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# Assessing Violence

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It has been my privilege to work with the Reverend Dr. Walter F. Taylor Jr. in “The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation” task force of the Catholic Biblical Association. This group met annually to discuss cross-cultural theories related to, for example, conflict resolution, kinship, honor-shame, purity, and collectivist cultures, especially as these might provide nuances for a better understanding of scripture. During a final meeting in this context (at Santa Clara, California, in August 2016), Taylor and I began conversation about a new study: *Virtuous Violence: Hurting and Killing to Create, Sustain, End, and Honor Social Relationships*.<sup>1</sup> In appreciation for Taylor’s many contributions to this task force, an overview of *Virtuous Violence* is presented here with hope that this new study might enhance our collective understanding of violence.<sup>2</sup> The article follows the general format of our former task force. It begins with a definition of violence, followed by a presentation of the model behind *Virtuous Violence*, and an application of data from the authentic letters of Paul. The article concludes with an assessment of the model’s relevance for both understanding scriptural portrayals of violence and contemporary responses to some forms of violence.

A cardinal procedure for the task force was to define terms. Defining violence is complicated. Broadly, definitions of violence share a concern with physical force. Violence is then potentially inclusive of everything from football games to advertisement that might, for example, subliminally “force” one to seek a product. Considered here will be purposeful violence as physical harm or the threat of such harm, especially that in service to values or norms.<sup>3</sup> Broadly, this type of violence functions like the imposition of a fine, imprisonment, or shunning. It is a mode of behavior called upon when values or social norms are no longer enough in themselves and, thus, are perceived to need the support or enforcement of such behaviors as sanctions. Whether manifest or not, this type of violence (such as fines or shunning) is rooted in the assurance

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1. Alan Page Fiske and Tage Shakti Rai, *Virtuous Violence: Hurting and Killing to Create, Sustain, End, and Honor Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

2. Other options fall between two extremes. Some Bible dictionaries do not offer “violence” as an entry. By contrast, when one searches for “Bible, violence” some sites suggest the Bible’s mention of violence as a rationale for skepticism about the Bible or revealed religion.

3. Intentionally excluded are instances of “unintended” or “random” violence.

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or possibility that it can occur. Thus, unless inflated, a threat of violence can function as effectively as actual physical harm. In this sense, it is coercive and, whether systematic or erratic, is necessarily related to power and/or dominance, regardless of how fleeting or fluid that power or dominance.

Another requirement within the task force was to utilize a cross-cultural working model of the phenomenon studied. While there are many notions about violence, the cross-cultural study provided in *Virtuous Violence* is rather unique.<sup>4</sup> Fiske and Rai note that “(a)cross cultures and history, most violence is morally motivated to regulate relationships in a culturally prescribed manner.”<sup>5</sup> Rooted in the observation that “(h)uman beings treat each other differently *depending on the qualitative nature of the relationships that bind them*,” the authors posit “a complexity and variation to social life and, particularly, violence.”<sup>6</sup> Their goal is to understand violence beyond the weakly supported (and largely Western) notion that all violence is necessarily “abnormal” or due to sickness or a lack of morals.<sup>7</sup> “Morality is about regulating social relationships, and violence is one way to regulate relationships.”<sup>8</sup>

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4. The authors repeatedly use the term “theory” to describe their work. It seems obvious they would appreciate tests of their theory as a reasonable next step in the protocol of social science. The following will use this theory as a model or specific application of the theory.

5. Ibid, 16.

6. Ibid., 7.

7. Ibid., 3. Violence due to sicknesses like psychopathy or evil, (disengaged, dehumanizing) is another type of violence. But to assume that these sources are pervasive or even prevalent causes of violence unfortunately serves to “explain away (violence) as a mistake or error. This would be incorrect moral reasoning” (see also 156).

