

An Economic Approach to Theology of the Lord's Prayer

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0. Introduction: the two requests.

Jesus' early teachings, as embodied in the Lord's Prayer, are partly formulated by way of two requests that – whatever their deeper meaning - are undeniably economic in their content: (i) "Give us today our daily bread" and (ii) "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." I propose to explore Jesus' meaning by taking seriously, almost literally, these two requests and comparing them with related requests that we nowadays would be more inclined to make. Can we accept the extreme form of material dependence on God suggested in request (i)? Do we still think of our relationship to God in the rather stark legal terms presupposed in request (ii)? Does the famous "golden rule" of which (ii) is an application suffice as an ethical principle? Why don't we ask God to help us pay our debts to our creditors rather than to release them? And if we are now to understand both these parts of the Prayer more metaphorically than Jesus intended, can we articulate the nature of these meta-metaphors? In trying to answer these questions I will revisit some of Jesus' parables, among which some very familiar ones and one not very well known.

The following three sections are devoted the first (section 1) to request (i), the second (section 2) to request (ii). In section 3, the conclusions: I will try to answer, at least partially, the questions raised.

1. The Itinerary of Bread.

Our food is the outcome of a social process (i.e., "production") but individually, we do not know where our daily bread comes from. It is in fact rather mysterious. If we tried to trace back its provenance, would we reach its original source...God?

1.1. The Food of Paradise: Yunus' quest

There is in the Sufi tradition an interesting tale, mid-way between the parable and a tale from the Arabian Nights, which tells the story of a Sufi novice, Yunus the son of Adam.^[1] He begins a sacred quest at once theological, spiritual, and geographical, exactly to verify his faith on this matter. He hopes, by cutting through the social process of class differentiation and division of labor, "to find the means whereby sustenance comes to mankind, and learn something about how and why". He decides "to adopt the religious way, which exhorts man to rely upon almighty God for his sustenance": "Rather than live in the world of confusion, where food and other things come apparently through society, I shall throw myself upon the direct support of the Power which rules over all. The beggar depends upon intermediaries: charitable men and women, who are subject to secondary impulses. They give goods or money because they have been trained to do so. I shall accept no such indirect contributions." So, he leaves the city for the countryside, and soon finds himself in the dervishes' sacred place, the bank of the river. There he decides to remain, devoting himself to prayer, contemplation, and...waiting for the Food of Paradise. One day, "as Yunus sat staring at the sun's broken lights reflected in the mighty Tigris... something bobbing in the reeds caught his eye." It is a tablet of halwa, composed of "almond paste, rosewater, honey and nuts and other precious elements... Halwa was prized for its taste and esteemed as health-giving food." Yunus is heartened, but realizes that only if he will continue to receive halwa at regular intervals will he have the confirmation that he has found the direct channel to Providence he had been looking for. The following day, there is in fact the hoped for repetition, and Yunus decides to resume his journey walking upstream, so as to reach the origin of his daily sustenance. After many days, he arrives at a place where the river broadens, and in its middle there is an island, where a high

castle is built. At sunset, he spots a beautiful maid leaning forward from a turret of the castle and dropping in the river...a packet of halwa...his food for that day! It won't be easy for Yunus, and it will take the help by a dervish Master and a whole tribe of jinns, to approach the damsel, and receive at last from her very lips the revelation of the reason of her daily sendings to him:

"The halwa, as you call it, I throw down each day because it is in fact the residue of the cosmetic materials with which I rub myself every day after my bath of asses' milk."

"I have at last learned", said Yunus, "that the understanding of a man is conditional on his capacity to understand. For you, the remains of your daily toilet. For me, the Food of Paradise." Although Yunus is very quick in recovering from this disconcerting revelation, and is able to draw a positive teaching from it, he fails to find an answer to his original, and highly ambitious, question. The shortcut that should have enabled him to pass through society and lead him directly to God as the provider of human necessities remains undiscovered. Perhaps he will stop seeking for it.[\[2\]](#)

1.2. Manna

Still, there is in the story of the people of Israel a famous episode in which what his admirable faith and intellectual audacity had led Yunus to seek, in vain, does take an immediate visibility, exceeding perhaps the expectations of the epistemologically sophisticated Sufi trainee: the fall of manna from heavens in the many years of pilgrimage in the desert while searching for the promised land, Canaan: [\[3\]](#)

The sons of Israel ate manna for forty years, up to the time they reached inhabited country: they ate manna up to the time they reached the frontier of the land of Canaan (Ex XVI: 35).

While production is taken care of miraculously by God, the distribution of manna requires the establishment of an organic and strict legal code, the outcome, as usual, of the cooperation between Yahweh and Moses. The distribution must be egalitarian, each family should take in proportion to the number of its members, and it should not be saved. If someone tries to get more, the correct proportions re-establish themselves ...automatically so to speak. Equally pointless prove the attempts to store it, for then it rots foully. It can be kept to bridge the Sabbath, however. And that particle that, put in a jar, is placed before the Testimony (Ex XVI:34) does not rot.

1.3. The Evangelic concept of wealth

Perhaps we have in Exodus a first indication of what we ask when we pray God "to give us our daily bread". In analogy with the Yahweh of the Israelites, Jesus on the one hand invites us to ask God for all that we need, as in Mt VII:7-11:

Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For the one who asks always receives; the one who searches always finds; the one who knocks will always have the door opened to him. Is there a man among you who would hand his son a stone when he asked for bread? Or would hand him a snake when asked for fish? If you then, who are evil, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

on the other hand, he exhorts us not to worry about our future needs, as in Mt VI:25-34:

That is why I am telling you not to worry about your life and what you are to eat, nor about your body and how you are to clothe it. Surely life means more than food, and the body more than clothing! Look at the birds in the sky. They do not sow or reap or gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they are? Can any of you, for all his worrying, add one single cubit to his span of life? And why worry about clothing? Think of the flowers growing in the fields; they never have to work or spin. Yet I assure you that not even Solomon in all his regalia was robed like one of these. Now if that is how God clothes the grass in the field which is there today and thrown into the furnace tomorrow, will he not much more look after you, men of little faith? So do not worry; do not say, "What are we to eat? What are we

to drink? How are we to be clothed?" It is the pagans who set their hearts on all these things. Your heavenly Father knows you need them all. Set your heart on his kingdom first, and on his righteousness, and all these are things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Therefore God, who knows our needs, will take it upon himself to satisfy them. The only necessity which gives legitimacy to a request of ours is generated by our present needs. If our future needs have for us an urgency greater than or equal to our present one, we are beginning to be...rich. It is probably incorrect to think that in Jesus' view the moral dangers of wealth beset only a Rockefeller, or a Bill Gates, or any other tycoon. They beset all who have enough imagination not to undervalue the future with respect to the present... they beset all of us. To be rich, it is enough to have an unconstrained imagination.

