

**An eye for an eye versus turning the other cheek:
Moral Accounting in the Gospel of Matthew**

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1. A familiar but distant text.

The author of the *Gospel of Matthew* constantly presents Jesus as decrying primary adherence to the accepted socioeconomic structure. Not only shall the first be last and the last first (19.30), but it is easier for a camel to pass through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven (19.24). Followers are urged to abandon not only economic security (they should give away all they have, e.g. 19.21) but immediate social ties: Matthew's Jesus requires followers to love him more than family members (10.37), and even urges a man not to bury his father before coming to follow him (8.21). He wears fringes (9.20, 14.36), tells people to obey the Law of Moses (5.17ff, 19.16-19, 22.37-40), and pays his temple tax (though in a miraculous and unorthodox way, 17.24ff). But he gets into disputes with the priests because he does not tell his disciples to fast (9.14-15), lets his followers harvest grain to eat on the Sabbath (12.1-8), heals on the Sabbath (12.9-14), and does not insist on ritual hand-washing before meals (15.1ff) - not to mention overturning the tables of the temple money changers (21.12-13).

Yet obviously no preacher could make more pervasive use of the social structures he rejects, as metaphoric models for the new and better world that he advocates. Matthew's Jesus apparently rejects the familial labels of mother and brothers for his official family members but simultaneously tells his followers that they are his mother and his brothers (12.46-50). Or, in another passage, they are the wedding guests at a Jewish wedding and he is the bridegroom (9.14-15), over whom they are *religiously obligated* to rejoice and feast. And the parables constantly use contemporary social relationships and financial transactions to reason about the relationship between humans and God or the Kingdom of Heaven. It is a pearl of great price which one should sell all one has in order to buy (13.45), a storehouse full of treasure accessible to the faithful (6.19-21, 13.52), a treasure hidden in a field which one can sell one's possessions to purchase (13.44), a vineyard or estate whose owner hires workers or employs slave labor (20.1-17, 21.28ff, 21.33ff, 24.45-51, 25.14-30), or a

wedding to which a King invites subjects (22.1-14) or to which bridesmaids are late (25.1-12).

As has been generally recognized, Jesus does not just propose an alternate system, he turns the extant one inside out or upside down. And he does this by metaphor. Literally, the laws of purity do not permit Jews to defile themselves by eating non-kosher food - but Jesus says that they should be more concerned with the metaphoric purity of their minds, which are defiled by sinful thoughts and words (15.10-20). This metaphoric kashrut is also inverted in that it controls what *comes out* of the person (sinful actions and words) rather than what goes in (food ingestion). Literal giving away of one's possessions is metaphoric *purchase* of the Kingdom of Heaven (19.21); literal abandonment of one's family is metaphoric association with a new family, that of the Church. And so on.

Contemporary Christianity regards Jesus' teachings as potentially universal moral precepts - or at least as ones applicable to us, in some way. But this can't be so in a simple way: not every society has a monetary system, or slavery, or major property owners, or a monarchy. And those that do, still don't have systems just like the Roman and Jewish ones prevailing in Jesus' Palestine. In the first *Flashman* book by George McDonald Fraser, an evangelical Methodist British colonel of an Indian regiment preaches to his regiment via an Urdu interpreter. He chooses the parable of the Prodigal Son as his text. Flashman, the narrator, is one of the colonel's British officers; unlike the Colonel, he speaks Urdu, and hears the interpreter saying "So he kills a calf. Evidently he is not a Hindu." The lesson here appears to be that the audience is not extracting any general morality from the parable, which to them is just an odd tale about a different culture - indeed it is unclear whether the listeners imagine the Prodigal Son's family to be Christian or possibly Muslim, but they (perhaps like some of the English members of the colonel's audience) have no idea what Judaism is.

