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MAN IS NOT ALONE

a philosophy of religion

Abraham Joshua Heschel

HARPER TORCHBOOKS THE TEMPLE LIBRARY

Harper & Row, Publishers, New York

Detailed historical discussions of some of the major themes of this book will be incorporated in the next volume of this work: MAN IS NOT ALONE—A Philosophy of Judaism.

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FROM WONDER TO PIETY

While man is attached to the ultimate at the root of his being, he is detached and uncurbed in his thoughts and deeds, free to act and free to refrain; he has the power to disobey. Yet a tree is known by its fruits, not by its roots. There are no ugly trees but there are wormy fruits. Only one question, therefore, is worthy of supreme anxiety: How to live in a world pestered with lies and remain unpolluted, how not to be stricken with despair, not to flee but to fight and succeed in keeping the soul unsoiled and even aid in purifying the world?

Such strength, such guidance cannot be wrested from the stars. Nature is too aloof or too old to teach confused man how to discern right and wrong. The sense of the ineffable is necessary, but not sufficient to find the way from wonder to worship, from willingness to realization, from awe to action.

Western philosophy has suffered its tragic defeat as a consequence of the fondness of its great masters for the problem of cognition. Guided by the assumption that he who knows how to think will know how to live, philosophy has, since the days of Socrates, been primarily a quest of right

thinking. Particularly since the time of Descartes, it concentrated its attention on the problem of cognition, becoming less and less aware of the problem of living. In fact, the less relevant to living a problem was, the more respectable and worthy of exploration it appeared to philosophers.

However, thinking about ultimate problems is more than a particular skill. It is an act of the total personality,* a process which all faculties of mind and soul are thrown in, and is necessarily affected by the personal climate in which it comes to pass; we think the way we live. To think what we sense, we must live what we think. If culture is to be more than the product of a hothouse, then it must grow out of the soil of daily living, and in turn affect the inner stronghold of the human personality. Culture has to grow from within outward, from the concrete existence, conduct and condition of man.

THE PROBLEM OF THE NEUTRAL

The problem of living does not arise with the question of how to take care of the rascals or with the realization of how we blunder in dealing with other people. It begins in the relation to our own selves, in the handling of our physiological and emotional functions. What is first at stake in the life of man is not the fact of sin, of the wrong and corrupt, but the natural acts, the *needs*. Our possessions pose no less a problem than our passions. The primary task, therefore, is not how to deal with

* Compare Chapter 8.

the *evil*, but how to deal with the *neutral*, how to deal with needs.

THE EXPERIENCE OF NEEDS

The will would remain dormant in human nature if not for the fact that there is a way in which it is constantly aroused. The way is the *experience of needs*, the feeling of pressure and urgency arising from internal or external causes, for the satisfaction of which man must bring his latent forces into action.

Needs, then, are man's system of communication with his inside and outside world. They report to the consciousness the necessities of living, but they also determine the aims he selects for planning and action. Things in the world around him often, though not always, remain outside his ken, until they become objects of his needs.

Engrossed in his thoughts and feelings, man may shut himself out of his environment, and it is his needs in which he meets the world again. They are the crossroads of internal and external life. It is, therefore, through an analysis of needs that we should approach the problem of living.

Specifically, need denotes the absence or shortage of something indispensable to the well-being of a person, evoking the urgent desire for satisfaction.* Psychologically, wherever

* The term "need" is generally used in two ways: one denoting the actual lack, an objective condition, and the other denoting the awareness of such a lack. It is in the second sense, in which need is synonymous with interest, namely "an unsatisfied capacity corresponding to an unrealized condition" that the term is used here.

there is a need, there is a desire to satisfy the need, and where a desire is not felt, the need has not been expressed. *Ignoti nulla cupido.* "There is no desire for what is unknown" (Ovid *Ars Amatoria*, iii.1.397). We yearn only for that of which we know.

> The jewel that we find we stoop and take't
> Because we see it; but what we do not see
> We tread upon, and never think of it.
> (Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, Act II, Scene 1)

LIFE—A CLUSTER OF NEEDS

Every human being is a cluster of needs, yet these needs are not the same in all men nor unalterable in any one man. There is a fixed minimum of needs for all men, but no fixed maximum for any man. Unlike animals, man is the playground for the unpredictable emergence and multiplication of needs and interests, some of which are indigenous to his nature, while others are induced by advertisement, fashion, envy, or come about as miscarriages of authentic needs. We usually fail to discern between authentic and artificial needs and, misjudging a whim for an aspiration, we are thrown into ugly tensions. Most obsessions are the perpetuation of such misjudgments. In fact, more people die in the epidemics of needs than in the epidemics of disease.

If man's biological evolution may be explained as adaptation to his environment, the advancement of civilization must be defined as the adjustment of environmental conditions to hu-

man needs. There are no material wants that science and technology do not promise to supply. To stem the expansion of man's needs which in turn is brought about by technological and social advancement, would mean to halt the stream on which civilization is riding. Yet the stream unchecked may sweep away civilization itself, since the pressure of needs turned into aggressive interests is the constant cause of wars and increases in direct proportion to technological progress. Morality, trying to sit in judgment and to distinguish between just and unjust interests, appears too late on the stage to be effective. When interests have become entrenched, no maxims can drive them away. The soul is slippery, filled with a mob of desires and resentments, unruly, fickle and loath to accept the hegemony of reason.

