

**On the Mystical Element in Moral Offense:**  
**An Existential Inquiry**

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**I. Introduction**

“Anyone who says to another ‘you fool’ is in danger of the fire of hell,” warns Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt. 5:22).

On the face of it, this seems excessive to say the least. Who of us has not, at one time or another, said or thought something contemptuous of someone else? Here the punishment seems so wildly out of proportion to the crime as to eclipse our dismay over the crime itself. Even if we concede that it is a bad thing to disparage others, certainly it is not so bad as to make one deserving of the fires of hell. What can Jesus mean?

Much depends here on how we interpret the phrase “the fire of hell.” If we take it to refer to a punishment deliberately crafted and imposed by a divine Potentate, then it is hard to see this statement as anything but monstrously extreme: What sort of being would inflict such horrific punishment for such a minor offense? But if we understand it to allude to the misery and heartache we inflict upon one another when we act in offensive ways, we can, perhaps, make more sense of it. Jesus is saying that the contempt expressed in such utterances as “you fool” lies at the very heart of what is morally offensive.

The purpose of my essay is to explore this ‘heart’ of moral offense. I have entitled it “The *Mystical* Element in Moral Offense” because of my sense that something mysterious is going on in both our tendency to *take* offense and to *give* it, something that points us to the very core of human existential concern. The following essay is an effort to glimpse this mystical element.

## II. Moral Offense

Why do we take offense?

Moral violation often takes the form of subjecting another to material harm, and this might lead us to suppose that it consists essentially in the material harm done. But the more we reflect on the matter, the more we realize that this is not the case; for we might suffer the very same harm through nature or accident without feeling morally offended. If my property is destroyed in an accidental fire, I suffer harm but no offense. If my property is stolen by another, I am offended. As Oliver Wendell Holmes remarked, “Even a dog distinguishes between being stumbled over and being kicked.”<sup>1</sup> But wherein lies the difference?

Moral offense is always a response to mistreatment *by others*. But even the word ‘mistreatment’ can be misleading here, for the offense consists not so much in the treatment suffered as in what the treatment betokens – the disregard, the blindness, the callous indifference of the other to our own fundamental well-being.

But here we encounter a mystery. Why should we care if the other is indifferent to us so long as our tangible needs and wants are satisfied? Again, we cannot say it is because we need respect from others for our material support, for this, again, would reduce moral offense to a reaction to material harm. But we see that this is not what it is. It must be that we demand respect from others *for its own sake*, i.e., that such respect is desired as a *primary* good.

To explore why this might be so, we will look at two accounts of human interrelation that complement one another in significant ways. The first is given by Arthur Schopenhauer in his work *On the Basis of Morality*, the second by Paul Tillich in his *Love, Power, and Justice*.

### III. Schopenhauer and the Egoic Self

Schopenhauer writes:

The chief and fundamental incentive in man as in the animal is *egoism* . . . By its nature, egoism is boundless; man has the unqualified desire to preserve his existence, to keep it absolutely free from pain and suffering, which includes all want and privation. . .

Everything opposing the strivings of his ego excites his wrath, anger, and hatred, and he will attempt to destroy it as his enemy. . . Egoism is colossal; it towers above the world; for if every individual were given the choice between his own destruction and that of the rest of the world, I need not say how the decision would go in the vast majority of cases.

Accordingly, everyone makes himself the center of the world, and refers everything to himself.<sup>2</sup>

As Schopenhauer presents it, egoism lies at the core of human motivation; our desire for self-preservation and self-advancement is fundamental. We are all fundamentally concerned for ourselves. But, as Schopenhauer also points out, such egoism is not primarily a *moral* disposition. It is first and foremost *ontological*; that is to say, it is a function of the ontological individualization that allows each of us to be a discrete self, distinct from others. As discrete beings, our interests and concerns are separated from one another. If I get a cold, you do not sneeze. If you have a toothache, I do not cry “Ouch!” Hence, I am naturally more concerned with *my* cold and *my* toothache than with yours. This is egoism. Egoism, writes Schopenhauer, “is due ultimately to the fact that everyone is given to himself directly, but the rest are given to him only *indirectly* through their representation in his head; and this directness asserts its right. . . Accordingly, everyone is all in all to himself.”<sup>3</sup>

All immorality is dependent on this natural, ontological, individualization whereby one person's "weal and woe" (as Schopenhauer puts it) is isolated from the weal and woe of others, such that it is possible for one person to pursue her interests, her "weal," in complete disregard of the interests of others. This ontological individualization creates an experiential chasm between one's awareness of self and one's awareness of other, a chasm that grounds the very possibility of immorality; for if we had to experience others' woe as we do our own, we would, by that fact alone, be as careful of others' interests as we are of our own. Of course, this is a simple tautology, for then the interests of the other would be our own.

