



## The Way Things Ought To Be

by Steven Garber

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One of the great questions that philosophers ask and answer is this: is it possible to create an “ought” from an “is”? If things are a certain way—just the way things are—can we argue with that? How dare we? To do so is to argue against what is natural, what seems plainly normal, i.e., it’s just how it is...always has been, and always will be.



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Of course, it is not just philosophers who debate this question. It is all of us, ordinary people each one: butchers, bakers, candlestick-makers, and architects and attorneys, painters and plumbers, teachers and financial counselors, computer engineers and advertising executives, parents and children, neighbors and citizens, the whole range of human responsibilities and relationships. *This is just the way it is*—how can you argue with that? But the question remains: can you get an *ought* from an *is*?

The question makes assumptions about life, perhaps most importantly, that there is an “ought,” a way that human beings are supposed to live, and that we have access to it. In our world today that is a much-debated assumption. As Steve Turner has put it, brilliantly, in his poem “Creed,” setting forth the “whatever” character of contemporary culture:

We believe that each man must find the truth  
that is right for him.

Reality will adapt accordingly.

The universe will readjust. History will alter.

No matter how complex the issue, how perplexing the question, how weighty the idea, we can always respond with a shrug-of-the-soul and say, “Whatever.”

And of course in the culture of whatever no one can make any judgments. The charges of arrogance and intolerance are thrown up against any opinion that an “ought” does in fact exist. At the dawn of the 21st century, perhaps this is most painfully seen in the arena of sexuality, where hopes and habits are often on very public display, for very public debate, i.e., who are you to say that I am wrong? that my desires are wrong? that my feelings are wrong? *This is what I want to do with whom I want to do it.* It is in this area of human life, where the most tender affections are known, that personal decisions, snowballing across a society, become global dilemmas. Everything in life is not sexual, but its meaning does reach far beyond the bedroom door. The cultural conversation that begins there, and is experienced most poignantly there, ranges far and wide, touching human experience from the most personal to the most public, from family concerns to political commitments—because it is in the *is/ought* relationship where so much about who we are and how we are going to live is forged.

### And She Cried

In my own university years, trying hard to make sense of the world and of my place in it—especially so in relation to sexuality—it was another poem of Turner’s that first opened my eyes to the moral meaning of the *is/ought* tension, and gave me a window into its resolution.

My love,  
she said  
that when all’s  
considered  
we’re only machines.

I chained  
her to my  
bedroom wall  
for future use  
and she cried.

Simply believing something to be true does not make it true; that was the gist of Turner's poem. If I believe that I am a machine, treating myself and others as a machine, then it still does not change the reality that I am in fact a human being with longings and yearnings to know and be known, to love and be loved, to touch and be touched. If I am treated like a machine, then for awhile, maybe, I will act like a machine, but eventually I will cry—because I really am a human being, after all, and I want to be treated like a human being ought to be treated.

But there is that word *ought* again. That it is there, and that it always will be there, is morally instructive—for those with ears to hear.

I once asked Steve Turner if he had seen the film *Dangerous Liaisons* and thought about its last scene as the cinematic version of his poem; at critical points there are eerie echoes. (He had not, but was intrigued by the question.) Profoundly framed by the is/ought conundrum, the story has been told and retold. Set in late 18th-century France, the pre-guillotine France of "Let them eat cake," it tells the tale of a group of men and women who treat each other as sex objects, as machines. Day after day, year after year, their lives are bed-hopping extravaganzas, with one word at the heart of all they think and say and do: sex. Quite openly they confess to all who are interested, "We do not believe in love. We believe in sex. Our bodies have desires, and we will satisfy them. But love, relationships, no, not ever."

All this seems to work very well, until one of the characters (played by the actress Glenn Close) begins to feel weary of her casual sexual encounters; she wants to love one man, and be loved by one man. Thus begins the dissolution of their happy world. As the impersonal nature of their interactions begins to sour even sex, she becomes an object of scorn, viz. What?! You believe in love?! The final scene of the film shows her face, pondering the reality of her humanity, tears beginning to grace her cheeks. They are not from some new-found gladness—that love, sweet love is finally possible—but from her grief that what she believed was so profoundly out-of-kilter with her deepest desires as a human being, that even though her worldview had no place for love, those convictions proved achingly unsatisfying to her as a woman. *And she cried.*

And she cried of course, because there is an *ought*—not just an *is*.

