

MATS FURBERG

## “Thou Art the Man”—An Essay on Moral Responsion

THIS IS A READING OF THE STORY of King David, Bathsheba, Uriah, and Nathan, as told in the Second Book of Samuel, Chapters 11 and 12.<sup>1</sup> Its beginning will give enough to work with for the time being:

And it came to pass in an eveningtide, that David arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house: and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon. And David sent and enquired after the woman. And one said, Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?

And David sent messengers, and took her; and she came in unto him, and he lay with her; for she was purified from her uncleanness: and she returned unto her house.

Like all stories, this narrative contains blanks: did the king send for any beauties he pleased, whoever they were? Was their consent never required? Such questions might have had answers three thousand years ago other than we would like to think today. But the Bible is usually read without much historical awareness, as a treasury of telling examples; and so shall I.

---

<sup>1</sup> Beam Agrell, Ingvar Johansson, Frank Lorentzon and Torgny Nordin read previous versions of this paper. I have learnt much from their comments. Jayne M. Waterworth made my English less Swedish.

I want to discuss the phenomenon of moral perception via something I call *responson*. The word is, as far as I know, not included in philosophical encyclopaedias. Nor does it occur in ordinary dictionaries, except as signifying the act of replying and, I am told, as a name of the first university examination. If the word is rare, I am pleased; it can then be used as a technical term for a type of phenomenon that we all are acquainted with but seldom pay heed to.

### 1. Preliminaries

I like to think of my study as an exercise in aesthetics, in the old sense of *aisthesis*. Perceiving is more than having visual, tactile, auditory, gustatory and olfactory experiences. It is attending to something, X, using these experiences to classify X. To perceive is not merely to attend to, in the sense of receive. It is also to act on the thing received. Perceiving is, for agents, relating X to their active life. I will argue that here seeing and doing are one. It is not the sort of perception sense-data philosophers talk about, which is mere beholding.

It is sometimes assumed that there is such a thing as a purely cognitive description of X, and that an emotive and/or normative description is thicker<sup>2</sup> than its cognitive counterpart. I doubt that everyday perception is stratified in the required way. Does the baby distinguish cognitively attending to his mother's breasts from wanting them and/or seizing them as his possession? Surely he sets no such boundaries. All the same, he does perceive the breasts, and this is a perception inaugurating that of an agent. His perception had better not be just that of a smell, a form, or of warmth, but of all these things and a good number of others as well. It had better be not a mere beholding of this totality but also a grasping and a sucking. If the baby is unable to perceive breasts that broadly, he will quickly starve. At the age when we are helpless and dependent on others, holistic perception is generally more advantageous than a less coarse one.

---

<sup>2</sup> The contrast between thin and thick descriptions was made famous by Clifford Geertz in his *The Interpretations of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). It goes, as Geertz acknowledges, back to Gilbert Ryle. It is discussed extensively in my book, *Den första stenen* [*The First Stone*] (Göteborg: Daidalos, 2000), especially in the chapter "Återvändo."

Presumably our later exploration of the world starts from a rough and ready grouping of a totality which we proceed to break down into details. Presumably we make smooth transitions between perceiving what X is like, perceiving how X is to be evaluated, and perceiving how X is to be treated. These three perceptions differ; but how odd if they were separated by abysses that we as explorers had to leap across or resign ourselves before.<sup>3</sup>

Let X be pointed to, under so scanty a description as a non-Lockean theory of reference admits. We may then classify X as something fleshy, or as a human being, or as a woman, or as a beauty. In this series, the description of X progressively thickens. A thicker description is more instructive and more contentious than a thinner one, whether the classification be predominantly cognitive, evaluative, or normative.

As the breast example is intended to illustrate, ordinary perception of ordinary life is fairly thick. Its thickness may shock us. At Madame Tussaud's, I ask a guard a question. He does not answer, does not look at me, does not move. I feel insulted until I realize that I have spoken to a waxwork. My perception changes. How? Presumably from seeing X under a thick G to seeing X under a thinner F. Seeing or fancying seeing X as a human being is thicker than seeing or fancying seeing X as a dummy. To repeat: I see X as G and then, because of my own reaction, recognize that X is merely F. It also happens that I see X as F and then, because of my own reaction, recognize that X is G: at Madame Tussaud's, I close my fly and with a start realize that what I have seen as a waxwork may well be a human being. The move from F to G is likely to occur as in this example, that is, as a reversal and correction of a previous dilution: ordinary perception is usually thick.

