



THE TRANSMORAL MORALITY

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WHAT is common to all moral philosophy, however varied, is that it cannot ground morality in itself but must necessarily uncover the assumptions underlying morality. The various schools of moral philosophy that have arisen down through the ages differ principally in what they take to be the ground or source of moral action—the will of God, the Platonic Good, the order of the universe (moira, dharma, rita), hedonism, reason, intuition, or evolution. While the study of moral philosophy deals with the general bases of ethical actions, the ethical *per se* means a decision involving real possibilities in an actual situation as to what one *ought* to do, as to what *I* ought to do. Thus the ethical can be defined as the tension between “is” and “ought.”

Religion is neither an objective philosophy nor a subjective experience. It is a lived reality which is ontologically prior to its expression in creed, ritual, and group. At the same time, it is inseparable from these expressions and cannot be distilled out and objectified in itself. The religious at this deepest level might be described as a basic *attitude* or relationship arising in the encounter with the whole reality given to one in one's existence. Although every religion has articulated moral codes and many moral codes refer back explicitly to religion, it is at this deepest, ineffable level, prior to expression, that the real roots of morality and moral action are to be found, for it is here that the various attitudes toward the

relationship between God, man, and the world emerge. Man cannot be ethical without being religious, therefore, for all ethics rests on a basic attitude toward reality which must ultimately be of a religious depth.

This recognition that the religious is the foundation of the ethical might well lead us to celebrate Kierkegaard's breakthrough from the ethical stage of universal law to the religious stage of the unique person in unique relation to God. Yet Kierkegaard's concept of the “suspension of the ethical” ultimately means a disastrous relativization of the ethical. His “knight of faith” does not reach the finite directly, like the Biblical Abraham, but through a dialectic in which he first renounces the finite for the infinite and then regains the finite through “faith by virtue of the absurd.” Kierkegaard's “knight of faith” must choose *between* God and creation. There is no longer a possibility of finding God in creation. He rejects society and culture for the lonely relation of the “Single One” to God, thereby losing any check on the reality of the voice that addresses him. Thus his “suspension of the ethical” means a relativization of ordinary ethical values, which have now lost the universality essential to law, without any higher morality replacing them.

Kierkegaard, at any rate, was explicit about suspending the ethical. Many others in our age have pointed “beyond morality” as the source of the ethical without noticing how they have undercut the very basis of ethics in so doing.



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Nietzsche's transvaluation of values is an excellent example of this. His rejection of the old morality takes place on the basis of implicit moral values (the higher selfishness, the right kind of chastity, joy in life, world-affirmation), yet that transmoral sphere in the name of which he transvalues values is not itself moral. It is instead a circular process in which values are the product of a "will to power" which justifies itself by the creation of new values and the progress toward the "superman" — an undefined direction which we can only assume to be upward, if we take for granted the very values that are to be created. That Nietzsche himself doubted that his nihilism has actually laid the ground for a higher value is suggested by his teaching of the "eternal return" of all things in which the only exercise for the will to power is the redemptive affirmation of what was — an *amor fati* which finds mystic joy in the ring of eternity but is no longer able to make those real decisions and perform those real actions in the world which would bear out Nietzsche's definition of man as "the valuing animal" and his claim that "without valuing the nut of existence is hollow."

Jung and Fromm, each in his own way, represent psychologically-oriented attempts to establish a "transmoral morality." In Jung's psychology of religion the place of God is taken by the deified Self produced in the depths of the unconscious by the integration of the personality. "God" acts only "out of the unconscious of man," says Jung in *Answer to Job*, and the promise of the Holy Ghost means nothing other than that for modern man God becomes *entirely* man: "God wants to become *wholly* man; in other words, to reproduce himself in his own dark creature (man not redeemed from original sin)" (p. 178 f.). The result of this approach to religion is a double relativization. First, all religious experience can be

celebrated just so it is first denuded of its reality as an encounter with real Transcendence. Second, one's relations to other men inevitably become functions of the integration of one's personality, and the court of conscience, as Jung himself says, is replaced by the gnostic integration of good and evil, which implies, he explains, succumbing "in part" to evil. Jung's psychologism thus claims a "religious" sanction for reducing the moral conscience and the situation between man and man to psychological functions and corollaries.

