On the Pleasures and Dangers of Culpability

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Abstract ■ This article takes up the topic of culpability by asking why so many religious converts today are opting for morally strict faiths that are centered around lists of well-defined rules to be followed and that dwell on the consequences of failing to follow them. It answers this question by first reviewing the canonical Western philosophical distinction between deontological and consequentialist approaches to ethics. It then goes on to argue that these types of ethical system thrive in different kinds of social settings. Consequentialism only works as a guide to action in settings in which stability makes outcomes predictable. Deontological ethics, by contrast, is particularly suited to situations in which the future is unpredictable. I argue that globalization has led many people in the world to find themselves living in this latter kind of situation at present. This is why they find religions focused on deontological ethical ideas appealing. I support this argument with material both on Pentecostal and Islamic religious movements. In the conclusion, I suggest that anthropology has also in recent years taken on a deontological cast, and I question whether this is the best way forward for the field.
Keywords ■ anthropology of morality ■ ethics ■ Islamic movements ■ moral reasoning ■ Pentecostalism

The rubric under which this article on moral reasoning unfolds is that of culpability. This represents a particular kind of constraint, one that would not have been in place had a related rubric such as that of responsibility been chosen. Responsibility is certainly one aspect of culpability, but culpability only encompasses that kind of responsibility one has for wrongdoing. Taken on its own terms, responsibility can refer to good things one ought to do, and can shade into notions of positive duty. But when responsibility is absorbed within culpability, it cannot point to the prospect of moral accomplishment, but only to that of moral guilt. A preoccupation with culpability thus leads to a style of moral reasoning that invests itself in worrying primarily about the possibility of being guilty and about how to avoid becoming so. Moral excellence in this frame is more about what one avoids than about what one accomplishes. Constrained as the view from culpability thus appears, I would still contend that at this time it is an inspired rubric under which to consider some of the prospects for an anthropological approach to moral reasoning. I say this because I think that many moral reasoners in the world today, including many anthropologists, do focus on culpability and operate within its constraints. In what follows I

will try to back up this claim and to ask how we might begin to explain why concerns about culpability are so important to so many people's moral lives today.

In order to provide a sketch of what I have in mind when I refer to what we might call culpable moral reasoning, let me briefly consider the case of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity. These kinds of Christianity, which I will call simply 'Pentecostal' in what follows to make for easier reading, are those in which believers are understood to be able to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit; gifts which allow them to speak in tongues, heal, prophesy, sometimes prosper, and struggle with some (though not perfect) success to lead moral lives, among other things. They are the fastest growing kinds of Christianity in the world today. *The Economist* (2006: 48) has recently reported that there are 500 million Pentecostals worldwide, a figure that accords well with the high end of social scientific estimates of a few years ago (Robbins, 2004a). Pentecostalism's growth has been particularly impressive in Africa, Latin America and Asia, but it is also spreading quickly in the Pacific and in the post-Soviet world. In light of the huge influence this version of Christianity has come to exercise on so many people in so many parts of the world, few would quibble with historian Mark Noll's (2004: 12) claim that its emergence at the beginning of the 20th century is an event that 'has had world historical significance'.

In this article, the aspect of that significance I want to examine is the style of moral reasoning Pentecostalism tends to encourage among its converts. This style, which is recognizable among Pentecostals from all of the myriad places where the faith has taken root, focuses on the human propensity to sin and the need to combat it. For Pentecostals, temptations to sin are everywhere. These temptations can follow from the nature of human desire, but they can also be the result of the deceptive enticements of various kinds of evil beings. In order to achieve their primary goal of salvation, Pentecostals have to resist these temptations. Left to their own devices, they stand little chance of success in this project, but with the help of the Holy Spirit in their hearts, they can hope to follow God's laws and live good Christian lives that are at least relatively free of sin. Toward this end, they spend a lot of time dwelling on the sins they have committed and those they feel tempted to commit, and they frequently engage in rituals such as prayer and church attendance that are designed to solicit the Spirit's help in their endeavor to avoid sin in the future.