Both moves are responsions if (a) G is thicker than F; (b) G involves importantly that X is to be treated in a certain way; and (c) the perceiver's second recognition requires him to reject the first one as faulty, although F is, in a sense, contained in G.

---

<sup>3</sup>Think of David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* as a whole, the books on the understanding and the passions leading up to the book on morals. Then one sees that its famous remark on the difference between *is* and *ought* (3.1.1 469 in the Selby-Bigge edition) can hardly be meant to point to a gulf, only to a difference to be "observ'd and explain'd." But Hume did not think that "the vulgar systems of morality" would be able to give such an account.

The shift from G to F or from F to G is in both cases set off by my own reaction. Struck by this reaction, I reconsider my perception. The shift is part of my life as a self-corrective agent.

A further complication is, in this essay, the fact that the thicker recognition involves a recognition of X as, roughly, a human being. As Bachtin and Sartre have reminded us, seeing X as human is seeing X as someone who arranges his perceptual world around himself, an arrangement I would be foolish not to take account of in my dealings with X. My shift from, or to, seeing X as G or my shiftless recognition of X as G is therefore likely to be momentous. It intimately affects my conduct to X. This sort of perception is, I believe, a forgotten pivot in our everyday idea of morality.

## 2. David's First Perception of Bathsheba

From his men David learnt the woman's name and civil status. What he saw or thought he saw was that her "uncleanness" was menstrual.<sup>4</sup> She was not pregnant. Nor was she just dirty; from a religious point of view she was impure. Her ablution was a purification. His perception is heavy with very androcentric concepts.

"She came in unto him, and he lay with her; for she was purified from her uncleanness." The "for" requires explanation. The authorized Swedish translation of 1917 employs *när*, signifying temporal coordination. It says euphemistically that the king screws her *when* she has "sanctified herself" (*belgat sig*) from her uncleanness. In the King James Version she does not wash herself again; David sets to work at once, *for* she was purified. He understands both why she performed her ablution and that she is no longer in a religiously unclean phase of her menstruation cycle. "For" signals that perceived "uncleanness" would have stopped him—that is, that he is not beside himself with lust and is responsible for his actions.

Whom or what did he see from his roof? Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of David's servant, Uriah the Hittite? A sociobiologist might say, "No, just naked female flesh. His virile

---

<sup>4</sup> See Torgny Lindgren, *Bathsheba*, trans. Tom Geddes (London: Harvill Press, 1989). In his novel, Lindgren ignores the menstruation theme. To my mind, it is essential to the biblical story. So is the idea of a clandestine outrage; but in the novel David has Uriah castrated before sending him back to the army.

member came alive. His perception got bloodshot and exploded into activity. The step from male lustfulness to taking possession is a short one for a man in power who does not have to pay regard, nay, is confirmed in his power by his ruthlessness. The woman is taken to him, he mounts her, and when he gets tired she is sent back home."

This is a nasty possibility. Later I shall query its gap between perception and action. At present I take on the split question, "Whom or what did David see?" My claim is that on this interpretation the *who* is superfluous: he saw a body, not somebody. "Whom do I see?" was a secondary question, asked only in order to identify this exquisite body so that his men would know what to fetch him. The distinction between 'who?' and 'what?' will follow us and prove important to the notion of moral responson.

My next remark is that the story is renowned because it is deviant. To most people who ask "Whom or what do I see?" the *who* is so important that if it is answered the *what* drops out. David's emphasis is odd not because most of us are too feeble to treat one another like things, but because we do not care for<sup>5</sup> that type of conduct. We want relations to human beings to be different than to tools or to robots; and to some we want relations for a longer time than that of coitus. Usually we do not see each other merely erotically, and when we do we seldom see sexual serfs. 'See' is not metaphorical; the perception itself is erotic and/or sexual.

My third remark does willful damage to my first. David is not a tender lover. But he does see a woman, not an animal or an angel. In his focus is a body—but it entices him because it is that of a woman. There is no logical circle here, only a (perverse?) fascination by reverberations and shadows. One philosophical task is to separate his sort of perception from a more normal one. Another is to remind us that even his sort is emphatically not of a thing. For better or worse, it is a perception of a human being. The 'fleshy' interpretation is too crude.