THE INADEQUACY OF ETHICS

The most pressing and most ignored of problems—how to live—will not be solved through teaching sagacious rules. Knowledge of ethics is as far from being identical with virtue as erudition in musical theory is from making one an artist. One may be learned and wicked, an authority on ethical theory and a scoundrel, know how to condemn anger and be unable to curb it. Life is not lived in the form of a debate among member faculties of the soul, in which the most persuasive wins the argument. Life is often war, in which disorderly forces of folly, fancy and passion are thrown into battle, a war which cannot be won by the noble magic of merely remembering a golden rule. How should a wise ab-

straction be expected to compete with rage, cunning, insatiability and favoritism of the ego to itself?

It is true that our reason is responsive to reasonable arguments. Yet, reason is a lonely stranger in the soul, while the irrational forces feel at home and are always in the majority. Why bear hardship on behalf of virtue? Why act against nature and choose the right when pleasure abounds on the side of vice? Why forego that which one naturally should prefer or voluntarily endure that which one naturally should avoid?

Ethics expects man to consult his power of judgment, decide what action to take in the light of general principles and faithfully carry out the wise decision. Thus, it not only underestimates the difficulty in applying general rules to particular situations, which are often intricate, perplexing and ambivalent, but also expects every man to combine within himself judicial and executive powers. Moreover, while telling us what we are fighting for, ethical theory fails to tell us how to win the struggle; while telling us that we ought to, it does not tell us how to achieve mastery over folly and madness. It is true that ethics demands the acquisition of good habits, not only learning. However, no amount of habits can embrace the totality of living.

THE PERIL OF LIVING

Grave emergencies we mostly meet unprepared, in spite of our education that aims to prepare us for challenges to come. No one is able to rive the future and to see the exigencies it holds in store for him. No one can calculate the coils and whorls in

which the spiral nebula of life will turn, or predict to what depth envy, passion and desire for prestige may carry a person. What should we do beforehand to ward off a sudden subconscious urge to avenge, to insult, to hurt? A single vicious thought may spread like canker at the roots of all other thoughts, and one person with evil becomes quickly a majority against a multitude of people impartial to evil. Man is not made for neutrality, for being aloof or indifferent, nor can the world remain a vacuum; unless we make it an altar to God, it is invaded by demons.

With a capacity to hurt boundless and unchecked, with the immense expansion of power and the rapid decay of compassion, life has, indeed, become a synonym for peril. Upon whom shall we rely for protection against our own selves? How shall we replenish the tiny stream of integrity in our souls? Countless are the situations in which we witness how the power of judgment wanes in vagrant minds, how integrity collides with a contemptible desire that comes out of the way.

> O, what men dare do! What men may do!
> What men daily do, not knowing what they do.
> (Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*,
> Act IV, Scene 1, 1.19)

One of the lessons we have derived from the events of our time is that we cannot dwell at ease under the sun of civilization, that man is the least harmless of beings. It is as if every minute were packed with tension like the interlude between lightning and thunder, and our moral order were a display of ancient oaks with ephemeral roots. It took one storm to turn a civilization into an inconceivable inferno.

Trees do not die of age, but because of barriers that prevent the rays of the sun from reaching them, because of

branches that lose self-restraint, spreading more than the roots can stand. We today may rarely gaze at the sky or horizon, yet there are lightnings that even overbearing trees do not cease to dread. Only fools are afraid to fear and to listen to the constant collapse of task and time over their heads, with life being buried beneath the ruins.

NEEDS ARE NOT HOLY

Needs are looked upon today as if they were holy, as if they contained the quintessence of eternity. Needs are our gods, and we toil and spare no effort to gratify them. Suppression of a desire is considered a sacrilege that must inevitably avenge itself in the form of some mental disorder. We worship not one but a whole pantheon of needs and have come to look upon moral and spiritual norms as nothing but personal desires in disguise.

It is, indeed, grotesque that while in science the *anthropocentric* view of the earth as the center of the universe and of man as the purpose of all being has long been discarded, in actual living an *egocentric* view of man and his needs as the measure of all values, with nothing to determine his way of living except his own needs, continues to be cherished. If satisfaction of human desires were taken as the measure of all things, then the world, which never squares with our needs, would have to be considered an abysmal failure. Human nature is insatiable and achievements never keep pace with evolving needs.

WHO KNOWS HIS REAL NEEDS?

We cannot make our judgments, decisions and directions for actions dependent upon our needs. The fact is that man who has found out so much about so many things knows neither his own heart nor his own voice. Many of the interests and needs we cherish are imposed on us by the conventions of society rather than being indigenous to our essence. While some of them are necessities, others, as noted above, are fictitious, and adopted as a result of convention, advertisement or sheer envy.

The modern mind believes that it possesses the philosopher's stone in the concept of needs. But who knows his true needs? How are we going to discern authentic from fictitious needs, necessities from make-believes?

As a rule, we become aware of our authentic craving suddenly, unexpectedly; not at the beginning of, but late in the course of our careers. Since we rarely understand what we want until it is almost too late, our feeling cannot be an index of what is essential. We are all eager and ready to subdue the inimical forces of nature, to fight what is hostile to our physical survival, disease, enemies, danger. But how many of us are eager and ready to subdue the evil within us or to fight crime when it does not threaten our own survival, the decay of soul, the enemy within our needs?

