Blame, Respect and Recognition: A Reply to Theo van Willigenburg

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In an article in *Utilitas* Theo van Willigenburg has argued that moral valuation is distinguished from other forms of valuation by the Kantian concept of respect. He criticizes, from that standpoint, an account I put forward, which builds on the connections between moral wrongdoing, blame and withdrawal of recognition. I examine the difference between these two approaches and defend my own.

I

In a couple of essays[1] I have defended an account of what makes a valuation distinctively moral, and made suggestions about the role morality plays within the larger domain of normative relations among human beings. This account centres on the feeling or feelings involved in the act of moral blame.[2] Theo van Willigenburg, in his 'Shaping the Arrow of the Will',[3] puts forward a Kantian alternative, founded on the notion of respect rather than blame. He describes my approach in the main accurately, and throughout very generously. He goes on to raise issues that seem to me to be of real ethical and cultural importance. I am grateful to him on all counts.

In some respects the difference between us is not as great as he thinks it is, as I shall try to show in section III. Undoubtedly, however, there are important differences. Willigenburg is right to relate them to certain differences between the ethics of Kant and Hegel, notably to the different implications carried by the notions of *respect* and

[1] 'The Definition of Morality' and 'Freedom, Morality and Recognition', in John Skorupski, *Ethical Explorations*, Oxford, 1999. See also my 'Morality and Ethics', *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. Craig (London, 1998).

[2] Its elements are not new. The idea that morality is to be characterized in terms of the feeling or sentiment of blame, including conscience or self-blame, occurs in Adam Smith, Hume and Mill. More recently, Alan Gibbard and Bernard Williams have defended it. But there is an important question, as will appear below, about how one characterizes the sentiment of blame. Smith explains it in terms of *resentment* (in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*). So do Gibbard and Williams. My account of the content of the sentiment links it instead with the Fichtean/Hegelian notion of recognition; in particular, with Hegel's discussion of the role of punishment in the transition from 'abstract right' to 'morality' (*Moralität*).

[3] *Utilitas*, 15 (2003). Hereafter cited as 'Willigenburg'.

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recognition. So I shall also try to explain why I find the latter notion more illuminating than the former.

I could put it, in a nutshell, as follows. Willigenburg strikes me as a Kantian of our times, sunnily focused on the vision of a morality wholly driven by respect. For my part I do not deny, and certainly do not wish to deprecate, the roles played in modern ethical life by certain democratic notions of respect. But I hold that to interpret the human phenomenon of morality in terms of these modern ideals of respect is to seek to grasp the deeper by means of the shallower. We live by our various projects and ideals without always recognizing the rock on which they stand. From caves in this rock, terrifying forces can emerge – powerful enough to cause appalling destruction. But if this is so, as it is, it must be acknowledged, not denied. A realistic understanding of morality should take stock of its various dangers and dysfunctions as well as its ideal functions, without trying to deny its indispensable, and formative, hold on human being and community.[4]

II

Before proceeding let me distinguish two elements in my view. (A) I put forward an a priori thesis connecting the concepts of moral wrongness and blameworthiness, and I then define other moral notions, such as moral duty or obligation, in terms of moral wrongness. (B) I make some interpretative suggestions about how blame and its associated patterns of feeling and action – guilt, 'ethical punishment' (remorse, repentance, penance) and atonement – function in the formation and re-formation of moral personality, and in the renewal of membership within a moral community. These suggestions are interpretative in the sense that they attempt to get at the 'meaning' of blame, guilt and ethical punishment, that is to say, at what role these reciprocating emotions and activities, in their ideal ethical shape, are meant to perform.

Thesis (A) carries no direct implication for the function and value of morality. Whether the concept of moral wrongness can be characterized by the concept of blame is one question. What role is played by the excluding and redeeming emotions expressed in blame and remorse – how they function and what their consequences are – is another. Thesis (A) does not tell us whether they are bad or good. They could be bad in various ways. There is the possibility that the apparent functions of moral valuation are themselves damaging; the possibility that while these are the apparent functions they are not (or perhaps just not usually) the real functions; and the possibility that whatever

[4] To put this another way: one should learn from Nietzsche's insight into the dark side of morality, even if one does not agree that it can somehow be 'gone beyond'.

