manner that subverts our true God-centeredness), or else (b) understood 'truly', as God's *solely* life giving, *purely* positive, eternal commands without any genuinely negative, prohibitive dimension (also section two), and (iii) by his treatment of evil (section three). I then argue (section four) that when reflecting upon ethics, it is advisable to distinguish between (i) the horizontal or diachronic aspect of ethics, that is ethics viewed as action(s), as decisions on our part concerning what is good or evil and (ii) the vertical or synchronic aspect of ethics, that is, ethics as passivity or morality, as our subjection to moral imperatives that forcefully impinge upon us, as what happens to a self (or soul) and forms a self.

(i) The City of God and the two poles of the soul/city

At the start of his great work *The City of God*, Augustine states that he proposes to consider 'the glorious City of God. . .both as it

[3] Milbank, 'The Midwinter Sacrifice', 53.

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exists in this world of time, a stranger among the ungodly, living by faith, and as it stands in the security of its everlasting seat'.[4] The City of God in this latter sense, that is, as a perfect, harmonious, and sinless community beyond time and yet also the origin and end of earthly human existence in time, 'is' (is or 'has' Being) in a primary, paradigmatic, original and ontological sense, whereas the City of God in its empirical, temporal, 'derived' or historical dimension 'exists' (though ever connected spiritually to its font in eternal Being) in the form of the church as a body as it looks to God in worship, in members of the church (the 'empirical' city of God) as they look beyond themselves to this glorious City, and in subjects of the earthly city as they likewise look beyond themselves to this glorious City. The latter is the 'truth' or 'true destiny' not just of the church but of the earthly city and each human self or soul as well. Considered as open and receptive to (the intimations of) the City of God, or 'looking upwards', so to speak, the 'rising' (or 'ascending') earthly pole of the soul and city allow the true and eternal font of divine justice to guide their earthly journey, and to the degree that they are attuned to 'the sovereignty of the Spirit in their midst', they may be truly said to 'live the life of God', whereas considered as closed off from the City of God and hostile to its intimations, the 'falling' (or 'descending') earthly pole of the soul and city possess a false autonomy and, as branches 'autonomously' cut off from their life in the vine (from the font of Life itself), they are derailed from their true destiny. 'Isaac' is the true destiny of 'Ishmael', and 'Christ' the true destiny of 'Adam'; just as our first being 'born in Adam' prefigures or anticipates our being 're-born in Christ', so too, Augustine tells us, the 'naturally born' earthly city is 'a kind of shadow and prophetic image' of the eternal City of God. 'This image', he says, 'was also called the holy city, in virtue of its *pointing t*o that other City, not as being the express likeness of the reality which is yet to be' (emphasis added).[5] As 'pointing to', the earthly city is, just as we ourselves are, 'in transition' from the death of sin in Adam to the fullness of life in Christ. Just as Hagar's 'natural' enslavement gives way to the divinely promised freedom of Sarah, and the earthly city as a slave points to the free City, so too (i) the inadequacy of our servitude under the law (our being in sin) points to the adequacy and freedom of God's grace, and (ii) the covenant from Mount Sinai 'bearing children for slavery' points to the covenant of promise.[6] Although Hagar's servitude

[4] Augustine, *The City of God*, ed. David Knowles, (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 1. Preface.

[5] Augustine, *City of God*, XV. 2.

[6] Augustine, *City of God*, XV. 2. (Gal. 4, 21–25).

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symbolises the servitude of the earthly city and of the soul, yet it is also 'a kind of shadow and prophetic image' in the (earthly) city and the (earthly) soul that points to the heavenly Jerusalem, the free City of God; 'But the shadows were to pass away with the coming of the light, and Sarah, the free woman, stood for the free city which the shadow, Hagar, for her part served to point to in another way'.[7] As Hagar 'points to' Sarah, so too the 'unredeemed' earthly city and soul prefigure the holy City; the earthly city exists 'not for its own sake but in order to symbolise another City'.[8] What this means is that for Augustine, just as the soul in sin points to, in the sense of being ever oriented to and implicitly anticipating the fullness of, the glorious (ontological) City of God, so too the 'earthly' city, in the same (literally identical) fashion, points to *its* true City. We are all 'Ishmael', for we all share in the bounty and corruption of our 'first-born' nature, but our hope in faith is that, 'as a result of the promise',[9] we are being born again into 'Isaac' as children of grace. We are all on a pilgrimage (Christians knowingly, on this side of eternity) from a condition of slavery and sin to a condition of freedom (in Christ). Being in transition, in the Platonic *metaxy*, we are moving from death to life through grace, stumbling frequently along the way but with our eyes fixed in hope on the cross and trusting in the grace of the resurrection. . .or so I contend, along, I trust, with Augustine who holds that there is a universal (all-enveloping) law of order within the universe that simultaneously separates and unites the unjust (the wretched) and the just (the blessed) – 'separates' because the unjust live 'outside' the true peace enjoyed by the just, and 'unites' (or at least envelops in some way within a common universe), because 'it is by the law of order that they [the wretched] are sundered from them [the blessed]'.[10] In Augustine's words, 'they are by their very misery connected with order'[11]; that is, their very 'order-induced' misery is itself a call to transition from death to life. However, it is precisely this notion of 'our being thus in transition', which John Milbank, William Cavanaugh and Oliver O'Donovan seem to deny.