At first blush we might suppose moral offense to be, essentially, an egoistic response. The offended party is responding to some harm done to herself or a loved one, and becomes offended as a self-protective reaction arising out of self-concern.

But if we are right in understanding moral offense to be, at base, a reaction, not to the *harm* done by another, but to the indifference or contempt shown by the other, then in the response of moral offense we discover something paradoxical: The morally offended party is offended, not so much by the *actions* of the other, as by the *egoism* of the other itself.

In other words, at the core of moral offense is an objection to the *other's* egoic isolation. The morally offended person demands that the *other* transcend his or her egoic self-regard and demonstrate some degree of *care* for the offended party. It is not the harm done *per se*, but the other's lack of care that is so objectionable. That this doesn't always translate into an objection to one's own egoism is, of course, part of the human moral predicament. We will have more to say about this below. Nevertheless, morality as such seems to be rooted in the paradoxical demand of the ego that egoism itself – at least the egoism of others – be overcome.

And, indeed, we find this demand echoed in virtually all moral systems. Each of them demands a piercing of the egoic veil that isolates us from others and makes possible our disregard of them. We are directed to take an interest in the interests of the other, to act *as if* our egoic self-containment were lifted and the other's concerns as immediately present to us as our own. This demand finds one of its most succinct expressions in the biblical command to "love your neighbor as yourself."

Schopenhauer describes the transcendence of egoism implicit in moral demands in this way:

How is it possible for another's weal and woe to move my will immediately, that is to say, in exactly the same way in which it is usually moved only by my own weal and woe? . . . Obviously, only through that other man's becoming *the ultimate object* of my will in the same way as I myself otherwise am, and hence through my directly desiring *his* weal and not *his* woe just as I ordinarily do only my own. But this necessarily presupposes that, in the case of his *woe* as such, I suffer directly with him, I feel *his* woe just as I ordinarily feel only my own . . . this requires that I am some way *identified with him*, in other words, that this entire difference between me and everyone else, which is the very basis of my egoism, is eliminated.<sup>4</sup>

Inherent to the moral urge, in other words, is the demand that our ontological individualization and isolation, which is the basis of our egoism, be somehow penetrated and opened. Underlying morality is the drive, not simply to be treated well, but to transcend the alienation from others that our ontological individualization imposes.

What is the basis of this drive? Why do we feel it so urgently? To explore these questions let us look at Paul Tillich's ontology of love as he presents it in his work, *Love, Power, and Justice*.

#### IV. Love as the Reunion of the Separated

In *Love, Power, and Justice* Tillich presents an ontological analysis of the impetus to love. "Love. . .," writes Tillich, "drives everything that is towards everything else that is. . . Love is the drive towards the unity of the separated. Reunion presupposes separation of that which belongs essentially together."<sup>5</sup>

Tillich's ontology posits an original Unity underlying our egoic separateness, a Unity to which we all natively belong and to which we all long to return. As a result, our egoic isolation is experienced by us as the *privation* of a more primordial togetherness. To put it another way: the veil of individualization that separates and hides us from one another, also *deprives us* of one another. This deprivation is something felt, in the desperation of loneliness, the anguish of rejection, the pangs of grief, and, quite sharply, in the sting of moral offense. In the moral demand, we require that the other *see us, acknowledge us, be there with us* in our self-concern. A world in which we are left entirely alone with our self-concern would be one in which we suffer a great deprivation, even if all our material wants are satisfied.