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the functions of moral valuation, the actual effects are destructive or oppressive. These various possibilities enter into the modernist suspicion of morality. On their basis, together with the a priori thesis, one might conclude that moral valuation should be explicitly rejected. Then there is also the less dramatic possibility that a quiet revaluation of moral vocabulary is anyway going on. Institutions and their meanings are never quite static. In the long run their meanings can change radically while in surface respects they may seem to have stayed the same. If some such change in the meaning of the moral is going on then the a priori connections between blame and what we regard as moral valuation may cease to hold. As I have already implied, however, even if that happened I do not think that the emotions that presently underlie moral valuation would disappear (though it might well be harder for them to find sufficiently deep, regulated channels through which to flow). The phenomena of recognition, its withdrawal, and atonement or restoring of recognition are too deep in the human psyche, too integral to the relationship between self and other.

Let me also stress, however, that in making this last remark I am *not* saying that these phenomena play a dominating or even central role in moral development, still less in self-development in the most general ethical and aesthetic sense. Other emotions play an important moral role.[5] And moral development has many other aspects, including inspiration by admired example, the development of discursive insight or practical wisdom and critical individual reflection on tradition – which last may be implicit in thoroughly re-interpretable parables, folktales or myths. Furthermore, I do not think that morality is more central to self-development than, say, such critics of moralism as Mill or Schiller do. Nor do I think it is less central. But that is another topic, concerning liberal ethical culture. My concern in the two essays was with understanding morality as such, and inasmuch as moral development plays a part in self-development, understanding thereby the role of guilt and atonement in the latter.

III

As far as characterizing the moral is concerned – as against interpreting its role, or determining its substantive content – I think the disagreement between Williigenburg and me, or at any rate Kant and me, is not as big as Williigenburg thinks.

Characterizing moral wrongness in terms of the notion of blame involves two steps. The first is to formulate an equivalence whose truth

[5] See e.g. Christopher Bennett, 'Personal and Redemptive Forgiveness', *European Journal of Philosophy* 11 (2003), and the articles cited therein.

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is grasped a priori in virtue of understanding what moral wrongness is and what blame is:

> An action is or would be morally wrong if and only if, in the absence of extenuating circumstances, a person would be blameworthy for doing it.

Note that blameworthiness is here to be understood in terms of there being sufficient reason to respond to the person with a certain sentiment or affective attitude, the blame-feeling – not in terms of the *act* of blaming.[6] For it may happen, for a variety of reasons, that this sentiment of blame, though justified, should not be expressed.

Plenty of questions arise about this formulation, but I want to waive them. Even if it, or something like it, is true and a priori, there is the question of whether it throws light on the concept of moral wrongness. If it is to do so, we must be able to identify the blame-feeling without relying for that purpose on the concept of moral wrongness. We could correctly identify the sentiment of blame as that feeling whose proper object is moral wrongdoing, but in the present context that would be of no help. Still, that does not leave us helpless. It is germane to point out that the intentional object of the blame-feeling must be something which the blamer thinks there was good reason for the agent not to do, and which he thinks the agent could have refrained from doing. But of course not every avoidable failure to act on good reasons is blameworthy. The nature of the reasons matters: it is the fact that the agent did the thing, despite *those* reasons, that is regarded by the blamer as sufficient reason for responding with the sentiment of blame. And I suggested that we could identify this sentiment, and thus the kinds of reasons it sanctions, by reference to the actions to which the sentiment disposes: namely, the variety of possible actions, more or less determined and emphatic, whose common theme is withdrawal of recognition. Then I sought to explain what is involved in 'recognition', and how ethical punishment can provide 'at-one-ment' or in other words, the restoration of recognition.

Could we elucidate the moral concepts in terms of a Kantian notion of respect rather than blame? Could we, in particular, formulate an equivalence linking moral obligation and respect? In answering these

[6] At this point I differ from Mill. His focus is on the act, and in theory at least he assesses the reasonableness of blame (the act, not the feeling) by utilitarian standards. For me the way we assess whether the sentiment of blame is reasonable in a particular case is not based on considerations coming from practical reason. It is, rather, a special case of our general capacity to assess the reasonableness of feelings as such. In that respect my view is more like Smith's than Mill's, in that Smith takes the 'propriety' (one could equally say: reasonableness) of feelings in general to be determined by their objects, not by the utility of the actions to which they dispose.