---

<sup>5</sup> 'Care for' may sound as if we have a choice. That is not what I intend to convey. Phenomenologically we do not see how we *could* act like that. David's type of conduct does not strike us as possible. Yet he did act in an impossible way. The double use of these modal concepts is, I think, unavoidable. The man who says, contemptuously, "Well, the king obviously could do things that you claim are impossible" has missed the bus. But if asked why this is so, we are (or I am) stumped for an answer.

He saw a woman, but as a “lay.” Is his perception immoral? Or is it amoral? The *Tractatus* holds that logic *and ethics* are transcendental,<sup>6</sup> that is, they are preconditions for the very possibility of experience. Then no room seems to be left for amorality. Ethics includes immorality as well as morality; hence amorality is either beyond ethics or surrounding it. We have no experiential inkling of what these spatial metaphors try to express if ethics *is* transcendental. Yet David’s perception seems to be neither moral nor immoral; it cries out for another characterization.

Ethics is concerned with commitments and responsibilities—try to conceive of a human being with no notion of commitment to other human beings. Is it like conceiving of a human being with no notion of logical relations? “Some men are morally deficient just as some are intellectually deficient. Being a deficient X is being less than an X; hence, an amoralist is less than human.” Well, he is not treated as retarded; we consider him a man who does not care about his commitments rather than as a man with no notion of commitment. He sees other men as third persons. They are “those people” or even that Continental monster, “the Other.” Never, never are they *you*.

Many of us are used to the idea of two sets of criteria for the human mind, one considering the first and another the third person. I suggest that ethical concepts are tripods, demanding also a consideration of the second person. I argue my case at length in three books.<sup>7</sup> The arguments cannot be summarized intelligibly here, so I ask you to call up in your mind’s eye and nose and ear and flesh some differences between a casual sexual encounter and an encounter with someone you care about. Call them up and pay heed to *how* you perceive, to your interrelations, to your reaction to her or his reactions and to your mutual display of feelings and respect. Does the idea of tripod concepts take hold?

Davidian sexuality is more performance than fun. More to the point, it is sexuality engaged in coitus, not in intercourse.<sup>8</sup> His

<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961) 6.13 and 6.421. “Transcendental” is to be read in a Kantian way.

<sup>7</sup> *Nedom vara och böra?* [*Underneath Is and Ought*] (Nora: Nya Doxa, 1993); *du* [*you*] (Stockholm: Thales, 1998); and *Den första stenen* [*The First Stone*].

<sup>8</sup> The importance of distinguishing *intercourse*—in the general sense of social dealings between individuals involving exchange of ideas and so forth—from *coitus* is driven home by Stanley Cavell in, for instance, *The Pursuits of Happiness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981).

“partner” is no partner. He is not interested in her. She is perhaps never spoken to except in orders. She is seen as a beautiful woman but not as a (possible) friend or enemy. Davidian perception is a pauperized form of ordinary tripod ones.

If this is right, Davidian amorality is no alternative to ethics, but is ethics on the verge of extinction. Ethics has the second person at its heart. An immoralist is paradigmatically a man who in his affairs with you does see you—your interests, your joy, your grief—but does not care, or does not care enough. Morality expands by treating the third person as a possible *you*. The expansion is, I suppose, foreshadowed in the original meaning of the Latin *persona*: a mask (of you and me), through and through sounding (*personans*) like you and me.<sup>9</sup>

Amorality, if it does not mean immorality, is the absence of morality; it is looking at and conducting oneself towards other human beings as if they were things. There are amoralists in this sense, at least occasional amoralists. But David is no psychopath. He would not have been sexually aroused had he thought that he was watching an automaton. His pleasure requires that Bathsheba is a possible *you*, but his indolence means that this possibility is nipped in the bud so that he does not have to care and engage himself. His so-called amorality misses out the second person but tries to retain its fragrance. That is why I call it ethics on the verge of extinction.

### 3. *David's Perception of the Married Couple*

From David's point of view the episode is closed when Bathsheba is sent back to Uriah's house. But there are thousands of years to the advent of the pill; and “the woman conceived, and sent and told David, and said, I am with child.” A scandal is imminent. The rest of Chapter 11 narrates how he copes with the situation.