Here we are in the twenty-first century, with all of the historical and anthropological sophistication brought by the late 20th century, and all of the attendant postmodern uncertainty of textual readings. How do we, or how do other readers who are not Jews of Roman Palestine, extract lessons from Jesus' teaching as reported by the evangelists? And a related question: how can there be relevance to people in general, from lessons based on inversion (sometimes ironic inversion) of one particular localized social and religious system? How can we unpack not only the layers of cultural

difference between us and Matthew's text, but the deep layers of authoritative and culture-centric interpretation that have been built up surrounding that text? (NOTE: Recognizing the uncertainty of this authorial attribution, my references to the text's author as "Matthew" should be understood as an abbreviation for "the author or redactor of the *Gospel of Matthew*"; I shall similarly refer to the words and actions of "Jesus", meaning what "Matthew's Jesus" says and does.)

2. Moral accounting and literal accounting.

Various routes suggest themselves to a cognitive linguist wanting to relate to Matthew's text. One is of course to examine the cultural frames of the biblical texts, in their historical context, as many historical analysts have done. Looking at what the legal relationships of fathers and children were in Roman Palestine, for example, will obviously help us not to interpret every reference to fathers or sons in the Gospel texts as transparent references to modern American parent-child relations. Another, which will be the focus of my present query, is to try to identify shared aspects of these different frames. This is a difficult task. Cognitive work on metaphor has shown that even such deep-seated metaphors as our spatial models for time are different in different cultures - and cognitively different, not just linguistically different (Boroditsky 2000, Boroditsky and Ramscar 2002, Núñez and Sweetser 2006). But the metaphoric framings I shall discuss are pervasive in such a range of Middle Eastern and European ancient societies, as well as many modern Christian societies - there is variation in specifics, but much common ground, as attested by legal and historical sources as well as by linguistic research. The common ground in question is an understanding of financial exchange as a metaphor for social and religious interaction.

The *Gospel of Matthew* is historically attributed to Jesus' disciple Matthew, who was apparently a tax-collector. The text does report Matthew's recruitment (9.9), and in agreement with Mark (15-17) and Luke (5.29-32), Jesus' statement that he associates with people like tax collectors because they "need a physician", while morally "healthy" people do not (9.10-13). However, the metaphoric framings involved in the Matthew text might themselves have helped to prompt its attribution to a tax-collector. Whoever he is, Matthew makes constant use of metaphors construing religion and spiritual relationships as finance. He seems generally obsessed, in fact, with what Taub, Lakoff and others (Lakoff and Johnson 1999) have called Moral Accounting, the metaphor

whereby human interactions and relationships are understood as financial exchanges. You do something good for me, and I owe you a favor *in return*. You do something bad to me, and I'm gonna *pay you back* or possibly *get even*. Or as Matthew says, speaking of moral judgment rather than business, *the measure you give will be the measure you get* (7.2; cf. Mark 4.24, Luke 6.38). Of course, our financial systems are not those of Roman Palestine. But we can be pretty sure that we share at least some of this particular metaphoric structure with Matthew, since the metaphor runs through Indo-European and Middle Eastern cultures as far back as we can trace them - and indeed through their religions as well. Kurke (1991) has analyzed Pindar as an example of the Greek understanding of religion as a financial transaction - a sub-case in its turn of the Indo-European model. As a mortal, you give the gods praise, worship and sacrifice, and they will give you powerful help in return. In this session, Therese Descamp's paper will touch on this model, as it is manifested in the patron-client relationship understood by the author of Psalm 137 to exist between God and Israel.

The Moral Accounting metaphor, then, maps actions onto exchanges. An action is understood to possibly benefit the agent or the patient; a commercial exchange similarly benefits one side or the other. If I do something good for you, that is *giving* you something, and you owe me a debt of positive action (if only gratitude) in return. If I do something bad to you, that is *giving* you something bad, so the debt owed is then one of negative action or *retribution*: you will *pay me back* for my ill deed, or *get even*. The two kinds of currency, positive and negative, balance each other just as a negative debt and a positive payment do in real accounting. So if I do something bad to you, another way to balance the moral books (as opposed to revenge) is *restitution*: I do something good for you, to make up for the previous bad thing I did. Either way, we can then say that the accounts are even or *balanced*.