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questions it will help to notice three ways in which the concept of respect appears in Kant's ethics.

A. There is the idea of respect as the distinctive attitude that is appropriate towards any being that has the capacity to make and act on moral valuations – which Kant thinks all human beings equally have:

> Although a human being has, in his understanding, something more than [animals] and can set himself ends, even this gives him only an *extrinsic* value for his usefulness (*pretium usus*); that is to say, it gives one man a higher value than another . . . But a human being regarded as a *person*, that is, as the subject of a morally practical reason, is exalted above any price; for as a person (*homo noumenon*) he is not to be valued merely as a means to the ends of others or even to his own ends, but as an end in itself, that is, he possesses a *dignity* (an absolute inner worth) by which he exacts *respect* for himself from all other rational beings in the world. He can measure himself with every other being of this kind and value himself on a footing of equality with them.[7]

B. There is the idea of respect as the distinctive attitude that is appropriate towards someone who does his or her duty, observes the imperatives of morality.[8]

C. There is the idea of respect or reverence (*Achtung*) as the distinctive attitude that is appropriate towards 'the moral law'.

It hardly needs saying that the idea of respect expressed in (A) mattered deeply to Kant, or that it has been exceptionally important in late modern ethical thought. It provides a metaphysical basis for a leading modern ethical and political ideal. Moreover, some philosophers (including I think Willigenburg, who refers to 'the core moral duty of respect for one's own and others' humanity'[9]) think it provides the foundation of morality as such – for never treating persons merely as means, respecting their freedom to make their own choices, and so on. My own view is that some notion of equal respect is a vitalizing civic and

[7] *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge, 1996), p. 557 (*Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:434–5). In this passage Kant bases respect not on the capacity to set oneself ends but on the capacity for moral insight and agency, treating the former as merely useful. Apparently he thinks that the ability to set ends and deliberate about how to achieve them varies empirically among human beings, whereas the capacity to will autonomously is transcendental and absolute. That is consistent with something else he seems to think, viz. that the capacity of practical self-determination inherently carries with it the possibility of autonomy, i.e. already makes one 'the subject of a morally practical reason'. He can still hold that only the latter and not the former gives a being unconditional value. Hence beings which were practically free but lacked autonomy (could formulate and act from hypothetical but not categorical imperatives) – if such were possible – would not have unconditional value.

[8] Compare Stephen Darwall's distinction between appraisal and recognition respect, in 'Two Kinds of Respect', *Ethics* 88 (1977). I will not use this terminology here partly because respect in sense (A) may differ from what Darwall means by 'recognition respect' and partly because for my purposes I am making a contrast between respect and recognition.

[9] Willigenburg, p. 368.

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political ideal for liberal democracies, but that the thesis that all 'persons' have equal moral competence or even capacity cannot be the basis for it; furthermore, I think that the thesis cannot provide a substantive foundation for a theory of moral duties either. However these are not the issues at stake here. Even if a capacity-based notion of respect of type (A) can do these things, it cannot lend itself to formally characterizing what morality *is*. That is because the kind of respect, if any, that is called forth simply by the *capacity* for making and acting on moral valuations as such is called forth independently of how well or badly, in moral terms, the person who has the capacity acts. It is important for Kant, as just noted, that everyone should equally have the moral capacity, however virtuous or vicious they in fact are – since in his theory it is on that capacity that their claim to moral consideration is based.

The point does not apply to the notions of respect involved in (B). If we can identify an attitude that is appropriate just to those who do their duty, in so far as they do their duty, then it may be possible to characterize duty, that is moral obligation,[10] in terms of it. A moral obligation is a type of normative *should* compliance with which gives sufficient reason for that attitude towards the person who complies. Likewise, if there is a distinctive sentiment, *Achtung*, that is called forth just by those normative *shoulds* that are moral obligations, then we can say that a moral obligation is that towards which *Achtung* is reasonably felt.