The content of Pentecostal moral reasoning is far more complex than I can do justice to in this short article. I have explored it in detail elsewhere, both in a single ethnographic case and comparatively, and will not take it up further here (Robbins, 2004a, 2004b). But even without saying more about its content, the brief sketch I have given is enough to provide us with a sense of the most important outlines of its general style. This is a style focused on individual culpability (one has to recognize that one has sinned in order to convert) and on the need to control one's own propensity to

sin. Those who follow it tend to adopt more or less ascetic lifestyles in relation to worldly pleasures – usually forgoing alcohol, violence, sexual relations outside of marriage and public displays of whatever counts locally as conspicuous consumption. Often, though not always, they also withdraw from politics both in the local and broader arenas; to engage politically is to court falling into lying, anger and other sinful behaviors. Overall, Pentecostalism promotes a moral style that turns an overwhelming concern with personal culpability into a single-minded effort to follow a strict set of rules in order to move toward a state of spiritual purity. Its followers are people who have a strong sense of personal guilt and a burning desire to avoid or alleviate it.

In order to define this style of moral reasoning in a way that makes it useful for asking comparative questions, I want to characterize in very general terms two different ways people can approach moral questions. The two different ways of taking up moral questions that I have in mind are what in Western philosophy are distinguished as deontological and consequentialist approaches to moral reasoning. Roughly speaking, in deontological approaches, one focuses on knowing and intentionally following appropriate rules and not on the consequences of one's rule-governed actions. Having understood and intentionally followed the rules is enough to ensure that one is free of moral guilt. In a consequentialist framework, by contrast, one's actions are judged by their results, not by how closely they conform to a given rule. In such systems, it is possible with good intentions to follow a rule by performing an action that in the context in which it is performed turns out to have bad consequences and be culpable for those consequences. In the terms of this distinction it is clear that Pentecostals fall on the deontological side. As Soeffner (1997:41) has put it for Luther, so too for Pentecostals, they live in a moral system so concerned with following the rules and purifying one's inner life that it has to be described as one based on an 'impractical' reason that 'is under no obligation to the logic of action' and its consequences. If some manner of withdrawal from the world is the cost Pentecostals and others who follow this course pay for attaining deontological security, then such withdrawal is justified.

Having characterized the Pentecostal approach to moral reasoning as predominantly deontological, I want to ask why so many people in the world today (at least most of those 500 million Pentecostals, but also, I would argue, many others as well) would want to adopt such a style of moral reasoning. Focused as it is on the tendency for individuals to do wrong and the need for vigilance to combat this tendency, it is on the face of things one of the 'harsher' versions of moral reasoning from which one might choose. What accounts for its current appeal?

By way of exploring a potential answer to this question, let me start with the claim that different styles of moral reasoning are embedded in different kinds of social circumstances, and that forms of moral reasoning only flourish in those social circumstances that are well suited to them.

Consequentialist moral reasoning, for example, only works where people have a sense that the social world they inhabit is relatively predictable, such that the probable consequences of an action appear relatively easy to gauge with certainty. Where such conditions do not hold, deontological approaches make much more sense – even in situations in which one cannot control the consequences of one's actions, one can control whether or not they conform to a rule or set of rules. Devji (2005) makes a similar argument, and one that has inspired my own, in his account of the self-understanding of Al-Qaeda. As he analyzes Al-Qaeda, its members do not see themselves as engaged in instrumental politics because they find it impossible, under current global conditions, to predict the exact political effects their actions will have. Instead, they evaluate their actions in terms of an ethics of duty, one in which it is having done the right thing that counts, not the consequences of one's act (Devji, 2005: 3–4). I would suggest that a similar argument can be made for the Pentecostals I have discussed (though the content of the set of rules they adhere to is quite different): they find the world too chaotic and unpredictable to support consequentalism as a dominant style of moral reasoning (which is not to say they never have recourse to it, only that it is not the primary way in which they understand themselves morally), and instead find a kind of security in the promises deontological schemes make to guarantee the moral value of every act at the moment it is undertaken.

Should one want to expand this examination of the attraction of deontological reasoning far more broadly than I have here, a good place to start would be Guyer's (2007: 410) very stimulating recent article on what she calls 'the evaporation of the near future in theory and public representations' in the contemporary United States. Focusing on monetarist macroeconomic policy and evangelical Christian discourse (a larger discourse within which that of Pentecostalism is located), she shows how a combined emphasis on the immediate present and the very long run have put the near future out of play as a temporal framework. What is lost in this move is the provision of a temporal space for the kinds of consequentialist reasoning Guyer sees as having dominated the politics of the 1950s and 1960s, at least in Britain (2007: 410, 418). Although it goes unsaid in the article, what takes the place of this kind of reasoning is a turn to deontological forms that do not need to refer to the near future world of demonstrable consequences to reckon the value of actions. Working deftly across a wide range of materials, Guyer's discussion provides a sense of some of the conceptual infrastructure, particularly as regards time, that allows for the shift to deontological styles of moral reasoning I have tried to track here.