Having absorbed an enormous amount of needs and having been taught to cherish the high values, such as justice, liberty, faith, as private interests, we are beginning to wonder whether needs and interests should be relied upon. While it is true that there are interests which all men have in common, most of our

private interests, as asserted in daily living, divide and antagonize rather than unite us.

Interest is a subjective, dividing principle. It is the excitement of feeling, accompanying special attention paid to some object. But do we pay sufficient attention to the demands for universal justice? In fact, the interest in universal welfare is usually blocked by the interest in personal welfare, particularly when it is to be achieved at the price of renouncing one's personal interests. It is just because the power of interests is tyrannizing our lives, determining our views and actions, that we lose sight of the values that count most.

RIGHT AND WRONG NEEDS

Short is the way from need to greed. Evil conditions make us seethe with evil needs, with mad dreams. Can we afford to pursue all our innate needs, even our will for power?

In the tragic confusion of interests, in which every one of us is caught, no distinction seems to be as indispensable as the distinction between right and wrong interests. Yet the concepts of right and wrong, to be standards in our dealing with interests, cannot themselves be interests. Determined as they are by temperament, bias, background and environment of every individual and group, needs are our problems rather than our norms. They are in need of, rather than the origins of standards.

How could individual or national eagerness be the measure of what is objectively required, if whole nations may be persuaded to cherish evil interests? If a universal state should ever

be established and mankind by a majority of votes should decide that a particular ethnic group is to be exterminated, because this would suit the interests of mankind, would that decision be right? Or would the statement of a creditor nation that $2 + 2 = 5$ be correct? An action is right, a statement is true, regardless of whether it is expedient or not.

The true is not what is opportune, nor is that which we desire for the satisfaction of urgent needs necessarily right. What is right may correspond to our present interest, but our interest in itself is not right. Right is beyond the feeling of interest. It may demand doing things which we do not feel the need of, things required but not desired.

He who sets out to employ the realities of life as means for satisfying his own desires will soon forfeit his freedom and be degraded to a mere tool. Acquiring things, he becomes enslaved to them; in subduing others, he loses his own soul. It is as if unchecked covetousness were double-faced; a sneer and subtle vengeance behind a captivating smile. We can ill afford to set up needs, an unknown, variable, vacillating and eventually degrading factor, as a universal standard, as a supreme, abiding rule or pattern for living.

We feel jailed in the confinement of personal needs. The more we indulge in satisfactions, the deeper is our feeling of oppressiveness. To be an iconoclast of idolized needs, to defy our own immoral interests, though they seem to be vital and have long been cherished, we must be able to say *no* to ourselves in the name of a higher *yes*. Yet our minds are late, slow and erratic. What can give us the power to curb the deference to wrong needs, to detect spiritual fallacies, to ward off false ideals and to wrestle with inattentiveness to the unseemly and holy?

Needs cannot be dealt with one by one but only all at once, at their root. To understand the problem of needs, we must face the problem of man, the subject of needs. Man is animated by more needs than any other being.* They seem to lie beneath his will and are independent of his volition. They are the source rather than the product of desire. Consequently, we shall only be able to judge needs if we succeed in understanding the meaning of existence.

* See p. 138.

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MAN'S FAVORITE UNAWARENESS

Our theories will go awry, will all throw dust into our eyes, unless we dare to confront not only the world but the soul as well, and begin to be amazed at our lack of amazement in being alive, at our taking life for granted.

Confronting the soul is an intellectual exposure that tears open the mind to incalculable questions, the answers to which are not easily earned. Modern man, therefore, believes that his security lies in refraining from raising such issues. Ultimate questions have become the object of his favorite unawareness. Since the dedication to tangible matters is highly rewarded, he does not care to pay attention to imponderable issues and prefers to erect a tower of Babel on the narrow basis of deeper unawareness.

Unawareness of the ultimate is a possible state of mind as long as man finds tranquility in his dedication to partial objectives. But when the tower begins to totter, when death wipes away that which seemed mighty and independent, when in evil days the delights of striving are replaced by the nightmare of futility, he becomes conscious of the peril of evasive-

ness, of the emptiness of small objectives. His apprehension lest in winning small prizes he did not gamble his life away, throws his soul open to questions he was trying to avoid.

THE MEANING OF EXISTENCE

But what is there at stake in human life that may be gambled away? It is the meaning of life. In all acts he performs, man raises a claim to meaning. The trees he plants, the tools he invents, are *answers to a need* or a purpose. In its very essence, consciousness is a dedication to design. Committed to the task of coalescing being with meaning, things with ideas, the mind is driven to ponder whether meaning is something it may invent and invest, something which ought to be attained, or whether there is meaning to existence as it is, to existence as existence, independent of what we may add to it. In other words, is there only meaning to what *man does*, but none to what *he is*? Becoming conscious of himself he does not stop at knowing: "I am"; he is driven to know "what" he is. Man may, indeed, be characterized as *a subject in quest of a predicate*, as a being in quest of a meaning of life, of all of life, not only of particular actions or single episodes which happen now and then.

Meaning denotes a condition that cannot be reduced to a material relation and grasped by the sense organs. Meaning is compatibility with an idea, it is, furthermore, that which a fact is for the sake of something else; the pregnancy of an object with value. Life is precious to man. But is it precious to him alone? Or is someone else in need of it?

THE ULTIMATE SURMISE

Imbedded in the mind is a certainty that the state of existence and the state of meaning stand in a relation to each other, that life is assessable in terms of meaning. The will to meaning and the certainty of the legitimacy of our striving to ascertain it are as intrinsically human as the will to live and the certainty of being alive.