All sorts of entailments follow from this metaphor. In commercial transactions, you don't just let the books sit unbalanced. Tolerating bad debts undermines the entire financial system in all kinds of ways. So both sides of a transaction have an obligation to balance the books, although debt forgiveness remains a possibility in individual cases. Similarly, in a religious or legal system based on moral accounting, it is wrong not only to do evil things, but also to fail to punish an evil-doer. If we just let crime run unpunished, it would undermine the "social contract."

Matthew's Jesus uses the Moral Accounting metaphor in innovative ways, and in particular uses it differently with respect to human-human relationships than with respect to human-God relationships. In so doing, he uses two different models of the SOURCE domain of accounting - the standard one, where debts are to be balanced, and the radical end-of-days one wherein Jesus urges his followers to give away their possessions and lend money without repayment. These produce two correspondingly distinct moral models.

Let us first turn to the human-Divine accounting relationship. In the parable of the Talents, Matthew (25.14-30) presents the case of three slaves who are given money to keep for their master. Two of them invest it wisely, get a return, and have more money when their master returns. The third is so worried about losing money that he buries the coin to keep it safe, and thus has only exactly the same coin to show when the master asks for an accounting. He is reproved, and the money is taken from him and given to one of the servants who invested. Jesus states that this is a metaphor for the Kingdom of Heaven. Certainly it seems sound financial policy - we also would prefer to entrust our money to successful investors rather than to unsuccessful ones. And yet this is the same Jesus who told his followers to give away all they have and follow him (19.21), and not to be concerned for their future clothing and nourishment (6.25-34). So Jesus seems to be saying that we should be unconcerned with literal financial planning, but should see our relationship with God very seriously as metaphoric financial planning.

Before sentencing the non-investing slave to further severe punishment, the master (or Matthew) finally resumes the Talents parable with the statement that *For to all those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away* (25.29). This seems a very cynical (or at least brutally realistic) financial assessment - the kind of statement a modern American liberal readily sees as applicable to current Republican tax policies. Again, it is not at all the literal financial policy that Jesus is urging on his followers. All the gospel texts agree that Jesus advised the faithful to give everything to the poor and not to think of providing for themselves (at least partly because the "End of Days" is approaching); he explicitly directs them to give to everyone who begs from them, and not to refuse anyone who asks to borrow from them (5.42). He urges completely unselfish giving of alms - his followers are to give tzedaka (an important Jewish religious duty) in secret (6.1-4), to make sure God understands that they are doing it only as a good deed and not for the sake of social standing. Yet in this

story about the Kingdom of Heaven, the Master not only insists on the best return for his "money", but overtly supports the consequently increasing metaphoric financial gap between the moral accounting status of the haves and the have-nots.

Matthew gives added evidence of his preoccupation with strict Moral Accounting throughout his gospel, as those whom he describes as making the wrong moral choices are severely punished in outer darkness or a fiery furnace, with *wailing and gnashing of teeth* (e.g., 8.12, 13.42, 13.50, 22.13, 25.30). Some of the literal source-domain circumstances in the parables are unlikely ones. One imagines that when a King issues invitations to his son's wedding (as in 22.1-14), the invitees would not generally ignore these messages. And although it seems potentially reasonable to invite other guests in place of the delinquent ones, it seems very implausible to seriously punish beggars and folks off the street for failing to show up in proper clothing when suddenly dragged off to a royal wedding as replacement guests: how could they have known to be ready, and how would they have had the resources if they had known? Yet in this parable, they do get punished. In the target domain, of course, the parable may be saying that the Pharisees and other religious leaders (those who are first invited to the wedding) may be ignoring God's real wishes, but all the ordinary folks should nonetheless attend to His wishes and prepare morally for the Kingdom. In the target domain of religious worship, Moral Accounting demands punishment for those who defy God's will and reward for those who follow His commands.