Let us consider the latter suggestion first. What is *Achtung*? It is, we are told, the sense one has, when confronted by a moral ought, that one 'must' comply – the *praktische Nötigung*, practical necessity, of duty. Clearly this practical necessity does not mean that it is impossible to fail to do one's duty. Nor is it the 'must' of a merely practical-rational should. If I conclude, after careful consideration of my pension plan, that I must sell shares and buy bonds, I am concluding that that is what there is most reason to do – what I should, in *that* sense, do. This is certainly a normative should but it is not a normative should that calls forth *Achtung*. It may alert me to the 'power of reasons' but it does not fill me with reverence. In failing to act on it, I have not, as far as I can see, done something morally wrong. So 'practical necessity', if it correlates with *Achtung*, is not to be identified with taking something to be a 'conclusive reason'.[11]

It may be replied that practical-rational shoulds of this kind are merely hypothetical. Given how Kant conceives the difference between categorical and hypothetical imperatives he can determine the set of

[10] I use the terms 'duty' and 'moral obligation' as synonyms here, though in other contexts it may be useful to distinguish them.

[11] Willigenburg, p. 359.

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moral obligations very simply. It is the set of categorical principles of practical reason. Reason categorically lays down what ends are permissible or required, and commands us to constrain our activities by certain rules. The understanding issues hypothetical imperatives that tell us how to achieve the ends we have. Our moral obligations are thus coextensive with the requirements of reason.

True. But this equation would not on Kant's own view yet explain what it is to experience a categorical requirement of reason as a moral obligation. It is here that his account in terms of the sentiment of respect plays its role. For Kant moral obligation is a relational notion that presents or identifies categorical practical principles by reference to the distinctive impact they make on our affective nature.

Kant's view, it will be remembered, is that a holy will does not experience practical laws as duties. Nor therefore does it feel the sentiment of respect or reverence for the moral law. It is finite sensuous beings who experience practical laws as duties, proper objects of the feeling of respect or reverence (*Achtung*). He offers an insightful phenomenology of this feeling. Respect for the moral law reduces the influence of self-love and

> *strikes down* self-conceit altogether, since all claims to esteem for oneself that precede accord with the moral law are null and quite unwarranted because certainty of a disposition in accord with this law is the first condition of any worth of a person . . .[12]

Reverence for the law is thus connected with self-respect. In the absence of a reliably moral disposition other bases of self-esteem fall away. Furthermore, while Kant thinks that experiencing the lawgiving of our own reason, that is, its imperatival effect on us, is elevating, he also thinks that it necessarily contains an element of burdensomeness or constraint. So he would not disagree with my view that the experience of moral obligation is the experience of a freely accepted discipline: 'we stand under a *discipline* of reason' though it is 'our own reason' that gives it.[13] To imagine that we humans, with our openness to the sensuous and our finite rationality, could transcend the moment of constraining discipline contained in the experience of moral obligation is, according to Kant, to think that we could be holy beings who do not experience practical shoulds as moral imperatives at all, but simply and readily act on them. It is to usher in '*moral enthusiasm* instead of a sober but wise moral discipline'.[14] (I am tempted to think that Kant would see Willigenburg as one of those moral enthusiasts.)

[12] *Practical Philosophy*, p. 199 (*Critique of Practical Reason* 5:73).
[13] Ibid., p. 206 (5:82).
[14] Ibid., p. 209 (5:86).

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Now the Kantian equation of moral obligations with requirements of reason is unacceptable to anyone who thinks that there are categorical principles (such as prudent self-interest) that are not moral obligations, or that moral obligations are in any case not categorical. Yet even if one holds some such view it is still possible to consider on its merits Kant's account of the experience of moral obligation. He presents reverence for the moral law as basic, respect for others and oneself as subsidiary. I shall suggest below that that is characteristic of an honour code: self-respect is derived from one's affiliation to a code that commands respect and the degree to which one lives up to that code. At the same time however one can understand Kant's concept of *Achtung*, reverence, in terms of agency-directed respect (respect in sense B): to experience a normative should as a moral obligation is to experience it as something one cannot violate on pain of loss of self-respect. Or, a moral obligation is a should compliance with which merits such respect. Non-compliance – acting morally wrongly – thus removes merited respect; in other words, it merits loss of respect (in sense B).