In the final chapter of his momentous, path-breaking work, *Theology and Social Theory*, John Milbank holds that Augustine 'puts peaceful reconciliation in no dialectical relationship with conflict' (here his target is the work of Alistair MacIntyre) but holds that instead he 'does something prodigiously more historicist, in that he

[7] Augustine, *City of God*, XV. 2.
[8] Augustine, *City of God*, XV. 2.
[9] Augustine, *City of God*, XV. 3.
[10] Augustine, *City of God*, X1X. 13.
[11] Augustine, *City of God*, X1X. 13.

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isolates the codes which support the universal sway of antagonism, and contrasts this with the code of a peaceful mode of existence, which has historically arisen as 'something else', an *altera civitas*, having no logical or causal connection with the city of violence'.[12] On the contrary, however, as we have seen, Augustine's *altera civitas*, his 'glorious city of God, *does* have a deep logical and causally significant connection with the sinful city of violence, and this is not just a political but also an ethical or (personal) spiritual connection, one between (i) the eternal call of God's glorious city (the new Jerusalem) and (ii) each sinful human heart and each sinful human city, a connection in the form of a response, hoped for or otherwise. We are constantly being called from death into life; the 'hand of Life' enters into and touches our death in sin, and this 'touching', this entering of the Saviour into sinners needing salvation, this call from the eternal City that pierces (or hungers to pierce the resistance of) the very heart of even the 'falling' earthly city and citadel of the soul darkened by sin, would, I submit, be simply impossible if the peace of the *altera civitas* 'had no logical or causal connection with the city of violence'. Likewise, when Oliver O'Donovan suggests that 'there is no true *tertium quid* between [Augustine's] two cities'[13] and by William Cavanaugh claims that for Augustine 'church and coercive government represent two cities, two distinct societies'[14] and that the two cities do not have 'a kind of common political space or state',[15] it seems to me that what these authors implicitly challenge is precisely the Augustinian notion of our 'being ever in transition' between the death of sin and the fullness of life in Christ, so that for them, it would seem that we are either in sin *tout court* or in the grace of the kingdom *tout court*, either fully, unconditionally and unreservedly in Satan's kingdom ('dead in sin') or fully, unconditionally and unreservedly in God's kingdom ('alive to God'), either held captive by the law or existing beyond the law. However, what Romans 6;11 intends, I believe, is not that we *are* 'dead to sin' and that we *are* 'alive to God' but that we are *to consider ourselves as such*, meaning (i) that our faith in Christ acts as a bridge to Christ himself that, in a sense, leads us beyond the sinful condition that we must nevertheless endure for a while longer and (ii) that the direction of our gaze towards God and his promised fullness of life carries us towards, and in a sense into, that very fullness, so that in 'considering

[12] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory; Beyond Secular Reason*, (Blackwell, Oxford, 2006) 392.

[13] Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, 'The Political thought of City of God' in *Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics, Past and Present*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 59.

[14] William T. Cavanaugh, "From One City to Two: Christian Reimagining of Political Space", *Political Theology* 7, no 3 (2006): 309.

[15] Cavanaugh, "From One City to Two", 311.

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ourselves as such', we are not deceived. If so, however, then not only is there a *tertium quid* between the two cities, between the city of God and the city of violence, but we actually *are*, each of us, that *tertium quid*, that 'point of transition', that 'common space', between the two. It is interesting to note here that Milbank[16] speaks of our having a 'glimpse beyond ethics' (a false glimpse in Nietzsche's case but a true glimpse in the case of a Christian sense of the overflowing plenitude of the triune God) but, as we shall see in the next section, such a 'transitional glimpse' is only possible for those living in the Platonic *metaxy* (C. S. Lewis's 'shadow land'), in a realm between (i) our death-in-sin and need of salvation, both simultaneously revealed by law/morality as it 'descends' upon us) and (ii) the fullness of life intended by (God's) law/morality, pointing beyond itself and pointing us beyond ourselves.

(ii) Repent (good) and believe (good); Don't steal (good) and be generous (better); Reactive morality (bad) as opposed to true God-directed and God-oriented morality (good)

Milbank rightly says that 'generosity or true not stealing acts out of the assumption of plenitude'[17] but there is a mid way point (more precisely a realm of transition or 'soul- making' in which we live out our lives) between merely law-induced 'not stealing' (obedience to the law, despite temptation) and true not stealing (a generosity that 'exceeds' the law) and that intermediary zone (Augustine's and Plato's *metaxy*) is one in which we have a bi-focal understanding or 'double prism-ed' conception or 'experience' of the law. We see law, on the one hand, at certain times and in certain moods, as mainly an alien but forceful intrusion into our lives with which we must begrudgingly comply, so that we have not yet done with the desire for stealing (or of lying, or of adultery…); we long for the advantages that infringing the law would bring but whilst we prudently forego them because we must, we do not forego in our hearts the 'spirit' of stealing (or of lying, or of adultery…), and we do not seriously renounce the attractiveness of vice. On the other hand, and at other times, this grudging attitude to the law is challenged and gives way (in varying degrees) to a conception of the law as having our own best interests in view or at least we have faint glimpses of our true destiny as mutually fulfilling members of a single community, of the vision Milbank describes as 'ontological peaceableness'. Our moral condition or 'ethical profile' (where we are at) at any particular time

[16] John Milbank, "Can Morality be Christian?" in The *Word Made Strange; Theology, Language, Culture* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1998) 225.

[17] Milbank, "Can Morality be Christian?", 225.