Uriah is a soldier and a person of importance, being one of David's thirty-seven mighty men (23:39). It is surprising that the king takes no consideration of him and odd that he does not recognize his wife: Jerusalem is a small town, they live close to his

---

<sup>9</sup> “The third person” is a misnomer. Grammatically, it is convenient to put the pronoun ‘it’ in the same category as ‘he’ and ‘she.’ Sometimes it is also in the same semantical category, as when it is used to refer to a child. But generally it refers to things; and to see X as a thing is very far indeed from seeing X as a person.

palace, and she is beautiful.<sup>10</sup> What he did know when sending for her was that her husband was not at home. Since this is “the time when kings go forth to battle” he is in the field. Now he is called to Jerusalem, and David has an insipid conversation with him before sending him down to his house to wash his feet: “And Uriah departed out of the king’s house, and there followed him a mess of meat from the king.” But he baffles David’s hopes by refusing to go home, have his dinner and sleep with his wife as long as his comrades “are encamped in the open fields”—which may be an act of loyalty to them but is also a criticism of David, who does not lead them. After two days he is sent back to the army.

He can be ordered about, but there are things servants cannot be ordered to do without arousing their suspicion. Since Jews do not believe in immaculate conception, David is in trouble. He is a man who practices genocide, so presumably has no scruples about assassinating Bathsheba. Yet he does not contemplate that way out. Perhaps he is bridled by the idea that she is getting big with his child, is a uterus where his scion is growing. (As a matter of fact, he will later beget Solomon with her.)

Whether or not he has this “stud farm” perception, he turns his gaze to her husband. Uriah is important to his army and thereby to him. His death would weaken Israel. Nevertheless, he has to be eliminated, as a chess player gives up a knight in order to better his situation.

Accordingly, the king writes a letter to Joab, commander-in-chief, bidding that Uriah be put in the forefront of the hottest battle and abandoned so that “he may be smitten, and die.” The order is carried out, but another of the king’s men is also killed (by a woman, to top it all). Joab is worried, but David “said unto the messenger, Thus shalt thou say unto Joab, Let not this thing displease thee, for the sword devoureth one as well as another” (11:25). When Bathsheba’s mourning was past, he “sent and fetched her to his house, and she became his wife, and bare him a son.” His reputation was no longer at stake; he had set her and her child right. In the story, he gives no more thought to Uriah the Hittite until Nathan appears. Yet his tricks were designed for the manipulation of a human being, not of an animal or a chessman.

---

<sup>10</sup> Is he myopic? Spectacles had not yet been invented.



In his quick violence and belated attempt to mend what he has broken, David is a caricature of the man of action. He (or she) is not utterly foreign to any of us. All of us have to be trained to abstain from action and to simply look at important things with which we could have interfered. "Trained to abstain"—meddling comes naturally to us. Our normal perception is not *first* looking, hearing, poking, sniffing, tasting and *then* acting; it is using our senses *in* acting or acting *in* using our senses—a primitive whole out of which the distinction is made between perceiving without doing and doing without perceiving. Just as the baby sees the roughness or smoothness of the breast and does not infer the tactile quality from the visual one, so we see the manageability or unmanageability of an object without inference. The idea that we see only with our eyes, hear only with our ears and so forth, and hence need a sixth sense to see the coldness of a winter's day, is a strange one; and so is the idea of a wall between perceiving and doing. Perceiving is frequently incipient doing, that is, doing until we *give up* our pursuit.

Aristotle's idea of practical inference seems to be that action is sometimes entailed in perception: seeing X as G is acting upon X in certain ways *unless* ....<sup>11</sup> Our conceptions of ordinary perception and ordinary action are formed by non-paralyzed human beings—a neglected truism. Phenomenologically, our perceptions of X as G are filled with unreleased actions. Apples have a certain form and certain colours, but they are also, qua apples, edible and so forth.

#### 4. Tripod Perception

I have already said a little about perceiving X as a human being. Looking at you I see a mind in action. If this sounds too incorporeal, I see a being who perceives, remembers, ponders, feels, plans. As Bakhtin reminds us, I know that your perception is anchored to the place from which you perceive. I also know that roughly as I see you as a mind you see me as similarly endowed. I know that there is a surplus in your perception that is lacking in mine and the other way round—you, but not I, can see what is going on behind my back. We tell each other what one of us cannot see, and the

---

<sup>11</sup> A subtler rendering is to be found in G.E.M. Anscombe's seminal *Intention* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1966) 32–35.

scope of human information is enlarged. Otherwise, our species would hardly survive. The cooperation does not work unless what kindles one of us very often kindles the other. This is part of what is meant by saying that we do not see each other as robots. A human being has his own point of view, notices other men's and women's points of view, and is concerned with divergences and similarities. David cannot have liked to hear that "Uriah slept at the door of the king's house, with all the servants of his lord"—men who had taken Bathsheba to the royal bed and who might set their beards wagging.

