

The sick and the imperfect: Augustine and Hegel on the Fall

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‘People are religious,’ Wittgenstein remarked in one of his notebooks, ‘to the extent that they believe themselves to be not so much *imperfect* as *sick*. Anyone who is halfway decent will think himself utterly imperfect, but the religious person thinks himself wretched’¹. Here I take up Wittgenstein’s distinction between the sick and the imperfect as a means to draw together the work of two authors who may seem to have little in common, Augustine and Hegel. Our focus shall be the biblical story of the Fall, a story which both authors saw as expressive of truths about the human condition and which would prove decisive in their respective anthropologies. Both discuss the story at length, Augustine in Books XII-XIV of *The City of God* (CG), Hegel in the third division of his 1827 *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (LPR). These shall be our primary texts. My aim is twofold. First, through a consideration of Augustine’s and Hegel’s accounts of the Fall in §§1 and 2, I aim to demonstrate that whereas Augustine clearly reads the story as evidence of human *sickness*, Hegel, by building the story into his philosophical system, is able to cite it as in effect an expression of our present *imperfection*. On this basis, I conclude by considering the implications of this proposed reading for our understanding of evil. I argue that in fact it is Augustine who provides the more adequate account of, at least, our *experience* of evil, and that perhaps, in this area, Wittgenstein’s religiously ‘sick’ have something important to teach us.

¹ Wittgenstein (1980), p. 51. Emphasis in original. I borrow this quotation from Stephen Mulhall’s fascinating book, *Philosophical Myths of the Fall* (Mulhall 2005. The quotation appears on p. 7). Having discussed Wittgenstein’s remark in his introduction, Mulhall proceeds to make a case for reading Nietzsche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein all as having in different ways incorporated into their thought ‘the conceptual structure of the Christian doctrine of original sin’. All of them, Mulhall argues in short, regarded human beings as in some sense ‘sick’, not merely imperfect.

§1 – Augustine on the Fall²

It was Augustine, bishop of the north African city of Hippo in the fourth and early fifth centuries, whose work served more than that of any other early Christian author to establish the notion of original sin as a central element in the doctrinal teaching of the Western Church. In his *Confessions*, indeed, he coined the very phrase³. In recent decades, Augustine's close association with Christian doctrines of the Fall and original sin have made him the target of certain contemporary authors, notably Elaine Pagels⁴, interested to emphasize the existence of other doctrinal perspectives in the early Church less anthropologically pessimistic than Augustine's. For indeed Augustine's alleged pessimism is notorious, especially in matters sexual. Peter Brown offers the following succinct statement of Augustine's view:

For Augustine, [sexual intercourse] was, in itself, a miniature shadow of death. Like death, the onset and culmination of sexual sensation mocked the will. Its random movements spoke of a primal dislocation. It betrayed a *discordiosum malum*, an abiding principle of discord lodged in the human person since the Fall⁵.

That such a view has not won favor among contemporary liberals, Christian or otherwise, is not surprising. The very notion of 'an abiding principle of discord lodged in the human person' challenges too frontally the constructive and ameliorative principles and ambitions of liberalism; principles and ambitions deeply rooted, of course, in the Enlightenment.

Yet while some have called this pessimism, others have called it realism, and in this latter guise Augustine's thinking on the Fall has had a quite different reception. Drawing upon Augustine's portrayal of the earthly city in CG – itself a product of the Fall – Reinhold Niebuhr

² Parenthetical citations in this section refer to book and chapter of CG (Augustine 1998).

³ Augustine (1991), p. 82.

⁴ See especially Pagels's *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (Pagels 1988).

⁵ Brown (1988), p. 408.

in the 1950s sought to articulate and defend what he called Augustine's 'political realism'; a view akin, he argued, to the modern realist visions of Machiavelli and Hobbes. Like these later authors, wrote Niebuhr, Augustine recognized that 'the mind is the servant and not the master of the self'; yet unlike them and, Niebuhr thought, more perceptively than they, Augustine recognized that '[this] self which thus made the mind its instrument was a corrupted and not a "normal" self'⁶. In a more recent work of retrieval, Charles Taylor has identified the 'site' of this corruption, so to say – namely human 'inwardness' – as a distinctively Augustinian invention, and perhaps the latter's greatest contribution to Western culture⁷. On such a view Augustine's pessimism-cum-realism, together with the two-tiered anthropology at its basis – of ourselves as creatures both 'inner' and 'outer' – remain significant not only for what light they may shed on our human condition, but for having so deeply impressed themselves upon the cultural horizons against which our modern conception of the self has been formed.