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can only be expressed by the 'in so far as' or 'to the degree that' formula, for in this intermediary zone in which we live out our lives and rely upon God's grace to resist temptation and move forward in the Spirit, 'being wholly lost in sin' (being lost in a world of vice which scarcely, or even no longer, knows itself as such) and 'being beyond sin' (being lost in a world of virtue which scarcely, or even no longer, knows itself as such) are, respectively, conditions of the soul to be avoided (living death) or striven for (fullness of life or Milbank's 'ontological peaceableness'). However Milbank, I believe, blurs and casts doubt upon this very zone or dimension in which we habitually live out our lives by speaking as if we are either (i) lost in a world of sin or in the 'dimension' of reactive morality or else (ii) caught up or enraptured in a world of charity, of mutuality and free, spontaneous, joyful and heartfelt giving, as if, that is, we undergo a 'once and for all' and complete 'death to sin' and, leaving behind the realm/world of sin forever, enter a graced world of generous mutuality that is beyond sin and morality, a world in which we no longer need God's law to help us restrain sin and to 'hold us in being' as distinct integral selves. On this side of eternity, I wish to maintain, we live our lives between these two worlds and are ever being drawn from the one to the other, from sin to salvation, from law as burden (No) to law as grace (Yes), from repentance to belief, from our death in sin to our life in God.

Besides law and morality in the two senses discussed above -law/morality as apparently alien, against us and negative towards us but truly for us (in truth, it is always grace, however we subjectively apprehend it in sin), and law as our very own, truly ours and positive towards us-, there is also an important third sense of law/morality to be taken into account, namely law and morality 'pressed into service' as the glamorous embellishment of evil, indeed as instruments of evil; it is in effect this distorted 'morality' that Milbank has in mind when he says that 'morality' cannot be Christian. Curiously and ironically, what Milbank calls 'reactive morality' is more 'unethical' than 'immoral'; it could almost be described as acting morally and even *being* moral but for unethical reasons, as 'not stealing' for example but not doing so as a 'facilitative', moral step towards real generosity (the true end of the formative force of morality) but as a way of maintaining a proud, self-contained soul or city cut off from its true destiny in the plenitude of community and either indifferent to, or contemptuous towards, the demands of its loving God. Since what Milbank refers to as 'morality' is really 'distorted morality', then to his five marks of morality, namely Reaction, Sacrifice, Complicity with Death, Scarcity and Generality,[18] we should add

[18] Milbank, "Can Morality be Christian?", 219.

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Pride and Contempt for God to make up the seven devils that inhabit each well-swept house (and city) that has been cleansed of all marks of true godliness and made precisely into such a defiantly 'God-free' zone (Luke 11: 25). But then he leaves precious little room for morality as traditionally and properly understood; he holds that law and morality are to be approached and understood either 'falsely' as human-centred, 'reactive' and concerned with self-containment in one form or another, (of the soul or of the city but always in a manner that subverts our true God-centeredness), or else 'truly', as God's *always* life giving, purely positive, eternal commands that direct us (as indeed they do) towards the heavenly city but *never* play a negative role in restraining sin, including the sin of reactive morality and law that characterises Augustine's descending earthly city and that he (Milbank) describes so well. It is not the case, for Milbank, that what appears to be a divine 'No' is in truth a divine 'Yes', but rather that there is not even the appearance of a negative 'against sin' side or dimension of God's commands. The latter, I maintain in contrast, have what I would call a permanently (not apparent or illusory) negative dimension, and even if the point of the negative is always positive, that does not mean that there is no negative, that, as Milbank holds, God's commands do not have a negative aspect at all. He says that 'Do not steal means, for the gospel, positively 'be generous'[19] but for the gospel 'Do not steal' surely means precisely what it (negatively) says; the form of the law, when it commands the respect it deserves, serves to keep evil at bay and helps form/constitute a spiritual being ever more capable of true generosity. As Augustine says, 'in the first place, injure no one, and, in the second, do good to everyone [you] can'[20] and Barth too is broadly right (though with the reservations expressed below) in saying that 'the one Word of God is both Gospel and Law',[21] that 'the Law is the necessary *form of the Gospel*, whose content is grace'[22] and that it is part of the Church's 'prophetic witness *for* the will of God *against* all of men's sinful presumption, *against* all their lawlessness and unrighteousness'.[23]

Milbank's emphasis on the purely (that is, *only*) positive intent of the law as God's revealed commands is in line with Derrida's point in the 'Force of Law', that 'the essence of law is not prohibitive but affirmative'.[24] However, Derrida goes on to say that 'there is no such thing as law (*droit*) that doesn't imply *in itself*, *a priori*, *in the*

[19] Milbank, "Can Morality be Christian?", 225.

[20] Augustine, *City of God*, XIX. 14.

[21] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 511.

[22] Karl Barth, "Gospel and Law" in *Community State and Church* ed. W. Herberg (Doubleday; New York, 1960), 80.

[23] Barth, "Gospel and Law", 80.

[24] Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law. The Mystical Foundation of Authority", *Cardozo Law Review*, 11:5–6, (1990), 929.