In spite of failures and frustrations, we continue to be haunted by that irrepressible quest. We can never accept the idea that life is hollow and incompatible with meaning.

If at the root of philosophy is not a self-contempt of the mind but the mind's concern for its ultimate surmise, then our aim is to examine in order to know. Seeking contentment in a brilliant subterfuge, we are often ready to embezzle the original surmise. But why should we even care to doubt, if we cease to surmise? Philosophy is what man dares to do with his ultimate surmise of meaning in existence.

Animals are content when their needs are satisfied; man insists not only on being satisfied but also on being able to satisfy, on *being a need* not only on *having needs*. Personal needs come and go, but one anxiety remains: *Am I needed?* There is no man who has not been moved by that anxiety.

MAN IS NOT AN END FOR HIMSELF

It is a most significant fact that man is not sufficient to himself, that life is not meaningful to him unless it is serving an end beyond itself, unless it is of value to someone else. The self may have the highest rate of exchange, yet men do not live by currency alone, but by the good attainable in expending it. To hoard the self is to grow a colossal sense for the futility of living.

Man is not an all-inclusive end to himself. The second maxim of Kant, never to use human beings merely as means but to regard them also as ends, only suggests how a person ought to be treated by other people, not how he ought to treat himself. For if a person thinks that he is an end to himself, then he will use others as means. Moreover, if the idea of man being an end is to be taken as a true estimate of his worth, he cannot be expected to sacrifice his life or his interests for the good of someone else or even of a group. He must treat himself the way he expects others to treat him. Why should even a group or a whole people be worth the sacrifice of one's life? To a person who regards himself as an absolute end a thousand lives will not be worth more than his own life.

Sophisticated thinking may enable man to feign his being sufficient to himself. Yet the way to insanity is paved with such illusions. The feeling of futility that comes with the sense of being useless, of not being needed in the world, is the most common cause of psychoneurosis. The only way to avoid despair is *to be a need* rather than an end. *Happiness*, in fact,

may be defined as the *certainty of being needed*. But *who* is in need of man?

DOES MAN EXIST FOR THE SAKE OF SOCIETY?

The first answer that comes to mind is a social one—man's purpose is to serve society or mankind. The ultimate worth of a person would then be determined by his usefulness to others, by the efficiency of his social work. Yet, in spite of his instrumentalist attitude, man expects others to take him not for what he may mean to them but as a being valuable in himself. Even he who does not regard himself as an absolute end, rebels against being treated as a means to an end, as subservient to other men. The rich, the men of the world, want to be loved for their own sake, for their essence, whatever it may mean, not for their achievements or possessions. Nor do the old and sick expect help because of what they may give us in return. Who needs the old, the incurably sick, the maintenance of whom is a drain on the treasury of the state? It is, moreover, obvious that such service does not claim all of one's life and can therefore not be the ultimate answer to his quest of meaning for life as a whole. Man has more to give than what other men are able or willing to accept. To say that life could consist of care for others of incessant service to the world, would be a vulgar boast. What we are able to bestow upon others is usually less and rarely more than a tithe.

There are alleys in the soul where man walks alone, ways that do not lead to society, a world of privacy that shrinks from the public eye. Life comprises not only arable, produc-

tive land, but also mountains of dreams, an underground of sorrow, towers of yearning, which can hardly be utilized to the last for the good of society, unless man be converted into a machine in which every screw must serve a function or be removed. It is a profiteering state which, trying to exploit the individual, asks all of man for itself.

And if society as embodied in the state should prove to be corrupt and my effort to cure its evil unavailing, would my life as an individual have been totally void of meaning? If society should decide to reject my services and even place me in solitary confinement, so that I will surely die without being able to bequeath any influence to the world I love, will I then feel compelled to end my life?

Human existence cannot derive its ultimate meaning from society, because society itself is in need of meaning. It is as legitimate to ask: Is mankind needed?—as it is to ask: Am I needed?

Humanity begins in the individual man, just as history takes its rise from a singular event. It is always one man at a time whom we keep in mind when we pledge: "with malice toward none, with charity for all," or when trying to fulfill: "Love thy neighbor as thyself." The term "mankind," which in biology denotes the human species, has an entirely different meaning in the realm of ethics and religion. Here mankind is not conceived as a species, as an abstract concept, stripped from its concrete reality, but as an abundance of specific individuals; as a community of persons rather than as a herd or a multitude of nondescripts.

While it is true that the good of all counts more than the good of one, it is the concrete individual who lends meaning to the human race. We do not think that a human being is valuable because he is a member of the race; it is rather the opposite: the human race is valuable because it is composed of human beings.

While dependent on society as well as on the air that sustains us, and while other men compose the system of relations in which the curve of our actions takes its course, it is as individuals that we are beset with desires, fears and hopes, challenged, called upon and endowed with the power of will and a spark of responsibility.

THE SELF-ANNIHILATION OF DESIRE

Of all phenomena which take place in the soul, desires have the highest rate of mortality. Like aquatic plants, they grow and live in the waters of oblivion, impatiently eager to vanish. Inherent in desire is the intention to expire; it asserts itself in order to be quenched, and in attaining satisfaction it comes to an end, singing its own dirge.

