VII

Love as a Possibility for the Individual

No system of justice established by the political, economic, and social coercion in the political order is perfect enough to dispense with the refinements which voluntary and uncoerced human kindness and tenderness between individuals add to it. These refinements are not only necessary, but possible. If the error of the medieval system of politics was to take traditional equilibria of justice for granted without seeking to perfect their basic structure, its virtue was to seek the refinement of this justice by the love of individuals. In spite of the hypocrisies of the traditional medieval "lady bountiful" a genuine humaneness developed within and above the injustices of feudal society which bourgeois society, in spite of its sentimental devotion to the ideals of justice and love, has never achieved. The most grievous mistake of Marxism is its assumption that an adequate mechanism of social justice will inevitably create individuals who will be disciplined enough to "give according to their ability and take according to their need." The highest achievements of social good will and human kindness can be guaranteed by no political system. They are the consequence of moral and religious disciplines which might be more appreciated in our day if the Christian Church had not mistakenly tried to substitute them for the coercive prerequisites of basic justice.
AN INTERPRETATION OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

What is necessary in this respect is also possible. The life of the individual stands in an ascending scale of freedom and therefore under an ascending scale of moral possibilities. An individual who lives in New York does not have the freedom, and therefore lacks the possibility, of relating his life in terms of intimate contact and brotherly obligation to an individual in Tokyo. He is even restrained from that kind of relationship with many people in his own city and his own nation. But there are always areas in which he is free to transcend the mechanisms and the limitations in which all life is involved and to relate his life to other life in terms of voluntary and free cooperation. It must, of course, be remembered that he is not free to transcend the total system of nature in which he stands which sets his life in competition with other life. The command to love his neighbor as himself must, therefore, remain an impossibility as well as a possibility. The ultimate reach of the ideal into the realm of the impossible does not, however, restrict the possibilities. On the contrary, it establishes a dimension in which every achievement of human brotherhood suggests both higher and broader possibilities.

A moral discipline calculated to increase the intensity and range of man's obligation to other life involves two factors: The extension of the area in which life feels itself obligated to affirm and protect the interest of other life and the provision of an adequate dynamic to support this obligation. Corresponding to these two factors there are two resources in human nature to

LOVE AS A POSSIBILITY FOR THE INDIVIDUAL

which this religio-moral discipline must be related: The natural endowments of sympathy, paternal and filial affection, gregarious impulses and the sense of organic cohesion which all human beings possess, and the faculties of reason which tend to extend the range of these impulses beyond the limits set by nature. Unfortunately, the moral systems which have sought to extend the rational range of social obligation have been deficient in dealing with the problem of social and moral dynamics, while the systems which have dealt with the latter have usually neglected to deal adequately with the rational contribution to morality. On the one side Stoic, Kantian, and utilitarian rationalism have neglected or obscured the problem of moral dynamics, while on the other side Romanticism and many schools of Christian thought have failed to do justice to the contribution of reason to moral conduct. The failure of both schools of moral thought imparts a tragic aspect to the whole history of morality in Western culture.

The rationalists from the Stoics to Kant have correctly assessed the rôle of reason in morality, but have not been able to relate it to the dynamic aspects of life. It is true that reason discloses the "moral law." It reveals, or at least suggests, the total field of life in which obligation moves. The rational man is thus able to recognize the mutual relationships between, let us say, life in Africa and life in America, which the ignorant man does not see and for which he therefore
AN INTERPRETATION OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

recognizes no obligation. Furthermore, reason discloses how uncontrolled impulses create anarchy both within the self and within the social whole. Against this anarchy it sets the ideal of order. Reason tries to establish a system of coherence and consistency in conduct as well as in the realm of truth. It conceives of its harmonies of life with life not only in ever wider and more inclusive terms, but also works for equal justice within each area of harmony by the simple fact that the special privileges of injustice are brought under rational condemnation for their inconsistency. Under the canons of rational consistency men can claim for themselves only what is genuinely value and they cannot claim value for any of their desires if they are not valuable to others beside themselves. Reason thus forces them to share every privilege except those which are necessary to insure the performance of a special function in the interest of the whole. A large percentage of all special privilege is thereby ruled out by the canons of reason; a fact which persuaded the Enlightenment to expect injustice to vanish with ignorance and has tempted a modern radical rationalist to seek the destruction of social injustice by the simple expedient of puncturing the illusions and prejudices by which social injustice justifies itself in the eyes of both its victims and its beneficiaries. Even utilitarian moral rationalism is not altogether wrong; for on certain levels of conduct reason discloses harmonies of life so immediate and so necessary that only the most heedless