An ordinary robot has no history, for it has no hopes and desires, nothing to strive for, nothing to fear and despair of, no cheerful or nagging memories. A human being has. His history has a first person version and several third person versions. Something is distinctly odd if they all agree: people have different interests and spans of attention, so they remember different things and put them together differently. Similarly, something is distinctly odd if they all disagree: then they hardly speak of the same man. Chronicles are monstrous unless they see their subject as a possible *you*. The notion of a human being is a tripod concept. The history of us invites accounts from the points of view of the first and the second and the third person.

A violated woman has much to despair of. In a cool hour the rapist as well as a bystander knows this—a vital truth about human beings. If we think (too) kindly of David, he tries to repent by including Bathsheba in his harem and accepting her child as his: a basically decent man is tempted, falls and then is entangled in crime by his cowardice.

When we look at each other, history enters. Human life is a web of commitments. Some of them are embodied: David can see them in Bathsheba's swelling belly, and his palace reminds him that he is a king by the grace of God, a man who does not stand above His laws.

The knowledge that perception is richer than what oculists are concerned with reverberates in the philosophy of Sartre, but is strangely distorted. Meeting your gaze is, in *L'être et le néant*, meeting the gaze of Medusa, an idea which turns his book into a kind of diary of a very disturbed man (poor Simone de Beauvoir). In everyday life Medusa is absent. When I have something to hide, your gaze is embarrassing; but meeting your eye may be what I hope for when I have nothing to hide; and staring contests would

not be memorable if they were everyday fare.<sup>12</sup> Very often we look at each other without evil intent and for the *second* person.

On what did David rivet his eyes when he first saw Bathsheba? And how did he see her husband? We know little of his encounter with Uriah, but the man stubbornly refuses to enter his own house, even in order to sleep off the effects of drink (II Sam. 11:13); perhaps he had heard rumours. Being not historians but phenomenologists, we read imaginatively, not to learn more about people in the text but to learn more *about ourselves* who fill in its scanty information in the way we do. If you were the king, would you meet Uriah's gaze? Unless you are an accomplished actor your face might give you away. This is psychology and a *bedeutsam*<sup>13</sup> remark on our notion of the human gaze.

If my description is correct, David saw Bathsheba and Uriah as human beings, not puppets. But he saw them as human beings in a minimal sense, as third person figures, not second person figures. They were servants, neither friends nor foes. The second person has been much maltreated in the very book which called attention to its existence, viz. Buber's *Ich und du*. He maltreats it because he writes in a religious tradition and in its spirit moves from mystic experience to ordinary life instead of the other way round.<sup>14</sup> My three books try to show that our attitudes to the second person are not mystic but certainly different from those to the third person. Had David seen Bathsheba as a second person, he would have looked out for her feelings and thoughts. If he then had sent her back without thanks, without consolations, without a word to the effect that she, Bathsheba, is not just one more beauty added to his collection of trophies—well, then it would have been

---

<sup>12</sup> Staring is less rude in other cultures than mine. My point is saved if you consent to the last sentence of the paragraph: in all cultures people often look at one another without evil intent and in the second person.

<sup>13</sup> To my knowledge, Heidegger never defines his notion of *Bedeutsamkeit*. It seems to signify incipient conceptualization: an acceptable statement of a *bedeutsam* connection is not yet a conceptual truth, but to deny it would be what P.H. Nowell-Smith in his *Ethics* (Baltimore MD: Penguin Books, 1954) used to call "logically odd."

<sup>14</sup> His primary encounter is with a tree. The tree is taken as a paradigm of a *thou*, a somewhat archaic translation of the German '*du*.' Even if it had been the burning bush that is or hides the Lord (Exodus 3:2 ff), the move to encounters with human beings, that is, with you and you and you, would have been precarious.

an act of meanness. Now it is gross insensibility. We may suspect that in a way she is not even present except as a tool for masturbation.

