

Phil 002: Contemporary Moral Issues

Cruelty and Schadenfreude
Sample slides



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I

What's Wrong With Enjoying True Crime?

It Expresses Something Morally Bad

I I

II

III

Last lecture, we sketched several preliminary reasons for thinking that there might be something wrong with deriving entertainment from true crime media.

I. Engagement expresses something morally bad about us

§ Cruelty

§ Schadenfreude

II. Empathetic engagement with vicious people is wrong

III. Engagement disrespects the dignity of other persons

I I

II

III

Today, we will look at the idea that engagement with true crime media expresses something bad about us.

First, let's consider why it might matter if it does. One could think that whatever is expressed is sufficiently disconnected from action so as to be morally inert.

Here are two reasons for thinking that we should be concerned:

- 1) It reveals our true character/nature and that is directly morally relevant
- 2) It encourages tendencies that will indirectly lead to morally wrong actions.

Character & Human Nature

I I

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Many philosophers have thought that having a virtuous character was a central part of the ethical good. This reflects a concern with being the right sort of person, not just doing good things.

Imagine a billionaire who murdered someone sadistically but who gave away millions of dollars to famine relief. Plausibly, he saved more people with charity than he killed—far more lives than the ordinary person ever saves.

Would you really think of him as a mostly good person? Probably not. You likely don't think of him as a good person at all, and that has to have something to do with his character. It's not just the fact that he killed someone. If that had been accidental, it would have made less of a difference.

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Most ethical theories have a role for character. Philosophers who think that having a virtuous character is the most important thing are called **virtue ethicists**.

Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics holds that virtues are the primary ethical concepts. It is good to have virtues, bad to lack them, and worse to have vices. It is best to possess all the virtues in the highest degree. Right action is whatever the fully virtuous person would do.

We will talk more about virtue ethics later this week and in week 4.

Moral Corruption

I

We might also think it reveals our vulnerability to moral corruption. If we think that, then we are likely to also think that continued engagement with true crime could actually corrupt us.

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How would it do this?

One possible mechanism is by desensitizing us to morally bad things so that we come to no longer see them as so beyond the pale (compare the Overton Window in political theory).

Another mechanism could be that, although cruelty is only a small part of our characters naturally, as we repeatedly satisfy that drive, it begins to increase until eventually it becomes much more dominant.



II

Nietzsche on Cruelty

On the Genealogy of Morality

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Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was a German philosopher who is well-known for many of his inflammatory and unconventional ideas, as well as a particularly bombastic style of writing.

His most famous work is *Beyond Good & Evil* (1886). We also read selections from *On The Genealogy of Morality* (1887), which Nietzsche intended as a companion piece to *BGE*.

GM is a book that is devoted to two related tasks. The first is uncovering the historical origins of morality, considered as a developing set of beliefs, practices, and norms. The second is determining the value of that system. These are related insofar as Nietzsche thinks how morality developed was in part guided by its usefulness to human beings.

GM: Second Essay

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While the first essay is about the development of the categories of good, bad, and evil, the second essay is about the development of our conscience and our concepts of duty, obligation.

As a very brief gloss, Nietzsche's hypothesis is that obligations arose out of creditor-debtor relationships.

These relationships were originally between two specific people. However, over time, they began to extend to groups, to the whole community, and then backwards in time to past members of the community.

Eventually, Nietzsche thinks we arrive at a concept of duty that is not tied to our particular relation to anyone, but duty *simpliciter*.

Cruelty As Satisfaction

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In considering this, Nietzsche considers the relationship of punishment to debt, which is where he discusses cruelty.

To ask it again: to what extent can suffering be a compensation for “debts”? Insofar as making someone suffer felt good in the highest degree, insofar as the injured one traded an extraordinary counter-pleasure for the loss, including the displeasure over the loss: making someone suffer—a real festival, something that, as mentioned, was priced more highly the more it contradicted the rank and the social standing of the creditor.

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I II

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It seems to me that the delicacy and even more the tartuffery of tame domestic animals (that is modern human beings, that is us) resists imagining with all its power the degree to which precisely cruelty constitutes the great festival joy of more ancient humankind, indeed accompanies almost all of their joys as an ingredient; how naively, on the other hand, and how innocently its need for cruelty emerges, how absolutely it posits its “disinterested malice” (or, to use Spinoza’s words, its *sympathia malevolens*) as a normal human trait-: thus as something to which the conscience heartily says Yes! For a more profound eye, even now there would perhaps be enough to perceive of this oldest and most thorough festival joy of human beings;

The Sublimation of Cruelty

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Nietzsche suggests that this drive has not died out, it has just become more sophisticated in its object. That is the connection to true crime.

III

Perhaps it is even permitted to entertain the possibility that the delight in cruelty really need not have died out: in relation to how pain hurts more today, it merely needed a certain sublimation and subtilization, that is, it had to be translated into the imaginative and psychical and adorned with such completely innocuous names that even the tenderest hypocritical conscience would not suspect them (“tragic compassion” is such a name; another is “les nostalgies de fa croix”).