egoism will destroy them, since their destruction involves the destruction of the ego's interests. Reason, in short, discovers that life in its essence is not what it is in its actual existence, that ideally it involves much more inclusive harmonies than actually exist in history. This is what the Stoics meant by the natural law, though neither the Stoics, nor the Age of Reason after them, were always clear whether natural law was the ideal to which reason pointed or certain universally accepted standards of conduct in actual history, a confusion which sometimes led to a curious compound of radical and conventional morality in both cases. Romanticism with its undue and uncritical emphasis upon the moral dynamic of the emotions failed to do justice to this critical function of reason in the moral life; and Protestant orthodoxy, allowed its idea of total depravity in which man's rationality was involved, to betray it into contempt for the rational contribution to morality. Furthermore, reason could only project a law and men could be saved not by law, but by grace. The errors of Romanticism were partially corrected, at least at this point, by the Enlightenment; but the error of orthodox Protestantism (particularly Lutheran Protestantism) contributed to its ineptness in the field of social ethics. The fact is that Christianity as a whole always had to borrow from some scheme of rationalism to complete its ethical structure. The early Church borrowed from Stoicism and Thomasian Catholicism appropriated Aristotelian doctrine to provide a foundation for its more distinctively Christian superstructure.

204

LOVE AS A POSSIBILITY FOR THE INDIVIDUAL

Cf. Robert Briffault, "Rational Evolution and Breakdown."
AN INTERPRETATION OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

In spite of these necessary contributions of reason to moral conduct and of rationalism to moral theory, no rational moral idealism can create moral conduct. It can provide principles of criticism and norms; but such norms do not contain a dynamic for their realization. In both Stoic and Kantian moral theory the conflict in the human psyche is mistakenly defined and virtuous reason is set at variance with the evil impulses. In both cases the social impulses with which men are endowed by nature are placed outside of the moral realm. Thus the Stoics regarded the sentiment of pity as evil and in Kantian ethics only actions which are motivated by reverence for the moral law are good, a criterion which would put the tenderness of a mother for her child outside of the pale of moral action.

Rationalism not only suppresses the emotional supports of moral action unduly, but it has no understanding for the problem of moral dynamics and has, therefore, failed dismally in encouraging men toward the realization of the ideals which it has projected. Laws are not automatically obeyed, whether the laws of the state or the higher law of reason. Henri Bergson criticizes the Stoics for their inability to produce a morality consistent with their universalistic idealism. In view of the fact that in every system of moral thought, achievements fall short of ideals, and

No deed is all its thought had been,
No wish but feels the fleshly screen.

Bergson, Two Sources of Religion and Morality, p. 55.

LOVE AS A POSSIBILITY FOR THE INDIVIDUAL

It may seem unjust to single out the Stoics for condemnation, particularly when the lives of an Epictetus and a Marcus Aurelius give a luster of moral sincerity to a system of thought which the reputed hypocrisies and dishonesties of a Seneca, Cicero, and Brutus cannot altogether dim. Nevertheless, it remains true that Stoicism was unable to arrest the decay of Roman life and that its idealism was, on the whole, little more than an affectation of a small intelligent aristocracy.

The effort of various types of rational idealism to provide an adequate dynamic for their ideal or an adequate theory of dynamics vary greatly; they are similar only in their common inadequacy. Utilitarian rationalism sought to use reason to harness egoistic passion to social goals. It thought that the intellectual demonstration of the ultimate inter-relatedness of all life could persuade men to affirm the interests of their neighbors in immediate situations out of self-regarding motives. The theory is absurd because in immediate situations one life may actually live at the expense of another; in such situations egoistic purpose can hardly be beguiled by considerations of what life is and ought to be in its truest and most ultimate essence.

According to the naturalistic rationalism of John Dewey, reason cuts the channels into which life will inevitably flow because life is itself dynamic. Reason supplies the direction and the natural power of life-as-impulse insures the movement in the direction of the rationally projected goal. The theory presupposes a non-existent unity of man's impulsive life, a greater
degree of rational transcendence over impulse than actually exists and a natural obedience of impulse to the ideal which all history refutes. Nothing in the theory could explain why the nations of the world are still so far from realizing the rationally projected and universally accepted goal of universal peace. The explanation in terms of the theory would probably be that reason had not yet sufficiently corroded the old tribal behavior patterns of the nations; but such an explanation hardly does justice to the non-traditional and immediately vital and spontaneous impulses toward war.

