

What is to be said about the view that moral commitment is meaningless unless the world is such that "absolute justice" will eventually be done—understanding by "absolute justice" a state of affairs in which there is an exact proportion between the past deeds of a person, good and bad, and her or his present condition of weal or woe?

The first thing to be said is that the notion of "absolute justice" is evidently incompatible with the very nature of reality conceived as social—in the sense that no one can completely determine the being of anyone else and that the being of everyone is partly determined by the being of others. If all things are social in this sense, so that everything is in part self-determined, in part other-determined, by others that are themselves one and all in part self-determined, there is and must be an irreducible factor of chance in existence simply as such. What actually happens is always the product of multiple causes, so that no one, not even one having the maximum power conceivable given the essential sociality of existence, could possibly guarantee an exact proportion between past deeds and present condition that so-called absolute justice requires. Given genuine freedom or self-determination on the part of every *socius*, there is an unavoidable risk of evil, in the sense of the consequences of one actor's actions not harmonizing with those of others; and by the same token, there is an irreducible factor of chance—and so "injustice." Therefore, the only conditions under which "absolute justice" could be realized are conditions under which real sociality, and hence real existence, would be impossible. Any social situation, in this world or any other, where "absolute justice" would be realized would be an intrinsically *nonsocial* situation, and so not really a social situation after all.

So the notion of "absolute justice" involves a self-contradiction—essentially the same self-contradiction involved by any other set of claims that at once postulate a social situation—for example, as between Creator and creatures—and yet imply that the situation cannot be really or conceptually but only verbally "social"—as, for example, when the Creator is supposed to have, or is held accountable for having, all the power there is, instead of having all the power that any one individual could conceivably have consistently with there being others who also have some power—or, in other words, consistently with the situation between Creator and creatures really

being a social situation. But if the notion of "absolute justice" is implicitly self-contradictory, its eventual realization cannot be made a necessary condition of moral commitment without making moral commitment itself similarly self-contradictory and therefore, precisely, meaningless.

Nor is this the only serious problem with the whole notion that moral commitment is meaningless unless there can eventually be a situation of "absolute justice." Another such problem is with the underlying assumption that moral actions somehow require external sanctions in the form of proportionate rewards and punishments in order to be meaningful. Anyone who does not love God or her or his neighbors for their own sakes simply does not love them—period. And if she or he doesn't love them, what reward does she or he, in a moral sense, deserve? Anyone who needed a reward wouldn't deserve it, and anyone who deserved it wouldn't need it, love of others for their own sakes being its own—and only morally necessary—reward. And could anyone ever be persuaded to love others by the threat of eventual punishment? If the threat worked, would she or he really love God and her or his neighbors, or only behave as if she or he did in order to escape the threatened punishment?

It's only too clear that external sanctions neither have nor can have anything to do with properly *moral* commitment, whatever role they may play—and quite properly play—in controlling human behavior. Insofar as rewards or punishments are necessary to secure good behavior, human laws and enforcement procedures should by all means be devised to provide them—but only with the recognition that their role is precisely legal and not properly moral.

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