I have claimed that Augustine's account of the Fall portrays human beings as in some sense sick, not merely imperfect. Such for some is his folly, for others his insight, as we have seen. To understand this notion of human sickness, one may distinguish two of its main elements. First, that we ourselves, and so too the earthly cities we establish, are in some sense fundamentally disordered both outwardly (in conduct) and inwardly (in will). This is his weaker, descriptive claim. Yet second, and further, Augustine's account seems to suggest that the cause of this disorder is ultimately mysterious, and the means for righting it finally beyond our reach. So confused and depraved have we become, on Augustine's view, that progress toward an ordered state is not possible for us alone. We are not, it would seem, fully competent moral

⁶ Niebuhr (1953), p. 146.

⁷ Taylor (1989), p. 140.

agents, and only by divine grace may we hope for recovery. Let us consider each of these two elements in turn.

Our fall into disorder was, it seems from Augustine's discussion in CG, a two-fold event. Outwardly, the story is familiar: having been created and placed in the Garden with a good and free will – devoid of evil sentiments, alien to fear and suffering, and well-situated to remain forever in this happy condition (14.10) – Adam and his partner (named Eve only after the Fall) made evil use of their free will by eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Though prompted by the serpent's temptation, the act was entirely their own. From this outward act there originated a 'whole series of calamities' (13.14), primarily the couple's expulsion from the Garden and condemnation to a life of labor and struggle with their new and increasingly inordinate emotions and desires. And so forth, indeed, into our time: for as Augustine puts it, 'we were all in that one man' – we too are responsible for Adam's sin – not as our individual selves, for we 'had not yet been created' in that form, but rather in 'the seminal nature' – Adam's nature – 'from which we were propagated' (ibid.). Thus have we 'inherited' responsibility for the couple's act, and with it the disordered will from whence it sprang.

In this disordered will lies the other, inward aspect of the Fall, and here I would suggest one may begin to locate Augustine's most valuable insight: namely that, *before* their outward act, Adam and Eve had already become evil 'in secret', covertly, and 'only because of this ... were able to fall into overt disobedience' (14.13). This secret, it would seem, was hidden even from the couple themselves; it was, in Augustine's neo-Platonic language of the *Confessions*, a change of orientation or inward 'turn' from God to created things, which would emerge overtly as evil sentiment – and as fear and suffering – only in and following its outward expression. Though

responsible for their act, one may rightly add that, on Augustine's account at least, it seems they never saw it coming.

I've suggested that sickness implies, first, outward and inward disorder – this we have seen – but also, second, that it seems in some sense to compromise our standing as moral agents⁸. Such a view is reflected in our legal system, where the sick, especially the mentally ill, are usually not held fully accountable for their actions. When sick, beset by pains and confusions and perhaps lacking a clear understanding of our condition, we are prone to act in ways that a 'healthy-minded', fully informed agent would not. The situation of Adam and Eve seems a paradigm case of sickness in this sense: for certainly each chose to eat of the fruit, each willed it, yet neither, on Augustine's account, seems to have known in the moment of this choice that their will had become secretly evil; i.e. that already they were, covertly, sick. From this a question arises concerning what seems to be a tension, even a contradiction in Augustine's account: for how can Adam and Eve – how can anyone – be held responsible for a turn in their will that was wholly unknown to them? How and why did this turn occur? Though one may concede that the couple's evil act arose from their evil will, and though one may go on to link this evil will with any number of related concepts (for example, with pride), no such concept seems able to account for the *origin* of our evil will, none is the *cause*, and anyway none were outwardly apparent in the couple's circumstances or known to them before the moment when, inexplicably it seems, they willed evil and ate the fruit.