How different is this from my characterization in terms of withdrawal of recognition? Kant characterizes moral obligation in terms of the sentiment it arouses just as much as I do. Characterizing a principle of practical reason as a moral obligation is saying that it appropriately gives rise to the distinctive sentiments towards it, oneself and others which we have just been considering. He thinks that the principle itself applies categorically, irrespective of that experience of it. I agree with that. It seems to me that the reasons for doing something that is morally obligatory exist independently of its characterization as morally obligatory, and that they are indeed categorical.[15]

Nor do I characterize blame in terms of anger or resentment. That seems to me to confuse emotions that dispose to aggression (sometimes justified aggression) with an emotion that disposes to withdrawal of recognition. Obviously, when one is oneself injured by a moral transgression that may well arouse resentment as well as (and more immediately than) blame. In contrast, the sentiment of blame can properly be felt by any observer as well as by the victim. It is not a species of resentment (not even, as in Smith's view, of sympathetic resentment). Its characteristic quality is rather a chilliness or a

[15] Willigenburg notes the agreement on p. 360. I am saying that the (normative) reasons for doing something that is morally obligatory are the reasons that make it morally obligatory, not the fact that it is morally obligatory. Nonetheless, the desire to avoid loss of self-respect, or to avoid guilt (that is, on my view, loss of self-recognition) can and does enter into one's motives. Consider such thoughts as these: 'It would be beneath me to do that', 'I couldn't live with myself if I did that' ('shrinking from it as an impossibility', in Mill's words in 'Utilitarianism', *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, x. 228). The motivating role of conscience is a tricky subject which cannot be pursued here.

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shrinking away or withdrawal than the aggression of anger. This is particularly clear in one's own case, in the experience of guilt, which could hardly be resentment directed against oneself. The resentment view must make guilt something different from blame (fear of retaliation, for example), whereas a view that identifies blame with withdrawal of either respect or recognition can treat them on a par: guilt is loss of self-respect, or alternatively, loss of self-recognition. The difference that remains between my view and Kant's is thus the difference between respect and recognition and their respective loss in one's own eyes and others'.

Willigenburg connects the difference between respect and recognition with what he sees as my tendency to understand morality in terms of the community rather than the individual. He unfairly compares an optimistically glowing conception of the individual's free respect for the moral law with a pessimistically oppressive conception of the community's recognition of the individual. But, if we adjust for that, his point is correct. In response, I want to make three claims on my side of the debate. (i) The Kantian idea of respect takes an aristocratic ideal, or honour code, and seeks to transmute it into a democratic or republican ideal. But morality is more fundamental than any ideal, be it aristocratic or democratic. Correspondingly the idea of recognition addresses an ethically and anthropologically more primitive notion of membership within a community under norms. (ii) The recognition model connects moral knowledge and agency to recognition within a determinate community and its historically evolved morality, rather than to the chivalric metaphysical picture of a finite being's lonely encounter with a noumenal realm of moral law. (iii) Just because moral disciplines engage with these more primitive reactions involving outcasting, remorse and atonement they can be, when corrupted, more destabilizing in their effect on a community and destructive in their effect on individuals than a corrupted ideal of *noblesse* (or *humanité*) *oblige* is ever likely to be. That, as I said at the beginning, is a fact about morality that should be soberly acknowledged rather than wishfully ignored.

IV

(i) By an honour code I mean a code that associates noble action with honour, esteem and pride, ignoble action with dishonour, contempt and shame. Much of what Kant says about servility and self-respect mobilizes these feelings, while detaching nobility of character from the idea of social rank that goes with them in their aristocratic version. He invokes an honour code for Everyman – every person, moral subject, representative of humanity.