It is this privation, and our desire to overcome it, that undergirds the drive for love. Tillich writes: "Love reunites that which is self-centered and individual. . . It is the fulfillment and the triumph of love that it is able to reunite the most radically separated beings, namely individual persons."<sup>6</sup>

In moral offense, then, we experience (in negative image, so to speak) our drive toward this mysterious – we might now say *mystical* – Unity. Suggested here is that the egoism of which

Schopenhauer writes is, in some sense, ontologically superficial. Deeper than our egoic separateness is a more primordial Unity from which we are, for the most part, estranged, but with which we long to reunite. Tillich writes, “Separation presupposes an original unity. Unity embraces itself and separation.”<sup>7</sup> The sense of *radical* self-enclosure of which Schopenhauer writes, thus, results from our failure to recognize, or somehow experience, this primordial Unity. In the Eastern mystical traditions this failure is dubbed *Ignorance (avidya)*. Ignorance here is not primarily a cognitive category; it is the failure to experience our rootedness in the universal ontological ground.

And yet there remains a puzzle. In the phenomenon of moral offense we see, so to speak, egoism’s objection to egoism – but not necessarily to its *own* egoism; it is egoism’s objection to the egoism of the other. Although the morally offended person demands the elimination of the *other’s* egoistic disregard, she does not necessarily demand the same of herself. Why not? If the ego’s drive is for communion with the other, why do we so often take delight in saying to another: “you fool”?

## **V. Two Modes of Reunion**

If, with Tillich, we define love as “the drive toward the unity of the separated” then we must recognize that there is – to employ a Jungian figure – a shadow side to love. This shadow of love finds expression in the legends of both the Buddha and the Christ.

It is said that at the birth of the Buddha a seer prophesied that he would become either a great spiritual sage or a great world conqueror. Buddha becomes the Buddha only by rejecting the latter course and following the former. A somewhat similar story is told of Jesus: During his

sojourn in the desert Satan promises him dominion over all the earth if he will but bow down to and worship Satan. Jesus fully becomes the Christ only in rejecting the offer.

These legends suggest that there are *two* paths by which humans seek to overcome the deprivation of egoic separation: the path of conquest and the path of love. The conqueror too seeks unity with the other, but it is a unity of domination. The conqueror seeks to fill the void of his egoic isolation through subsumption of all otherness into himself. The conqueror seeks to control the other, dominate the other, and thereby *appropriate* the other to himself. This is the *shadow* of love.

All the great spiritual traditions teach that this path of conquest is ultimately self-defeating; the apparent unity achieved thereby is illusory. But we must not be too quick to dismiss the satisfaction it affords. The I's conquest of the not-I, and of the anxiety aroused by it, can be both thrilling and gratifying. The aim of the conqueror is to bring the world under the dominion of the I, the ego, and thereby eliminate the threat that duality poses. Ontologically, of course, this is an impossible task, for the realm of the not-I is limitless; nevertheless, the feeling that progress toward this goal is being made is exhilarating. It is only upon suffering defeat, or when there is nothing left to conquer, that the futility of the pursuit becomes evident.

What this implies is that the *root* of what we call "good" and what we call "evil" is actually the same. *Both* are rooted in the drive to overcome egoic isolation.

And yet there is a profound difference between the two. The drive for love (let us call it the *agapic* drive) and the drive for conquest (let us call it the *hegemonic* drive) do not operate on the same ontological level. The agapic person seeks communion with the Unity *underlying* separation; for that very reason she does not seek to destroy separation itself. The truly agapic person respects the world in its plurality and differences. As Tillich puts it: "It is the superiority



of the [agapic] person-to-person relationship that it preserves the separation of the self-centered self, and nevertheless actualizes their reunion in love.”<sup>8</sup> The hegemonic person, in contrast, seeks to smash through the walls of separation so as to make the other an object of her own egoic will. The agapic person seeks unity at a level transcendent of, but also respectful of, the other’s ego. The hegemonic person seeks unity through bringing all other egos under the dominion of her own. In Western religious mythology this hegemonic drive is represented by the figure of Satan, who seeks to give to his own ego the status of God.

In this context, we might distinguish between two *species* of offense: true moral offense and what we might now call “prideful offense.” Prideful offense is a hegemonic response to opposition; moral offense is an agapic response to exclusion. The morally offended person seeks justice; i.e., a restoration of mutually caring relations. The pridefully offended person seeks vengeance; i.e., a reversal of power relations.

What we see in concrete life, however, is often a confusion and conflation of the two. The drive for love and the drive for hegemony are intermingled in complex ways, as are the responses of moral and prideful offense. We can gain further insight by examining the nature of this confusion.

## **VI. Ignorance and Offense**

Let us return to an earlier point: At the basis of our sense of egoic isolation – and hence, at the basis of both moral and prideful offense – is what the Eastern traditions call *avidya* (Ignorance); i.e., our failure to experience (“*know*”) the Unity that is our ontological ground.