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analytic structure of its concept, the possibility of being "enforced", applied by force'.[25] Now this allegedly analytical link between law and force/enforceability suggested by Derrida certainly seems to imply that the essence of the law is prohibitive (negatively enforcing its will against opposition) as well as affirmative, and thus to put him at odds with Milbank's purely positive position. How then are we to conceive of the prohibitive aspect of law? Is it essential or accidental? My own view is that whilst the essence of law is indeed affirmative (Barth's divine 'Yes'), yet at the same time, in the light of our human weakness and proneness to self indulgence, it is invariably prohibitive or negative as well (the divine 'No'); its prohibitive character could, I think, be best characterized as a 'necessary accident'. Thus justice/law is affirmative by essence and prohibitive by empirical human necessity or by virtue of the sinful waywardness of our humanity. It is as if what law, justice and morality ultimately intend is a suffusion of the empirical by the ontological, of the empirical 'actual' by the truly 'real', an affirmation and celebration of life and value in all its aspects, a spontaneous or authentically willed harmony of the good in all things (including humanity), but the 'pragmatism of law' is obliged to acknowledge our human waywardness and, along with it, the regrettable empirical necessity of enforcement and compulsion. Thus it is entirely proper, I believe, for Derrida to emphasize the importance, and even the necessity, of the link between law and force/enforceability but the problem with Derrida's manner of speaking here is that it suggests that, at the very heart of law, we find not only an affirmative essence of life in its fullness but also a 'prohibitive essence'.[26] However, when reflecting upon law, it is important to recognize its prohibitive aspect *as empirically necessary rather than as being co-constitutive of its very essence*, or as, in Derrida's words, lodged in 'the analytic structure of the concept'. By claiming that there is an intrinsic link between law and the 'prohibitive negative', rather than, as I've suggested, a necessary but external link, Derrida in effect puts the 'accidental', even if empirically necessary because of sin/human weakness, at the heart of the 'truly essential'. Barth is, I believe, closer to the mark in asserting that the one Word of God is 'first Gospel and *then* Law',[27] that is, in my more Augustinian terms, that the Word of God announces *first* (that is in terms of ontological priority and precedence) the perfect harmony of ultimate reality and the fullness and purity of the eternal glorious City of God, and *then* takes into account our fallen human condition by announcing the empirical necessity of the prohibitive aspect of law, its 'ongoing' necessity in order to restrain

[25] Derrida, "Force of Law", 925.
[26] For a more extended discussion, see . . . . . .
[27] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 511.

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sin (denied by Milbank) and to restore us to the fullness of being originally intended by God.

There is, then, no reason why we may not worship, so to speak, at the shrine of *both* Dionysius and Apollo, and to see that just as Nietzsche was simply wrong in insisting that Apollo had to be de-divinized or de-absolutes in order for Dionysius to be recognised as the 'true' absolute, so too Milbank is mistaken in 'de-divinizing' the divine aspect of prohibitive, genuinely 'negative' law and morality in order for the overflowing love of God to be acknowledged as the true absolute. In Apollo, the Greeks divinized individuation (the forming of distinct integral selves), the idea of proportion, of limit, of moderation, of each spiritual value or quality being held in its proper place, and they were, surely right to do so, for when due limits are observed, absolute value is present and is realised. However, the Greeks also esteemed the frenzied, 'intoxicated' demigod Dionysius, the god who is for the most part absent (or appears to be) from ordinary, everyday life but whose divine presence privileges us in rare, inspired moments when our self is 'decentered' and we are taken out of ourselves into the true or absolute 'centre' of being. Now just as Nietzsche ardently admires the ecstatic tone of the Dionysian festival, for here, as he says, 'the individual, with all his restraint and proportion, succumbed to the self-oblivion of the Dionysian states, and forgot the precepts of Apollo', so too in a parallel fashion, Milbank (rightly) admires the ecstatic tone of the soul completely caught up in the divine plenitude and so 'lost in grace' as to be scarcely aware any longer of the distinction between giving and receiving but (wrongly) dismisses or 'forgets' the divinity (the divine 'for-us-ness') of the law and morality. Our real life, he (again rightly) says is in giving without counting the cost. 'I exist in receiving; because I receive, I joyfully give.[28] When Milbank speaks (however truly) in this way of our giving so freely and spontaneously in the Spirit, it is perhaps pertinent to recollect (the contrasting but complementary truth) that Apollo was a 'God' and one whose precepts must never be forgotten, if by 'forgotten' we mean 'overlooked' 'ignored' or 'disregarded'. Rather, what is meant, – or what should be meant – by 'forgetting the precepts of Apollo' is that the precepts of Apollo

[28] Milbank, "Can Morality be Christian?", 228. Milbank takes exception to what he calls the 'ascription to me [by Christopher Insole *The Politics of Human Frailty; A Theological Defence of Political Liberalism*, SCM Press, London, 2004)] of a kind of blithe willful May time optimism' that 'entirely ignores my Pauline insistence on the utter fallenness and demonic captivity of the current world' (*Theology and Social Theory; Beyond Secular Reason*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2006, Preface p. xv). What is missing, however, in his work (missing, I believe, because deemed unnecessary) is any account of the transition (and especially the role of law/morality in this transition) from fallen, demonic captivity to what he calls 'the hidden realm of real peaceful being that cosmic evil obscures from our view' (Preface p. xv).

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may only be forgotten in the sense that a ballerina, imbued with the genius of her art, 'forgets' (i.e., incorporates into the core of her very being), its elementary precepts and technical rules and moves freely in its spirit and 'freely gives' from the fullness of her artistically cultivated self.