If the naturalists among the rationalists think that reason can beguile natural life to extend itself beyond itself, the Kantian idealists can find no effective contact between the real and the ideal world. The intelligible self is the lawgiver and imposes the law of rational consistency: Act so as to make thy action the basis of universal law. But what is to persuade men to obey the law? An inherent force of reverence for law, the sense of obligation. There are two difficulties in this interpretation. One is that the law is only in the realm of essential and not in existential reality. It therefore has no force in the realm of existence to secure its realization. The other error follows naturally from the first: The intelligible self with its sense of obligation is hopelessly cut off from the sensible self of the passions and desires of natural life. The ideal cannot get itself realized; it cannot even enlist the forces of nature in man which inchoately support the ideal.

AN INTERPRETATION OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

attitude is commanded proves that the cleavage is not overcome; the command comes from one side of reality to the other, from essence to existence.

The ideal of love is thus first of all a commandment which appeals to the will. What is the human will? It is neither the total personality nor yet the rational element in personality. It is the total organized personality moving against the recalcitrant elements in the self. The will implies a cleavage in the self but not a cleavage, primarily between reason and impulse. The will is a rational organization of impulse. Consequently, the Christian ideal of a loving will does not exclude the impulses and emotions in nature through which the self is organically related to other life. Jesus therefore relates the love of God to the natural love of parents for their children: “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more will your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?” In its appreciation of every natural emotion of sympathy and pity, of consanguinity and human solidarity, the ethic of Jesus is distinguished from the ethics of rationalism. In this respect there are points of contact between Christianity and Romanticism, perhaps most fully revealed in such men as St. Francis. The moral will is not a force of reason imposed upon the emotions. It utilizes whatever forces in nature carry life beyond itself. But since the forces of nature carry life beyond itself only to enslave it again to the larger self of family, race, and community, Christian ethics never has, as in Romanti-

LOVE AS A POSSIBILITY FOR THE INDIVIDUAL

cism, an uncritical attitude toward impulses of sociality. They all stand under the perspective of the “how much more” and under the criticism, “If ye love those who love you what thanks have ye.”

The “natural man” is not only under the criticism of these absolute perspectives, but under obligation to emulate the love of God, to forgive as God forgives, to love his enemies as God loves them. Love as natural endowment, eros, is transmuted under this religious tension into agape.4

In Henri Bergson’s Two Sources of Morality and Religion the religious force which breaks through the “closed morality” of devotion to family and community is called the force of mysticism. The word mysticism to designate what Bergson has in mind is badly chosen because of the tendency toward passivity and contemplation rather than moral creativity in mysticism, a tendency Bergson himself recognizes but seeks to confine to the eastern rather than Christian mystics.5 But his idea is correct. The motive power of a love which transcends the impulses of nature is a combination of obedience to God and love of God. The idea of obedience is maintained in Jesus’ teachings by the concept of the sovereignty (basileus) of God, usually

4 Professor Anders Nygren in his Agape and Eros succinctly states this distinction as developed in Christian theology: “Eros must always regard the love of man as the love for the good in man. . . . Agape is the precise opposite. God’s love is the ground and pattern of all love. It consists in free self-giving and it finds its continuation in God’s love for man; for he who has received all for nothing is constrained to pass on to others what he has received.” p. 171.

5 Cf. Henri Bergson, op. cit., p. 216.
translated as the “Kingdom of God.” The element of obedience, of a sense of moral obligation, of a willful act of conformity to the divine standard, is consonant with the division between good and evil in the human soul which makes perfect love impossible, because no act is possible in which the resistance of egoism and sin is completely absent. The element of love of God as a motive of social love is consonant with the fact that the attraction of the good is actually present in human life, in spite of its sin. Both the fact that it is present and that it is challenged by sin is expressed in the paradox of the love commandment, “Thou shalt love.” In the terms of the moral experience of man it might be stated in the terms, “I feel that I ought to love.”