Such suicidal intention is not vested in all human acts. Thoughts, concepts, laws, theories are born with the intent to endure. A problem, for example, does not cease to be relevant when its solution is achieved. Inherent in reason is the intention to endure, a striving to comprehend the valid, to form concepts the cogency of which goes on for ever. It is, therefore, not in pondering about ideas, but in surveying one's inner life and discovering the graveyard of needs and desires, once fervently cherished, that we become intimately aware of the temporality of existence.

Yet, there is a curious ambiguity in the way in which this awareness is entertained. For while there is nothing man is more intimately sure of than the temporality of existence, he is rarely resigned to the role of a mere undertaker of desires.

Walking upon a rock that is constantly crumbling away behind every step and anticipating the inevitable abruption which will end his walk, man cannot restrain his bitter yearning to know whether life is nothing but a series of momentary physiological and mental processes, actions and forms of behavior, a flow of vicissitudes, desires and sensations, running like grains through an hourglass, marking time only once and always vanishing.

He wonders whether, at the bottom, life is not like the face of the sundial, outliving all shadows that rotate upon its surface. Is life nothing but a medley of facts, unrelated to one another; chaos camouflaged by illusion?

THE HELPLESS CRAVING

There is not a soul on this earth which, however vaguely or rarely, has not realized that life is dismal if not mirrored in something which is lasting. We are all in search of a conviction that there is something which is worth the toil of living. There is not a soul which has not felt a craving to know of something that outlasts life, strife and agony.

Man is not alone

Helpless and incongruous is man with all his craving, with his tiny candles in the mist. Is it his will to be good that would heal the wounds of his soul, his fright and frustration? It is too obvious that his will is a door to a house divided against itself, that his good intentions, after enduring for a while, touch the mud of vanity, like the horizon of his life which some day will touch the grave. Is there anything beyond the horizon of our good intentions?

Man's quest for a meaning of existence is essentially a quest for the lasting, a quest for abidingness. In a sense, human life is often a race against time, going through efforts to perpetuate experiences, attaching itself to values or establishing relations that do not perish at once. His quest is not a product of desire but an essential element of his nature, characteristic not only of his mind but also of his very existence. This can be shown by analyzing the structure of existence as such.

WHAT IS EXISTENCE?

While existence as a general category remains indefinable, it is directly known to us and, in spite of its indefinability, not entirely out of relation to the mind. It is not an empty concept, since even as a most general category it cannot be completely divested of some relations. There is always a minimum of meaning in our notion of existence.

The most intrinsic characteristic of existence is independence. What exists does so in reality, in time and space, not only in our minds. In ascribing existence to a person, we imply that the person is more than a mere word, name or idea, that

he exists independent of us and our thinking, while that which is a product of our imagination, like the chimerical Brobdingnags or the Yahoos, depends entirely on our mind; it is nonexistent when we do not think of it. However, existence thus described is a negative concept which tells us what existence is not and places it out of relation to us. But what is the positive content of existence? Does not existence imply a necessary relation to something beyond itself?

THE TEMPORALITY OF EXISTENCE

It is obvious that the relation of existence to time is more intimate and unique than its relation to space. There is nothing in space which is so necessary to existence, or belongs so intimately to it, that we could not abandon it without incurring any radical harm. Existence implies no possession of property, no mastery over other beings. Even the particular position we occupy in space we can freely exchange for another one, while the years of our lives are of absolute importance to us. Time is the only property the self really *owns*. Temporality, therefore, is an essential feature of existence.

Time, however, is the most flimsy of things: a mere succession of perishing instants. It is something we never hold: the past is gone forever, what is yet to come is beyond our reach, and the present departs before we can perceive it. How paradoxical and true—the only property we own we never possess.

THE UNINTERRUPTEDNESS OF EXISTENCE

The temporality or evanescence of existence is, indeed, painfully obvious to all of us. Caught in the mortal stream of time, which permits us neither to abide in the present nor to return to any moment of the past, the only prospect we constantly face is that of ceasing to exist, of being thrown out of the stream. Yet, is it temporality alone that is intrinsic to existence? Is not permanence, to some degree, just as intrinsic to it? Existence implies duration, continuity. Existence is *uninterruptedness*, not a year now and a year then, dispersion, but continuous extension. Relative and limited as life's uninterruptedness may be, it is, like temporality, one of the two constitutive characteristics of existence.

There is an element of constancy in the inner structure of existence which accounts for permanence within temporality, as it is the enduring aspect of reality which alone is capable of being an object of logical judgment. For only that aspect of a thing which is constant and which remains the same, independent of the changes which the thing itself undergoes, can be grasped by the categories of our reason. In other words, our categories are the mirrors, in which the things are reflected in the light of their constancy. There is nothing which the mind esteems more than abidingness. We measure values by their endurance.

Even our consciousness of time depends upon a principle that is independent of time. We are conscious of time by measuring it, by saying a minute, an hour, a day. Yet in order to measure time, we must be in possession of a principle of meas-

urement which is taken to be constant. We cannot measure it by directly comparing one stretch of time with another, for two parts of time are never given at once. Thus, time itself cannot yield a consciousness of itself, for in order to be a consciousness of itself it would have to be equally present at all stages of time. Consciousness of time, therefore, presupposes a principle that is not temporal and does not, like each instant, vanish to give birth to the next one. Time itself depends for its continuation on a principle that is independent of time, for time itself could not yield permanence. The stream of time flows along a "no time's land."