8. Ibid, 5–6. “Morality consists of a certain set of evaluative

While the authors personally abhor violence (and offer some practical solutions for limiting this type of intentional violence), they recognize the need to understand how and why violence is used by a perpetrator who "...intends to harm or kill in order to constitute a social relationship to make it correspond with a prescriptive model of what the relationship ought to be – what it *must* be made to be."<sup>9</sup>

### Assessment of relationships

The foundation of this theory involves the assessment of relationships.<sup>10</sup> Two relationship assessments are prominent: The notion that relationships are regulated by others (meta-relationships) and the broad differentiation of characteristics or dynamics that constitute a relationship.<sup>11</sup> Briefly summarized, the first type of relationship is labeled "Community Sharing" (CS). Such relationships are motivated by a concern with unity. With behavior and identity often manifest through a perspective of us (our group) vis-à-vis them (their group), such relationships are characterized as especially directed "toward caring for and supporting the integrity of the in-groups through a sense of collective responsibility and common fate."<sup>12</sup> Generally only those in the group are within the scope of moral concern. What happens to other groups can be meaningless or beyond the scope of consideration. Here violence is morally praiseworthy, if the victim is perceived as a potential threat or contaminant to the in-group.

Another kind of relationship is called "Authority Ranking" (AR). Here relationships are motivated to sustain a hierarchy that creates and maintains linear ranking and order in social groups. Such asymmetrical relationships are considered natural and good. Violence here might serve and therefore be praised as it enforces those asymmetrical relationships. For example, violence might function to make its victim realize a lower rank or status than the one perpetrating the violence.

"Equality Matching" (EM) is concerned to sustain the percep-

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emotions, as well as a certain set of intentions... that something should or should not be done, while the intentions concern making relationships what they should be." An ideal model of how to relate is assumed: "Morality thus concerns the realization of ideal models for relationships... Morality is relationship regulation and moral motivation is the motivation to make actual relationships correspond with culturally implemented ideals of the four "relational models." See also 135–136 where morality is defined "as the intentions, motivations, evaluations, and conjoined emotions that operate to realize ideal models of social relationships in a culturally meaningful manner." This is to say that they are in accord with the cultural "preos." For Fiske and Rai, the neologism "preos" is inclusive of all the prototypes, paragons, practices, precedents, paradigms, proscriptions, precepts, proverbs, and principles that guide people.

9. Fiske and Rai, 17.

10. As the title of the study suggests, violence can be employed at various stages of any relationship, *ibid.*, 22–25. People engage violent behavior to create, conduct, sustain, protect, terminate, or even mourn a relationship.

11. These are more fully articulated in *ibid.*, 18–20.

12. *Ibid.*, 18: "[A] threat to the (our) group or its integrity, or to any member of it, is felt to be a threat to all."

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tion of equality within a group. Such relationships are focused to regulate behavior by keeping track of what one is owed—assuming reciprocity as obligation. EM seems compatible with CS but it might be distinguished, for example, as one might care more about being shamed (CS) than about another "getting away with more" than me (EM). With a concern to seek a one-to-one correspondence, those who value EM might ask "an eye for an eye" or whatever would be required to bring the perception that balance is once again restored.

Finally, "Market Pricing" (MP) is a type of relationship where one is motivated by desire to respect and utilize proportionality. Thus "cheating" is the primary and generic violation. Both laws and corresponding punishments are manifest with concern to address a variety of variables such as costs, contribution, effort, or merit. A court system might seek rewards and punishments that are not equal ("eye for an eye") as much as reasonably commensurate with another kind of value. For example, one proven to have committed sexual assault would not be likewise assaulted in return. Rather, imprisonment and/or being labeled as a sexual predator or convict might be considered an appropriately commensurate response. In contrast to the other three, those motivated by MP might be less inclined to seek direct physical violence, if another form of sanction is available. Certainly, such motivation requires a great deal of attention and debate about what sanctions would be reasonably commensurate. But violence is typically only a last option.<sup>13</sup>

These types of relationships (and their respective motivations) are not mutually exclusive. One can be interested in preserving both unity and authority, or proportionality and authority. Of course, violence is not a necessary or necessarily preferred way to regulate a relationship in any of them. Unity, rank, equality, and proportionality can be achieved otherwise. But violence can and does exist as a "moral" possibility for all four types when it is perceived to be needed in service to achieving these motivations or ends.<sup>14</sup> Because their relationships tend to be more intense, CS and AR are more likely to motivate violence: "The stronger the relationship, the more the participants are prone to violently

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13. It can occur, for example, in the form of justifiable police shootings or capital punishment.