Some account of this – and some evidence for my description of this contradictory account as a valuable insight – may be gleaned from Augustine's discussion of the fall of the

⁸ This point was brought to my attention by William Babcock's insightful article on this topic (Babcock 1988). Yet where Babcock's argument moves finally toward a criticism of Augustine – i.e. that the latter's attribution of responsibility for the Fall is morally incoherent – I shall suggest that this conceptual incoherence is precisely the clearest sign that Augustine's account offers us, in a rather different sense, valuable insight into the nature of our experience of evil.

angels in Book XII of CG. For here we have a moment clearly parallel to that faced by Adam and Eve in the Garden: though all the angels were created good by God, indeed equally so, some fell into evil and others did not. Why? Augustine's crucial admission comes in chapter six:

[I]f we seek an efficient cause of the evil will of the wicked angels, we shall find none. For what is it that makes the will evil, when it is the will itself that makes an action evil? Thus an evil will is the efficient cause of an evil action, but nothing is the efficient cause of an evil will (12.6).

An evil will, then, for Augustine seems to arise in response to nothing outside itself – there is no account to be given of its origin – but rather it arises from a defect, a *privatio*, just as blindness is a defect of the eye or hearing of the ear (12.1). This defect removes or diminishes the goodness of the will, and thus, in being made to fall short of the good, the will becomes evil. One may call this process wholly immanent, for the defect, as Augustine writes in Book XIV, ‘belongs to the nature of which it is a defect ... [and] cannot exist except in a nature’ (14.11). Such defects are a danger, Augustine writes, only ‘in a nature the Creator created out of nothing’ (ibid.) – so for ourselves and for all other created beings, including the angels. The point to be derived from Augustine's discussion here seems to be this: that no system or theory, however sophisticated, can *finally* explain why some sin where others do not – though we may certainly have a go at this, as in medical or legal science, and in doing so accomplish much relative good for the earthly city.

Here we seem to have a portrait of human sickness, or of the experience of sickness. In this respect Augustine's insight seems valuable indeed. The turning of our will from good to evil comes, as it were, like a thief in the night; though a thief who has, unbeknownst to us, resided in our house for some time. We are caught off guard, as too when we fall ill, yet later perhaps we wonder how we could have missed the signs, or ignored them. For creatures like us, created from

nothing, this evil turning of the will is, like sickness, a constant possibility. We can and, Augustine believes, must try to ward it off – must by means of ascetic discipline and the wise choice of companions endeavor to maintain our spiritual health – yet despite our best efforts shall, like Augustine himself even after his conversion, frequently succumb to temptation. Like a fall into sickness, a fall into evil often seems mysterious. For how could things have come to this, we ask? How could we have acted so? Yet though potential rationalizations may abound, very often such acts seem to lack sufficient reason. And yet, inwardly, we persist. Wittgenstein perhaps would call this religion.

§2 Hegel on the Fall⁹

In considering Augustine's account of the Fall it seemed useful to begin by considering his reception in more recent conversations – conversations in which he has often been championed or maligned precisely for his views on this point. In considering Hegel's, which has in itself understandably exerted a less broad cultural influence than Augustine's, the more pressing task is to situate it clearly within the framework of his own philosophical system. Hegel's most sustained and mature treatment of the story appears, as noted, in the third and final part of his LPR, entitled 'The Consummate Religion' – by which he means Christianity. We may begin by locating his account here. This third part is divided into three 'elements', corresponding to the three moments of Hegel's dialectic; the second of these elements, entitled 'Representation, Appearance', is further divided into two sections, 'Differentiation' and 'Reconciliation'. The first of these shall occupy our attention in what follows. Hegel's account of the Fall is tucked away near the end of this first section, just following a discussion of 'natural humanity' and just preceding, by a few pages, his next section on 'reconciliation'.

⁹ Parenthetical citations in this section refer to Hegel's LPR (Hegel 2006).

One can understand the significance of this schematic placement of Hegel's account by considering its basic features. Two are primary. First, Hegel regards the story of the Fall as a representation (*Vorstellung*), i.e. the mode of expression proper to religion, and not a concept (*Begriff*), i.e. the mode proper to philosophy. The first half of Hegel's section on differentiation presents the Fall's meaning, as it were, conceptually; I turn to this in a moment. Hegel's discussion of the story itself follows this as a kind of illustration – though perhaps no illustration in Hegel is a mere illustration! The story presents the same content as the preceding conceptual considerations, but in a different form. A second feature of Hegel's account provides an initial contrast between his view and Augustine's: namely that whereas for Augustine the story portrays the disordered nature of our *will*, for Hegel it portrays the emergence of *consciousness*. Thus although his account of the story appears near the middle of the third part of LPR, in fact the transition it expresses – from innocence into differentiation – is that between the first and second parts of his system. It is the Fall which inaugurates the long period of separation or alienation (from God, and from the world), and the 'process' of passing through it, coextensive, on one reading at least, with history itself. At the end of this process, one is brought to reconciliation – the subject of Hegel's next section. Clearly the placement of Hegel's account is no accident.