1.4. The human answer to manna: long-life milk

As many have humbly and honestly observed, this precept of Jesus' is not observable.

In the first place, it is almost impossible to classify by duration our needs. Oughtn't I to take care of the bills payable till next week? To make sure that there will be enough on my bank account by the time the checks I have written as payments in some transactions will come back to my bank? Secondly, some of our most basic needs positively require foresight: shouldn't I start looking for a new apartment, now that my current landlord has announced that he will not renew the lease which expires next year? Shouldn't I begin to save today for my children's university studies?

In the third place, it is empirically false that if we do not individually begin today to provide for tomorrow's needs, tomorrow God, somehow or other, will see to them himself. Much more likely, nobody will. And it is precisely this supposition that fills us with an anxiety that we have learnt to keep in check, but is always there.^[4] Of course if one becomes wealthy,^[5] the material cause for the anxiety is removed, but the deeply in-built attitude may remain as a neurotic symptom and/or as an inhibiting cultural inheritance which prevents us from joining, at last, the "lilies of the field", the theme ironically explored by the English economist J.M. Keynes (1931) in his famous essay "Economic perspectives for our grand-children".

In a different sense, at the social rather than individual level, the needs of tomorrow are provided for by men. It is them who try to bring forth the conditions that Jahweh promised would prevail in the land of Canaan: abundance for all, a specific dimension of this abundance being precisely its ability to continue in the future. The modern Christian who says the Lord's Prayer recognizes, in some sense, his dependence on God, but is committed to reduce, for himself and for others, the precariousness of existence. And sometimes in doing so he is struck with the thought (or at least the hope!) that in so doing, he is seeking the Kingdom of God and its justice! Is he at those moments badly deluding himself?

If Jahweh wanted the manna to rot, man has invented tinned meat, the refrigerator, deep-frozen foods, long life milk. And man has invented even paper money and credit, which would allow improvements in individual welfare even in a society where production was interrupted, as when the Israelites were wandering in the desert. Applications of these ideas are, for example, a public pay-as-you-go pension system, or a comprehensive obligatory system of medical insurance. It is not only with individual savings decisions, but with productive techniques, and with sophisticated methods of social organization, that our civilization has met the problem of the future. We are all now, at least collectively, wealthy. We have reached Canaan, at last. The hard trials that life does not spare to anybody, the terrible tragedies, the defeats, inevitable and repeated, in our individual and social endeavors are more than sufficient to preserve us from falling in the temptation to get unduly proud of these achievements; granting that that there ever was such a temptation.^[6]

1.5. Our daily bread: today's...or tomorrow's?

The translation of the Greek word *epiousion* with the rather down to earth "daily" has been widely discussed through the centuries. The two greatest linguists of the whole Christianity, St. Jerome and Martin Luther,

devoted their best energies and resources to the problem, and eventually they both ratified “daily”. However, “daily” does not exhaust the wealth of connotations of the Greek word, or, for that matter, of the Aramaic word *mahar* of which *epiousion* was probably meant to be a translation. The bread that we ask is also “supersubstantial”, divine, and it also the bread that we hope to eat in the last, in the final day. This is because for the Israelites the evening of a given day is both ...supper time, and the beginning of the new, the next day. So today’s bread can only be referred to as tomorrow’s. But which tomorrow? The humble day that will come next to the present (beginning with today’s supper), and will carry with itself its own peculiar trouble, as Jesus said, or the grand, the final tomorrow? Both: for in late Judaism ‘tomorrow’ does not designate only the next day, but also the grand tomorrow, that is the final fullness of times. Notice how the interpretation of our request (i) varies according to the interpretation of this “tomorrow”: if it is our daily bread, we say that we rely on God day by day and don’t even dare to look forward. If it is our final bread, the bread we will eat at the consummation of times, we jump over the whole future, we telescope it in its end, its hopefully happy conclusion...in either case, however, there isn’t much for us to do. Any sort of planning is ruled out. If we plan the “tomorrow”, we will be tempted to introduce trifling improvements (such as extending the life span of milk) which will distract us from the present: but it is only in the present that the new life that we are awaiting may erupt...and it is well known what happened to those who refused the Lord’s invitation to his banquet...

1.6. Bread as product and as gift

The Lord’s Prayer is, almost certainly, the prayer which announces the inception of Jesus’ mission, the prayer which gives an identity to his group. [7] For the followers of an itinerant teacher, people who lived on offerings and...miracles, it must have been immediate to regard bread as a gift and, by extension, the whole system of relationships between God and men, and among men, as a circuit of gifts, precarious and marvellous. [8]

The temptation to show the Devil that he could turn the stones of the desert into loaves of bread was resisted by Jesus (Mt IV:3) but was always there, as perhaps the power to do so. Even if we take the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves as an indication of the abundance of the Divine grace, and not necessarily as a description or a promise of what material conditions would be like in the coming Kingdom, we may wonder if there isn’t the danger that the teaching of a wandering Master may be laced with a parasitical vein. Jesus, however, had been a carpenter, or a stonemason, or perhaps even an architect before starting on his strange career of itinerant teacher, healer, and exorcist. Perhaps in the following verses his new precept is stated in a way that does not ignore his previous work experience.

1.6.1. The parable of the tower and the war (Lk XIV: 28-33)

And indeed, which of you here, intending to build a tower, would not first sit down and work out the cost to see if he had enough to complete it? Otherwise, if he laid the foundation and then found himself unable to finish the work, the onlookers would all start making fun of him and saying, “Here is a man who started to build and was unable to finish”. Or again, what king marching to war against another king would not first sit down and consider whether with ten thousand men he could stand up to the other who advances against him with twenty thousands? If not, then while the other king was still a long way off, he would send envoys to sue for peace. So in the same way, none of you can be my disciple unless he gives up all his possessions.

Therefore Jesus is well acquainted with the anticipatory, planning, calculating, and even strategic dimensions of human action. They do exist, and it is precisely to them that we should renounce. The supreme act of planning would appear to consist in giving up for good all planning and all calculations. For the attempt to gain practical control over the future, for production, for enterprise, there would seem to be absolutely no room. What is the fate, in Jesus’ stories, of the producers? Perhaps the answer is in the following

1.6.2. The Parable of the vineyard labourers (Mt XX: 1-16)

Now the Kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner going out at daybreak to hire workers for his vineyard. He made an agreement with the workers for one denarius a day, and sent them to his vineyard. Going out at about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place and said to them "You go to my vineyard too and I will give you a fair wage". So they went. At about the sixth hour and again at about the ninth hour, he went out and did the same. Then at about the eleventh hour he went out and found more men standing round, and said to them, "Why have you been standing here idle all day?" "Because no one has hired us" they answered. He said to them, "You go into my vineyard too. In the evening, the owner of the vineyard said to his bailiff, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with the last arrivals and ending with the first". So those who were hired at about the eleventh hour came forward and received one denarius each. When the first came, they expected to receive more, but they too received one denarius each. They took it, but grumbles at the landowner. "The men who came last", they said "have done only one hour, and you have treated them the same as us, though we have done a heavy day's work in all the heat." He answered one of them and said, "My friend, I am not being unjust to you; did we not agree on one denarius? Take your earnings and go. I choose to pay the last-comer as much as I pay you. Have I no right to do what I want with my own? Why be envious because I am generous? Thus the last will be the first and the first, last.