One of the virtues of an analysis of something as abstract as a 'style of moral reasoning' is that it allows one to see connections between cases one might have missed had one stayed a bit closer to the ground. In this spirit, I want, in closing, to consider the extent to which Pentecostals and contemporary anthropologists might, from this abstract point of view, sit more

closely together than one would have thought. Few would contest the claim that anthropology is full of moral passion at the moment, and that such passion often steers not only the kinds of analyses anthropologists perform, but even the kinds of research they take up. Rather than try to prove such a general claim here, I want simply to ask if this moral passion, assuming it exists, has not itself lately taken on a deontological cast. And to start to answer this question in the brief compass of this article, I want to approach it by looking at one unusually eloquent and self-aware article that suggests that it has.

The article in question is by Speed (2006: 71), and it presents an account and critical analysis of her 'critically engaged activist research', aimed, among other things, at helping the Nicolás Ruiz community of Chiapas to present a case before the International Labor Organization (ILO). If won, the case would help the majority of the community's members in their struggle to define themselves as indigenous, retrieve lost lands and protect their right to maintain their customary consensual political process by refusing land usage to community members who did not join the majority decision to become a 'Zapatista base community' (Speed, 2006: 68). Speed's account of her collaborative, engaged work in this divided community is exemplary for its clear-sighted presentation both of a very complex social situation and of the ethical and political issues it raises for the politically involved anthropologist. Moreover, toward the end of the article she takes a turn that is directly relevant to my concerns in this article. Having reported that the ILO refused to hear the case she prepared with the people of Nicolás Ruiz on the basis of a technicality, Speed (2006: 73) asks how activist research such as hers should be judged – should the court's refusal to hear the case be counted as a failure of the research? In response, she notes that she is 'wary' of the '"practical effectiveness" criteria' that would lead us to answer yes to that question. 'Might not', she wonders, 'an outcome that seems negative in the short run contribute to a situation that generates a positive result in the medium or long run (or vice versa for that matter)' (2006: 74). She then goes on to suggest that:

> . . . perhaps a better criterion for evaluating the success of activist research undertakings would be to ask ourselves whether they address the critical questions directed at the discipline. Do they address neocolonial power dynamics in our research processes? Do they seek to engage rather than to protect our research subjects? Do they maintain a critical focus even as they make explicit political commitments, thus creating a productive tension in which critical analysis meets (and must come to terms with) day-to-day political realities? (2006:74)

The shift from consquentialist to deontological moral reasoning is clear here. In a world where we are unable to gauge the practical consequences of our actions (and note that neither the 'medium' nor the 'long' run in Speed's argument represent Guyer's practical space of the near future), we best lay down clear deontological rules for what constitutes good practice

and make sure to follow them, finding our sense of moral security in the fact of our having done so.

I cannot imagine any reader who would come away from Speed's article without a good deal of admiration for the thoughtful, self-critical voice with which she presents her research. But her openness to the complexity of the situation both she and her 'research subjects' find themselves in only makes this last minute turn to deontology seem that much more symptomatic of a strong trend in this direction within anthropology more generally. Weber (2004: 83–94) long ago took up the dangers of relying solely on deonto-logical moral reasoning in his lecture on 'Politics as a Vocation'. Calling the deontological style an 'ethics of conviction', and counter-posing it to a more consequentialist 'ethics of responsibility', he comes down squarely in favor of the latter. He even at one point suggests that it is dangerous to give any quarter to the ethics of conviction by aiming to reconcile both kinds of moral reason (2004: 86). Yet in some of the most potent words of his famous conclusion, he does acknowledge that, when carried out well, such reconciliation may be possible:

> . . . I find it immeasurably moving when a *mature* human being – whether young or old in actual years is immaterial – who feels the responsibility he bears for the consequences of his own actions with his entire soul and who acts in harmony with an ethics of responsibility reaches the point where he say, 'Here I stand, I can do no other' [editorial fn. omitted]. That is authentically human and cannot fail to move us. For this is a situation that *may* befall *any* of us at some point, if we are not inwardly dead. In this sense an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility are not absolute antitheses but are mutually complementary, and only when taken together do they constitute the authentic human being who is *capable* of having a 'vocation for politics'. (Weber, 2004: 92, emphases in original)

These are words worth recalling at a time in which anthropologists, as much as the people among whom they work, confront a world terrain so broken and hazardous that it appears navigable only with the aid of a deonto-logical crutch. For the costs of achieving the feeling of steady progress that a *sole* reliance on deontological reasoning affords are surely too high to be worth paying.

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