The second person *necessarily* matters, positively or negatively; that is my reading of the dictum that ethics is transcendental.<sup>15</sup> David's dealings with other people ignore what is of importance to them. When Uriah cannot be fooled into paternity he becomes a hindrance, something (rather than somebody) to be polished off; and what is Bathsheba now but a ground already tilled for royal corn?

### 5. *Responsion*

Had somebody asked the king whether he saw the man and the woman, his impatient answer would presumably be "I'm not blind." But blind he is, and this is at last where *responsion* explicitly enters. The Lord sends Nathan to tell him a story of a rich man "with exceedingly many flocks and herds" who was too greedy to kill an animal of his own to feed a guest, but robbed a poor man of his one ewe lamb.<sup>16</sup> In a rage, the king condemns the rich man to death; and Nathan comments, "Thou art the man." Stricken, David confesses, "I have sinned against the LORD." (II Samuel, 12:1-13; cf Psalm 51.)

The story is a religious one, but I read it in a secular way: the parable makes David see that in what he may have described to himself as womanizing and as writing Joab a letter about a stubborn man, he has committed adultery, rape, and murder. These thick descriptions are truer (he now thinks) than his thin and ego-centric ones. In the light of Nathan's "Thou art the man," he may even see himself as an adulterer, a rapist, and a murderer—one of those who, according to Leviticus, have committed abominations for which they are to be stoned. I shall return to this.

---

<sup>15</sup> This reading faces a number of awkward questions that cannot be dealt with here: Is all experience human? Is the human paradigm presupposed when angels, or dolphins, or cyborgs are accorded experiences? Is that presupposition sufficient to guarantee that ethics is transcendental?

<sup>16</sup> Not a lamb nor a ram lamb; no, a ewe lamb, which furthermore "lay in his [the poor man's] bosom, was unto him as a daughter"—Nathan prepares his denouement carefully.

The Bible does not say that David gives in at once. Nathan first tells him that what he has done secretly will be done to him publicly: God "will take thy wives before thine eyes, and give them unto thy neighbour, and he shall lie with thy wives in the sight of this sun" (12:11).<sup>17</sup> Only then does David confess. He and his god are androcentric and rather unsavoury characters.

The notion of respension is tripodical and relies on two "personal" ways of seeing and treating human beings: as third persons (*he, she*) and as second persons (*you, you*). Nathan uses this doubleness. Parables demand the listener's cooperation. He has to go beyond the story; he is not told where to go, but he has to find out if he is to see its point. A parable is nothing to a listless man. A will to work on its material is a prerequisite for understanding.

Nathan does not show his hand. He tells an apparently straightforward story, implying that he is asking David to judge as a king. His ruse succeeds: David shoulders his royal responsibilities. Consequently, he has to ask himself how the appropriation of the ewe lamb by a man who is not in need is to be judged according to the laws of Israel—laws which, remember, are also the laws of God. Having delivered his sentence he is told, "Thou art the man." Uriah becomes the poor man, Bathsheba the ewe lamb, and David condemned by his own words. His recognition and confession of his abominations demand that he *is already* committed to striving to be a righteous man—striving to *be* so, not merely to keep up appearances.

In David's case, the respension has two parts. One shifts from a fairly value-free point of view to a fairly value-laden one. Nihilists also, being human, like certain things and dislike others. But they do not think of them in terms of value. Or they think that values are likings and dislikings.<sup>18</sup> A person with a value-laden point of view, on the other hand, holds that adultery, rape or murder

---

<sup>17</sup> The prophecy came true when David's son Absalom rebelled against him, drove him away, and in an act of defiance "went in unto his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel" (16:22)—an exercise in virility since there were ten of them. (When David regained his kingdom, says 20:3, "they were shut up unto the day of their death, living in widowhood.") Moreover, David lived to witness a correspondence to his affair with Bathsheba: his eldest son Amnon "ravished" his own sister, David's daughter Tamar; and did it indiscreetly (II Sam. 13).

<sup>18</sup> So, I suspect, does many a preferentialist.

cannot be defined as an act frowned upon. He considers it wrong, however many favour it. Its popularity may even add to its badness.