The central meaning of this Parable is clear: we should not try to impose our own, inevitably limited, view of justice, and in particular, our conviction of our superior merits, to God's dealing with other people. It is interesting to compare this to the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The answer of owner of the vineyard to the vine-worker is similar to, although much sharper than, the answer that the father gives his elder son, who complains for an indifferent treatment in spite of the fact that he has never left the father and has been working hard all along. These hapless workers have to be content with what is due to them, according to the explicit or implicit bilateral contracts or agreements made with their principals. If they want strict justice, they should see by themselves that they are receiving neither more, nor less, than their due. Or perhaps: since they have, as they claim, some natural merits, they don't need God's grace, and they will not get it.

There may be some sophistry in the owner's answer, though. Of course he can do what he wishes with his resources, but in managing a farm workers should be given equal treatment, i.e., equal pay for equal work. This may even be an implication of the Golden Rule, a principle of ethics that Jesus, as we shall see, underwrites. The insinuation of envy is badly *ad hominem*, and moreover very likely false: the worker who addresses the owner is sincerely mystified. He would probably not resent the owner's making a gift to the late-comers. What he objects to is the title of the payment to them. A policy of treating each case in the light of its individual peculiarities may perhaps be considered as based on a principle of justice: for example, an Anglo-Saxon judge freely searches for the law, rather than applying a well defined code. But this strange justice means deferring all attempt at a personal evaluation of the situation to a completely discretionary authority. In a sense nothing is just that cannot be seen to be just. On the other hand, our ability to see is, like the vine worker's, limited. This line of thought is perturbing, and is perhaps meant to be. The Jewish religion is of course based on the belief that the relationship between the people and God are based on a well defined code, even if they were often tormented by doubts as to the precise provisions of the code.

Perhaps the answer to these doubts lies in the fact that the story represents the coming of the Kingdom. At the twelfth hour, the world has ended and, as a thief in the night, the Kingdom has come. The handing out of wages represents the entry in the Kingdom, as in the Parable of the Prodigal Son does the welcoming feast organized by the Father. The Kingdom is represented like an happy-ending story, or perhaps better, like the end of an happy-ending story. Time stops there. Jesus probably knew very well that if there had been a tomorrow, and the next morning the vine owner had gone to the square looking for labourers to hire, he would not have found them, or, if he had found them, the issue of the wage per hour would have come up for a thorough discussion and negotiation; that the Prodigal Son would have found it very hard, in fact, impossible, to get up early and join the elder brother in the fields; that he would soon have gone to pawn one after the other the new clothes, shoes, and ring; that the elder brother would very likely square up to the father and ask for his share, like the Prodigal Son had done, and start working on his own.

But, for the purpose of announcing the coming of the Kingdom, these highly likely suppositions were irrelevant. They are not irrelevant, however, to ethics, which cannot avoid being concerned with the aims of our actions, and to their indirect effects. The coming of the Kingdom unfastens these constraints of the future

on the present, so that the vine owner finds himself, in his dealing with his workers, in a position of greater discretionary power. His benevolence to the last-comers, and his associated coldness to the early-comers, should then be seen as part of the announcement of the Kingdom, not as criteria for managing an actual vineyard. Indeed, the coming of the Kingdom supersedes the vineyard and all human activity.

2. Debts

While the theme of request (i) is the relationship between men and God, in request (ii) a three-sided relationship between men, other men, and God is contemplated. (i) deals essentially with theological ontology; (ii) with theological ethics. A discussion of some general ethical principles and precepts seems a necessary preliminary to an analysis of some of the parables where request (ii) is illustrated and developed.

2.1. The Principle of Retribution, the Precept of Love, and the Golden Rule

1. Let us define an important normative principle, **the Principle of Retribution**. This says that

(PR) good should be met with good, and bad, with bad.

This is a very general legal principle, and in some version or other is likely to be an inescapable constituent of any form of organized community.^[9] It clearly dominated the Old Testament, both in the sense that it is a main constituent of the Law prescribed by Jahweh to his people, and in the sense that Jahweh himself adhered to it in his behavior toward his people.^[10] It is important to compare it to, and differentiate it from, a famous precept that we find in the New Testament, known as the **Golden Rule** (GR).

2. The specific form of the golden rule which Jesus was familiar with came from the teacher Hillel (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbath, 31a), a master of the generation immediately preceding Jesus':

(HGR) Do not do unto others what you would not have done to you by others.

However, Jesus himself (Lk VI:31; Mt VII:12) preferred a positive formulation of the precept

(JGR) Do unto others what you would have others to do unto you,

which is perhaps not entirely equivalent to the preceding one: presumably, Hillel's version (HGR) applies to situations in which people are somehow in competition with one another, and each of whom would draw a benefit from some act of unfairness; while Jesus' (JGR) refers to asymmetrical situations in which somebody is in need and would benefit from other people's help.^[11]

3. How is this "help" to be considered? Should one help anybody who asks for it, i.e., anybody who is subjectively in need? Or should one help anybody who is objectively in need, i.e., anybody whose condition is qualified by some law or social convention as a necessity worthy of other people's support? For example we usually distinguish between states of need in which one is fallen by one's own fault or not, and between states in which one is fallen for external, abnormal causes ("emergencies") and states that result from the ordinary process of things. This is because the society we live in is in itself a system of (indirect) cooperation whereby our needs are usually fulfilled. Indeed if society worked well enough, so as to take care of all or most of our needs, JGR could be interpreted as

(JGR') Make your contribution to society in some of the prescribed ways, so as to

return the benefits you receive from your participation to it.

However, JGR' is highly unlikely to be the appropriate interpretation of JGR: intellectually, it probably belongs to a later era; ethically, it is too weak. JGR is likely to apply to human interactions that take place where society at large fails. Only if the precept is taken in its absolute interpretation can it be considered as

independent of other laws: but then it would also appear to imply an invitation to disregard the fact that we already live in a society, and perhaps to actually leave it. But unlike other contemporary religious groups Jesus' movement, we know, was not separatist:[12] so perhaps we must conclude that JGR invokes, at least implicitly, some existing rules specifying under what conditions help is due to other people.