THE SECRET OF EXISTENCE

It is in this relation of temporality to abidingness that the secret of existence resides. For whether we attempt to explain, for example, organic living by postulating a mysterious "vital force" or by physico-chemical laws exclusively, the basic question remains unanswered: What makes that force or those laws endure? Is the driving force of living the will to live? But the will itself is subject to change. Obviously, there must be some permanent principle that gives duration to the will. If so, what is the relation of the will to live to that principle? Moreover, is it true that existence is the result of a deliberate decision? Does my organism grow, multiply and develop because it wants to? Are the urge, endeavor, daring and adventure which characterize life the result of choice? If so, we are not aware of it. We know, on the contrary, that human will never creates life. In generating life, we are the tools not

the masters. We are witnesses rather than authors of birth and death. We know that something animates and inspires a living organism. But what? To use the concept of a subconscious will to live, of a will that we do not know ourselves, is like employing a *deus ex machina,* the device whereby in ancient drama a god was brought to the stage to provide a supernatural solution to a dramatic difficulty, with the difference, however, that here the *deus* appears in disguise, claiming to be a natural being.

What is the lasting in our own lives? What remains constant through all changes? The body grows and decays; the passions all flow down the stream of oblivion. What does a man, looking back on the threshold of death, consider *lasting* in all that has happened and passed? Is it our will to live? Our reflective concern?

IN BEING WE OBEY

Looking at our own existence, we are forced to admit that the essence of existence is not in our will to live; we must live, and in living we obey. Existence is a compliance, not a desire; an agreement, not an impulse. *In being we obey.*

We struggle, suffer, live and act, not because we have the will to. Our will itself is obedience, an answer, a compliance. It is only subsequently that we get to *will* what we *must;* the will is appearance, our compliance—"the thing in itself." Is not the life of the body a process of obedience. What is thinking, if not submission to truth, compliance with the rules of logic? For the fact that there is logic, independent of wishful thinking, exercising over our minds coercive, implacable

power is unexplainable as a product of the will or mind. The acts of logical thinking are the mind's, but that there must be logic at all, that the mind cannot but think in accordance to its rules, is *not* the mind's.

THE ULTIMATE GOAL

We have characterized man's quest for a meaning of existence as a quest for the lasting, and have shown that the relation to the lasting is at the root of all existence. Yet the natural piety of obedience is no answer to man's quest. For while man is attached to the lasting at the root of his being, he is, as we stated above, detached and uncurbed in his thoughts and deeds; he is free to act and free to refrain; he has the power to disobey. It is because of his being independent that he is haunted by a fear of his life being irrelevant and by a will to ultimate meaning.

Every human being harbors a craving for the lasting, yet few of us comprehend the meaning of the lasting. There is only one truth but there are many ways of misunderstanding it. There is only one goal, but there are many ways of missing it.

What is the ultimate goal? The prolongation of existence in its present form with its pleasures and cares? The perpetuation of the self with its languor, vanity and fear? We do not love the totality of the ego to such a degree that our highest aspiration should be to preserve it forever. In fact, we begin to brood about immortality in our anxiety about the perpetuation of others rather than in an anxiety about the perpetuation of our own selves. The thought of immortality begins in compassion, in a transitive concern for those who have been taken away.

The true aspiration is not that self and all that is contained in it may last, but that all the self stands for may last. Man can be a nightmare but also a fulfilment of a vision of God. He has been given the power to surpass himself; to answer for all things and to act for one God. All beings obey the law; man is able to sing the law. His ultimate legacy is in his composing a song of deeds which only God fully understands.

TIME AND ETERNITY

The way to the lasting does not lie on the other side of life; it does not begin where time breaks off. The lasting begins not beyond but *within time*, within the moment, within the concrete. Time can be seen from two aspects: from the aspect of *temporality* and from the aspect of *eternity*.

Time is the border of eternity. Time is eternity formed into tassels. The moments of our lives are like luxuriant tassels. They are attached to the garment and are made of the same cloth. It is through spiritual living that we realize that the infinite can be confined in a measured line.

Life without integrity is like loosely hanging threads, easily straying from the main cloth, while in acts of piety we learn to understand that every instant is like a thread raveling out of eternity to form a delicate tassel. We must not cast off the threads but weave them into the design of an eternal fabric.

The days of our lives are representatives of eternity rather than fugitives, and we must live as if the fate of all of time would totally depend on a single moment.

Seen as temporality, the essence of time is detachment, iso-

lation. A temporal moment is always alone, always exclusive. Two instants can never be together, never contemporary. Seen as eternity, the essence of time is attachment, communion. It is within time rather than within space that we are able to commune, to worship, to love. It is within time that one day may be worth a thousand years.

Creative insights grow a life-time to last a moment, and yet they last for ever. For to last means to commune with God, "to cleave unto Him" (Deuteronomy 11:22). A moment has no contemporary within temporality. But within eternity every moment can become a contemporary of God.

This is why we said above that the good is an ontological fact. Love, for example, is more than co-operation, more than feeling and acting together. Love *is* being together, a mode of existence, not only a state of the soul.

The psychological aspect of love, its passion and emotion, is but an aspect of an ontological situation. When man loves man he enters a union which is more than an addition, more than one plus one. To love is to attach oneself to the spirit of unity, to rise to a new level, to enter a new dimension, a spiritual dimension. For, as we have seen, whatever man does to man, he also does to God.