Interestingly, Milbank allows 'our worldly logic' to wonder 'why should we trust the giver for whom giving is easy?',[29] to which I would reply that for human souls who have not yet done with sinning, giving is never easy *tout court* but, as a matter of degree (which it always is), *becomes* more and more easy in the case of the soul ascending through pain, discipline and obedience and brimming ever more fully (and 'naturally') with the Spirit, and, correspondingly, less and less easy (and 'un-natural') for the soul sinking into the darkness of the disconnected or undisciplined self. (Citizens of the descending earthly city may be disconnected but heroically disciplined, having the 'reactive' and 'self-contained' virtues that Milbank describes so well, or they may be undisciplined to the point where they are so far beneath the benign 'self- forming', 'chaos-restraining' function of the law that they become 'disconnected' in every conceivable sense.) In the case of our ballerina, whose highly cultivated artistic self offers such a stark contrast to the disconnected or undisciplined selves of the citizens of the descending earthly city, the 'Holy Spirit in her life' is as much present in her scrupulous, daily 'Apollonian' attendance to the practice of ordinary steps and routines, as it is in her ecstatic enjoyment of her art. If we look at her life as a dancer as a whole, there is no need to 'purchase' the aspect of Dionysian ecstasy at the price of a downgrading of the aspect of Apollonian order, routine and attendance to everyday duties (to, so to speak, the 'law and morality' of dance). There are not two rival divinities here; rather, the Holy Spirit is present throughout in different ways in a single process or integrated unity. It is true that we more readily and more willingly ascribe an absolute significance to the ecstatic moment than to the ordinary and the dull, but the kind of disciplined routine and 'sacrificial' practice that the ballerina engages in, however dull and boring it may be, 'holds her in being' as a ballerina (holds *her* Satan at bay) and provides the (in a sense, divinely formed) foundation for the ongoing perfection of her art. I would suggest that a better word for the 'ordinary', when it is thus designates a familiar medium of God's gentle 'routinised' presence in our lives, might be the 'homely', i.e., those qualities/situations, however familiar, and those activities, however repetitious, in and through which we feel ourselves to be either at home (talking each evening after dinner by the fire, anticipating unostentatiously the joy of the heavenly banquet)

[29] Milbank, "Can Morality be Christian?", 228.

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or to be on our way home (the repetitious practice of the ballerina/our grudging obedience to the law that nevertheless acknowledges its true point and purpose, its 'for-us-ness', its sense of leading us homeward).

(iii) Evil

Another way in which Milbank deprives law and morality of its benignly constructive but prohibitive role is in his treatment of evil. Broadly, it could be said, on the one hand, that he mistakes the occasion of virtue for its evil cause, or more precisely, the (often, generally) evil occasion of true virtue for its real cause, namely the love of God-in-humanity expressed in the form of courage, heroism, patience, etc.,[30] but then, on the other hand, that in the case of 'reactive' morality, the (often, generally) evil occasion of reactive virtue enters, so to speak, into the very character of the (false, seeming) virtue that it occasions in the way Milbank explains so well, as, for example, the way in which a vainglorious or pride-filled mercy rejoices in the evil that both occasions the 'reactive' virtue in question and leaves its mark of evil upon it. Virtue, I maintain, is adaptive (flexible) and serves the true good; sham virtue is reactive (border-protecting) and shields itself against the true good. Virtue respects morality and acknowledges the legitimacy of its imperatives; sham virtue distorts morality and turns it into a self-serving, self preserving, self containing and 'border (of the self or city) protecting' moral mechanism. It is true, as Milbank says, that we only acknowledge an *observance* of laws in the face of a threat to them, the threat of our own inner temptations or else outward violations by others'[31] but it is also true that what the law broadly requires of us is our profound recognition of the truth expressed in it, our free acknowledgement of 'what truly is', of the reality of each person as a child of God, of each person's true ontological status. Thus the law, in one stroke, evokes our free recognition of truth and yet simultaneously brings to light the full force of our sinful resistance to it. Milbank is, then, right to say that evil is a threat and temptation, that 'the law assumes that each is a threat to all, that we are *tempted* to murder, to rob, to lie' and that 'the law and all of us collectively *hold back* a threat to all of us', but misleading in saying that what we thus give to each other is

[30] Milbank, "Can Morality be Christian?", 220. If it is the case, as Milbank (following William Blake) asserts, that '*every* act of mercy, in so far as it rejoices in itself, rejoices also in its [evil] occasion' ("Can Morality be Christian?", 219), then it is also true that every act of mercy, to the degree that it does not rejoice in itself, rejoices in its divine cause or true substance and is, indeed, an overflow into time of its true substance, of divine mercy itself.

[31] Milbank, "Can Morality be Christian?", 220.

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'the meagre gift of survival, ownership and literal truth'.[32] Firstly, the mutual gift of physical survival is no meagre gift. Secondly, the enforcement of (respect for) law and morality helps to prevent our 'deformation', the dissolution or disintegration of our spiritual self, the diffusion of its energies in sinful, death-bearing, 'self'-diminishing pursuits (at once shattering and shrinking). By 'dissolution', 'shattering', 'shrinking', etc, I mean to convey the condition of a soul or self descending ever deeper into a state of 'low immediacy' where it virtually loses its 'capacity to be recognised' as a self and hovers precariously on the border of non-Being.