4. Jesus, as is well known, mentions with high approval another ethical precept,

(PL) Love your neighbor like yourself.

This is "the Precept of Love" (Lev XIX:18), and is thought by many Biblical scholars to have been, at least at the origins, a command of national, or tribal, solidarity. [13] It forbade private revenge among compatriots. It was consistent with a system of justice based on the PR, and in particular, on the *jus talionis*. In Mt XXII:36, Jesus says that PL, together with the love of God, constitutes the supreme commandment. In a different context (Mt VII:12) Jesus says that the JGR "is the Law and the Prophets" [14]. The connection between the two precept is not clear and I know of no good discussion of it.[15] Presumably, Hillel and Jesus offered their versions of the GR as developments and explications of PL. In their hands, PL was becoming a universal ethical principle. Perhaps the parable of the Good Samaritan represents the culmination of this process: while the country-fellows –and co-religionists- hasten to pass by –lest they should contaminate themselves if the fallen man happened to be dead- it is the foreign, despised Samaritan who stops, has no fear to take him in his arms, and helps him to come to and to recover.

To the modern, historically unencumbered reader, PL says that we should accord to the needs and rights of other people the same consideration as we accord to ours: that we should subject our instinctive drive to think of ourselves first to the hard discipline of an abstract rule of equality. Which rule? By its appeal to our social imagination GR says something more as to how we can figure out what is required of us, in any given context.

5. Are PR and GR mutually consistent? JGR is certainly compatible with the precept that good should be met with good, the first part of the PR. Is JGR compatible with the whole of the PR? PR would appear to be merely reactive, while JGR would seem to be concerned with what one should do when one has the initiative. Therefore, a maxim of the type

(GR-PR) Do unto others, on first encounter, what you would have others do unto you,

and, on later encounters, reciprocate or take into account in some way

or other their earlier behavior to you,

would appear logically possible and, on the face of it, not at all unreasonable. However, Jesus is explicit, insistent, in his refusal of it: other people's earlier hostile behavior should not be returned. Indeed, he demands even more of us: we should return good to bad. In other words, JGR is to be interpreted, in this respect, as an absolute, unconditional norm: we should ignore whatever bad action has been levelled against us. On this interpretation, JGR is certainly incompatible with PR.

6. There is another problem of consistency. Suppose I see two men, the first desperately running away from the second, who is dead set on pursuing him. Which of the two should I, by JGR, help? Forming an idea of who is right, who is wrong would appear unavoidable. But, hasn't Jesus also enjoined us not to judge other people? How is JGR coordinated to this other most difficult precept? Perhaps this latter is in itself a consequence of JGR: for as we have seen JGR implies the negation of PR, but it seems that for Jesus to judge is to apply PR. But then it would seem that in many cases our ability to help others, and defend others as well as ourselves and our dependants, is severely restricted.[16]

7. Both HGR and JGR go deeper than PR, for they seem to contain an answer to a question to which the PR does not even claim to provide one: what is to be understood by good, and bad? Well, says Hillel, those very actions that you would hate to have done to you, you should not level against others. And, says Jesus, those

very actions that you would like to have done to you, are those that you should do for the benefit of others. Thus they appeal to a common core of humanity within each of us, to an inherent uniformity of needs and desires. This should enable each of us to know what is good, and what is bad. Therefore, it can be argued that Hillel and Jesus can be considered as discoverers of a form of **natural law**. Like many instances of natural law precepts, GR is subject to several objections:

(i) Circularity: What if my preferences and yours do not possess the required degree of congruence? What, for example, if I would rather be informed of my true health conditions, in case of a possibly deadly cancer, and you would rather not know? A possible reformulation would be

(JGR'') Do unto others what you think they would rather have done to them,

but here the experiential insight provided by introspection has vanished, and the rule assumes an embarrassingly utilitarian slant.

(ii) Incompleteness: uniformity, even universality of desires is no guarantee that it is good to satisfy them. Some principle must be invoked, in order to know which desires and needs deserve satisfaction.

(iii) Indeterminacy: one can easily envision social norms requiring equal cooperation of all, but a cooperation of varying degrees. Then for any degree of required cooperation, GR is satisfied, but the degree of cooperation is left undetermined. For example, what percentage of our tax assessment should we pay? How much capital should each generation leave to the next under an ideally fair intergenerational compact?

8. At the least, the golden rule does not give a complete account of what is good and bad, in fact, like PR, it presupposes these notions. It can be considered, more than a principle of justice, a principle of moral pedagogy, suggesting a first approximation test of fairness. At the beginning of our moral training, we are all in need of learning to remove our self from the pedestal on which we find it naturally installed. JGR teaches us to use introspection to gain an insight in what the others may be like, i.e., to use our knowledge of ourselves to make room, within our imagination, for the existence of the others. Nothing provokes Jesus' indignation as our attempt to invoke our relation to God in order to buttress the pedestal instead of stepping down from it, and demolishing it. Or, GR may be taken as a criterion of moral euristics, a way of finding out what the proper conduct should be in certain circumstances. But as we have seen its scope is very limited.

9. Suppose somebody hurts or abuses us, thus violating HGR. Should we try to punish her, or have her punished? We should, by the PR. By the GR, and by the principle of requiting evil with good which must govern its interpretation, it would seem that we should not, for, presumably, she would rather avoid standing in judgement and bearing its consequences: unless, of course, she realized that what she has done is bad, and thought that the punishment is deserved, or at least, that it is her duty to submit to it. Indeed, according to Simone Weil (1999, p. 1039), the criminal offender has not only a duty, but a right to her sentence. This strengthens our earlier conclusion that the GR should be reformulated in the following way:

(JGR''') Do unto others what (you think) they ought to wish to have done to them,

where the reference to an underlying, existing, fundamental law is brought out at its fullest.

10. It seems, therefore, that the GR cannot play either of the roles of being a synthesis of the Law and the founding principle of a new religious group, a new and better society: even less can it play both roles, as Jesus probably thought. Perhaps there is a genuinely anarchical element underlying Jesus' social attitude, as has been suggested by such keen students of the New Testament as the economist Ludwig von Mises (1951) and the jurist Hans Kelsen (1957, 1960). But it is not developed systematically, and we are left to wonder if GR is to be taken as a principle of individual conduct in a given society or as a principle of social organization. In particular, we are left in a state of uncertainty with respect to the conditions under which we should move in assistance to other people, whether our participation to society as it is can be considered as an observance of this rule, how and whether to intervene when confronted with conflicting claims, what is

good and what is bad, and how to behave towards people hostile to us or our dependants. On none of these problems does GR appear to provide the key to a solution, and even less so, of course, does PL.