Significantly, the Bible describes love in the following way: "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy *meod*." What does *meod* mean? It can only mean what it means everywhere in the Bible: the adverb "*very*," "*much*," in a superlative degree. In trying to qualify the verb "to love" the text was suddenly short of expression. Progressively it states: "with all thy heart." And even more: with all thy soul. But even that was not sufficiently expressed until it said: with all thy *veriness* . . .

20 The Essence of Man

THE UNIQUENESS OF MAN

All that exists obeys. Man alone occupies a unique status. As a natural being he obeys, as a human being he must frequently choose; confined in his existence, he is unrestrained in his will. His acts do not emanate from him like rays of energy from matter. Placed in the parting of the ways, he must time and again decide which direction to take. The course of his life is, accordingly, unpredictable; no one can write his autobiography in advance.

Is man, who occupies such a strange position in the great realm of being, an outcast of the universal order? an outlaw? a freak of nature? a shred of yarn dropped from nature's loom, which has since been strangely twisted by the way? Astronomy and geology have taught us to disdain the overweening vanity of man. Even without the benefit of astronomy and geology, the psalmist must have been oppressed with a sense of self-insignificance, when he asked the somber question:

> When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers; the moon and the stars, which Thou hast ordained; What is man that Thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that Thou visitest him?
>
> (Psalms 8:3–4)

However, if man's value and position in the universe are to be defined as one divided by the infinite, the infinite designating the number of beings which populate the universe; if man $= \frac{1}{\infty}$, how should we account for the fact that infinitesimal man is obviously the only being on this planet capable of making such an equation?

An ant is never stricken with amazement, nor does a star consider itself a nonentity. Immense is the scope of astronomy and geology, yet what is astronomy without the astronomer? What is geology without the geologist?

If we had to characterize an individual like William Shakespeare in terms of a measuring rod, we would surely avail ourselves of Eddington's description of man's position within the universe and say that Shakespeare is almost precisely halfway in size between an atom and a star. To assess his vegetative existence, it is important to know, for example, that man consists of a hundred million cells. However, to assess the essence of man, which alone accounts for the fact of his being anxious to assess his existence, we must discern what is unique about him.

Reflecting about the infinite universe we could perhaps afford to resign ourselves to the trivial position of being a nonentity. However, pondering over our reflection, we discover that we are not only carried and surrounded by the universe of meaning. Man is a fountain of immense meaning, not only a drop in the ocean of being.

The human species is too powerful, too dangerous to be a mere toy or a freak of the Creator. He undoubtedly represents something unique in the great body of the universe: a growth, as it were, an abnormal mass of tissue, which not only began to interact with other parts but also, to some degree, was able to

modify their very status. What is its nature and function? Is it malignant, a tumor, or is it supposed to serve as a brain of the universe?

The human species shows at times symptoms of being malignant and, if its growth remains unchecked, it may destroy the entire body for the sake of its expansion. In terms of astronomical time, our civilization is in its infancy. The expansion of human power has hardly begun, and what man is going to do with his power may either save or destroy our planet.

The earth may be of small significance within the infinite universe. But if it is of some significance, man holds the key to it. For one thing man certainly seems to own: a boundless, unpredictable capacity for the development of an inner universe. There is more potentiality in his soul than in any other being known to us. Look at an infant and try to imagine the multitude of events it is going to engender. One child called Bach was charged with power enough to hold generations of men in his spell. But is there any potentiality to acclaim or any surprise to expect in a calf or a colt? Indeed, the essence of man is not in what he is, but in what he is able to be.

IN THE DARKNESS OF POTENTIALITY

Yet the darkness of potentiality is the hotbed of anxiety. There is always more than one path to go, and we are forced to be free—we are free against our will—and have the audacity to choose, rarely knowing how or why. Our failures glare like flashlights all the way, and what is right lies underground. We are in the minority in the great realm of being, and, with a

genius for adjustment, we frequently seek to join the multitude. We are in the minority within our own nature, and in the agony and battle of passions we often choose to envy the beast. We behave as if the animal kingdom were our lost paradise, to which we are trying to return for moments of delight, believing that it is the animal state in which happiness consists. We have an endless craving to be like the beast, a nostalgic admiration for the animal within us. According to a contemporary scientist: "Man's greatest tragedy occurred when he ceased to walk on all fours and cut himself off from the animal world by assuming an erect position. If man had continued to walk horizontally, and rabbits had learned to walk vertically, many of the world's ills would not exist."

BETWEEN GOD AND THE BEASTS

Man is continuous both with the rest of organic nature and with the infinite outpouring of the spirit of God. A minority in the realm of being, he stands somewhere between God and the beasts. Unable to live alone, he must commune with either of the two.

Both Adam and the beasts were blessed by the Lord, but man was also charged with conquering the earth and dominating the beast. Man is always faced with the choice of listening either to God or to the snake. It is always easier to envy the beast, to worship a totem and be dominated by it, than to hearken to the Voice.

Our existence seesaws between animality and divinity, between that which is more and that which is less than humanity:

below is evanescence, futility, and above is the open door of the divine exchequer where we lay up the sterling coin of piety and spirit, the immortal remains of our dying lives. We are constantly in the mills of death, but we are also the contemporaries of God.

Man is "a little lower than the angels" (Psalm 8:5) and a little higher than the beasts. Like a pendulum he swings to and fro under the combined action of gravity and momentum, of the gravitation of selfishness and the momentum of the divine, of a vision beheld by God in the darkness of flesh and blood. We fail to understand the meaning of our existence when we disregard our commitments to that vision. Yet only eyes vigilant and fortified against the glaring and superficial can still perceive God's vision in the soul's horror-stricken night of human folly, falsehood, hatred and malice.