Let us use a real life event to elucidate what I mean by 'low immediacy' or the 'descent into dissolution'. One day Marie said to her husband, Brian, that it was about time he considered giving up football training and that he should think about taking his son Thomas to football training instead. Brian's reaction to this entirely unexpected suggestion was initially unenthusiastic and defensive, but after giving the matter further thought, he then agreed that his wife's suggestion should be taken up. Before considering this actual case, let us, firstly consider a different scenario where Brian, out of sheer laziness, decides not to take his son to football training. Curiously, in this situation, Brian is perfectly secure in his status as an unambiguous agent of action and as a definite 'locus' of decision making; and yet the purpose set for him as a 'family man' by his 'family world' is not realized in and through him. His failure to act damages both his family world and his 'self', which is an integral, constitutive element of that world. The lack of ambiguity with respect to Brian's agency in this case is due to the 'simplicity' or the 'low immediacy' of his decision, for it involves only a desire to remain in an uninterrupted state (laziness!), the registering of this desire in his mind and his conscious assent to its dictates (i.e., non-action). He is certainly 'the' agent in this case and yet he is scarcely 'an' agent at all; indeed, he is in danger of becoming 'de-agent-ified', of ceasing to be an agent or self in any meaningful or humanly recognizable sense at all, or at least of persisting as a kind of ('shadowy') self only in the grotesquely diminished sense of continuously 'allowing' his energies –understood in Nietzschean terms as natural manifestations of energy, knowing no vindictiveness![33] – to be wastefully dissipated; he is 'false' to himself and his 'family world', whereas in the case where he does the right thing, his agency, when he finally decides after some hesitation to take his son to football training, is paradoxical and ambiguous. He is 'true' to himself, not so much because he acts, as because he allows himself to be acted upon by the law,

[32] Milbank, "Can Morality be Christian?", 220.
[33] Milbank, "Can Morality be Christian?", 221.

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by the forceful moral imperative expressed in his wife's words, for his 'act' is then also His act, God's will expressed in his will; it is an acknowledgment of the true (simultaneously spiritual and temporal) good of the family and a form of assimilation of this spiritual reality into his inner life and 'growing' self. Finally, let us assume that Brian, admittedly in saint-like fashion, is at all times fully alive to the exigencies of his family world, that he spontaneously agrees to his wife's suggestion and that he decides without the slightest hesitation to take his son to football training. In thus thinking and acting in the 'spirit' of the family, Brian achieves a higher simplicity or immediacy, for in this case there is no difference or felt tension between God's will (here expressed as the will or 'true good' of the family) as it enters into Brian's consciousness and his present or actual will, but rather an identity between the two which makes the 'ought' redundant and which makes his act or decision fully his own (fully 'active', so to speak) and yet entirely passive, in the sense that his conscious will is the servant or medium of the will of the family (God's will for *this* family expressed in Marie's words). Ordinary ethical experience, – or our manner of experiencing the authoritative, forceful, moral imperatives of our various worlds upon us, i.e., the 'oughts' or requirements of the 'imperative law' issuing there from – falls, so to speak, into a realm between the self 'falling' or tempted towards the lower type of simplicity or immediacy, where the 'own self' (the Holy Spirit within us) of an agent is scarcely involved at all, and the self lured heavenward or 'rising' towards the higher type of simplicity or immediacy, where the 'divine' own self (the Spirit in us) operates through and is entirely in harmony with, the conscious will of the agent.[34]

By helping to prevent our 'de-formation', the dissolution or disintegration of our spiritual self, the enforcement of (respect for) law and morality helps (thirdly) constitute the self as a distinct integral self that may then serve as a vehicle of divine plenitude and 'expand' into its God-ordained destiny, thereby helping (in Augustine's words) 'our restless hearts to find rest in Thee'. It is this third feature and advantage of the law (of 'law against sin') which is at the same time its greatest danger and disadvantage. The reason is that we know only too well that the formative force of the law can help constitute the self as a self that then defies, and cuts itself off from, what God intends, and in this case (and *only* in this case), the morality/law of the Gospel assumes in an 'earth-bound' mind the distorted guise of

[34] In . . . . . I describe how faith plays a role in these journeyings of the self, how our human 'inner' subjective is both lured into, and subject to, the 'outer' imperatives of *its* divine 'objective' and how faith draws into symbiotic union and 'intensifies' (brings about a fuller subjective apprehension on our part of) the 'for-each-otherness' of the human subjective and the divine objective.

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'reactive morality' and becomes an instrument of self-containment (of the soul or of the city, as Milbank rightly says). For Augustine, the wellspring of hope and redemption for the soul caught in the grip of reactive morality (in his terms, those ensnared in the 'inverted' ethics of the falling earthly city) is the lure of the holy City, experienced as a deep inner restlessness that yearns for fulfilment in Him and his kingdom. We need to be clear that whilst it may be a feature of 'reactive morality' that a 'part', as Milbank says, must be sacrificed to the 'whole' (of the self or city),[35] this is not so in the case of morality as such, as Milbank appears to think; God's laws or commands 'know no evil', for as the latter descend with prohibitive restraint upon us, nothing (literally, no thing, no being or no true aspect of being) is lost or destroyed; rather nothing, in the sense of evil and vice (the violent vacuum of 'anti-beings' and 'anti-Being'), is held at bay to allow 'Being itself' full rein in and through us. The 'self-sacrifice' of reactive morality is self-diminution ('all loss and no gain'); the 'self-sacrifice' (self-control, self-government) of real morality is self-expansion ('all gain and no loss'). For Augustine, there is self-expansion through the law; for Milbank, there is self-expansion in spite of, or at least wholly apart from and independently of, the law. Admittedly, there is some truth in his claim that *every* 'command of duty requires a violent renunciation' (presumably he has *every* command of 'ordinary morality' in mind) but this should be understood, not as 'a subordination of the part to the whole',[36] as he suggests, but as a forthright (even 'violent') rejection of violence itself, of the seductive call of Death, of the vacuum of non-Being that draws beings away from their orientation to Being itself (to 'fuller being') and towards a bastardised form of chaotic un-in-formed, disintegrated existence that becomes increasingly indistinguishable from 'living death' (non-being).[37] Precisely because he is right to say that 'sin itself *is* sin because it negates being',[38] he is wrong to say that morality (not 'reactive' morality) requires sacrifice in the sense of a part (a being or 'existent' in some sense) being sacrificed for something else; it is because sin negates being and life that the eternal command of the Lord of Life forbids it.