The God, whom to love is thus commanded in the Christian religion is, significantly, the God of mythical-prophetic conception, which means that he is both the ground of existence and the essence which transcends existence. In this mythical paradox lies the foundation for an ethic which enables men to give themselves to values actually embodied in persons and existence, but also transcending every actuality thereby escaping both the glorification of human temporal, and partial values characteristic of naturalism and also the morally enervating tendency of mysticism to regard “love of creatures” as disloyalty to God and to confine the love of God to a rational or mystic contemplation of the divine essence which transcends all finite existence. Whatever the weaknesses of Christianity in the field of social morality, history attests its fruitfulness in eliciting loving and tender service to men of all sorts and conditions without regard to some obvious merit which might seem to give them a moral claim upon their fellow men. The Christian love commandment does not demand love of the fellow man because he is with us equally divine (Stoicism), or because we ought to have “respect for personality” (Christian liberalism), but because God loves him. The obligation is derived, in other words, not from the obvious unities and affinities of historic existence, but from the transcendent unity of essential reality. The logic of this position is clearly stated by the Quaker saint, John Woolman, in dealing with the question of slavery: “Many slaves on this continent have been oppressed and their cries have reached the ears of the Most High. Such is the purity and certainty of His judgments that he can not be partial to any. In infinite love and goodness he has opened our understanding from time to time, respecting our duty to these people.” Naturally such a religious presupposition operates to make men sensitive to the actual underlying unities of human life in historic existence, as expressed, for instance, in the words of St. Paul: “He hath made of one blood all the races of men.” But the obligation is derived from a more transcendent unity and purity of value than any historic realities, and is therefore proof against the dis-love of creatures” as disloyalty to God and to confine the love of God to a rational or mystic contemplation of the divine essence which transcends all finite exist-

AN INTERPRETATION OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

appointments and disillusion of naturalistic morality, in which there is always a touch of a romantic exaggeration of the goodness of man and a corresponding cynical reaction. But the insistence upon the Creation as a work of God always saves prophetic religion from contempt for the partial and imperfect values of history and a consequent identification of religion with a passive contemplation of a transcendent ideal beyond existence. Unfortunately, historic Christianity has sometimes been partially beguiled from this prophetic position, as, for instance, in the theology of Thomas Aquinas in which Aristotelian rationalism influences him to regard a rational and mystical contemplation of the divine as religiously superior to ethical existence.

The Christian doctrine of love is thus the most adequate metaphysical and psychological framework for the approximation of the ideal of love in human life. It is able to appropriate all the resources of human nature which tend toward the harmony of life with life, without resting in the resources of "natural man." It is able to set moral goals transcending nature without being lost in other-worldliness. The degree of approximation depends upon the extent to which the Christian faith is not merely a theory, but a living and vital presupposition of life and conduct. The long history of Christianity is, in spite of its many failures, not wanting in constant and perennial proofs that love is the fruit of its spirit. Martyrs and saints, missionaries and prophets, apostles and teachers of the faith, have showed forth in their lives the pity and tenderness toward their fellow men which is the crown of the Christian life. Nor has Christianity failed to impart to the ordinary human relations of ordinary men the virtues of tenderness and consideration.

While every religion, as indeed every human world view, must finally justify itself in terms of its moral fruits, it must be understood that the moral fruits of religion are not the consequence of a conscious effort to achieve them. The love commandment is a demand upon the will, but the human will is not enabled to conform to it because moralistic appeals are made to obey the commandment. Moralistic appeals are in fact indications of the dissipation of primary religious vitality. Men cannot, by taking thought, strengthen their will. If the will is the total organized personality of the moment, moving against recalcitrant impulse, the strength of the will depends upon the strength of the factors which enter into its organization. Consequently, the acts and attitudes of love in which the ordinary resources of nature are supplemented are partly the consequence of historic and traditional disciplines which have become a part of the socio-spiritual inheritance of the individual and partly the result of concatenations of circumstance in which the pressure of events endows the individual with powers not ordinarily his own.

The soldier's courage, his ability to transcend the inclination of "natural man" to flee death, is the fruit of a great tradition and the spirit of the military community which enforces it. In the same manner the
tenderness and graciousness with which men are able to regard the problems of their fellow men, beyond the natural inclinations of human nature, is the fruit of a religio-moral tradition and the loyalty of a religious community to the tradition. Even if we cannot accept St. Paul's Christ-mysticism, bordering as it does on the very edge of the magical, it is nevertheless true that the Church is the body of Christ and that the noble living and the noble dead in her communion help to build up in her the living Christ, a dimension of life which transcends the inclinations of natural man. It is consequently natural and inevitable that the faithful should regard genuine acts of love as proceeding from propulsions which are not their own, and should confess with St. Paul, "I, yet not I, but Christ that dwelleth in me."