Erich Fromm sees the source of values in purely pragmatic terms, the good being what contributes to the mature and integrated personality, vice being what destroys it. Although he advocates creativity and love as opposed to sado-masochistic relations of dominance and submission, he leaves us with a fatal ambiguity as to whether love is a value in itself or merely a function of one's own self-realization, whether moral action is concerned with others for their own sake or is merely a means to becoming "mature," "integrated," "creative," and "productive." Fromm defines the God of humanistic religion as "the symbol of man's own powers," yet he speaks of the goal of man as "becoming what one potentially is, a being made in the likeness of God." What this contradiction suggests is a still deeper unclarity as to the relation between such essentially instrumental terms as "power," "potentiality," and "creativity" and the values of love, fairness, kindness, and relatedness that Fromm espouses. Values cannot be based on "self-realization," for self-realization must imply the valuing that distinguishes between when one has realized one's authentic self and when one has not.

In diametric contrast to Fromm, Jean-Paul Sartre declares that with the death of God all source of moral values disappears. "Nowhere is it written that the Good exists, that we must be honest,



as it is by the grace that comes to us from within and from without.

"Morality does not depend on any concrete religion," writes Tillich; "it is religious in its very essence." Yet the ultimate ground of morality, for Tillich, is beyond the moral, and the moral itself tends to be devalued into a lesser, external, objective sphere of human existence to be distinguished from the inner sphere of authenticity, love and grace.

The question of moral motivation can be answered only transmorally. For the law demands, but cannot forgive: it judges, but cannot accept. Therefore, forgiveness and acceptance, the conditions of the fulfillment of the law, must come from something above the law, or more precisely, from something in which the split between our essential being and our existence is overcome, and healing power has appeared. (64)

Tillich not only splits the self, he splits God—into one who judges and one who forgives. "Torah" in the Hebrew Bible, in contrast, means neither isolated law nor isolated grace nor a combination of the two. It is not a sphere of "unbearable tensions," as Saint Paul and Tillich see it, but the life-giving stream through which man attains to authentic existence. It is not objective and universal any more than it is subjective and merely particular. It is God's instruction and demand in the concrete historical situation.

Martin Buber understands conscience not as originally bad, as Tillich claims, but as "the individual's awareness of what in his unique and non-repeatable created existence he is intended to be." It is this same conscience which summons us to "obedient listening," to "experiencing the other side of the relationship," and to responding to the address that comes to us through the unique other in the concrete situation. "It is always the religious which bestows, the ethical which receives," writes Buber.

"Every ethos has its origin in a revelation." But the religious to Buber means a personal relationship with the Absolute, a bond between the Absolute and the concrete in which the immediacy of religious reality is the ever-new source of the ethical. The good grows out of the actual present concreteness of the unique direction toward God which we apprehend and realize in our meeting with the everyday. "Every revelation is revelation of human service to the goal of creation, in which service man authenticates himself."³ One cannot meet the Eternal Thou by turning away from the temporal Thou; one cannot find one's direction to God apart from "the lived concrete." God tenders the situation, but our response comes from "the unknown conscience in the ground of being, which needs to be discovered ever anew." "'Conscience' is human and can be mistaken."⁴ Nonetheless, if one responds as a whole person, one can have confidence in one's response as one cannot in any objective knowledge or universal prescriptions of morality.

"No responsible person remains a stranger to norms," writes Buber. "But the command inherent in a genuine norm never becomes a maxim and the fulfilment of it never a habit." Rather the norm enters into the character of the man, becomes latent in a basic layer of his substance, and reveals itself only in a unique situation "which demands of him a solution of which till then he had perhaps no idea." Even in prohibitions a direction, a yes is revealed to us. "In moments like these the command addresses us really in the second

³ Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God*, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957, "Religion and Ethics," p. 98; Martin Buber, *Good and Evil, Two Interpretations*, New York, Scribners Paperback, 1961, p. 142.

⁴ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, New York, Beacon Press, 1955, "The Question to the Single One," p. 69.



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person, and the Thou in it is no one else but one's own self."⁵ True moral action must be understood in terms of the unique claim of the moment and not the general maxims of a "morality" divorced from situation. Good is always what is done with the whole being, evil what is done as a divided person, one part of which rebels or obeys while the other silently resists. "The true norm commands not our obedience but ourselves," writes Buber. Only a norm which addresses the particular Thou that you are in the very situation in which you find yourself is one which can call forth a response of the whole person; otherwise you must suppress your response to the present situation in favor of some abstract and timeless formula of "responsibility."