14. *Ibid.*, 267. It is noted that "if someone can effectively influence their partners in other ways, they don't *need* violence" (my italics).

regulate it.”<sup>15</sup> By contrast, more dispassionate and impersonal relationships (more typical within AR) are less likely to end in violence. In other words, where people see themselves more individually, violence is more likely limited to exigency.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond recognizing the importance of these basic types of relationships and the motivations that serve them as four broad ideological goals, Fiske and Rai also note the importance of “meta-relationships.” Meta-relationships are comprised of individuals or groups who have a share or interest in the morality of the violent behavior. “. . . (T)he aim of violence is often to regulate relationships not just with the victim but also with others.”<sup>17</sup> Fiske and Rai note it is often difficult for individuals to commit violence. Some perpetrators “are only able to commit the moral violence they know they should commit because their moral motives are reinforced by fear of being shamed, fear of failing their loved ones, and fear of punishment. . . . Violence is virtuous if the agent, her reference group, and her audience truly regard it as the right and moral thing to do, however difficult.”<sup>18</sup> This creates a potentially complex number of variables. So, for example, A does violence to V or refrains from violence to B in order to regulate A’s relationship with C. X hurts Y in order to impress or find merit with Z. The possibilities are many. The point is that, at times, people can perpetrate violence because they sense or know other respected or endeared individuals expect them to act.

### Applying the model to Paul’s writings

Working with this model, the next step for the task force was to apply the data. In consideration of Dr. Taylor’s expertise, the following application focuses on a sample of data from the authentic letters from Paul and his co-workers.

Writing with a general intention to support the integrity of the groups (community) Paul helped to establish, the authentic letters largely respond to concerns that threaten such integrity, as they consider how to respond to the new revelation from God (authority). As the groups were forming, borders were perceived to be much more porous than among groups defined by birth. Thus, the letters reflect a consistent effort to define characteristics of those in the group “in Christ” and how such life ultimately differed from life outside. While encouraging others to receive the new revelation, the letters are aware of opposition both from longer established groups (e.g., Pharisees) and other Christ-related

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With their response to the revelation, Paul and those with him could surrender some of the former identity markers, for example, calendar observations, diet, circumcision or bloodline. Those who respected the status quo (who refuted the newest revelations) and those who disagreed with their more specific understanding of the new revelation in Christ could claim Paul and his co-workers as a problem. Surrendering the old ways could be perceived by those who held onto them as an invitation to violence, either as the old group tried to impress upon those falling away the seriousness of their behavior or, as appropriate for newly formed others who offend and affront the old groups, merely by their existence. Mention of Paul having been whipped, beaten, and stoned (2 Cor 11:24ff.; cf. Gal 6:17); his understanding of the violence enacted against Jesus (e.g., 1 Thess 2:14–16); and violence against others connected to the groups related to him (Phil 1:28–30; 1 Thess 2:2) are each plausibly set in such agonistic social dynamics.

The letters show Paul could not simply ignore all those who opposed, challenged, or contradicted him publicly about his understanding of God’s revelation in the person of Jesus Christ. In response, Paul could generally limit his violence to rhetoric, vilifying or contrasting those who oppose life in Christ. While rare, Paul was clearly not beyond expressing his wish that violence overcome some of those who oppose Paul or his understanding of revelation (Gal 5:10–12).

Elsewhere, an appreciation for both revelation and the groups formed in response to that revelation leads to what appears to be a more passive view toward violence. For example, in Rom 5:1–11, Paul can claim to rejoice in suffering, knowing that Christ died for us, and later (6:5) notes that we are united with him in a death

15. Ibid.

16. Cited as an example were arguments for a “reasonable” deployment of the atomic bomb. It was recognized that this act could bring both devastating destruction and an end to war with Japan. So, the destruction of the bomb was proportionately calculated and judged necessary to spare the destruction of American lives, calculated to be lost achieving the same end of war objective via hand to hand combat.