In his justly famous work *Ethical Studies* F. H. Bradley helps us to better understand these ethically induced 'expanding' and 'contracting' states of the self when he urges us to accept that 'the whole self is present in its states, and that therefore the whole self is the object aimed at; and this is what we mean by self-realization.'[39] What

[35] Milbank, "Can Morality be Christian?, 222.
[36] Milbank, "Can Morality be Christian?, 223.
[37] This point is further elaborated in . . . . . .
[38] Milbank, "Can Morality be Christian?, 224.
[39] F.H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies* (The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988), 68.

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Bradley says here of 'the whole self [as] the object aimed at' is precisely what Augustine has in mind by the restfulness of the perfected soul 'that rests in Thee'; also, what Bradley has in mind by the whole self being 'present in its states' is precisely what Augustine means by the 'restlessness-inducing' presence of God in each human self; and, finally what Bradley means by 'self-realization' is what Plato and Augustine mean by the soul journeying to its divinely ordained fullness in the kingdom, becoming ever more properly ordered, as Augustine would say, to God as its 'absolute object' and acting more and more 'as it wants' ("Love God and do as you want": Augustine). However, this 'whole self' may be present to the everyday self or 'I', whose task it is to weave together the various aspects of our spiritual world into a harmonious unity or a self-consistent system of ends (Bradley's 'whole of ends'), as either **a** 'silent approver' (of our everyday, routine and entirely innocent activities) or as the moral law's censorious**,** and would-be prohibitive but life-bearing critic; in this case the disapproving voice of the whole self becomes virtually indistinguishable from the censorious voice of the law, of God's formative commands invading our inner world with force and conviction but also with a strong desire for our re-formation. Take, for example, the case of a married man who attempts to seduce one of his female employees but who also wishes to be faithful to his wife. Whatever he may wish, it is clearly not possible for this man to completely separate the two spheres of 'work' and 'home', in such a way that his consciousness would cease to serve as the 'meeting point' of the various spheres of his existence or as the uniting thread of a *single* spiritual world; nor is it possible for him to be perfectly at peace with himself (i.e., with his self as 'seducer' and as 'husband') whilst attempting to seduce his employee and also whilst helping his wife to prepare the evening meal. This person, like every person, is a 'living whole-of-parts' that is continuously sustained and held together by the part-whole mediation of the conscious 'I' in its everyday thoughts, aims and actions. His everyday self has a degree of autonomy concerning the kind of spiritual universe it will inhabit; by its actions, it determines whether it will become an enhanced or a diminished self, whether it will inhabit an expanding or a contracting universe; each self *becomes*, what it acts and wills. Either the self is drawn by Being into ever fuller life (all gain; all life; all being/gift) or it is drawn into the vacuum of anti-Being (all loss; all death; all evil/deprivation) In the case of our seducer, the more he seduces, and the more he ignores the commanding restraint of life-bearing law/morality, the more his spiritual identity disintegrates (or 'de-forms', instead of 're-forming') and the more he *becomes* the kind of self or person who does this kind of deed with ever greater facility, as the attribute of infidelity is gradually communicated, so to speak, into the core of his 'ever diminishing' being. Just as a

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single act of seduction has reverberations throughout his self as a whole, threatening to unravel its unity and inner consistency, so too to habitually seduce has an effect on the kind of person he is (a kind that is ever more alien to his true essence). In this case, the 'self as seducer' comes increasingly to occupy the 'centre stage' of his spiritually declining 'energy-dissipating' world; what the moral law and his 'own self' (increasingly silenced) forthrightly reject as alien, as anti-Being and as ultimately destructive of the very being and integrity of the self, may actually become through his choices, the pivotal point of a distorted or inverted 'whole self'. This kind of resistance to the life bearing law is self-diminution to the point of death, unless of course the sinner can grasp through grace the opportunity for self-reformation and self-expansion that the law never ceases to offer. Milbank believes that the moral law 'always views death as an enemy to life rather than as the passage of life to further life' (CM, p. 224) but it is death in the sense of non-being, of self-diminution to the point of extinction, that the moral law opposes in order to then turn the tide of contracting 'diminishing' life towards fuller 'expanding' life.

(iv) Conclusion; The diachronic (horizontal/ethical) and synchronic (vertical/moral) aspects of ethics

When reflecting upon ethics, it is advisable to distinguish between (i) the horizontal or diachronic aspect of ethics, that is, ethics viewed as action(s), as decisions on our part concerning what is good or evil and (ii) the vertical or synchronic aspect of ethics, that is, ethics as passivity or morality, our subjection to moral imperatives that forcefully impinge upon us, as what happens to a self (or soul) and forms a self, remembering of course that whilst these ethical aspects are distinguishable in principle and for purposes of analysis, they are inseparable in practice and mutually implicative. In doing good, a soul becomes good; there is a 'communication of attributes' from act to person, from the 'character' of a series of acts to the 'character' of a self. Thus the diachronic acts of the 'self as active' (or agent) in the time series cause backwards, so to speak, the 'character' of the self by acting upon the 'self as passive', as 'being formed', as improving (growing towards the light of God and exhibiting its own 'higher level synchronicity' and wholeness/holiness) or as deteriorating (sinking further into darkness, becoming 'de-synchronised' or disordered as a self) The law and morality is divine synchronism descending 'from above' with formative force upon a self that, once initially constituted as a self through the grace of obedience to the law, thereafter may grow into ever higher levels of (its own unique) synchronicity. Thus the diachronic feeds the synchronic and vice versa, for good