### We Are Without Excuse

But why? Why the "ought"? And how do we know what the "ought" is like? A generation ago, Francis Schaeffer said it very well: "God is there and he is not silent." The work of the L'Abri community, founded by Schaeffer and his wife, was rooted in that commitment, and day by day their life together was formed by its meaning. It is one thing to confess, to even begrudgingly acknowledge, that God is there, that we are not alone in the universe. But it is something else altogether to confess that God has spoken about who we are and how we are to live.

The Bible begins with a Story that has cosmic consequences, situating us in a world created by God, in a world in which we are given a task that is written into our natures, the fabric of our existence: to care for the creation, to be responsible stewards, exercising dominion in the earth, discovering its possibilities, unfolding its resources—all for the sake of the glory of God, imaging his rule in our lives.

God has not hidden this from us, making it known to only a select few. No tribe or tradition is "privileged." As Paul writes in Romans 1, "God has revealed himself so plainly in what he has made, that we are without excuse." There is a way we are supposed to live, a way that is most satisfying, a way of true and genuine flourishing, but when we do not, God holds us accountable, because he has made us responsible. Though not a Christian, Vaclav Havel, the great Czech playwright-who-became-president, sees this all very clearly, image-bearer of God that he is. "The secret of man is the secret of his responsibility." And so he argues that if God is gone from the universe, if we are really on our own, then we no longer have access to words like accountability and responsibility, in fact to words like purpose and meaning. For Havel, these words, and the rich visions that accompany them, are only possible if God is there.

The beliefs-behind-the-beliefs, the presuppositions, that shape both Schaeffer and Havel, create the conditions for understanding that there is an "ought" to human life under the sun, that we are made for a purpose, with certain tasks to take up, with meaning written into our deepest longings.

Words like accountability and responsibility are all bound up with an “oughtness” about the universe, and our place in it, viz. that there is a way that we ought to live, and that we are not clueless about that (Romans 1); in fact the “ought” is so plain, that we are without excuse.

### The Rule of Creation

The novel *Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier, winner of the National Book Award for Fiction, offers a window into this reality in the story of Stobrod Thewes, “a notorious local ne’er-do-well and scoff-law.” A native of Cold Mountain, he enters the Civil War on the side of the South, ends up in Virginia, fighting a fight that he does not care about. Not a good father, not a good husband, not a good soldier, he becomes a good fiddle-player.

*Stobrod put the dollar in his shirt pocket and left. Time and again during the walk back to the camp he stopped and looked at his fiddle as if for the first time. He had never before thought of trying to improve his playing, but now it seemed worthwhile to go at every tune as if all within earshot had been recently set afire.*

*The music he had made up for the girl was a thing he had played every day since. He never tired of it, and in fact, believed the tune to be so inexhaustible that he could play it every day for the rest of his life, learning something new each time. His fingers had stopped the strings and his arm had drawn the bow in the shape of the tune so many times by now that he no longer thought about the playing. The notes just happened effortlessly. The tune had become a thing in itself, a habit that served to give order and meaning to a day’s end, as some might pray and others double-check the latch on the door and yet others take a drink when night has fallen.*

*From that day of the burning on, music came more and more into his mind. The war just didn’t engage him anymore. He became casual in his attendance. And he was little missed. He came to prefer spending as much of his time as he could manage in the dim regions of Richmond’s taverns, rank places that smelled of unwashed bodies, spilled liquor, cheap perfume, and unemptied chamber pots. In truth, he had throughout the war spent as much time as he could afford in such places, but the difference now was that his main interest became the musical niggers that often played for the customers. Many a night Stobrod wandered from place*

*to place until he found a fellow working at a stringed instrument with authority, some genius of the guitar or banjo. Then he’d take out his fiddle and play until dawn, and every time he did, he learned something new.*