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We should rethink cruelty and open our eyes; we should finally learn to be impatient, so that such immodest, fat errors no longer wander around virtuously and impudently, like those for instance that have been nurtured about tragedy by ancient and modern philosophers. Almost everything we call “higher culture” is based on the spiritualization and deepening of cruelty-this is my proposition; that “wild beast” has not been killed off at all, it lives, it thrives, it has merely- deified itself What constitutes the painful lust of tragedy is cruelty; what has a pleasing effect in so-called tragic pity, and at bottom even in everything sublime all the way up to the highest and most tender shudders of metaphysics, gets its sweetness only when the ingredient of cruelty is mixed in.

Meaning and Suffering

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Would Nietzsche think the fact that true crime expresses the drive to cruelty is enough to condemn it?

It seems like he would not.

W

ith these thoughts, by the way, I am absolutely not willing to concede new grist to our pessimists for their discordant and creaking mills of life-weariness; on the contrary, I explicitly intend to demonstrate that back when humankind was not yet ashamed of its cruelty, life on earth was more cheerful than now, where we have pessimists.

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Nietzsche does not condemn cruelty as such as bad.

With these thoughts, by the way, I am absolutely not willing to concede new grist to our pessimists for their discordant and creaking mills of life-weariness; on the contrary, I explicitly intend to demonstrate that back when humankind was not yet ashamed of its cruelty, life on earth was more cheerful than now, where we have pessimists.

Festival Redemption

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Partly, this is because he does not think we should deny our nature. The other part is that he thinks suffering can be redeemed by giving it a meaning– something like fitting it into the narrative of life by subordinating it to a higher aim.

Here, Nietzsche seems to think this is done by making it an object of appreciation. The inherently public nature of the festival provides a context in which suffering can be seen as significant, in the way that putting a ball through a hoop becomes significant in the context of a basketball game.

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Now with the help of such inventions life at that time knew how to perform the trick that it has always known how to perform, to justify itself, to justify its "evil"; for this it would probably need other auxiliary inventions (for instance life as riddle, life as epistemological problem). "Every evil is justified, if the sight of it uplifts a god": thus rang the prehistoric logic of feeling-and really was it only the prehistoric? The gods conceived as friends of cruel spectacles-oh how far this ancient idea projects even into our European humanization! on this we might consult Calvin or Luther. It is certain in any case that the Greeks still knew of no more pleasant side dish for the happiness of their gods than the joys of cruelty.

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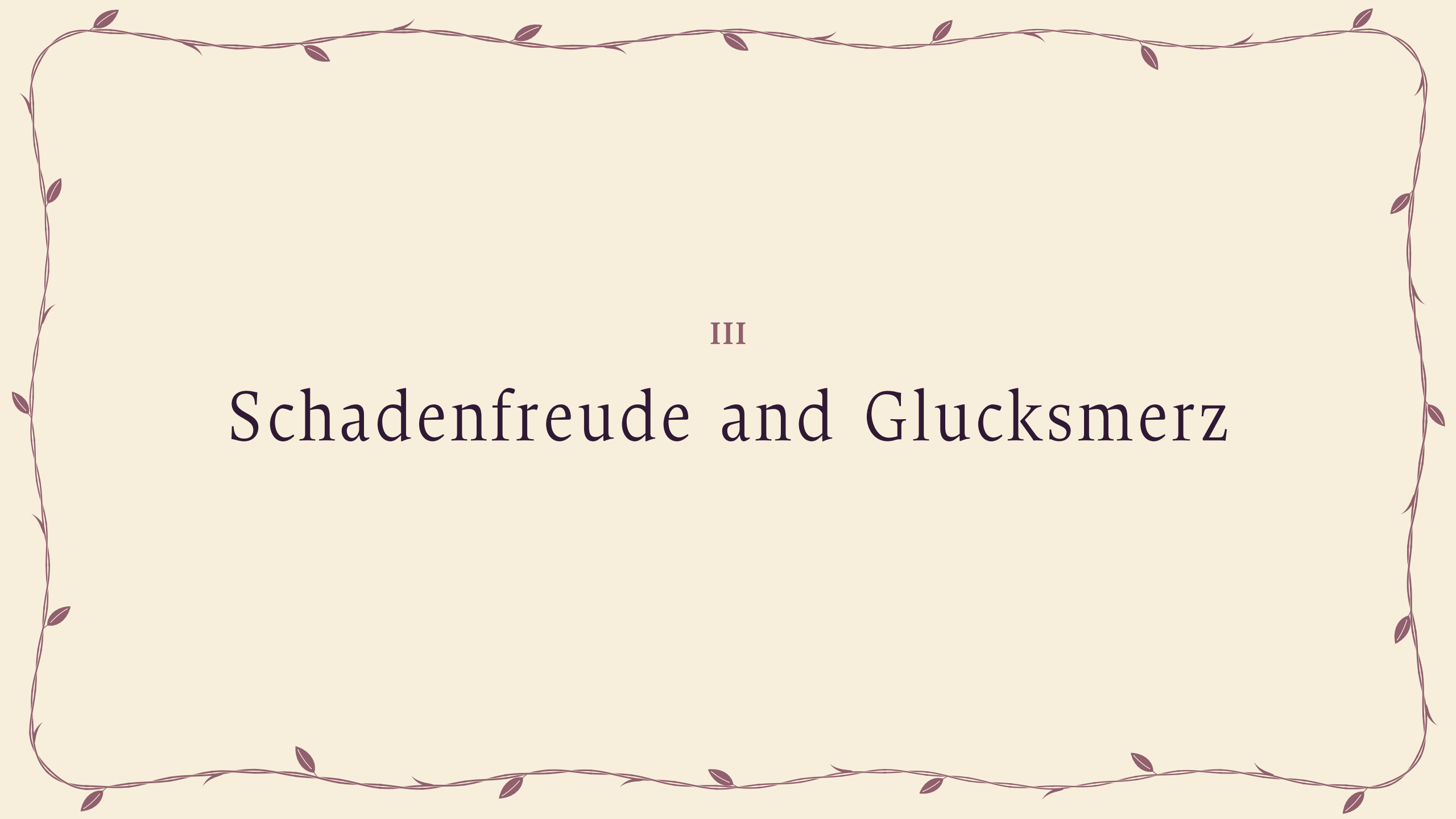
With what eyes then do you think Homer had his gods look down on the destinies of human beings? What at bottom was the ultimate meaning of Trojan wars and similar tragic horrors? It cannot be doubted in the least: they were intended as festival games for the gods: and insofar as the poet is of a more "godlike" disposition in these matters than other people, probably also as festival games for the poets