2.2. The PR and GR applied to debtor-creditors relationships

Suppose I am your debtor, and you are my creditor. Should I pay you, or am I authorized to believe that I don't have to? By the PR, since you did me a good turn to advance me some money, I should definitely pay you back at the agreed time, which would be good for you. It is true that this puts me at an inconvenience: for, now, I would certainly rather not pay. But it would seem very strange to impute the inconvenience of paying to the malicious action undertaken by you, my creditor, when you accepted to lend me the money I am now unwilling to hand back! So if I do not pay I cannot in good faith pretend that I am carrying out the "bad for bad" part of the PR.

Let's consider how the GR can be applied to the situation. JGR enjoins me to do to you what I would rather you did to me, and presumably this means "what I would rather you did to me if I were in your position", i.e., if I were your creditor. Well, if I were your creditor I would certainly wish you to pay me. So, I should pay you.

But Jesus' attitude to this problem is that debts should be condoned. Can we get this outcome from the GR? Suppose I am your creditor, and at the appointed time, you seem reluctant to pay. Should I press you into restitution, by harassing you or taking you to court? This would be bad for you, and, by HGR, I should not do to you what I would rather you didn't do to me if I were in your position. If I were in your position of debtor I would certainly find your attempts at being paid obnoxious. Therefore, by HGR, I should forego my right to receiving the money, which is the desired conclusion. It is in at least partial contradiction to the earlier one, for the former dealt with the duties of the debtor (and therefore rights of the creditor), and now we have found that the creditor should not exercise his right. Although this is the conclusion desired by Jesus, it does not seem to have been validly reached in this way. The duty to pay back is inherent in the debtor's position. His reluctance to pay would be much more justified if the claimant were not a creditor of his', but a highwayman holding him at gunpoint.

Suppose that when the debt is due, the debtor cannot pay. Debtor and creditor might, however, agree to a postponement, or a dilution in time of the payment. The debtor's inability to pay at the expiration date does not by itself empty the creditor's right. In Jesus' times, however, the creditor was almost always in the position to press for immediate repayment, for he could seize into slavery the debtor and his family. It is not clear, however, that to Jesus debtors are always supposed to be in this extremity: although this might help to make sense of his position. Nor is it known what he thought of slavery, an institution which Paul, for example, thought perfectly legitimate

Let us now consider a debtor, his creditor, and...God. Suppose the creditor gives up his right on the debtor. He does, on Jesus' view, the debtor good, and this good redounds on God as well. So, by an implied ontological and ethical principle of transitivity, God is affected by the creditor' action in the same way as the debtor. For each of us, the impact of our actions on the various people we are in contact with is mirrored on God. He will release the creditor his debts to Him, if and only if the creditor has done so to his debtor. He rewards good behavior, and punishes bad behavior. Thus when we make request (ii) we are asking God to behave to us according to the PR, not to the GR.

2.3. The religious anthropology of debts.

That request (ii) is often translated "Forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" shows that ever since the beginning of Christianity it has been held that to Jesus debts symbolized sins, i.e., offences to God that make the offender liable to some punishment, and/or require some redressing, and therefore put man in a position of debt.^[17] This may be seen as an application the PR, an application in which it comes dangerously near to a "principle of retaliation." But the connection between offence and indebtedness it invokes is more metaphysical than ethical. God himself would seem to be subject to this sort of necessity. Once offended directly or indirectly through our not releasing our debtors their debts to us, he is automatically our creditor, even if he may, or may not, decide to mete out his punishment. He may, or may not, act according to the precept that enjoins the offended human party to meet evil with good! Revenge should be given up, but God is the victims' avenger. Somehow, this does not strike us as right. We should like to think of God as more, not less, forgiving than he wants us to be!

There is an alternative to the interpretation of debts as sins. A debt can also be thought of as the sum requested for a ransom. Indeed after having instigated and favored the Israelites' flight from Egypt, Jahweh had acquired the Pharaoh's legal title of complete Lordship over them.^[18] So he is our creditor because we haven't paid him for our freedom from the Pharaoh. This is not a very inspiring theory, either. We find it hard, nowadays, to think of God in this way.

That there was nothing historically compelling in the identification of debts with sins in Jesus' times may be verified by considering the Book of Wisdom (Ecclesiasticus) by Jesus Ben Sirach. (Sir XXIX: 1-10), written two hundred years before Jesus of Nazareth:

Making your neighbor a loan is an act of mercy, to lend him a helping hand is to keep the commandments. Lend to your neighbor in his time of need, and in your time repay your neighbor on time. Be as good as your word and keep faith with him, and you will find your needs met every time. Many treat a loan as a windfall, and embarrass those who have come to their rescue. Until he gets something, a man will keep his neighbor's hand, and refer to his wealth in respectful tones; but when the loan falls due, he puts it off, he repays with offhand words, and pleads the inconvenience of the time. Even if he can be made to pay, his creditor will barely recover half, and consider even that a windfall. But otherwise he will be cheated of his money, and undeservedly gain himself an enemy: the man will pay back in curses and recriminations, and instead of respect will have contempt for him. Many, not out of malice, refuse to lend; they are merely anxious not to be cheated for nothing.

We can see that Ben Sirach's view of credit relationships is similar to ours: debts should be paid, and many credit transactions, useful to both parties, are not carried out because the creditors fear that their debtors will not pay back. A situation in which each does his best to pay his debts not only satisfies GR, but is more efficient than one in which debtors are known to be slack. On the other hand, Ben Sirach shares Jesus' belief that God will be benevolent and forgiving with us if and only if we have been benevolent to others (Sir XXVIII: 1-2):

Resentment and anger, these are foul things too, and both are found with the sinner.

He who exacts vengeance will experience the vengeance of the Lord, who keeps strict account of sin. Forgive your neighbor the hurt he does you, and when you prey, your sins will be forgiven.

Thus it would seem that making request (ii) to God we are invoking the PR twice: as an ontological principle that converts our sins into credits of his', and as a rule of his behavior to us. This is a little disquieting: isn't Jesus the prophet of a loving, merciful God? To go more deeply into this question, one needs to consider (at least) the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant and that of the Unjust Steward. The former seems to be related to the Parable of the Talents. The latter to the Parable of the Tower and the War. Both deal with situations where there are hierarchies of debtor-creditors relations. Strict application of the Law is shown as deadly, the cunning and lack of sanctimonious scruples of the "children of darkness" is praised.