Alienation from this ground is experienced as a fundamental threat – the threat of isolation, exclusion, radical aloneness – to which we respond with the drive for union with the not-I, a drive that can take one of two basic forms: agapic or hegemonic.

We respond with offense (among other negative feelings) when thwarted in this drive. Thus, in the response of offense we see a trace – a spark or token – of the drive for union with our ontological basis (in religious terms: God or Brahman, or whatever we wish to call it). This drive for Unity is what we have called the *mystical element* in moral offense.

But this mystical element will be hidden from us in direct proportion to our Ignorance. To the extent that we are out of touch with the Unity underlying separation we will tend to feel threatened by separation – otherness – itself. And this sense of threat will tend to lead us in a hegemonic direction, for in our Ignorance we know of no other way to overcome our separateness than through expanding the domain of the ego. In this way the moral urge itself, the urge for unity with others, is corrupted into the hegemonic drive.

And this brings us back to an earlier point: In the response of moral offense we see the ego's objection, not to egoism *as such*, but to the egoism of the *other*. It is the *other's* egoic disregard that is offensive to me (not my own). It is the *other's* ego that I wish to modify (not my own). Much of what we commonly call moral offense, thus, is really a confused admixture of moral and prideful offense. *My* egoism demands that *you* desist from *your* egoism. If you do not, I am offended, but my offense has a prideful taint that becomes a barrier to true reconciliation. Our cries for justice are laced with a lust for vengeance; our *moral* righteousness is permeated with a prideful *self*-righteousness. As a result, my offense at you triggers your offense at me, and there we remain, in mutual offense, suspended in irreparable discord. Our very offense offends.

Is there a way out of this dilemma?

The great spiritual traditions present an answer by showing us the way moral offense is transformed in one who has passed beyond *Ignorance*.

The figures of Buddha and Jesus are among the most prominent representatives of the spiritual *gnosis* that is the counter to spiritual *Ignorance*. In both figures we see an ability to respond to moral violation, not with unmitigated offense, but with compassion, forgiveness, and a call for reconciliation. Jesus' forgiveness of his crucifiers from the Cross is perhaps the most striking instance of this. What allows for such extraordinary graciousness?

What we see in such spiritually enlightened figures is that their experience of the Unity that underlies separation affords them an equanimity unavailable to the Ignorant. They do not experience moral violation as a threat to their very being, for they experience themselves as rooted in an ultimate Unity that cannot be destroyed by such violation. Thus, they are able to stand back and see the tragic Ignorance that gives rise to moral violation, and see, as well, that underneath *all* violation is a deeper longing for communion. Thus, even as he is dying in torment on the Cross, Jesus is able to say, "Father forgive them, they know not what they do." His ability to forgive his tormentors is not simple magnanimity on his part; it is also the expression of his longing to be reunited with them in the very love upon which they are now (ignorantly, tragically) trampling.

This does not mean that moral violation is not taken seriously. Forgiveness of moral violation is not dismissal of it. Even for one who has passed beyond Ignorance, the threat that moral violation poses remains serious. All the great spiritual traditions acknowledge this. Without moral regard, human life is degraded and miserable. The moral demand is an urgent one for human life at both the individual and the societal levels. But the overcoming of Ignorance

changes the character of moral offense in a fundamental way, in a way that eliminates the tendency of offense to itself become offensive.

What this implies is that there are more and less enlightened ways to *be* offended. Offense will manifest itself differently depending upon one's level of spiritual maturation. Let us, then, look at these levels more carefully.

## **VII. Stages of Moral Maturation**

Let us call the ethical status of one who has passed beyond Ignorance, *theonomous*. We take the term *theonomous* from Tillich, who coined it to refer to the moral-spiritual state of one whose actions are governed by the law (*nomos*) arising from the immanent experience of the Unity that underlies separation (*theos*). Such a one has overcome the sense of egoic isolation that tends to make desperate our *need* for others, a desperation that conditions the hegemonic drive. Such a person's response to moral violation is qualified by a profound compassion for the anguished Ignorance at its base, and by a fundamental longing for reconciliation.