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Consider again the passage quoted by Willigenburg from the *Critique of Practical Reason*:

> A human being can . . . be an object of my love, fear or admiration even to amazement and yet not be an object of respect. His jocular humor, his courage and strength, the power he has by his rank among others, could inspire me with feelings of this kind even though inner respect toward him is lacking. Fontenelle says '*I bow before an eminent man, but my spirit does not bow*.' I can add: before a humble common man in whom I perceive uprightness of character in a higher degree than I am aware of in myself *my spirit bows*, whether I want it or whether I do not and hold my head ever so high, that he may not overlook my superior position . . . *Respect* is a *tribute* that we cannot refuse to pay to merit, whether we want to or not; we may indeed withhold it outwardly but we still cannot help feeling it inwardly.[16]

This is moving and true. The respect that is due to moral merit, uprightness of character – and that is explicitly what Kant has in mind here – is distinguishable from all questions of rank, and from all other excellence. Respect of this most fundamental kind is due to any person who thinks conscientiously about their moral obligations, and acts, even in adverse circumstances, on their conclusions. In focusing in previous articles on the connection between blame and loss of recognition, I certainly did not mean to deny the importance of this particular attitude, as an attitude towards people of moral integrity.

But consider the use Kant makes of this attitude of respect in his advocacy of morality. Honour codes confer self-respect on the basis of one's status and one's ability to live up to it. Thus one might say: 'Remember that you are a Montague (or Capulet), and act accordingly'. In the ideal type of an aristocratic ethic, the self-respect that distinguished status confers arises not just from having that status but from living up to its obligations. Essential to the point is that these are obligations that those who do not have the status do not have – as Nietzsche emphasized, the meaning or self-worth conferred by an honour code presupposes the 'pathos of distance'. What then creates the distance for Kant? It is our status as moral beings in comparison with the rest of nature, and our success in living up to that status. Respect in sense (B) is thus related to respect in sense (A), in exactly the way that an honour code links a status to success in living up to that status. Honour, or respect, results from living up to one's standing, shame and disgrace are the sanctions.

Kant connects the two forms of respect – (A) and (B) – in this way in his discussion of servility in *Metaphysics of Morals*:

> This duty with reference to the dignity of humanity within us, and so to ourselves, can be recognised, more or less, in the following examples.

[16] *Practical Philosophy*, p. 202 (*Metaphysics of Morals* 5:77).

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> Be no man's lackey. – Do not let others tread with impunity on your rights. – Contract no debt for which you cannot give full security. – Do not accept favours you could do without, and do not be a parasite or a flatterer or (what really differs from these only in degree) a beggar. Be thrifty, then, so that you will not become destitute. – Complaining and whining, even crying out in bodily pain, is unworthy of you, especially if you are aware of having deserved it; thus a criminal's death may be ennobled (its disgrace averted) by the resoluteness with which he dies. – Kneeling down or prostrating oneself on the ground, even to show your veneration for heavenly objects, is contrary to the dignity of humanity . . . one who makes himself a worm cannot complain afterwards if people step on him.[17]

He sounds like a master inducting to a chivalric order, a crack regiment or a society of samurai. Furthermore, the distinctions he makes, in the same place, between humility and servility, arrogance and self-respect, also appeal to this masculine discipline and ideal of the noble. In a group regulated by an honour code, the code – the precepts of one's group – is the fundamental object of reverence. Self-respect is supposed to be founded on the degree to which one knows oneself to have lived up to it, humility on the fact that one can never do so fully. The man of honour, in short, measures himself only by his own code. Kant writes about morality in the same vein. Humility, he says, as against servility, arises not from comparing ourselves to other people but from judging ourselves by the moral law. Arrogance involves inappropriate comparison of oneself with others, self-respect, the judgement that one has, however inadequately, succeeded in following the code.[18] His strategy of persuasion is to put every person, every representative of humanity, on their mettle by appeal to an honour code that gives to all the 'sublime vocation' of rational beings.[19] Mere nobility of birth or social power then becomes utterly irrelevant. *All* of us are placed distantly above – incommensurably above – the merely natural

[17] Ibid., pp. 558–9 (6:436–7). Compare p. 580 (6:463): 'I cannot deny all respect to even a vicious man as a man; I cannot withdraw at least the respect that belongs to him in his quality as a man, even though by his deeds *he makes himself unworthy* of it' (my emphasis). Kant proceeds to condemn certain punishments as disgraceful because they 'dishonour humanity itself'. Similarly, an aristocratic society will hold that an aristocrat deserves a certain respect just in virtue of his status as an aristocrat, despite his wrongdoing, and shield him from certain punishments on the grounds that they would dishonour the aristocratic status itself.

[18] *Practical Philosophy*, pp. 557–8 (6:435–6).