Because of his immense power, man is potentially the most wicked of beings. He often has a passion for cruel deeds that only fear of God can soothe, suffocating flushes of envy that only holiness can ventilate.

If man is not more than human, then he is less than human. Man is but a short, critical stage between the animal and the spiritual. His state is one of constant wavering, of soaring or descending. Undeviating humanity is nonexistent. The emancipated man is yet to emerge.

Man is more than what he is to himself. In his reason he may be limited, in his will he may be wicked, yet he stands in a relation to God which he may betray but not sever and which constitutes the essential meaning of his life. He is the knot in which heaven and earth are interlaced.

When carried away by the joy of acting as we please, adopting any desire, accepting any opportunity for action if

the body welcomes it, we feel perfectly satisfied to walk on all fours. Yet there are moments in every one's life when he begins to wonder whether the pleasures of the body or the interests of the self should serve as the perspective from which all decisions should be made.

BEYOND OUR NEEDS

In spite of the delights that are within our reach, we refuse to barter our souls for selfish rewards and to live without a conscience on the proceeds. Even those who have forfeited the ability for compassion have not forfeited the ability to be horrified at their inability to feel compassion. The ceiling has collapsed, yet the souls still hang by a hair of horror. Time and again everyone of us tries to sit in judgment over his life. Even those who have gambled away the vision of virtue are not deprived of the horror of crime. Through disgust and dismay we struggle to know that to live on selfish needs is to kill what is still alive in our dismay. There is only one way to fumigate the obnoxious air of our world—to live beyond our own needs and interests. We are carnal, covetous, selfish, vain, and to live for the sake of unselfish needs means to live beyond our own means. How could we be more than what we are? How could we find resources that would give our souls a surplus that is not our own? To live beyond our needs means to be independent of selfish needs. Yet how would man succeed in breaking out of the circle of his self?

The possibility of eliminating self-regard ultimately depends on the nature of the self; it is a metaphysical rather than

a psychological issue. If the self exists for its own sake, such independence would be neither possible nor desirable. It is only in assuming that the self is not the hub but a spoke, neither its own beginning nor its own end, that such possibility could be affirmed.

Man *is* meaning, but not his own meaning. He does not even know his own meaning, for a meaning does not know what it means. The self *is* a need, but not its own need.

All our experiences are needs, dissolving when the needs are fulfilled. But the truth is, our existence, too, is a need. We are such stuff as needs are made of, and our little life is rounded by a will. *Lasting* in our life is neither passion nor delight, neither joy nor pain, but the answer to a need. The lasting in us is not our will to live. There is a need for our lives, and in living we satisfy it. Lasting is not our desire, but our answer to that need, an agreement not an impulse. Our needs are temporal, while our being needed is lasting.

WHO IS IN NEED OF MAN?

We have started our inquiry with the question of the individual man—what is the meaning of the individual man?—and established his uniqueness in his being pregnant with immense potentialities, of which he becomes aware in his experience of needs. We have also pointed out that he finds no happiness in utilizing his potentialities for the satisfaction of his own needs, that his destiny is to be a need.

But who is in need of man? Nature? Do the mountains stand in need of our poems? Would the stars fade away if astrono-

mers ceased to exist? The earth can get along without the aid of the human species. Nature is replete with opportunity to satisfy all our needs except one—the need of being needed. Within its unbroken silence man is like the middle of a sentence and all his theories are like dots indicating his isolation within his own self.

Unlike all other needs, the need of being needed is a striving to give rather than to obtain satisfaction. It is a desire to satisfy a transcendent desire, a craving to satisfy a craving.

All needs are one-sided. When hungry we are in need of food, yet food is *not* in need of being consumed. Things of beauty attract our minds; we feel the need of perceiving them, yet they are not in need of being perceived by us. It is in such one-sidedness, that most of living is imprisoned. Examine an average mind, and you will find that it is dominated by an effort to cut reality to the measure of the ego, as if the world existed for the sake of pleasing one's ego. Everyone of us entertains more relations with things than with people, and even in dealings with people we behave toward them as if they were things, tools, means to be used for our own selfish ends. How rarely do we face a person as a person. We are all dominated by the desire to appropriate and to own. Only a free person knows that the true meaning of existence is experienced in giving, in endowing, in meeting a person face to face, in fulfilling other people's needs.

When realizing the surplus of what we see over what we feel, the mind is evasive, even the heart is incomplete. Why are we discontent with mere living for the sake of living? Who has made us thirsty for what is more than existence?

Everywhere we are surrounded by the ineffable, our familiarity with reality is a myth. To the innermost in our soul even

beauty is an alloy mixed with the true metal of eternity. There is neither earth nor sky, neither spring nor autumn; there is only a question, God's eternal question of man: Where art Thou? Religion begins with the certainty that something is asked of us, that there are ends which are in need of us. Unlike all other values, moral and religious ends evoke in us a sense of obligation. They present themselves as tasks rather than as objects of perception. Thus, religious living consists in serving ends which are in need of us.

Man is not an innocent bystander in the cosmic drama. There is in us more kinship with the divine than we are able to believe. The souls of men are candles of the Lord, lit on the cosmic way, rather than fireworks produced by the combustion of nature's explosive compositions, and every soul is indispensable to Him. Man is needed, he is *a need of God.*