2.4. The parable of the unforgiving debtor (Mt: XVIII: 23-35) ^[19]

And so the Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who decides to settle his accounts with his servants. When the reckoning began, they brought him a man who owed ten thousand talents, but he had no means of paying, so his master gave orders that he should be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, to meet the debt. At this, the servant threw himself down at his master's feet. "Give me time" he said "and I will pay the whole sum." And the servant's master felt so sorry for him that he let him go and cancelled the debt. Now as this servant went out, he happened to meet a fellow servant who owed him one hundred denarii; and he seized him by the throat and began to throttle him. "Pay what you owe me" he said. His fellow servant fell at his feet and implored him, saying, "Give me time and I will pay you". But the other would not agree; on the contrary, he had him thrown into prison till he should pay the debt. His fellow servants were deeply distressed when they saw what had happened, and went to their master and reported the whole affair to him. Then the master sent for him. "You wicked servant," he said, "I cancelled all that debt of yours when you appealed to me. Were you not bound, then, to have pity on your fellow servant just as I

had pity on you? And in his anger the master handed him over to the torturers till he should pay all his debt. And that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother from your heart.

This is as straightforward an illustration of request (ii) as can be found in all of the four Gospels. We should therefore study this parable with great care. There are in fact several important points that need remarking.

i) Here it is the king who takes the initiative, and does not merely put off, but actually cancels, the unmerciful servant's huge debt. In other words, God is not just a mirror of man's action toward his neighbor. He does not merely react to man's evil action: he actually teaches man by example to be generous.

ii) The servant's unmerciful behavior might be explained as follows. He may have been a rather soft creditor in the past. Indeed, his insolvency to the king may have been due to his previous leniency to his debtors. Having been freed from his huge debt to the king, he may have made the resolution to be firmer with his debtors so as to avoid a repetition of his own insolvency to the king. His fit of unexpected harshness may be an expression of his resolution to be a more diligent administrator of his king's resources. His role of intermediary sets him in a position where it is difficult to draw the line between his duties to his creditor (the king) and his rights to his debtors.

iii) Does the unmerciful servant violate JGR? Yes, in a somewhat modified and weaker version: not only he doesn't do to his fellow servant and debtor what he would like others to do to him if he were in his debtor's position, he doesn't do to his debtor what some other person (the king) has actually done to him when he was in his debtor's position toward the king.

iv) The debt release spectacularly, generously offered to the unmerciful servant by the king had all the appearances of being a definitive, irrevocable royal act. It turns out to be revocable. The king had not specified beforehand that the validity of his act was conditional on the servant's later behavior. Perhaps, this is a kingdom where the royal acts are all revocable. Once again, a kingdom where no "rule of law" binds the king himself!

v) Together with the release from the debt, there was supposed to be a change of heart on the part of the servant. The king expected him to become more, not less, lenient to his subordinates. The fact remains that the king reacts with uncurbed anger at the unmerciful servant's wrongdoing. The PR still rules.

v) A somewhat more technical observation is this. There is no doubt that the king is seen as all-powerful. But even if he can cancel a huge debt at his wish, he cannot overrule his budget constraint. If his sources are smaller, his uses will also have to go down. Other people, who depended on some steady flow of public expenditure, will be affected. There is no indication that the king, in his sudden dash of pity, pays any attention to them. Once again, there a suspicion of arbitrariness even when he is at his best.

vi) There is a subtle difference between request (ii) as expressed in the Lord's Prayer and this parable, to the advantage of the latter. There is after all no identification, in the Parable, between debts and sins. This might seem paradoxical since the parable deals with a hierarchy of debtor-creditors, but in the parable, unlike in request (ii), debts stand...for debts, not for sins. The "sin" lies in the unmerciful servant's inability to see the symmetry between the two situations; or in not finding it overwhelming in responding to his debtor's pleas. There is a sin even if no law is broken. However, notice that the evil action, once committed, does put the unmerciful servant back in the position of debt to the king. On the whole, the king's attitude would appear to conform to (GR-PR), a sensible, but fully human and unchristian maxim.

2.5. The parable of the crafty steward (Lk XVI: 1-8) [\[20\]](#)

There was a rich man and he had a steward who was denounced to him for being wasteful with his property. He called for the man and said, "What is this I hear about you? Draw me up an account of your stewardship because you are not to be my steward any longer." Then the steward said to himself, "Now that my master is

taking the stewardship from me, what am I to do? Dig? I am not strong enough. Go begging? I should be too ashamed. Ah, I know what I will do to make sure that when I am dismissed from office there will be some to welcome me into their homes.”

Then he called his master’s debtors one by one. To the first he said, “how much do you owe my master?” “One hundred measures of oil” was the reply. The steward said, “Here, take your bond, sit down straight away and write fifty”. To another he said, “And you Sir, how much do you owe?” “One hundred measures of wheat” was the reply. The steward said, “Here, take your bond and write eighty”.

The master praised the dishonest steward for his astuteness. For the children of this world are more astute in dealing with their own kind than are the children of light.

The parable is immediately followed by the explanation (Lk XVI: 9-13), offered, according to Luke, by Jesus himself:

And so I tell you this: use money, tainted as it is, to win you friends, and thus make sure that when it fails you, they will welcome you into the tents of eternity. The man who can be trusted in little things can be trusted in great; the man who is dishonest in little things will be dishonest in great. If then you cannot be trusted with money, that tainted thing, who will trust you with genuine riches? And if you cannot be trusted with what is not yours, who will give you what is your very own?

No servant can be the slave of two masters: he will either hate the first and love the second, or treat the first with respect and the second with scorn. You cannot be the slave of both God and money.

Both the parable and its commentary, and even more the relationship between them, have been much discussed. Many different interpretations have been suggested. The following owes much to the researches of J. Duncan Derrett (1970).

i) Unlike many other parables, which like this one take their inception from a momentous day when some sort of reckoning is due, the absentee master does not represent God.^[21] Rather, in the place of God stand here the people who observe the steward’s behavior to his masters’ debtors, and possibly the debtors themselves. It is the benevolence and gratitude of these people that the steward tries to obtain by his strange and at least superficially unscrupulous handling of some of his master’s credits.

ii) Why are the debts reduced and not, as usual, cancelled? The debts are total debts, and include interest. Interest is higher on the debt expressed in oil, because oil is a substance subject to a much wider qualitative variation than wheat. The figures given are absolutely realistic.

iii) Thus, the steward cancels interests, not the principals of the loans. He had been lending at interest to fellow Jews, against the Law. He had been doing it with the tacit approval and perhaps at the instance of his master, who in this kind of business did not risk any legal sanction, because by the Jewish law of agency the legal responsibility lied with his agent.

iv) Even so, it should be very difficult for him to oppose his steward’s decision. For the evidence of the earlier contracts has been destroyed, and a thorough investigation of the whole matter would bring out their usurious nature! So he realizes that the steward, his former accomplice, has manage to stall him. It may have been the moment when the pupil has outsmarted the master. The steward, acting in self-defence, has not only performed a good action, he has even forced the master to be good. It is very likely that the master’s “praise” is a formal ratification of the steward’s act.