17. Ibid., 33: “We can’t understand violence without recognizing the metarelatational configurations that morally motivate it.”

18. Ibid., 4–5. Beyond individuals interested in observing and influencing the regulation of relationships (e.g., pastors, police, tribal heads), it would seem institutions or ideas (e.g., state or national ideology) could be considered.

19. See the excellent study, Walter F. Taylor Jr., *Paul: Apostle to the Nations, An Introduction*, (Fortress, 2012), chapters 3–5 (35–123) for an overview. Subsequent chapters provide additional insights to the authentic Pauline letters cited here.

and resurrection like his. The suffering or trials cannot separate them from a life to come with God (8:35–39).

A key hermeneutic for Paul was that ultimately all was perceived to be God's doing; and what God was doing is part of the new revelation perceived to be well underway. The newest phase began in God's raising Jesus from death. God's actions were not yet completed, but what God had done already made it clear to Paul that there was very little they could do to stop, influence, or otherwise significantly delay the completion of God's plan.

Paul understood time in this present world to be short. Those who continued to ignore or more actively dishonor God would soon experience God's wrath. Such wrath involved God satisfying his honor through acts that served as the defense of his honor.<sup>20</sup> With the understanding and conviction that the wrath of God would soon bring destruction for some, Paul said that anyone obedient to this God could and should bless those who persecute (Rom 12:14ff.). At the same time, he could note with confidence that people who sin "deserve to die" (Rom 1:32–2:9; cf. 1 Cor 3:17; Gal 5:21).<sup>21</sup> This acceptance of violent harm due to outsiders, who are actively opposed to the values of the new group in Christ, is not a frequent focus in these letters. But these instances demonstrate the pervasiveness of violence.

God's wrath is not just a manifestation for those on the outside. Those only nominally on the inside, who oppose or abuse God's new values, were also to be threatened by God's coming wrath (1Thess 4:6; cf. Phil 3:18ff.). Meanwhile, it seems Paul would have been fine to live and let live (Gal 6:17), gathering those who would be gathered and leaving the rest for his God.

Paul's awareness of violence may be an extension of an apocalyptic view.<sup>22</sup> Broadly, this is accurate (elements are reflected in, e.g., Rom 8:18–39). In the current world, one suffers violence. Violence is simply a given, pervasive in the present creation. In the process of transition to the forthcoming world, divine violence is due to some but not to those authentically in Christ. Such violence is subsequent to judgment, marking those who refute, ignore, or work against God's newest revelation.<sup>23</sup> However, more specific to Paul's understanding, is the notion that one can only speak of violence as something to be expected from God. It is not something that humans in Christ need to seek out or actively add to an

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already violent creation.<sup>24</sup> In fact, the commitment of a group that is following God's revelation can be demonstrated by how they intentionally leave such wrath for the sovereignty of their God.

In sum, the authentic Pauline letters portray an awareness of the values of violence. Both before (Gal 1:13; 1 Cor 15:9) and after his encounter with the Christ, much of Paul's appreciation of violence comes from his focus on unity (CS) and God (AR).<sup>25</sup> After his conversion to Christ, Paul's understanding of who deserves violence has more to do with what he understands about God's powerful rank and the process through which this reality will soon become fully revealed to all. Violence is rooted in Paul's awareness of Christ crucified and, by extension, with those who now suffer with or in Christ. Violence is also portrayed as something expected in the form of God's wrath. Violence could be expected to go away only after God's final violence was exerted over against the present violence. Paul seems convinced and therefore able to promote the idea that until that fuller sovereignty of God becomes manifest, violence remains something as anticipated as divine sovereignty itself. However, it is not for Paul or the groups in Christ to bring forth that violence which results from their holding as firmly as possible to the new revelation.