Sometimes the act of complete self-abnegation, the pouring out of life for other life, is the consequence of pressures of a given moment which endow the individual with resources beyond his natural capacities. The mother who sacrifices her life for her child is enabled to do this by the heightening of the natural impulses of mother love in a moment of crisis. In soberer moments of reflection she could not give herself so completely for another life. The same mother who thus sacrifices herself might conceivably be engaged in more prosaic moments in shrewd unconscious calculations in which mother love is compounded with the will-to-power. Martyrs do not achieve martyrdom by taking thought. Whether a man stands or yields in the hour of crisis is of course determined by commitments made before the crisis arises. Devotion to a cause may be such that it becomes irrevocable and its revocation would result in the complete disintegration of personality. The crisis with its impending martyrdom adds its emotional pressures to the commitment of previous years. Furthermore, a strong devotion to a cause absorbs the individual in the cause so that the entire socio-spiritual impetus of the enterprise sustains him in the hour of crisis and endows him with resources which transcend anything possessed in his own right.

The Catholic doctrine that faith, hope, and love are "theological" virtues which are added to the moral possibilities of natural man by an infusion of grace is thus, broadly speaking, true to the facts. Only it is not true that the grace which is added is necessarily infused by the sacraments nor even that the Christian faith is its only possible presupposition. The grace of God is not confined so narrowly as theological defenders of historic religious institutions would like to confine it. But there are, nevertheless, forces in life which can only be described as the grace of God. What men are able to will depends not upon the strength of their willing, but upon the strength which enters their will and over which their will has little control. All moral action really stands under the paradox: "Work out your salvation in fear and trembling; for it is God who worketh in you both to will and to do his good pleasure."
AN INTERPRETATION OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

But love is not only a fruit of grace, but also a fruit of faith; which is to say that the total spiritual attitude which informs a life determines to what height a moral action may rise in a given moment. Deeds of love are not the consequence of specific acts of the will. They are the consequence of a religio-moral tension in life which is possible only if the individual consciously lives in the total dimension of life. The real motives of love, according to the Christian gospel, are gratitude and contrition. Gratitude and contrition are the fruits of a prophetic faith which knows life in its heights and in its depths. To believe in God is to know life in its essence and not only in its momentary existence. Thus to know it means that what is dark, arbitrary, and contingent in momentary existence can neither be accepted complacently nor tempt to despair.

To understand life in its total dimension means contrition because every moral achievement stands under the criticism of a more essential goodness. If fully analyzed the moral achievement is not only convicted of imperfection, but of sin. It is not only wanting in perfect goodness, but there is something of the perversity of evil in it. Such contrition does not destroy selfishness in the human heart. But there is a difference between the man who understands something of the mystery of evil in his own soul and one who complacently accepts human egoism as a force which must be skillfully balanced with altruism in order that moral unity may be achieved.

To understand life in its total dimension means to accept it with grateful reverence as good. It is good in its ultimate essence even when it seems evil and chaotic in its contingent and momentary reality. Faith in its essence is not an arbitrary faith. Once held, actual historic existence verifies it; for there are in life as we know it in history and nature innumerable symbols of its ultimate and essential nature. Grateful reverence toward the goodness of life is a motive force of love in more than one sense. Gratitude for what life is in its essence creates a propulsive power to affirm in existence what is truly essential, the harmony of life with life. Furthermore, under the insights of such a faith, the fellow man becomes something more than the creature of time and place, separated from us by the contingencies of nature and geography and set against us by the necessities of animal existence. His life is seen under the aura of the divine and he participates in the glory, dignity and beauty of existence. We do not love him because he is “divine.” If that pantheistic note creeps into prophetic faith it leads to disillusion. He is no more divine than we are. We are all imbedded in the contingent and arbitrary life of animal existence and we have corrupted the harmless imperfections of nature with the corruptions of sin. Yet we are truly “children of God” and something of the transcendent unity, in which we are one in God, shines through both the evil of nature and the evil in man. Our heart goes out to our fellow man, when seen through the eyes of faith, not only because we see him thus under a transcendent perspective but because we see ourselves...
under it and know that we are sinners just as he is. Awed by the majesty and goodness of God, something of the pretense of our pretentious self is destroyed and the natural cruelty of our self-righteousness is mitigated by emotions of pity and forgiveness.

The moral effectiveness of religious life thus depends upon deeper resources than moral demands upon the will. Whenever the modern pulpit contemplates itself with the presentation of these demands, however urgent and fervent, it reveals its enslavement to the rationalistic presuppositions of our era. The law of love is not obeyed simply by being known. Whenever it is obeyed at all, it is because life in its beauty and terror has been more fully revealed to man. The love that cannot be willed may nevertheless grow as a natural fruit upon a tree which has roots deep enough to be nurtured by springs of life beneath the surface and branches reaching up to heaven.

VIII. Love as Forgiveness