[19] Cf. Willigenburg's formulation of this idea: 'Kant speaks often about respect for oneself, as one of the natural capacities of feeling that lie at the basis of morality enabling us to be motivated by the thought of duty. Reverence for one's own humanity, i.e. for one's reflective and deliberative nature, is the source of moral motivation' (Willigenburg, p. 368). This is exactly the way an honour code motivates. The self-respect I derive from my status as a human being makes me do my duty as a human being. Compare: the self-respect I derive from my status as an officer makes me do my duty as an officer.

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domain (and above merely self-determining non-moral agents, if such are possible[20] – natural agents without the law).

This is the essence of a certain modern individualist humanism. It is an ideal of the dignity of human beings that can have genuinely inspiring effects, but can also seem hollow. ('Congratulations! You're a human being.') However we do not need to consider here its merits and its demerits. The relevant question is how it is connected with morality. I do not believe that this ideal goes to the heart of what morality is. That is why I prefer to talk in terms of recognition, ethical punishment and atonement. These are not matters of honouring and respecting, dishonouring and shaming, by the standards of any honour code, however admirable.

Recognition is somewhat humdrum, involving no special applause or medals. It does not treat us all as congratulatory aristocrats, lawgivers within nature, members of a band apart. It structures all societies, not just post-aristocratic democracies with a liberal humanist ideal. In most cases it concerns what one takes for granted, as expected, from oneself and from people one recognizes as fellows. There are cases in which doing one's duty is hard, and cases in which it is hard to know one's duty, but by and large it is a matter of unreflective everyday observance. The dramatic, frightening side of recognition lies in its withdrawal.[21] It is then that one becomes aware of its existential importance for self-identity and meaning. The account I gave of transgression, withdrawal of recognition, penance as a response to that withdrawal and at-one-ment as a response to penance – the 'dialectic of atonement' to which Willigenburg objects – is meant to highlight the way in which it is important.

I want to end with some brief remarks about claims (ii) and (iii). My aim here is not to defend these claims, but to respond to Willigenburg's worry that they present a gruesome picture of a 'socialised morality'.[22]

(ii) As Willigenburg implies, I accept the Hegelian view that moral knowledge and moral self-determination are possible only within a historically determinate ethical community of mutually recognizing moral agents. What is the point of 'historically determinate'? Well, for a start, the structure of obligations within such a community is always in important respects agent-relative. There is what I am obliged to do because *I* hold this position in the web of roles, or again what I am obliged to do because we have collectively and legitimately decided to pursue these goals, and now *I* must play my fair part,

[20] See n. 7.

[21] Even in rather small cases. The child is chilled, thrown back on itself, by being sent away to its bedroom. (Or so the parents, perhaps forlornly, hope.)

[22] Willigenburg, p. 363.

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or again what I am obliged to do because of the history of specific understandings that I or my family or lineage have engaged in. Of course there are also agent-neutral moral obligations, obligations of rescue to strangers for example. But the salience of these in relation to agent-relative obligations is something one has to know. One knows all one's obligations, both neutral and relative, and their importance, only because one is dialogically immersed in that communal fabric – but, immersed in that fabric, one must come to know them critically and for oneself. To say that one is able to tell for oneself, and act from one's own conscience, is not to say that acquisition of such knowledge would be possible in an individual, private way. Moral knowledge, like all normative knowledge, can be both inherently dialogical and inherently first-personal.

This does not imply that the accepted morality of the community is always right. The received fabric of moral obligation can be criticized immanently, or from the standpoint of individual conscience, or (*pace* Hegel) from the standpoint of an 'abstract' theory of the good, such as utilitarianism. (It remains however that we cannot *construct* an ideal morality from that standpoint.)

This thumbnail sketch allows me to answer a question that Willigenburg raises: 'At the background of this story of atonement lies the idea that recognition within some community is crucial for the self. But is this community an actual or an ideal community?'[23] What has been said so far indicates that I cannot make this contrast as abstractly as Willigenburg, writing from a Kantian standpoint, envisages. An ideal moral community must always be an idealization of some actual moral community. And our actual community constantly figures, if only implicitly, in our moral judgements. (For example, it may make us less or more demanding on ourselves than we should be.) Nonetheless, that still leaves a big enough gap between actual and deserved blame. The individual can reject actual blame, and thus actual withdrawal of recognition, on the grounds that it is wrongful. He can do so by criticizing it as falling short of its own standards, or by direct appeal to his own conscience. Or he can argue that some received moral convictions must fall in the light of general ethical conceptions of the good.