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or ill in both cases. It is a distorted form of ethics in the first sense (diachronic ethics; ethics as knowing what to do and doing it) that Bonhoeffer has in mind when he says that whilst 'the knowledge of good and evil seems to be the aim of all ethical reflection', the 'first task of Christian ethics is to invalidate this knowledge', to point out that 'in the knowledge of good and evil man does not understand himself in the reality of the destiny appointed in his origin, but rather in his own possibilities'[40] and to insist that 'as the image of God man draws his life entirely from his origin in God, but the man who has become like God has forgotten how he was at his origin and has made himself his own creator and judge'.[41] What he says here is in perfect accord with what Augustine has to say about the 'descending' earthly city and its earth-bound gaze discussed in section one and with what Milbank has to say about 'reactive' morality, namely that in so far as the realm of ethical action or *practical* ethical 'knowing and acting' is a purely human field, divorced from God and God's intent for humanity, it is not ethical at all but rather a 'God-free' zone where man becomes his own good, acts (diachronically) in accordance with his 'knowledge' of what he takes to be good, and displaces the good for man intended by God.

Whilst, then, 'ethics' primarily consists of our attempts to realize value, to bring it into being and 'make value/goodness real' by what we do, 'morality' primarily consists of the operation within us of forceful divine imperatives (i) designed to form, constitute and 'hold in being' distinct, integral selves (to stave off the chaotic disintegration of the self, known as captivity of sin) and (ii) requiring us to respect each self or soul as a child of God and center of absolute value (to act rightly or justly towards others). Ethics consists, more precisely, of our endeavors to realize absolute value through the prism of the distinctive, relative values (friendship, generosity), as in the case of prescriptive ethical principles with a positive content (It is good, or one ought to, spend time with friends, thereby realising the value of friendship; it is good, or one ought to, give freely, thereby realising the value of generosity), as distinct from our subjection to the imperative obligations of morality or the 'descending synchronism' of God's law (One *ought not* to steal). Interestingly, Augustine speaks of a 'well-ordered concord with all men' requiring that, as we mentioned earlier, 'a man, in the first place, injure no one [morality], and, in the second, do good to everyone he can [ethics]'.[42] The experiential core of the passive dimension of ethics (ethics in the second sense, generally referred to as 'morality' but understood here in religious terms as divine synchronism descending

[40] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, (SCM Press, London, 1963), 3.
[41] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 4.
[42] Augustine, *City of God*, X1X. 14.

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'from above' with formative force upon us) is the forceful presence of a strong sense of obligation emanating from beyond us, yet felt as being 'for us', the elementary experience of which is universal but the interpretation of which (the significance subjectively attached to the experience) is highly varied. (Is it, for example, merely the strong commanding voice of values and obligations arbitrarily inculcated into us by our society, so that it is really just our own voice, as a 'human-centred' approach might argue, or is it the strong commanding voice of God, or of Reason, or…?) Whilst the human centred approach correctly 'senses' that ethics/morality is in some sense 'for us', that the well being of the human person is the ultimate end, or point and purpose, of value, yet the danger here is that the human person, if *only* considered under this aspect, may be mistakenly conceived of as the sovereign or master of values in the sense that he might (as a god not knowing God) regard them as just his own subjective preferences, as merely his own private 'knowing' of good and evil, and thus as instruments only of his immediate purposes without reference to God or even the good of the universe as a whole (the universal community of the good). This, as we have just seen, is the danger that Bonhoeffer alerts us to. If we see ourselves as the point and purpose, or absolute end, of values, then values will be seen as only *of* and *for* us, that is, as originating from, returning to, and serving only, each of us, individually or collectively, and thus as thoroughly subordinate to *our* purposes. Certainly, values are 'for us' but it is only as 'beyond us', as the call of Love itself from the heart of the Trinity, that they are truly 'for us', and that we are truly 'for them'; viewed otherwise, they are cut off from their true origin and end and thus de-natured, as Augustine originally noted and as both Milbank and Bonhoeffer would rightly insist. If we focus only on what is valuable as being so 'for us', there is a danger that we will succumb to a kind of pan-subjectivism (Bonhoeffer's concern), i.e., we will regard what is valued as merely a function of, or as being solely determined by, our own personal decisions (existentialism) or by the likes and dislikes of the 'subject who values' (emotivism). We will hold that value is merely a subjective or psychological characteristic which an object acquires through its relation to the liking (seeming good) or disliking (seeming evil) of a sentient subject. We need then to quickly counterbalance the present humanist or 'human-centered' (over-)emphasis in our culture on values being 'for us' by insisting that in truth (though it is a truth that can be acknowledged or denied) the human self is ever oriented to absolute value (love itself) in and through the distinctive human values (generosity, friendship, etc.). As oriented to God, to the font of value or Absolute Value itself, each human self is a 'soul in the making', and moves towards perfection, becoming more 'itself' and more fully developed as a self capable of receiving and giving love. We could perhaps express

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this by saying that our earthly human pilgrimage is from love itself, to love itself, through the constant call of love itself by which we are formed for the journey and improved along the way. This is Milbank's divine overflow being carried forward by us, becoming, so to speak, a diachronic continuation through us (by means of charity) of divine plenitude and peace, though, I would add (against Milbank), that this continuation is only possible through our being continuously 'held in being', and formed by the divine force/grace of law and morality (the descending divine synchronism)

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