*He first spent his attention on matters of tuning and fingering and phrasing. Then he began listening to the words of the songs the niggers sang, admiring how they chanted out every desire and fear in their lives as clear and proud as could be. And he soon had a growing feeling that he was learning things about himself that had never sifted into his thinking before. One thing he discovered with a great deal of astonishment was that music held more for him than just pleasure. There was meat to it. The grouping of sounds, their forms in the air as they rang out and faded, said something comforting to him about the rule of creation. What the music said was that there is a right way for things to be ordered so that life might not always be just tangle and drift but have a shape, an aim. It was a powerful argument against the notion that things just happen. By now he knew nine hundred fiddle tunes, some hundred of them being his own compositions.*

In this account of Stobrod’s leaving the war, “becoming casual in his attendance,” and beginning to play the fiddle, finding “something comforting to him about the rule of creation,” discovering “that there is a right way for things to be ordered so that life might not always be just tangle and drift but have a shape, an aim...” Frazier sees into the depths of human existence, of the ways we live and want to live—and must live, to live lives coherent with the cosmos, with its created purposes. Though I found the novel, in the end, unsatisfying, there are moments of brilliance, and this is one of them.

The act of discovery in which Stobrod learned the art and craft of the fiddle is a picture of human life writ large. There is an “oughtness” built into the creation itself, a way for things to be ordered that makes for human flourishing in every area of life: aesthetics and arts, economics and education, family and marriage, politics and play. In the beginning God created not just beavers and bears, but a cosmos, i.e., the universe considered as a system with an order and pattern. This is the truest truth for fiddles and tunes, with their thousands of thousands of possibilities. But the same is true for story-telling and poetry, for painting

and film-making, for sculpture and dance. Is it written in a book, even a Great Book, so that all can know? Is the Bible itself a textbook for ballet, a manual for becoming a great guitarist? Of course not; rather God has created a cosmos where in the act of discovery, indwelling an art with thoughtfulness, determination, and skill, there is the possibility of learning to “read” the rule of creation, finding shape and aim as we do so.

What Stobrod found as he “fiddled,” is the experience anyone has who takes the time to develop a vocation with the skills required to understand that things don’t “just happen,” that life and the world are not always “just tangle and drift.” As my father told me many times over the course of his career as a University of California scientist, “The longer I work at understanding the physical world, plants and how they grow, the more certain I am that this is a creation, an incredibly complex creation. The intention and order is there—if you have eyes to see.”

### Creation’s Seventh Sunrise

Someone who has had eyes to see is Wendell Berry, poet, novelist, essayist, and farmer. I have almost all that he has written, some forty books, and have found him to be a wise guide, pointing the way to a more fully human life—which in his terms, is also a more holy life, as his vision is deeply wrought out of the Christian story. With keen perception, one reviewer described him in this way:

Wherever we live, however we do so, we desperately need a prophet of responsibility and...Berry may be the closest to one that we have. But, fortunately, he is also a poet of responsibility. He makes one believe that the good life may not only be harder than what we’re used to but sweeter as well.

In his own art as a writer, Berry thinks deeply and widely, time and again reflecting upon what it means to be human in the modern world; and conversely, what we are losing as humans when we disengage and disconnect from the conditions which make humanness possible, *viz.* our relationships and responsibilities to people and places. And he has found a way to do so that carries his craft into the marketplace of ideas. It would be the very rare “Christian” bookstore that

would carry his work; on the other side, few serious bookstores in America would be without his books. He has found a voice that communicates to people, whatever their beliefs may be about the Apostles’ Creed.

In his stories of the Port William “membership,” he tells about the interconnected lives of a community of family and friends over the course of a century. Loving them as we come to know them, in their homes and in their fields, in all of their joys and their sorrows, we meet Uncle Jack, Mat and Margaret Feltner, Wheeler Catlett, Uncle Peach, Burleigh Coulter, Elton and Mary Penn, Nathan Coulter, Andy Catlett, Jayber Crow, and many more. And he is a poet as well, with work reflecting upon the cares and concerns of the human heart: work and worship, marriage and family, birth and death, pleasures and pains, rural and urban. One reviewer says it this way: “[Berry’s poems] shine with the gentle wisdom of a craftsman who has thought deeply about the paradoxical strangeness and wonder of life.” Yes, again and again and again.