I have claimed that Hegel's account of the Fall portrays us as imperfect, and yet perfection is not a concept native to Hegel's system. In Hegel's terms, I shall take perfection to mean 'fully consummated', which in the human case I take to mean an elevation to consciousness of one's own self-conscious nature – say, an achievement of self-transparency. Imperfection I take to refer to any state which falls short of this; a broad and indeed almost universal category which clearly calls to mind Wittgenstein's suggestion that '[a]nyone who is halfway decent will think himself utterly imperfect'. Only a god or a monster could think

otherwise. The crucial point is not, it seems, that Hegel regards human beings as imperfect in this broad sense – for of course he does – but that he sees us as finally *perfectible*, and conceives the period of separation inaugurated by the Fall as precisely a ‘process’ driving toward this perfection. Though Augustine too sees history, or at least salvation history, as driving toward a kind of consummation – namely the return of Christ and the Last Judgment – our finding ourselves on the right side of this consummatory moment depends on our setting aside the ‘old man’, born of Adam, and, with Paul, putting on the ‘new’. Hegel seems to see no need for such a categorical transition, for if only we persist in the process – the very process inaugurated by the Fall – we shall, with conceptual if not natural necessity, reach our consummation. This is the difference, it seems, between being imperfect (for now) and being sick.

Before discussing the story of the Fall itself, as I’ve said – the representation – Hegel begins by outlining more formally the moment of ‘conceptual determination’ (442) depicted in the story. Conceptually or, as Hegel puts it, scientifically, one begins with the ‘eternal idea’, namely God as absolute essence or truth. This is the first ‘element’, which may be expressed by a simple claim: ‘God is everywhere’ (432). Yet once this idea becomes an idea *for* a thinking subject, there emerges a second element: the ‘element of appearance in general’ (433). The thinking subject here in question, Hegel writes, is ‘the Son’. The procession of the Son from the Father is however not yet the emergence of an ‘other’, not yet ‘distinction’ or ‘determination’; it is rather an ‘act of differentiation’, a play of love with itself which ‘does not yet arrive at the seriousness of other being, of separation and rupture’ (434). Finally, however, the Son must ‘obtain the determination of the other as such’, for only *as* determined – *as* ‘an entity’ – can there be difference and, consequently, the ultimate self-determination of God himself, of the eternal idea, which is Hegel’s third and final element. And so in absolute freedom this idea, God,

through the Son, brings an ‘other’ into existence as a free and independent being. This other is ‘the world as such’.

Though having to this point made mention of just one Son, Hegel proceeds by following Jacob Boehme in distinguishing two: Lucifer, and ‘the eternal only-begotten One’. Lucifer, the first son, ‘posited himself for himself, he strove to be, and thereby he fell’ (435) – yet in his place ‘immediately’, Hegel writes, appeared the One, the true Son. Taking distance from Boehme’s mythological account, Hegel suggests that Lucifer was not so much a son of God as he was ‘the external world’ itself; i.e. the finite world outside of the truth, determinate, distinct, limited and negative. The One, in turn, he identifies as ‘the world of finite spirit’. The emergence of both of these together – the natural world and finite spirit – inaugurates this second element we’ve been examining, and leads, as we shall see, directly towards the moment of ‘conceptual determination’ depicted in the story of the Fall. And yet this is no static pair, for ‘the world’ – i.e. this pair taken together – not only ‘is’, but also constantly ‘sublate[s]’ its own being (which, *as* independent being, just *is* a state of ‘separation or estrangement from God’), doing so in and through, as Hegel puts it, ‘the process of the world in love by which it passes over from fall and separation into reconciliation’ (ibid.). Hegel’s second ‘element’ is and encompasses this process.