v) From Martin Luther to Immanuel Kant and others, many people have tried to penetrate the mysterious “fronesis”, that is, cunning, or astuteness, or shrewdness, by which he steward manages to save himself. He cleverly exploits the discretion and authority that his position of agent affords, and is quick to spot the weakness in his master’s legal and moral position and turn it to his own benefit. It is his supreme act of calculation, after which he will not have to calculate any longer. In a sense, we find here an answer to, or at least an illustration of, the Parable of the Tower and the War. One is reminded of the story of the Woman taken in Adultery (Jn VII:53-VIII:11), where Jesus himself is in the position of the calculator: on his answer depend both the life of the woman, and perhaps his own: salvation! And there too, the solution lies in exploiting a weakness in the legal positions of the questioners and the witnesses. [22]

vi) The steward’s “salvation” is both practical (he gains all the neighborhood’s goodwill) and spiritual (he finally makes a good action). Of course his motive is his concern for the future: but he is a child of darkness. The good action is also the action which is most advantageous for his reputation in the neighborhood! In a sense, it is true that he has opted for God rather than Mammon (his rich masters’ and his own pecuniary interests). But in another sense, it is part of the brilliancy of his calculation that he can serve two (and even three) masters! He abandons Mammon when nothing more could be gained from it! But this shows that he is not spiritually tied to it. So he can both serve God and provide for his own earthly future. He even serves his old master in forcing him to forfeit interest!

vii) The steward has gained his salvation by transacting in “tainted” money, i.e., money which had been obtained illegally. But money is no more infected by past sins, than people are. As people may suddenly see the light, so money of dubious origin may be put to good use, and the receivers should not be afraid of it.

viii) There is an interesting tension in Jesus’ conception of money. On the one hand, to the extent that money-making is the dominant motive in society, it is bad because it leads to violations of the Law. But any kind of separatism, as that practiced by the Essenes, or the attitude of separating “pure” from “tainted” money in one’s transactions, would be worse. There is something to be learned from the “children of darkness” and the single-mindedness, possibly also the intellectual freedom with which they pursue their ends.

3. Conclusions

While familiar with the Lord’s Prayer since early childhood, a serious reflection on requests (i) and (ii), and some research on their presuppositions, leads us to the uncomfortable but inescapable conclusion that they are inconsistent not only with our life practice but also with some of the ethical and even theological principles which underlie it and to which we subscribe.

Before Jesus’ injunctions not to think and not to worry about the future, I fear we are a little like the crafty steward and his master with respect to the law which forbade usury. Not only individually, but socially, as a civilization, we have invaded and occupied the future, pushing aside, if it had ever resided there, Divine Providence. Not on purpose, not with impious intentions, but actually acting with the best intentions and sometimes motivated by sincere religious zeal. Production is a social process as well as distribution, and takes place on earth and not in heavens. By getting the social process of production organized properly, we can achieve satisfaction of most material and even many spiritual needs. In the limit, no more downtrodden, no more victims to be helped. It is not that we refuse Jesus’ exhortation to try to be perfect. Rather, we cannot be perfect in that manner any longer. No Christian individual or institution today seriously proposes or upholds indigence as a way to perfection.

To be a Christian one needs a way to interpret these ancient precepts and beliefs so as to be still able to draw light and guidance from them. It is a very challenging task. The following thoughts are therefore very tentative. Both requests (i) and (ii) seem to tell us something about the temporal dimension of our life. (i) tells us not to be tied to the future, (ii) not to be tied (and pretend to tie others!) to the past. How can we interpret this? It is a fact that we can, both socially and individually, structure our time in different ways, we can be, in each moment, more or less present to ourselves and open to others. As J.M. Keynes pointed out, it may happen to us to overlook the fact that, by undervaluing the present, by withdrawing systematically,

neurotically from it, and investing existentially only in the future, we simply stop living, lose for example all ability of enjoyment and happiness.

The argument can be extended. The moment of prayer, meaning by it a dialogue with God, and the moment of love, cannot but belong to the present, a present that then broadens, expands, approaches eternity. Surely Jesus has had more than anyone else these experiences. Or he wouldn't have announced that the Kingdom was coming. Our life is wasted if we do not ever come to share them, within our limits. But a similar description can be given of the deep concentration in which we fall in any creative activity, be it artistic, scientific, educational. The economist Keynes was perhaps too much of a (lapsed) Christian literalist in thinking that one could be a "lily" only after the great phase of industrial transformation and capital accumulation. The true challenge is to be lilies while organizing and planning and facing up to one's social responsibilities. Some saints, we know, were intimate to God and formidable organizers and administrators. One can perhaps touch the eternal, and multiply the loaves of bread, by setting up an organizational structure that works, that allows the fusion of different human energies and contributions.

The discovery made by Jesus in his exploration of the mystery of God's nature –and

of man's heart- is a principle of empathy that cannot fail. By itself, taking notice of a similarity of situations does not lead to the practical conclusion that, therefore, an action of mercy is expected of us, even less to the acknowledgment of a duty. It is empathy that mediates between the similarity of situations and an abstract prescription of universalizability. No matter how complex and even contradictory is the Law, it is according to Jesus' teaching only by this sort of sympathetic perception that we can carry out the written or unwritten code, and God's will. Thus, GR (or the underlying PL) should summarize much of "the law and the prophets", but the powerful simplification thus achieved is not in itself decisive in clarifying ethical problems of any complexity. It is not even clear that it allows a satisfactory handling of the creditor-debtor relation. Any Christian ethics has had and will have to subsume other ideas and principles. In the meantime, we have to recognize that a well functioning democratic market society works without love and does not need Providence. It does not seem to work, however, without a sharp sense of duty to one's "neighbor", in Jesus' sense, and this may be the essential contribution of Christianity to our Western civilization. The basic ambiguity of the GR still remains but has not proved sterile: some Christians feel it their task to contribute to the well functioning of overall society; others, to taking care of the people who fall on the side.

If the ability to feel empathy is similar to an attitude of feeling, to a virtue of the heart, the ability to chart one's course in a situation charged with danger, the mysterious "fronesis", is similar to a virtue of reason, to an intellectual skill. But the former generates the abstract concepts of equality and duty, the latter rests on an essential layer of courage and daring. They are not virtues, however, because they are more similar to instinctual, or intuitive, reactions, and come in a flash from the depth of the person rather than from good habits. There is sometimes not enough time to learn to become...good. Schindler, Wallemberg, Perlasca,[\[23\]](#) or Pope John XXIII, or Gorbaciov have shown that the exercise of these attitudes need not be confined to a single moment of heroism: one can go on doubling the odds in one's challenge of an established order, opening new ground and charting one's course at every turn of history in the completely unknown and unexpected. These people among others have shown us how to turn request (i) and the exacting ideal it contains, into a new form of moral acrobaticism, the sanctity of hanging, while holding on one's shoulders a huge human charge, on one's bootlaces.