The moral-spiritual status of most human beings, however, is more ambiguous. Such ambiguity, again, is a function of our Ignorance; an Ignorance that is more a function of moral and spiritual immaturity than of willful perversity. As Schopenhauer notes, the ego's sense of self-enclosure is a natural human condition; it is only the exceptional human being who transcends this to any great degree. Nevertheless, most of us can acknowledge the validity of ego-transcending moral principles even when we are not spontaneously inclined to prioritize them above our egoic wants and needs.

In this respect, we might identify three moral-spiritual states human beings can occupy. The first is the state of egoism pure and simple. The pure egoist lives by the law of her own separate

interests. The pure egoist doesn't necessarily mistreat others, nor is egoism inconsistent with generosity, but the pure egoist's treatment of others is entirely conditioned by her interest in her own well-being (although she may not admit this to herself or others).

Next is what we might call the person of *justice*. The just person is egoistic by inclination but acknowledges, and strives to live in accordance with, the moral principles of selfless (i.e., ego-transcending) regard for others. Unlike the pure egoist, the just person is able and willing to act *against* his own private interests when he recognizes that this is what justice demands. Perhaps the fullest philosophical expression of this is to be found in the ethics of Kant. Most human beings, it seems, range between pure egoism and justice.

Finally, though, there is the theonomous person. The theonomous person's egoic inclinations are so fully informed by her experience of unity with others that her own satisfaction comes, principally, from the exercise of concern for them. These are the few saints among us. Paul's epistles proclaim that faith in Christ will itself transform us into such theonomous individuals. Alas, the actual history of Christianity suggests that it is not quite as simple as that.

Indeed, if we posit a continuum of moral-spiritual maturation, with pure egoism at one end and theonomy at the other, we might recognize the need for *different* religious approaches for each of these different stages in moral-spiritual development.

For the pure egoist, a transcendent God of disciplinary power, who rewards good behavior and punishes bad, seems necessary to reign in the excesses of egoism and direct the egoist toward justice. The pure egoist, motivated solely by self-interest, will only be moved by a God whose power threatens his interest in a basic way. For such a one, a God of judgment, threat, and reward, seems necessary.

For the just person, who longs for a theonomy she hasn't yet achieved, a benevolent God of love and promise seems more appropriate. The just person also seeks reward, but it is the reward of overcoming egoism itself, of entering upon the Unity underlying separation. In other words, it is the reward of becoming fully theonomous.

Finally, the theonomous person experiences God as an immanent presence that opens her up to the Unity that underlies all things. The theonomous person lives within this presence, this "eternal now," that is its own reward. Her principle desire is for the healing and restoration of the divided world.

In the biblical portrayal of God, we can discern all three of these divine representations – the God of disciplinary power, the God of loving promise, and the God of unitive immanence – superimposed upon one another, so to speak. It is as if the biblical authors present us with differing portraits of God in response to these different levels of spiritual maturation.

### **VIII. Conclusion: The Fire of Hell**

All of this allows us, finally, a fuller reflection on what Jesus may have meant in proclaiming that "Anyone who says to another 'you fool' is in danger of the fire of hell." The word translated hell here is *gehenna*, which originally referred to the valley of Hinnom, a valley outside of Jerusalem where refuse was burnt. It is an expression that suggests a place of abandonment, expulsion, exclusion, isolation. It is where the worthless are thrown away.

Jesus seems to be saying that it is *we* who throw each other away as a result of our egoic disregard for one another. In our efforts to prop ourselves up at the expense of others we consign each other to *gehenna*; i.e., to the anguish of isolation and exclusion that prevents us from experiencing the Unity we so long for. It is our protest against this feeling of being 'thrown

away' that lies at the heart of moral offense, and that leads us to seek to throw the other away in turn.

And in this way, as we see, the response of moral offense is paradoxical; for at the same time that it reflects our need to be united with others it undermines our ability to satisfy that need. My offense at you triggers your offense at me, and there we remain, suspended in offense, unable to achieve the love whose violation so offends us.

We may best look upon the phenomenon of moral offense, then, as but a seed, a germ, of something more sublime. Jesus, Buddha, and all the great spiritual sages call on us to pursue this higher sublimity, to follow the mystical element in moral offense to a place beyond offense itself: to apology, forgiveness, repentance, reconciliation, and through these, finally, to the repair and healing of our fractured relations.

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1. Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Common Law*, Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1909, 3.

2. Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), 131-132.

3. *Ibid.*, 132.

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4. Ibid., 143-144.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954, 26.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954, 25.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 27.