The other part of the responson shifts from a fairly uncommitted to a fairly committed point of view. Somebody may have a value-laden view of adultery, rape and murder, but can look at them with detachment: they are wrong, but he does not care. Having confessed his sin, David is not in that category. He is concerned with the wrongness of what he has done. Being religious more than moral, he is wrapped up in what he has done to God more than in what he has done to Bathsheba, Uriah, and himself. But he does not merely passively accept that he has done wrong; he repents. Repenting is more than regretting; it has pragmatic implications in the form of a serious attempt to change one's conduct. Unless one tries in earnest to mend one's ways, one does not "truly see" the nature of one's deeds or of one's soul.

This turn of phrase takes the notion of responson too close to Socrates' idea that nobody does wrong voluntarily. I share neither his optimism nor his conviction that we always know what is good and what is bad. My point is the conceptual one that if someone does not spontaneously strive to obtain or to shun A—in the sense that he does A or shuns A unless he *stops himself*—then his confession that he "truly sees" its goodness or badness is to be discarded.

Much more has to be said about my conditions that: (a) in a responson the perceiver of X sees X under a tripodal concept G, but sometimes has to be forcefully reminded of one of its legs (as Nathan did in the case of Bathsheba and as Mr Knightly, rather differently, reminded Miss Woodhouse of Miss Bates' second-person qualities in chapter forty-three of Jane Austen's *Emma*); and (b) that the perceiver does so recognize X because he has already reacted to X in a certain way. Moving to more examples may dispel the fog, and I have tried to do so in my books. In this essay, there is a final point to be made about the story of David, Bathsheba and Uriah, as told in the King James Version. It concerns self-identification.

### 6. *Responsive Self-identification*

David came to condemn himself because he had been wheedled into a position where he acted as a king and discovered himself a

humbug. He did not think of his kingship as a role to assume and leave as he pleased. Day and night he was the Lord's anointed. A king who, in a land of shepherds, robs a poor person of his one ewe lamb, has made himself unworthy of his calling, of his mission in life.

The discovery does not just embarrass him. You do many an awkward thing, blush and go on. You writhe when you think of it, you take care not to repeat it, but although the memory chastises you, basically you remain the same person. David's discovery is not in that category. In a not entirely metaphorical sense, he cannot survive it: he is shattered.

In several writings<sup>19</sup> Charles Taylor attempts a distinction between weak and strong evaluation. He makes it in the first person, for it is essentially tied to the evaluator's self-esteem. A weak evaluation is revealed in my likings and dislikings, preferences and rejections. A strong evaluation reveals itself in the doings and attitudes I identify myself with. If I do not support them, I disgrace myself in my own eyes: I am not the man I want to be.

Weak evaluations often conflict with strong ones. I may be able to meet my own eyes in the mirror only if I have overcome certain likings and preferences. I seldom have to be very acute to find out my weak preferences. They make themselves visible, presumably because they are casual. My strong evaluations are tied to what sort of person I want to be and what sort of life I want to pursue, to fairly durable patterns of conduct. Many are cultivated. They may surprise me: I am amazed at having trained myself to look at the world with attention to these aspects and not to those. Unwittingly I have fostered certain responses.

Many perceptions are due to our family and society. Bathsheba was brought up to think of herself as a woman, taking a pride in "female virtues." High among these was chastity. Let her identify herself as the (or a) wife of Uriah, roughly as David identifies himself as king of Israel. She evaluates wifely excellences strongly, especially fidelity. Sharing a bed with a man who is not her husband destroys her picture of what sort of woman and what sort of human being she is. The fact that David forced himself on her does not restore her in her own eyes.

---

<sup>19</sup> Above all in "What Is Human Agency?" (1977), reprinted in *Philosophical Papers* 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985).

Without previous acquaintance, David knows that she has this strong evaluation if she is decent. He also knows that she is likely to think that she has been soiled for all future, even if the affair remains clandestine. On reflection he knows that he may have destroyed her life. He also knows that she would probably have offered more than token resistance had he not been king. He did not attempt a seduction, for it was unnecessary; but her not opposing him is no evidence that she was willing to yield: a righteous judge would find him guilty of rape.

After Nathan, David may even see himself as a rapist. He has not merely done something; he has become something. I do not stop being a rapist when I rise from my victim. I remain a rapist forever or at least until I have been forgiven and have repented. The confession "I have sinned" carries implications for the future. The guilty man cannot mouth it and then shrug it off.