ENDNOTES

[1] "The food of paradise", in Idries Shah (1967).

[2] In the famous novel by Thornton Wilder The Saint Luis Rey bridge, a Franciscan monk, Brother Ginepro, witnesses by chance (or perhaps “by the divine intention”) to the sudden collapse of the finest bridge of the whole Peru, and to the death of the five people who had been crossing it at that crucial moment. Since no human intervention had been material in producing the accident, and the bridge itself, built with interlaced lianas by innocent Indians, was perfectly solid, the event seems to Brother Ginepro a pure, unadulterated act of God, whose providential intention it should therefore be possible to discover by reconstructing the biographies of the five victims. Which he sets out to do. But while Yunus, we can safely assume, will continue to seek the light meditating and dancing undisturbed on the bank of the mighty Tigris, Brother Ginepro, whose ill-fated speculative audacity is due to his extreme naiveté and great trust in God, falls soon foul of the Peruvian Inquisition, and dies at the stake.

[3] All biblical quotations are from the Jerusalem Bible.

[4] Unless we are ready to believe that, whatever may happen to us tomorrow, that is precisely what God had in store for us for tomorrow. Presumably in saying the Lord’s Prayer we admit that it is only imperfectly that his will is now asserting itself down here on earth. So our fear would seem to have a strong justification in this very prayer. Nor is it to be excluded that it may be precisely despair, the discovery that in some dire extremity nobody is willing to help us, that constitutes the “test” that in the Lord’s Prayer we ask God to spare us.

[5] This does not mean to be as wealthy as a nabob but to have an ensured future. All members of the R.C. clergy, for example, and not just the highest ranking of them, are rich in this sense. In the well known play Ghosts by H. Ibsen the problem of the possible impiety of foresight is brought up in the context of the modernizing Lutheranism of the late XIX century. The Reverend Manders, a man proud of his social standing as respected member of several boards of directors of the nearby city, has nonetheless strong scruples at insuring the new building that a prominent member of his parish, Mrs Alving, is having built to host the orphans of the neighbourhood. She is doing it with funds left her by her husband, a man who had become well known, in the latter part of his life, as a public benefactor. Manders would not wish that his flock should think that he does not rely on God, even for a project so obviously worthy of His approval as Mrs Alving’s orphanage. Mrs Alving, who after her husband’s death has begun to nourish strong doubts as to the sense of her religion and of her past life (she had been the motive force in the building up of her husband’s public image, but also, alas, and before that, a frigid wife) seconds Manders’s scruples, and so the two of them, without revealing to each other their different and opposing lines of thought, agree not to insure the building, thus setting up a theological experiment no different, in its essence, from Junus’, or Brother Ginepro’s. Unlike these latter, Mrs Alving’s experiment obtains a completely unambiguous answer: the building goes on fire the very day of its inauguration.

[6] Deut VIII: 17-18 is a strong warning by Yahweh against this temptation. I don’t know if his only too apparent fear to be overcome by man should still command our reverence. In our times the power complex is no more than a pathetic, if socially dangerous, form of neurosis.

[7] As can be inferred from Lk XI:1: “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John [the Baptist] taught his disciples”, an invitation to which Jesus answers composing the Lord’s Prayer.

[8] As Duncan Derrett (1994, p. 67) puts it, “He taught them to depend on him, to observe equality among themselves, and to anticipate the banquet in the World to Come.”

[9] See Hans Kelsen (1960).

[10] See Hans Kelsen (1957).

[11] Duncan Derrett (1994, p.75) makes much both of the GR and of the distinction between HGR and JGR:

“The kernel of the Sermon... is the Golden Rule, deceptively like Greek and Jewish maxims that warn us not to do to others what we should not like if the roles were reversed....It is open-ended, like Lev XIX:18 (“Love

your neighbour as thyself"). It applies universally. The various arrogances of Greeks and Jews are abandoned. Man takes responsibility for mankind." Still, one should notice that since an action can always be described –however contrivedly- as the abstention from another action, and vice-versa, HGR and JGR may turn out to be logically –if not pragmatically- equivalent.

[12] See on this our comments to the Parable of the crafty steward in section 2. See also "Jesus' opinion on the Essenes" by David Flusser (1988).

[13] See for example the exegesis provided by Angelo Tosato (2002, p. 299); see also Hans Kelsen (1957, pp.43-4).

[14] Hillel had also argued that HGR synthesizes "the whole of the Torah".

[15] David Flusser (1997) explores the historical background of the two precepts, but not, unfortunately, the semantic and conceptual problems posed by the relationship between them.

[16] What would the Good Samaritan had done if he had arrived on the spot while the muggers were beating

the hapless Israelite out of his senses? The case never arises in the Gospels. All conflicts are always mediated by, and take the form of controversies about, the Law.

[17] " 'Debt', we know, implies sin, though the ideas do not quite coincide..." says Duncan Derrett (1994, p. 57). But do we really know?

[18] As Ex XX: 2, Dt V:6, VI:12-13, IX:29 indicate (or dictate), they (or we) are his people in the strict sense of being owned by him as serfs.

[19] Also known as "Parable of the unmerciful servant".

[20] This is the title it receives in the Jerusalem Bible. It is also known as "The Parable of the Unjust Steward", the title preferred by Duncan Derrett (1970), or "Parable of the Unfaithful Steward".

[21] In "Jesus' opinion on the Essenes", David Flusser (1988) writes: "When in a parable we find somebody who is in debt with his Landlord, the latter always represents God and the debt cannot but refer to the duties of man to God". However, he himself had pointed out that "in rabbinical parables, and in Jesus', there is often a deliberate divergence between the moral ideas of their characters and the message that results from the stories: while the parable deals with practical utility, its meaning is religious and ethical...The parables allowed Jesus to express his fundamental understanding of the religious and philosophical paradox of the human condition...Therefore he created some parables whose theme was not only a-moral, but even more or less immoral. Such parables...were recorded only by Luke." So the wealth owner may well not be God. Or, if it is God, it is a different, more enigmatic, Krishna-like sort of God. Nor does a similar personage appear only in Luke: the wealth owner of the Parable of the Talents (Mt XXV: 14-30) is also a less than scrupulous individual.

[22] See Duncan Derrett (1970, pp.156-188).

[23] Of these the less internationally known is Giorgio Perlasca, an Italian citizen who found himself in Budapest in 1944 for business reasons. He had earlier fought in Spain with the Franco troops, and had been given a vague document of gratitude which he used in Budapest to take over the Spanish consulate pretending to be, and actually becoming, its effective head. By the brilliancy of his repeated and ever more daring acts of imposture, he managed to save thousands of people. See Enrico Deaglio (1993).

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