Hegel now turns to a discussion of ‘natural humanity’, bringing us finally, at its end, to the moment of conceptual determination we’ve been pursuing. The human subject, he writes, suffers from a twofold ‘cleavage’: it both is separated from God, i.e. from absolute truth, and, belonging as it does to both the natural world and the realm of finite spirit, is divided within itself. The subject indeed is nothing but these cleavages; it *is* contradiction – a contradiction which ‘holds itself together’ – and so, it is ‘evil’ (437). Yet in another sense, the subject, ‘natural humanity’, is good. The remainder of Hegel’s conceptual discussion explores and unpacks these

‘two opposed definitions’ of humanity: that we are by nature good, and by nature evil. We are good, he writes, only *implicitly*, for implicitly, we are spirit and rationality, created in the image of God (438). And yet our ‘deficiency’ is contained in this very word ‘implicitly’; the word itself ‘implies that everything has not been said’ (439). We are good, yes, but only in ‘an inner way’, not in actuality. We are good in ‘concept’, not in nature, yet insofar as we are (finite) spirit we must, he suggests, come to be *explicitly* that which we are implicitly, namely good.

Yet in doing so we must overcome that other, natural aspect of ourselves which is by nature evil, for there is such an aspect, and indeed it expresses, as Hegel puts it, a ‘higher standpoint’ (440). This latter aspect ‘arises’ once we ‘step forth’ out of immediacy – out of an animal state, wholly determined by our natural essence and natural will – yet though it *arises* in this moment (i.e. the moment of the Fall), already it was present long before, in our ‘natural state’ itself. To act wholly according to nature, Hegel suggests, is evil; there is nothing true in the ‘vacuous’ representation of ourselves happy in a state of nature, innocent and ‘good’ as a natural thing (441). Animals and other natural things are indeed good, he claims, yet it is not for conscious subjects such as ourselves to be in such a state. We are, he concludes, *both* by nature good *and* by nature evil; ‘it is false to ask’ whether we are simply one or the other, and ‘superficial’ to suggest that we’re (simply) equally both. Rather, he writes, in us ‘both of them, both good and evil, are posited, but essentially in contradiction, in such a way that each of them presupposes the other’ (442). This, he continues, is ‘the first fundamental definition’ of natural humanity, ‘the essential determination of [its] concept’.

In his very brief explicit account of the story of the Fall itself, Hegel aims to show how this story portrays representationally the far more intricate conceptual account just outlined. In the beginning, for us as beings created in the image of God, Paradise was, he says, a kind of

‘zoological garden’ (ibid.). We were animals, innocent and not yet conscious, in a state of nature. Evil arose in the moment when Adam and Eve ate the fruit, yet for Hegel, unlike Augustine, the significance of this act lay not in its transgression of the divine command (i.e., placing ourselves and our own will before God and his), but in the *content* of the act – for ‘the content is the essential thing’ (443). What fruit, after all, did we eat in transgressing God’s command? The fruit of the tree of knowledge, knowledge of good and evil. This fruit is, Hegel writes, an ‘outward image’ for the real and deeper meaning of our action: namely that by eating the fruit we had elevated ourselves to this knowledge, we had undertaken our first conscious act of *cognition*, and precisely *in* this act of cognition – of judging, distinguishing, dividing – we became no longer animals but now human subjects, with all the cleavage and separation this standing implies. The source of evil was not our act, i.e. our willing to eat the fruit, but rather these cleavages themselves which the act rendered effective. That this act was prompted by the serpent, Lucifer, indicates its source in ‘the evil principle’ within ourselves, i.e. our membership in the ‘natural world’, which constantly militates against – yet likewise, and crucially, enables – the explicit emergence of our implicit spiritual nature (as good).