There can be no split for Buber, therefore, between the religious and the ethical, no "transmoral conscience" which lends the moral a conditional validity. Ethical decision for Buber is both the current decision about the immediate situation that confronts one and through this the decision with one's whole being for God. I experience my uniqueness as a designed or preformed one, entrusted to me for execution, yet everything that affects me participates in this execution. I discover the mystery waiting for me not in myself, therefore, but in the encounter with the other that I meet. The "suspension of the ethical," writes Buber, leads in our age to honest men who lie and compassionate men who torture—to men who sincerely believe that brother-murder will prepare the way for brotherhood. The cure for this situation is the rise of a new conscience which will summon men to guard with the innermost power of their souls against the confusion of the relative with the Absolute. But man's meeting with the Absolute means to Buber just the fundamental ethical, the lived concrete, the covenant with the

present and the unique that lies at the heart of the life of dialogue.

That the doctrine of a transmoral conscience is a dangerous one that may mean the destruction of morality, Tillich recognizes in the cases of Luther and Heidegger. Yet he does not take the problem further than to state that we cannot dismiss the transmoral conscience without dismissing religion and depth psychology at the same time. "It is impossible *not* to transcend the moral conscience because it is impossible to unite a *sensitive* and a *good* conscience," Tillich writes. But what if the *best* conscience were precisely the one which refused to transcend and did not want to reach a "joyful conscience" that may accord well with one's inner state but not with moral conflict and tragedy?

The corrective to Tillich on this point is provided by Franz Kafka—if I have interpreted Kafka aright in "The Problematic of Guilt" chapter of my book *Problematic Rebel: An Image of Modern Man*. The man in Kafka's famous parable "Before the Law" thinks that the Law "should be accessible to every man and at all times," but he is not admitted to the door of the Law, even though when he dies he is told that no one else could enter that door. The Law is not available to every man at every moment for the simple reason that in the reality of one's personal existence one is not approached at every moment and one is not always ready to go forth to meet what comes. To say this in no way contradicts the statement that the door is intended just for this man, for what is in question here is not some universal law but a unique relationship to reality that is available to no one else. This does not mean that "the Law" is any the less problematic. The man who does not know the Law has the Law beaten into him: he is harried and whipped into knowledge. Yet acquisition of this knowledge never means that he knows in what his guilt lies or what it is that

⁵ *Ibid.*, "The Education of Character," p. 114.



is asked of him. Life is a commission and a task, yet man does not know who commissions or what his task is. The conclusion from this is not that we are all absolved from guilt, but that we are accountable for our existence in a way that eludes our rational grasp of guilt and innocence. We are guilty for not answering or answering in the wrong way the call that we can never clearly hear. "Only those fear to be put to the proof who have a bad conscience," said Kafka. "They are the ones who do not fulfill the tasks of the present. Yet who knows precisely what his task is? No one. So that every one of us has a bad conscience."

Man as called and called to account; life as in need of justification before eternity; . . . the absurd as the paradoxical way through which the self finds such meaning in existence as is open to it; "the fight between you and the world" in which one does not cease to contend yet backs the world; the suffering that must be borne as a part of one's meeting with the world; . . . our existence as a tension and mid-point between the "sanctum" and the "sputum"; the confusion produced by hearing at the same time the call of eternity and its opposite; . . . our accountability for our total personal existence; and our guilt for not answering or answering in the wrong way a call that we can never clearly hear—

all these enter into Kafka's unique understanding of the problematic of guilt.⁶

The title of Paul Tillich's book is *Morality and Beyond*. The title of this paper, in subtle contrast, implies that there is a morality which transcends the "moral," in the limited sense of the objectified, the articulated, the codified, the legalized, but that at the same time there is no area of *human existence* that is "beyond the moral." The attempt to establish a transmoral area of human existence, even as the source of the moral, falsifies the human situation and endangers all morality. The ground of morality is neither isolated grace nor external law. It is the dialogical, social, and historical reality of concrete human existence. This is ultimately a religious reality that transcends objectified morality but is never itself beyond the moral. Whether we stand within inherited structures—family, church, and state—or within limit situations and the "eclipse of God," what is essential is the continually renewed discovery of the ethical through the openness and response of one's whole existence to the concrete reality that one meets.

⁶ Maurice Friedman, *Problematic Rebel: An Image of Modern Man*, New York: Random House, Inc., 1963, pp. 334-361.



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