Hebrew scripture depicts a God who both punishes and is merciful - a God who is ready to destroy Nineveh for sinful ways, but reproves Jonah (*Jonah*, 4) for wanting the destruction of Nineveh once the Ninevites have reformed. Matthew's Jesus depicts a God who sometimes demands strict moral accounting (you are closed out of the wedding if you are a foolish bridesmaid with no oil in your lamp, 25.1-13; you are thrown in prison if you came to the palace for the wedding in street attire, 22.11-13) - but sometimes does not demand it. The parable of the workers in the vineyard (20.1-17) is economically implausible; the workers who came early in the day are naturally angry when the ones who worked only a couple of hours are paid a full day's wage too. The master reasons with them, saying that after all they still got paid a full day's wage for their work, so it doesn't hurt them if he wishes to be generous to the other workers. Even in the source domain, this is true - that is, as long as one is paid the agreed-on wage, one presumably has (or had, in pre-union days) no basis for complaint if

others are paid more per hour for the same work. But the master's behavior still seems unreasonable. In the target domain, of course, there are two crucial factors to be considered. First of all, the Kingdom of Heaven is not a thing to be doled out proportionately to one's good behavior; by the additional metaphoric logic of states as locations (you can't be in two physical places at once) presumably you either go to Heaven or you do not. And secondly, it is God's decision *when* and *whether* to demand a strict moral accounting of us. Presumably we should be ready for it all the time, since we do not know when we will die - and, according to Matthew, the End of Days may well be at hand in any case. But it is not for humans to decide the time of accounting (25.13), nor to decide whether God will be strict or merciful in his accounting.

Human-human accounting is another matter. An added complexity of Matthew's Jesus is that although he cautions us to prepare for strict moral accounting of humans towards God, he advises his followers *not* to demand strict moral accounting between humans, and to overpay their own moral accounts. Not only are they to give money without thought of any return (not even social "credit"), they are also to return good deeds for ill and "go the second mile" when asked to do one. Throughout at least Europe and the Middle East, metaphoric moral systems strongly demanded "keeping the books even" between humans. Revenge is one part of such systems: someone does something bad to you, and you even out the moral accounts by a bad deed in return. Restitution is another route: someone does something bad to you (or takes something good from you), and the accounts are evened out by them doing something good, or giving something good, to you. Both Jewish and Roman law have fines as well as physical punishments for offenses, showing both revenge and restitution manifested in the official legal systems. In none of these systems is it even allowable, let alone meritorious, to simply leave the books as they stand when an offense is committed against you. The law demands punishment for a crime, lest society be cheated of its due. And a man (this is a system of relations between heads of families) loses honor if he does not demand reparation for offenses against him or his household.

But Matthew's Jesus seems to advise that his followers *not* try to keep the books even in dealing with other people, but simply to accrue as much moral credit as possible. As Taub (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1999) has vividly pointed out, the idea of *turning the other cheek* (5.39) is an inventive and shrewd moral accounting strategy for achieving this new goal. It not only avoids accruing moral debit yourself (for doing a bad deed by striking your opponent) but "ups the

moral ante'' by offering your opponent a chance to fall yet further into moral debit. In another parable (18.21-35) Jesus describes a slave who is forgiven his large debt to his king, but then demands full payment of a smaller debt owed to him by another slave - the king sees this and revokes his previous merciful judgment, putting the slave in prison for debt. Although this literal scenario may not be entirely implausible, the moral scenario is presumably that to deserve any mercy in our moral accounting with God, we should never demand strict returns in moral accounting with fellow-humans. In many cases it seems that moral credit and literal credit are in inverse proportions - for example, the rich man who needs to unload his money to be able to enter Heaven. It follows that Christians should be greedy in their moral accounting system, sometimes precisely by being irrationally generous in their literal accounting. We need all the moral credit we can get, for the final accounting with God. And by this system, indeed the first (in financial credit) shall be last (in moral credit standing), and vice versa.