(iii) There is a healthy human reluctance, especially in well-ordered tolerant societies,[24] to resort to explicit moral condemnation. If one

[23] Ibid., p. 361.

[24] And in small-scale societies where expulsion or punishment may be costly – see George Silberbauer, 'Ethics in Small-Scale Societies', *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford, 1991), p. 22. So too in the case of a friend one may be reluctant to come even to an unexpressed verdict of blame, because of the chilling, distancing, at best spontaneity-reducing effect it will have on one's attitudes and acts. Anger, on the other hand, can be quite therapeutic.

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has to criticize, one prefers to criticize in other terms. Explicit moral condemnation is perilous and should properly be felt to be so. It is proper to be reminded that one does not know all the circumstances, that one cannot see inside men's souls, and so on.

Moral condemnation is 'judgemental'. This is often an implied criticism; the observation, however, is correct. But what 'judgement' does it pass? A person may be offended by being told his behaviour is crass, or naff, or lacking in dignity or pathetic or ridiculous, but he may instead tough it out and return contempt for contempt. In fact we are so inured to the idea that evaluations in terms of ideals of character or behaviour are 'a matter of opinion' that these forms of social discipline have lost much force. They still have great force within particular peer groups, but they do not have and never have had the judgemental force of coming from the community as such (in the way that a criminal indictment comes from 'the people'). Similarly, to be told that I am 'letting myself down' by my behaviour seems rejectable by a 'So what?'. Must I mind about letting myself down? Telling me that I'm letting down my own humanity does not affect the point – it may sound even feebler, because more abstract and less directed at one's pride in one's own distinctive ideals.

In contrast, seriously intended moral condemnation raises the ante and if it is accepted it retains its power to shock. It purports to speak for the community, the right, the universal. It is immediately felt as dangerous, because it legitimizes penal attitudes which must otherwise be kept in check, even if one disapproves in other ways. One cannot just shrug it off – one must accept it and repent or actively reject it. I can respect the ideals of others without accepting them as guides to how I should act. But morality is not something I can just respectfully decide not to live by in that way.

So I agree that withdrawal of recognition gives morality, as a positive human institution, its potentially dangerous charge. The honour code of individualist humanism feels less menacing. It can be elevating, especially in contexts of political action where the point is that moral or civil respect are not dependent on class or status. When it bases itself on the alleged metaphysical dignity of being human it can also easily seem a trifle absurd. Yet if Kantians overestimate how much persuasive power can be got out of appeal to this presumed dignity of being human that does not matter as far as morality is concerned, because the moral feelings are rooted much deeper. Their roots are the most primitive roots of identity and membership. We are, if we are wise, reluctant to rouse these feelings. When they are misdirected or irresponsibly inflamed, they can turn ugly. Willigenburg is quite right to be worried by his examples of 'the young man who is driven to become a devoted member of the Hitler Jugend' or the young

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woman who thinks it is better 'being a servile housewife than complete outcast'.[25] What is horrifying in these cases is that forces sanctioning moral accountability should be deployed to such perverted ends, and that the route back to recognition properly provided by remorse and atonement should be degraded into their nightmarish caricatures, self-abasement and self-betrayal. Just because these forces are so much a part of our identity and self-recognition their corruption – in civil wars, social panics, identity-undermining interrogations, the hunting out of scapegoats or blame-objects – is very frightening. In these episodes we see the pathology and exploitation of attitudes of membership and recognition which normally underlie and are only reluctantly brought to the surface.

The forces at the disposal of morality are terribly powerful, and horrifying when perverted. That does not show they do more harm than good. And in any case, I doubt whether they could be eliminated even if we wanted to do so. Unlike a guard dog, morality is not something we can easily expel from our house.[26]

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[25] Both on Willigenburg, p. 363.

[26] I am grateful to Sarah Broadie and Roger Crisp for helpful discussion.

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