But he is also an essayist with an eye that ranges across the landscape of “sex, economy, freedom, and community,” to quote the title of one work. Always concerned about what it means and takes to be human, Berry writes for *Everyman*, even as he does so with Christian conviction intact. Sometimes his flag flies for all to see—for example, in “Christianity and the Survival of Creation”—but more often than not he writes for those with ears to ear. In his newest collection, *Citizenship Papers*, he writes:

In the year 2000, I published a small book, *Life Is a Miracle*. My friend Charlie Sing has now asked me to deal with the question “Is life a miracle?”—thus inviting me to defend my title. Did I really mean it?

Yes, I did, and I do, mean it. And I mean it practically. I know that humans, including modern biologists, have learned a good deal about living things, and about parts of living things. But I don’t believe that anybody knows much about the life of living things. I have seen with my own eyes and felt with my own hands many times the difference between live things and dead ones, and I do not believe that the difference can be so explained as to remove the wonder from it. What

is the coherence, the integrity, the consciousness, the intelligence, the spirit, the informing form that leaves a living body when it dies? What was the “green fire” that Aldo Leopold saw going out in the eyes of the dying wolf? When you watch the eyes of the dying you see that they no longer see. I think a great painter can paint the difference between an eye that is dead and a living eye, but I don’t think anybody can explain the difference except by an infinite regression of responses to an infinitely repeated question: “But what was the cause of that cause?”

To me, as a matter of principle and of belief, life is a miracle.

The cause of that cause? Berry is never, ever cheap. He doesn’t farm cheaply, write cheaply, think or live cheaply. For him to ask a question about causation means that he will answer with care and rigor, and he will offer nothing cheap. As a habit of heart, this prophet and poet of responsibility weighs his words carefully, setting them before the watching world with craft and intention, exploring both delights and tragedies, glories and shames. If you have ears, then hear.

In his most “confessional” of works, the book where his own beliefs are most explicitly stated, *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979- 1997*, he reflects on what he has seen, and longs to have seen, with these words.

To sit and look at light-filled leaves  
 May let us see, or seem to see,  
 Far backward as through clearer eyes  
 To what unsighted hope believes:  
 The blessed conviviality  
 That sang Creation’s seventh sunrise.

Time when the Maker’s radiant sight  
 Made radiant every thing He saw,  
 And every thing He saw was filled  
 With perfect joy and life and light.  
 His perfect pleasure was sole law;  
 No pleasure had become self-willed.

For all His creatures were His  
 pleasures  
 And their whole pleasure was to be  
 What he made them; they sought no gain  
 Or growth beyond their proper measures,

Nor longed for change or novelty.  
 The only new thing could be pain.

Berry comes close to the glory of the creation, imagining creatures and their pleasures together as one with the pleasure of God, *viz.* “The blessed conviviality that sang Creation’s seventh sunrise.” The poem is one of many in his work that wisely and wonderfully allows us to come close ourselves, to see what God made and what it means.

In the beginning God did create the heavens and the earth, a cosmos with purposes and plans built into its very structures. There is an “oughtness” that gives shape and aim in every sphere of human life, in every dimension that humans take up their responsible action in history—even the way that fiddles are to be played. It is not all just tangle and drift.

Time when the Maker’s radiant sight / Made radiant every thing He saw / And every thing He saw was filled / With perfect joy and life and light. Such a moment, what a world—the only new thing could be pain.

*For many years Steven Garber has explored the formation of Christian spirituality, especially its implications for education and vocation. And while he has a classroom among many people in many places, his principal work is as the director of The Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation & Culture, which has as its core conviction that the church and society are renewed as a richer, truer vision of calling is taught and practiced. The author of The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior, now out in a 2nd edition, he also serves as Senior Fellow for the C.S. Lewis Institute in Washington, DC. A native of the great valleys of Colorado and California, he is married to Meg and with their children lives in Virginia where they are members of The Falls Church.*

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