3. Broader cognitive issues.

How unusual is a system like Matthew's diverse and even clashing financial metaphors? Well, one major body of research has shown similar complexity in American political metaphors. Lakoff (1996) has pointed out that in American politics, metaphors of parenting are pervasively used to understand government. Americans have two broad source-domain models of parenting, which Lakoff labels Strict Father and Nurturant Parent. A Nurturant Parent has a model of morality as nurturance and support between human beings. S/he works to provide all of his or her children's needs, and to give them opportunity in life, believing that parental love is manifested in helping one's children, who will thereby learn to become loving and helping adults when they are independent. A Strict Father has a model where morality is understood as strength. In such a model, helping one's children too much will keep them from becoming strong and independent, and punishment is necessary to keep them morally strong and able to resist temptation. Applied metaphorically to government, the Nurturant Parent model sees it as a scandal that a government should not ensure basic needs like housing, health care and education to all citizens - the US government is being a bad parent. The Strict Father model, on the other hand, sees it as immoral to help poor people because they are thus deprived of the motivation to be hard-working and independent - hard work having presumably brought about the financial prosperity of the wealthy. Is it right for a deadbeat to demand that his hard-working siblings or parents split their income with

him? If you don't think so, say the Strict Father modelers, then you shouldn't tax the rich.

Lakoff also found that *usually* people apply their *own* model of family to government; that is, if your personal family model is Strict Father, then you tend not to support a government which taxes the wealthy to pay for social programs. However, there are crossovers: some political conservatives seem to have Nurturant Parent models in their own families, but apply the Strict Father model to national politics.

In Matthew, we see an inversion of the prevailing literal accounting system: followers should not demand payment of literal debts, and should give their money away. We also see a metaphoric version of this inverted accounting system, in Matthew's proposed understanding of human-to-human moral relationships. But we see the "standard" strictly-balanced accounting system used as a model for Divine-human moral relations - with generosity and debt-forgiveness only at the option of the employer or creditor. Unlike the American political system, Matthew's models seem coherent at a higher level. If there is a single overarching moral accounting system, then gaining irrationally high moral credit in our dealings with humans may help us accrue enough credit to help in our strict accounting with God, where the debts are really big-time.

Considering the cognitive complexity of metaphoric structures can help us to understand apparently difficult aspects of texts. For example, in the case of the workers in the vineyard, we needed several contributing metaphors to untangle the rationale behind the Master's decision. The STATES ARE LOCATIONS metaphor means that Heaven vs. Hell is conceived of as an all-or-nothing choice; this, and not only the financial structure, is why it would be impossible for the Master to pay partial wages to the servants who worked for only part of the day. Inferential structures in one domain can highlight parallel inferences in another domain, via mapping - and these in turn can influence how reasoning is done in a complex, multi-metaphoric model (such as the Vineyard parable).

It is a crucial question, when looking at metaphoric structures in distant texts, to assess the extent to which there are at least parallels between our own metaphoric understandings and those of the authors. Obviously our financial and legal systems are very different from those of Roman Palestine. But some shared structure, and a broadly shared metaphoric mapping, allows us not only to understand, but to be powerfully affected by, Matthew's *turn the other*

cheek advice. STATES ARE LOCATIONS, even more than Moral Accounting, is a pervasive metaphor far beyond the cultures which go into the Judeo-Christian models of the world. It is based on a pretty universal correlation in experience: our psychological and intentional states do vary with physical location (we feel comfortable in our own kitchen, uncomfortable in a courtroom, and so on). As analysts, we should feel pretty comfortable, therefore, in identifying this mapping as part of the meaning of older texts.

Other apparently "universal" domains, of course, require a lot of sorting out of universal and culture-specific. Yes, certain basic facts of parent-child relations may be universal - for example, shared genes support a universal idea that children may *resemble* parents. Nurturance of small children universally tends to create an emotionally close but power-asymmetric relationship between care-givers and children. But social construal of this relationship is hugely variable. Is an adult child independent of parental authority, for example? What are the financial relationships between family members, and how is property shared? And so on. DesCamp and Sweetser (2005) argue that modern and Biblical models of God as Father do share structure, but of course not all structure by any means. So we have come full circle, and naturally need to consider historical context deeply even as we make use of "universal" cognitive mappings. Universal human cognitive abilities and constraints are always operating in specific cultural contexts.

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