The event described in the story, Hegel emphasizes, was for us necessary to enable a realization of our constitutive antithesis – that we are by nature good *and* evil – not just locally (that we sometimes break this or that command) and externally (that we participate in a Manichean battle between good and evil forces), but as an ‘infinite’ antithesis ‘within’ ourselves; a realization which, as he puts it, produces within us a feeling of ‘infinite anguish’ (447). Our ‘negation’, of which this anguish is a sign, stands not in some accidental relation to our ‘affirmation’, our identity; rather our identity itself is constitutively split – separated, as we’ve said, from both the world (i.e. itself as a natural being) and God. In realizing this, in the moment

of eating the fruit, our innocence disappears – and not only disappears but, more than this, is rendered forever closed to us. The gate back to Eden is blocked; our first, less adequate conception of ourselves has been superseded. For we have realized that the pure natural state in which we were created is precisely what we ought *not* to be; that the absence of consciousness and will which marked that state is itself, for us, what is evil (448). We have realized, in short, that we are, constitutively, imperfect; a claim which, I suppose, is not seriously in question. But more than this – as becomes apparent not immediately but only so to say ‘mediately’, as we express and unfold this identity in art, religion and philosophy – we find ourselves launched on a path, in and through history, toward a reconciliation of our constitutive cleavages; an overcoming of our present imperfection which shall come, for us, with no less (conceptual) necessity than did our initial realization of it in the Garden. We are imperfect, yes, but perfectible.

Conclusion

And so, I submit, Augustine and Hegel may be read as falling on different sides of Wittgenstein’s distinction between the sick and the imperfect. For Augustine, the Fall has rendered us sick, and not so much merely sick as terminally ill. For reasons we can never understand, our will has ‘turned’ – and ever again in so many moments *turns*, again and again – to evil. We are disordered and, in each moment perhaps, endangered by subsequent falls into further disorder. Only by decisively breaking this cycle by wholly renouncing the old man for the new – only by ‘putting on Christ’ – can we hope for recovery. Lacking such a prospect, i.e. lacking Christ, we are lost. For Hegel, though surely we are imperfect, we find that the very conditions out of which this imperfection arose, understood conceptually, are constituted in such a way as to press toward their own reconciliation. We *can* through our own efforts – spiritually

(with the One), not naturally (with Lucifer) – make this reconciliation actual in ourselves and our communities. Progress, even and indeed precisely for us in our current imperfect condition, *is* possible. Evil, it seems on Hegel’s account, is not as for Augustine something with which we have been permanently and mysterious saddled, but rather just an ‘empty nothingness’ (448) which, once we come to think rightly and rationally and to act rightly on this basis, shall no longer plague us. We can, *as* and starting precisely *from* the vantage of what we are at present, accomplish this.

I’ve suggested that it is Augustine, not Hegel, who provides the more adequate account of our experience of evil. For though indeed Hegel speaks of anguish – and of the ‘remorse’ of our cleavage from God and the ‘unhappiness’ of our cleavage from the world (449) – he seems to hold, unlike Augustine, that ultimately we *can* understand the origin of our evil will; even that he, Hegel, has in his philosophical system provided the means for so dispelling our mystification. This may be true, and Hegel may be right. Yet too it seems that our experience of evil – either as suffered at the hands of another, or as worked by our own – is felt as something finally more mysterious than this; something which perhaps the *story* of the Fall expresses, with all its contradictions, in a way that no systematic *account* of the Fall can ever do. Hegel is not to be blamed for this, for after all the series of his lectures we have here considered are concerned with the *philosophy of* religion, not religion as such – i.e. they are perhaps not an expression of ‘religion’ in the sense Wittgenstein intended. With Wittgenstein, then, one may suggest that religion is precisely ‘*not so much*’ a matter of thinking oneself imperfect as of thinking oneself sick – i.e. that a sense of imperfection is not sufficient on its own to ground a genuinely religious (versus philosophical) disposition; that also a sense of sickness may be necessary for this.

Indeed Augustine and Hegel may finally agree that we need both of these understandings of our condition, both the representational story and the conceptual account. The challenge posed by Hegel lies not so much in his distinction of these two – for indeed he preserves both representation and concept side by side and affirms their relative value – but in his philosophical intuition, or rather explicit claim, that the conceptual account is cognitively superior to the story, such that with time one may resolve, again cognitively, to leave the story (and the sickness) behind. Such a view is certainly allowed for by his system, regardless of what Hegel’s own intentions may have been. Augustine’s account of the Fall – which, as I’ve suggested, seems so well to express our experience of evil – may serve as a reminder that no philosophical account can on its own fully or finally express this experience. We may thereby do well to follow Wittgenstein in seeing religion ‘not so much’ as a response to our obvious imperfection as indeed a far more feeble and uncomprehending cry to be redeemed from a felt condition – from even an identity – to which we feel ourselves finally unable to be reconciled.

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