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The whole humankind of antiquity is full of delicate consideration for "the spectator," as an essentially public, essentially visible world that could not imagine happiness without spectacles and festivals. -And, as stated previously, even in great punishment there is so much that is festive! . . .

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III

Schadenfreude and Glucksmerz

Schadenfreude

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An alternative to thinking that our enjoyment of true crime media comes from cruelty is to think that it stems from the milder emotion of **Schadenfreude**. It is milder at least partly because it is a passive emotion– schadenfreude typically isn't experience when one is the cause of the bad fortune.

Schadenfreude

Schadenfreude is the experience of pleasure or satisfaction at the bad fortune of another.

Glucksmerz

Glucksmerz is the experience of displeasure or dissatisfaction at the good fortune of another.

I

Unlike spiritualized cruelty, schadenfreude is experienced as directly about the object of bad fortune.

II

It is therefore more psychologically transparent to us what is going on when we experience it.

I III

Schadenfreude is also typically milder in intensity, though because of its transparency, it is also more likely to provoke feelings of guilt or shame.

Example

Fans of the University of Kentucky basketball team report experiencing satisfaction when Duke basketball players are reported as injured. The degree of identification as a fan correlated with the intensity of the satisfaction.

Balance Theory

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According to Smith & van Dijk, schadenfreude behaves in accordance with a balance theory.

Balance Theory

In the parlance of balance theory, three-element units are balanced when all relations between the elements are positive or two are negative.

We feel schadenfreude when we dislike someone and they experience something positive. So we have to balance the scales with the negative emotion.

Here, dislike amounts to any negative evaluative orientation, where conscious or not.

Rivalry

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One factor which may contribute to our disliking someone is that we are in competition with them in some respect.

Smith & van Dijk report that both men and women experience schadenfreude in a more pronounced way with respect to sexual rivals, and that what triggered those responses varied in accordance with the dimension of rivalry.

That is, women were more likely to experience schadenfreude in relation to bad fortune with respect to appearance and men were more likely to experience schadenfreude in relation to bad fortune with respect to social status.

Their explanation is that this connects to the differential weighting of these factors for value in the dating market by men and women.

Group Identity

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Another significant factor is group identity. Belonging to a group makes us less prone to feel schadenfreude with respect to other group members.

However, it also makes us more likely to experience schadenfreude with respect to members of out-groups.

This effect is heightened in relation both to degree of identification with the in-group and degree of rivalry with the out-group. Compare fans of Kentucky basketball and Duke basketball.

Is Schadenfreude The Right Explanation?

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Could schadenfreude be what explains our enjoyment of true crime? Perhaps sometimes. Maybe we experience schadenfreude when the serial killer finally gets caught or a huckster's lies finally catch up with them.

Still, I do not think this explains very much of our enjoyment. Many prominent examples of true crime do not ultimately involve justice being served, or served in a way that feels inadequate.

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Could we be experiencing schadenfreude at the expense of true crime victims? Is it like watching the obnoxious teenagers get killed by Jason in a *Friday the 13th* sequel?

II

I III

That doesn't seem to fit the characteristics of this emotion. We typically do not dislike the victims of these crimes. Indeed, most true crime fans profess great sympathy with them.

Moreover, because such cases are typically far removed from us in space and time, it isn't plausible to see anyone in them as rivals.

Perhaps we could still see them as members of an out-group in competition with our own, but again, it's doubtful that is the case in many instances.

The background of the slide features a large, faint, circular seal of the University of California, Riverside. The seal contains a star at the top, an open book in the center, and the words "UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA" and "RIVERSIDE" around the perimeter. The word "ET VERE BE" is also visible at the bottom of the inner circle.

End