David also knows that cuckolds are considered ridiculous and dishonoured; and that Uriah, if he learned of the affair, would take it to heart, perhaps so much that he would become a threat to the adulterer. When David has him killed he removes a danger and makes himself a murderer. A murderer does not stop being a murderer by stopping murdering. His victim is past forgiving him or holding him to his crime; and how can he atone? He can suffer a penalty, but that does not bring Uriah back to life. Arguably, something is wrong with a man who has done something irretrievable but thinks atonement possible. Others may cease to hold him responsible. He cannot cease and still be repentant.

As I read the story of David, all this enters his confession, "I have sinned." In the light of Nathan's parable, he sees his past and himself in a new and condemning light. He recognizes Bathsheba and Uriah as human beings and as *second* persons. Having given this basic response to them, he finds that what he has done to them leaps forth as rape and murder and that he himself, the man of these atrocities, must be seen as a man who has sold out his strong evaluations. Possibly the strongest of them is that of a king, and he has not lived up to his royal responsibilities. In failing, he has in his own eyes ruined himself. He is a sham and a shame.

I have claimed not that perception is occasionally *spiced* with ethical concepts, but that everyday perception of everyday interaction *cannot* be ethically neutral and recognizably human. Being human, we cannot see each other neutrally; if we do, we are deranged. In the second person area, value nihilism is no



option.<sup>20</sup> Like illogicality, it is a degeneration we can undergo but not choose, in a full-blooded sense of 'choose'—choice involves evaluation.

### 7. *Post Scriptum*

My reading of the story of David and Bathsheba has presupposed the correctness of the King James Version. It is challenged in the newest Swedish translation of the Bible (called *Bible 2000* since it was published on the eve of the new millennium). I quote the relevant extract in my mother tongue and then give its salient points in English.

En dag när David hade stigit upp efter sin middagsvila och gick omkring uppe på taket till sitt palats fick han därifrån se en kvinna som badade. Hon var mycket vacker. David förhörde sig om vem hon var och fick veta att det var Batseba, dotter till Eliam och hustru till hettiten Urias. Då skickade han några män för att hämta henne, hon kom till honom, och han låg med henne fastän hennes reningstid ännu varade.

Bathsheba is watched *when having a bath*; she is not in a religious sense purifying herself. When she is brought to the king he goes to bed with her "*although* [fastän] her period of purification had not ended." In English, he is free to lie with her *for* she was "purified from her uncleanness"; in Swedish he makes love to her *in spite of* her uncleanness.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Restricting the area to the second person turns my claim into a logical truth. What ought to be addressed is Wittgenstein's general assertion that ethics is transcendental. For if morality and immorality are preconditions of human experience, value nihilism must be unintelligible. Conversely, if value nihilism is intelligible, then ethics cannot be transcendental. I believe that value nihilism is, like determinism, only apparently intelligible. But the reasons remain to be given.

<sup>21</sup> The translations are of the very same words, a grammatical construction being interpreted in two radically different ways. I owe this piece of information to a letter from Professor Bertil Albrektson, Old Testament exegete and member of the Swedish Bible Commission.

The Swedish translation baffles a gentile: how could she get pregnant while menstruating? The explanation is to be found in Leviticus 15:19, which says that after a menstruation a woman is to “be put apart seven days.” During that time she is unclean, “and whosoever toucheth her shall be unclean until the even.” She is, of course, able to conceive during that week. But the man making love to her is trespassing.

Does this matter? To David it does, and the story takes a not so King Jamesian direction. The Lord’s anointed has committed adultery, and murder, and manslaughter. How regrettable! But what is really bad is that he has deliberately broken the laws of Leviticus, laws setting the children of Israel apart from other people. His recognition of his sin deals a death blow to his self-esteem. From a moral point of view, a truly odd thing about Psalm 51, allegedly by David shortly after Nathan’s “Thou art the man,” is the beginning of verse 4: “Against thee, thee only, have I sinned”—not against Uriah, not against Abimelech the son of Jerubbesheth who was killed with him, and not against Bathsheba, but against the Lord.

Three thousand years is a long time in the development of human consciousness and moral perception. David’s repentance in his lyrics is about as close to present day amorality as you can get. Psalm 51, used by the Swedish Church as a confession of sins, is a song of a moral moron. Its indifference to human beings may serve as a foil to the responsive tripod second person perception that, in this essay, has been made a model of morality.