Some might promote the idea that, since Paul did not actively add to this world's violence (e.g., as a vigilante seeking to physically castrate his Galatian opponents), he was "non-violent."<sup>26</sup> It might be more accurate to characterize Paul as non-retaliatory. He is not opposed to retaliation so much as expecting and allowing for God's retaliation. For theological reasons, Paul refrained from actively producing or adding to violence, beyond the violence he

20. Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, "The Wrath of God: The meaning of *orgē Theou* in the New Testament World" in A.C. Hagedorn, Z.A. Crook and E. Steward, eds., *In Other Words: Essays on Social Science Methods in Honor of Jerome H. Neyrey* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 144ff.

21. In (Paul's) view, "God's positive intentions towards humankind, and his positive action in dealing with humankind, do not clash with the fact that God also punishes and condemns." Francois Tolmie, "Violence in the Letter to the Galatians" in Pieter G.R. de Villiers and Jan Willem van Henten eds., *Coping with Violence in the New Testament* (Boston: Brill, 2012), 78.

22. The following is heavily reliant on the insights of Jean-Daniel Causse, Élian Cuvillier, and André Wénin, *Divine Violence: Approche exégétique et anthropologique* (Paris: Cerf, 2011).

23. *Ibid.*, 129–131. Rom 2:5–11 particularly expresses such a view.

24. *Ibid.*, 147–148. Revelation now recognizes a violence against the violence of death.

25. His appreciation for unity seems easily rooted in his respect for revelation. That is not to say that Paul and his associates never utilize MP. MP seems to be employed in his discussions with Philemon and in his consideration of financial support and prayer as contributions distinguished between those in Judea and Corinth (e.g., 2 Cor 9:10–15). But even here all is in service to God.

26. With such an assumption, the violence portrayed in 1 Thess 2:14–16, for example, can be considered an intrusion, something too caustic for an "authentic" Paul.

could expect from those opposed to his new life. Not engaging in violence because one was told not to be violent (or, because God later will enact the violence) does not make one non-violent, so much as it makes clear one's allegiance to (or respect for) the prohibition against violence in an AR relationship. In this sense, Paul is portrayed like Jesus, who intends to go to Jerusalem to die like the prophets (Luke 13:31ff., cf. 18:31). Both see themselves as living in a world of violence and, true to their understanding of God, participating in this world of violence. Their actions certainly do not promote human violence, so much as they recognize the reality of violence in this world as human response to God's revelation.

While such distinctions might seem trivial, they can be important in assessing how one reads scripture. There is a difference between pulling perceived morals directly from scripture (e.g., Paul is perceived to be non-violent, therefore Christians always and everywhere should be non-violent) and, by contrast, first reading these documents according to their theology with an understanding of who God is and how God relates, seeking, like Paul, to hold morals that are consistent with such theological insights.<sup>27</sup> Paul does not add to violence through retaliation or status-quo behaviors because he understands God's ultimate power over retaliation (and death) to be more important.

### Assessing the model

After addressing the various objectives (definitions, presentation of a model, and application of the data), the goal was to assess the model. *Virtuous Violence* does not present a definitive or comprehensive explanation for all violence. The ultimate value of the study is its assessment of the evidence collected over time and through various cultures. It demonstrates that in certain contexts violence can be recognized as an act committed "on purpose," motivated to preserve some core value in a relationship. In this sense, *Virtuous Violence* appropriately argues against more simplistic notions of violence as due only to illness or moral weakness. The model can also be appreciated for demonstrating how multiple rationale can account for one phenomenon. In other words, it demonstrates how people in various types of relationships engage in violence for different reasons, motivated by serving different ends or goals that are perceived to define the relationship. With its appreciation of different relationships, the model allows one to understand what was intended with violence in groups that either hold differing values or differing weights for the same values or motivations.<sup>28</sup> For example, modern Western readers might be more familiar and comfortable with MP relationships. The breadth of the model allows those interested in MP to understand how their own assumptions about what violence is and what violence can accomplish might compare with assumptions held by individuals

27. This approach and its rationale are more fully articulated in the work of James A. Sanders, *The Monotheizing Process: Its Origins and Development* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2014).

28. It is not clear how EM constitutes a relationship dynamic of its own. Examples provided suggest it could be a subset of CS or AR (as in the example of Leviticus).

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in relationships motivated by CS or AR.

Applied to contemporary understandings of scripture, this model demonstrates the value of reading with care how ancient authors and their audiences initially understood categories of God, self, and others, as well as how violence functioned among them. It allows us to explore the ancient understanding of the world and to learn from their understanding. When combined with literary and historical studies, this model provides a more comprehensive understanding.<sup>29</sup>

In assessing the portrayal of violence, one might first ask if the human perception of the divine is, in fact, who the divine really is. Does one today necessarily understand God as a micromanager of a geocentric world or as a great patron, who will violently vindicate God's honor against those who have previously shamed him? If human perception is limited, biased, and conditioned by context, then it is important to explore that limitation, bias, or context. For some the question is posed: If so much has changed, why do we even bother with the Bible? Indeed, the human record of our interaction with and perceptions about the world are only minimally part of a common history. The Bible here might be little more than an artifact through which to better understand who we were and what we did. For others, the Bible remains a fundamental way for understanding our own connection to the Divine. We stand in a line begun with those who earlier received such texts, those who believed God is committed to creation with or without human cooperation. Like them, we continue to express our understanding of that commitment through our respective contexts and perceptions. Standing in that line, we are charged with the responsibility to both understand the tradition handed to us and to explain it the best we can for our own time and in

29. See, for example, Torrey Seland, *Establishment Violence in Philo and Luke: A Study of Non-Conformity to the Torah and Jewish Vigilante Reactions* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1995). Cross-cultural models allow readers to consider such previous literary studies with an awareness of how this type of violence relates to purposeful violence documented in exegetical work. Some might continue to question the value of any model in exegetical work. Models certainly cannot exist without data from more specific literary and historical study. But charges of reductionism are akin to criticizing a national or regional map for not having enough detail about the location of specific structures. The value of any model is its ability to handle all the relevant data. The value of some interpreters is the ability to incorporate multiple tools of interpretation.

anticipation of how it might be received as meaningful for those who continue this line. Here, scripture is minimally the foundation of a story that best reminds us of our collective human identity as created and imperfect.

One of the more significant insights from this study by Fiske and Rai is the realization that violence occurs most often (regardless of the type of relationship) where no other options are perceived. Similarly, violence is seldom employed if or when it is not perceived as something that will satisfy its aim or goal. One of the conclusions drawn by the authors is that “to reduce violence we must make it immoral.”<sup>30</sup> If correct, this is tantamount to saying that those interested in reducing or halting violence must make certain relationships and their motivations (unity, equity, authority) achievable only in certain ways.

A modern Christian trying to gain insights from this study might first consider the pervasive reality of the violence perceived in the world of Paul.<sup>31</sup> However, as we have moved from that world’s specific views about women in leadership, the geocentric earth, or God as necessarily a gendered male being, we can also move on from that world’s assumptions about violence. More than decry violence as sick or immoral, we might work to create alternatives for those who are in relationships with characteristics more prone to violence. Such work includes both providing resources for transitioning to other types of relationships and securing both the time and ability to educate and motivate people to pursue such options.

Some of the best memories of this project were from the collective efforts of the members of the working group to assess or adapt models in service of understanding the reality behind the biblical documents and the incarnation these texts sought to explain. A fair number of respectful and productive disagreements were part of these meetings. No doubt Dr. Taylor will disagree with at least some of the perspectives offered here. The author welcomes hearing about what has been too naively assumed, overlooked, or misunderstood. I especially thank Dr. Taylor for the more personal and pastoral insights offered so carefully over the years. Such gifts were the best part of any meeting. Thanks for everything, Wally!

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30. Fiske and Rai, *Virtuous Violence*, 267–268. “Violence only makes sense when alternative, less risky, and less costly means of regulating relationships are not readily available... When it is feasible to abandon a bad relationship and replace it with another, violence may be maladaptive... But if there are few or no alternatives to an existing relationship, then people may resort to violence to make it work—because *this* relationship *must* work.”

31. It is not something easily dismissed from Paul’s theology (or “moral views”) nor is it then likely something simply attributed to “bad people.”